The Markedness of Coincidence in Russian
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This paper presents a novel analysis of the Russian Infl domain. Specifically, I argue that in Russian, the past tense, as opposed to the non-past, is the default, unmarked tense. Consequently, non-past in Russian is marked by the specification of a privative feature on T0, which associates the event/state expressed by vP to some anchoring time. This analysis stems from observations of how subjunctive matrix and complement clauses are interpreted.

Matrix subjunctive clauses in Russian are generally formed with the particle by and the past tense form of the predicate (Mezhevich 2006:118), as shown in (1), in which the past morpheme -l is suffixed to the verb. The subjunctive mood typically expresses an eventuality as hypothetical, advisable, desirable, or obligatory with respect to the sentential subject (Harrison & le Fleming 2000:142). Despite co-occurring almost exclusively with the past-tense verb form, however, constructions containing by show no semantic tense contrasts whatsoever (Spencer 2001:298), also demonstrated in (1).

Unlike matrix subjunctions, in subjunctive complement clauses, a past-tense reading is unavailable for a subjunctive complement clause (Asarina 2006), as shown in (2c), while present and future interpretations are possible, (2a and b). Furthermore, the subjunctive particle by can also be used with the infinitive form of the verb in matrix clauses (Asarina 2006:10), (3), while it is entirely ungrammatical with non-past finite forms of the verb (Mezhevich 2006, 4). These observations raise the question of whether the past tense marker is spelling out any past tense morphosemantic features at all given that the form is compatible with various temporal interpretations and, at times, restricted to non-past interpretations.

The proposal presented here arises from a comparison of two alternative Infl structures that could be posited to capture the interaction between the particle by and the verb forms it may licitly co-occur with: a structure in which by morphosemantically requires the co-occurrence of some past tense feature and another in which it morphosemantically requires the absence of some feature that links the clause to the utterance context temporally. In other words, this is a comparison between a structure in which by requires the past tense or requires the absence of non-past. Given that by is permissible with infinitives, the former hypothesis should be dispensed with and the latter pursued.

The analysis I propose is based on the feature geometry of the inflectional domain proposed in Cowper (2005) and the inflectional system in Cowper (2010). I assume that the Infl domain as a whole temporally situates the eventuality described by the v/VP (Ramchand & Svenonius 2014). Whereas for Cowper (2005, 2010), the English Infl system contains the past tense feature [Precedence], which situates an event/state prior to some temporal anchor and is spelled out by the past tense morpheme -ed, I argue that Russian lacks this feature. Instead, Russian Infl contains the feature [Coin(cidence)] (Ritter & Wiltschko 2005; Wiltschko 2013, 2014) in T0, which links or associates the event/state described by the vP to the utterance context. When [Coin] is specified in the Infl domain, it links the event/state of the vP to some temporal anchor, which is the time of the immediately embedding clause or by default the moment of speech, as in matrix clauses.

By, I propose, is the spell-out of a modality head within Infl and its semantics are contradictory with those of [Coin], given that as a modality head, it cannot be linked to the utterance context. Hence, if -l is the spell-out of a T0 lacking [Coin] and infinitival forms of the verb are, as I assume, the spell-out of an Infl with no TP projection, we can capture the behaviour between by and co-occurring verb forms. Moreover, the analysis indicates that the non-past is the marked tense in Russian.

While perhaps controversial, the analysis presented here is able to capture why, unlike other languages with the subjunctive mood (Wiltschko 2013), Russian allows main
independent clauses to appear in the subjunctive. It additionally furthers work on features and properties of the Infl domain, showing how languages use different features, from what appears to be a limited set, to express time and realis contrasts.

Examples

(1) Ja ujexa-l-a by včera/sejčas/zavtra.
    I leave-PST-FEM by yesterday/now/tomorrow
    ‘I would have left yesterday/leave now/leave tomorrow.’
    (adapted from Mezhevich 2006:136)

(2) a. Ja xoču, čtoby Masha zavtra s’e-l-a jabloko.
    I want ČTOBY Mary tomorrow ate-PST-FEM apple
    ‘I want for Mary to eat an apple tomorrow.’

b. Ja xoču, čtoby Masha sejčas e-l-a jabloko.
    I want ČTOBY Mary now ate-PST-FEM apple
    ‘I want for Mary to be eating an apple right now.’

c. *Ja xoču, čtoby Masha včera s’e-l-a jabloko.
    I want ČTOBY Mary yesterday ate-PST-FEM apple
    Intended: ‘I want for Mary to have been eating an apple yesterday.’
    (Asarina 2006:8)

(3) Oj s”est’ by Pete (vchera/zavtra) jabloko!
    oh eat.INF by Peter (yesterday/tomorrow) apple
    ‘Would that Peter had eaten an apple yesterday!’
    ‘Would that Peter ate an apple tomorrow!’
    (adapted from Mezhevich 2006:132-3)

(4) a. *Ja propuskaj-u by etot doklad.
    I miss-LSG(IMP/PRS) by this talk

b. *Ja ujd-u by domoj.
    I leave-LSG(PRF/FUT) by home

Selected references
