

Split-scope definites in Russian

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(in)definiteness & genericity across languages

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Introduction

Bare arguments in Russian are not only compatible with uniqueness, but require it (Soloveva, Polinsky, Dayal, to appear):

- (1) #**sobak-a** spa-l-a v uglu, v to
dog-NOM.SG sleep-PST-FEM in corner in that
vremja kak **sobak-a** bega-l-a po
time.NOM when dog-NOM.SG run-PST-FEM over
krug-u
circle-DAT.SG

The dog was sleeping in the corner, while the dog was running around over the circle.

Haddock descriptions: singular definites

The existence of these two separable subprocesses can be proved by Haddock descriptions. In Haddock (1987) it's claimed that (2) could be felicitous and true in a context with multiple salient, relevant hats, but only one contains a rabbit, and in that hat sits exactly one rabbit.

(2) the rabbit in the hat

Haddock descriptions: singular definites in Russian

Russian bare nominals resemble such behavior. (3) is a felicitous question when there is only one rabbit-hat pair even if there are more rabbits in other places.

- (3) kak-ogo cvet-a **krolik**
which-ACC.SG.MASC colour-GEN.SG rabbit.NOM.SG
v **šljap-e?**
in hat-LOC.SG
Of which color is the rabbit in the hat?

Relative Readings of embedded DPs

The gap between the outer determiner's definite and indefinite components → relative reading in (4):

- (4) The character with the hat is a consonant. (✓relative)
- (5) The character that has the hat on it is a consonant.
(✗relative)

$$\widehat{A B} \widehat{D} \widehat{\quad} \widehat{E C F}$$

There are many character-hat pairs that satisfy the description in (4). However, in (5) *hat* in a relative clause supports only an absolute reading (there is only one character with exactly one hat, and it is 'D').

Relative Readings of embedded DPs in Russian

The same is true for Russian examples (6) and (7).

- (6) **bukv-a** s kryšečk-oj oboznača-et
letter-NOM.SG with hat-INS.SG mean-PRS.3SG
soglasn-yj zvuk
consonant-ACC.SG.MASC sound.ACC.SG

The letter with the hat is a consonant. (✓relative)

- (7) **bukv-a,** nad kotor-oj
letter-NOM.SG above which-INS.SG.FEM
narisova-n-a kryšečk-a, oboznača-et
drawn-PTCP-NOM.SG.FEM hat-NOM.SG mean-PRS.3SG
soglasn-yj zvuk
consonant-ACC.SG.MASC sound.ACC.SG

The letter that has the hat on it is a consonant. (✗relative)

Relative Reading of Superlatives in Russian

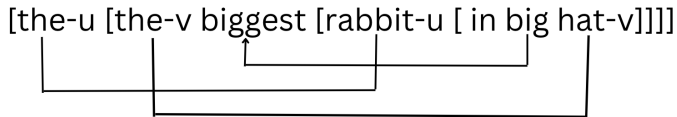
Russian superlatives lacks such relative reading:

- (9) *dostan'* *krolik-a* *iz* *samoj*
take.IMP.2SG rabbit-ACC.SG from most
bol's-oj *šljap-y*
big-GEN.SG.FEM hat-GEN.SG

Take the rabbit from the biggest hat. (✗relative, ✓absolute)

The superlative *samoj bol'soj* 'biggest' applies to hats with rabbits before the uniqueness check. Thus we need to have one rabbit-bearing hat that is bigger than all other rabbit-bearing hats, and subsequently only one rabbit that meets the description of being in that hat.

Relative Reading of Superlatives in Russian



Russian superlatives are formed in such a way that they are trapped inside a structure that does not include the witness for the rabbit, allowing only the absolute reading of 'the biggest hat'.

Possessives

According to Bumford (2017), both plain (10) and superlative (12) possessive descriptions don't have relative reading.

Plain Descriptions:

- (10) # the student who read Shakespeare's play
- (11) the student who read the Shakespeare play (✓relative)

Superlatives:

- (12) the student who read Shakespeare's longest play
(✗relative)
- (13) the student who read the longest Shakespeare play
(✓relative)
- (14) the student who read the longest play of Shakespeare's
(✓relative)

Possessives in Russian

Russian plain descriptions behave in a similar way:

(15) #učitel'	vyzva-l	k	dosk-e	učenik-a,
teacher.NOM.SG	call-PST.MASC	to	blackboard-DAT.SG	student-ACC.SG
kotor-yj	pročita-l		šejkspirovskuju	p'es-u
which-NOM.SG.MASC	read-PST.MASC		Shakespeare's	play-ACC.SG

The teacher called the student who read Shakespeare's play to the blackboard.

(16) učitel'	vyzva-l	k	doske	učenika,
teacher.NOM.SG	call-PST.MASC	to	blackboard-DAT.SG	student-ACC.SG
kotoryj	pročital		p'esu	Šejkspir-a
which-NOM.SG.MASC	read-PST.MASC		play-ACC.SG	Shakespeare-GEN.SG

The teacher called the student who read Shakespeare play to the blackboard. (✓ relative)

Possessives in Russian

Regardless of possessive position, Russian superlatives don't have relative meaning. (17) and (18) can only describe the student who read

Hamlet:

(17) učitel'	vyzva-l	k	dosk-e	učenik-a,
teacher.NOM.SG	call-PST.MASC	to	blackboard-DAT.SG	student-ACC.SG
kotor-yj	pročita-l		samu-ju	dlinn-uju
which-NOM.SG.MASC	read-PST.MASC		most-ACC.SG.FEM	long-ACC.SG.FEM
šejkspirovskuju	p'es-u			
Shakespeare's	play-ACC.SG			

The teacher called the student who read Shakespeare's longest play to the blackboard.

(X relative)

(18) učitel'	vyzval	k	doske	učenika,
teacher.NOM.SG	call-PST.MASC	to	blackboard-DAT.SG	student-ACC.SG
kotoryj	pročita-l		sam-uju	dlinn-uju
which-NOM.SG.MASC	read-PST.MASC		most-ACC.SG.FEM	long-ACC.SG.FEM
p'es-u	Šejkspir-a			
play-ACC.SG	Shakespeare-GEN.SG			

The teacher called the student who read longest Shakespeare play to the blackboard.

(X relative)

Conclusion

Russian bare nominals resemble split-scope behavior of definite descriptions, proposed in Bumford (2017). While an account of the missing relative reading of Russian superlatives is interesting in its own right, the existence of the absolute reading supports the claim that I am making about the definiteness of Russian bare singulars, and its presupposition of uniqueness.

References

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