Caseless nominals in Russian
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Background. Since Vergnaud 1977, (abstract) case has been considered a licensor of nominal expressions. However, there is a silence that certain structural types of nominals can escape the Case filter (e.g. by being pseudo/constituted, Massam 2001). Such nominals typically exhibit a certain structural deficiency, syntactic rigidity and special interpretation (narrow scope / predicates). Pereltsvaig (2006) argues that in Russian full-fledged DPs are distinct from Small Nominals (SNs). DP-subjects, (1a), are individuated / specific, syntactically active and trigger agreement whereas QP-subjects, (1b), lack these properties.

(1) a. V [DP tri zapyatye] fil’m [QP testelet] / ?[QP tri zapyatyx].

‘Five famous actors played in this film.’


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Problem. Pereltsvaig does not discuss whether the QP in (1b) is case-marked, but in the literature both possibilities have been advanced. One line of thought is based on Bubby’s (1985) suggestion that NOM and ACC are only assigned if an argument cannot be licensed otherwise. They can thus be unrealized. This happens in numeral phrases with a heterogeneous morphosyntactic pattern, prepositional quantifier phrases (chelovek deyat’ ‘about 10 days’), adverbial quantifier phrases (mnoogo ‘many books’) and with genitive of negation, which are subject to Direct Case Condition (DCC). These constituents are unavailable in lexical case positions (due to the Lexical satisfaction principle, Bubby 1985:108) and are only admitted in structural case positions, where a nominal can appear caseless. On this view, the QP in (1b) can be said to lack case.

In contrast, Tochilin (2013) argues that DCC-constituents are uniformly assigned abstract case, even though only nominals can realize it. His argument is: while QPs headed by numerals allow for case-marked agreeing modifiers (‘five books’), other DCC-constituents do not. *‘Et tri knig’ / ‘Three books’. DCC-constituents are not subject to DCC. A related claim, namely, that Russian non-nominal arguments like CPs are licensed by abstract case, is made in Kayauy 2016.

Proposal. Our contribution is a new argument supporting Bubby’s position. We argue that in Russian, there exist caseless SNs which have no case feature and therefore are not active for agreement and invisible for 8-probes. To construct an argument, we consider paucal constructions with feminine nominals (dvé nových / many new books). It zapyatye/zapyatyx ‘three commas’.

(2) a. Prepositional [dt ri zapyatyx] / [dt ri zapyatyx]

b. Prepositional [dt ri zapyatyx] / [dt ri zapyatyx]

In this sentence, three commas are missing.

If this hypothesis is correct, we have a constituent-internal morphological diagnostic for distinguishing nominative and caseless paucal constructions.

Secondly, we consider constructions with “quantitative meaning” (Mel’čuk 1985; Mikaelian 2013) which are remarkable because of the “disappearing” animacy. Instead of the standard realization of the accusative animate by the genitive, (3a), in the quantitative context, the numeral construction looks like accusative inanimate (= nominative), (3b).

(3) a. *pojatom na tri mal’chik / *na tri mal’chik

b. *na tri mal’chik / na tri mal’chik

‘Looked at three boys’

The standard account for (3b) (Mel’čuk 1985; Rappaport 2003) is: paucal numerals are assimilated to other numerals in that they loose the ability to agree with a noun in animacy. This account, however, looks like a stipulation.

We propose that quantitative prepositions and verbs assign structural accusative thus creating a direct case configuration. Besides, we assume that they favor QPs as their complements. Since QPs have no case feature, the structural case is not assigned. As a result, QPs remain caseless, and it is for this reason that (3b) looks like nominative / inanimate accusative: it is not animacy, but the accusative that “disappears” in these constructions.

Crucial evidence for this analysis comes from paucal constructions with feminine nominals. Inanimate paucal constructions show variation between a caseless QP and an (inanimate) accusative DP, (4b). Animate paucal constructions vary between a caseless QP and an animate accusative DP, nominative accusative / nominative form is not attested, (4b).

(4) a. [dt ri zapyatyx] / [dt ri zapyatyx]

b. [dt ri zapyatyx] / [dt ri zapyatyx]

This account, however, looks like a stipulation.

We therefore assume that quantitative prepositions, verbs and feminine nouns are caseless.

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Selected references


