

Does Russian Have Unaccusative verbs or an Unaccusative Construction?

The Russian subjectless construction [Obj_{ACC} + predicate], such as *Ego tošnit* ‘He is nauseous’, *Menja znobit* ‘I am shivering’ has been underexamined. Many studies examine the monadic accusative impersonal construction (MAI) in terms of its syntactic nature (Harves 2002), treating it as a peripheral issue of a related construction, i.e., the Adversity impersonal construction; *Lodku uneslo vetrom* ‘The boat was carried away by the wind’. (Mustajoki & Kopotev 2005, Lavine 2010, Schlund 2013). This study focuses on the semantic and pragmatic characteristics of the construction, using data gathered from the Russian national corpus (RNC) and employing a Cognitive linguistic approach, in particular the Energy Chain model (Langacker 1991; 2008, “Causal chain” Croft 1991) and Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995). My corpus study and semantic/pragmatic analysis of the MAI suggest that unaccusativity in Russian is not a lexical phenomenon, but a construction. That is to say, Russian does not have unaccusative verbs, but an unaccusative construction. The so-called unaccusative verbs occur commonly (and in some cases exclusively) in this construction.

The MAI has a structure that is identical to the unaccusative intransitive construction in absolutive/ergative languages, which is not the case for Adversity impersonal construction, which has two obligatory arguments. Therefore, it is possible to construct a hypothesis that unaccusativity in Russian surfaces in the MAI. Therefore, the MAI can be considered to be an unaccusative construction (UNACC).

The data collected from RNC presents three issues for this hypothesis. First, there are verbs that are semantically considered to be prototypically unaccusative but not represented in the UNACC, such as *Ja upal* ‘I fell’, *On umer* ‘He died’. Second, verbs such as *tošnit* occur outside the UNACC but can select a different construction, as in ex. (1a–b):

- (1) a. *Veter znobil proxožix.*
 wind_{NOM} shivered_{MASC} passer-by_{ACC}
 ‘The wind made the pedestrians on the street shiver.’
- b. *...ne tak že znobit zima, ne tak že greet leto.*
 ...neg as well chills_{3SG} winter_{NOM} neg as well warms_{3SG} summer_{NOM}
 ‘...winter is not so cold, summer is not so warm.’

Third, verbs that are traditionally considered not to have unaccusative meaning can appear in the UNACC, as shown in (2a–b):

- (2) a. *Tuču proneslo neožidanno bystro.*
 black cloud_{ACC} carried_{AGR} unexpectedly quickly.
 ‘The cloud drifted by unexpectedly quickly.’
- b. *Veter pronės nad moej golovoj rvanyj plastikovyj paket.*
 wind_{NOM} carried_{MASC} over my_{INST} head_{INST} torn_{ACC} plastic_{ACC} bag_{ACC}
 ‘The wind carried a torn plastic bag past over my head.’

These facts suggest that a verb is not enough in and of itself to determine unaccusativity in Russian. Lexical unaccusativity is not a sufficient condition for Russian unaccusativity; rather, UNACC should remain as the marker of Russian unaccusativity conditioned by other elements, since non-prototypical unaccusative verbs used in UNACC did have unaccusative meaning, as shown in (3a-b):

- (3) a. *Ego rvět.*
 he_{ACC} tears_{3SG}
 ‘He is vomiting.’ (UNACC)

- b. *On rvět bumagu.*
 he_{NOM} tears_{3SG} paper_{ACC}
 'He is tearing the paper.' (cf. transitive)

The question that remains is what the other elements licensing UNACC are. Based on a semantic/pragmatic analysis of corpus data, it seems that a perceived disconnect between the energy source element of the energy chain plays a key role. The breakup of the energy chain can be (1) a complete lack or imperceptibility/unobservability of an energy source, or (2) a lower degree of agentivity and transitivity, such as animacy, control, sentiency, or volition. These are similar to the three features of Russian impersonal construction suggested by Schlund (2018: 163); agentivity, referentiality, and topicality. The UNACC is a type of impersonal construction that is in close relation to the unaccusative construction in Russian.

In the strong version of this hypothesis, any verb that allows for having a kind of perceived disconnect with an energy source can be in the UNACC and have unaccusative meaning. On the contrary, prototypically unaccusative verbs can be in a transitive or ergative construction when the energy source of the energy chain is clearly shown or emphasized by the speaker, as in ex. (4):

- (4) *Stranu lixoradila narastajušaja s každyd dnem konfrontacija*
 country_{ACC} ran a fever_{FEM} growing_{PRAP} per every day confrontation_{NOM}
neprimirimyh političeskikh sil, partij, gruppirovok.
 irreconcilable_{PL.GEN} political_{PL.GEN} forces_{PL.GEN} parties_{PL.GEN} factions_{PL.GEN}
 'The country was in fever with the increasing confrontation of irreconcilable political forces, parties, and factions every day.'

In conclusion, unaccusativity in Russian is determined not on the lexical level, but on the constructional level. The disconnect between the energy-source element of the energy chain seems to play a significant role in licensing the UNACC. The disconnect is subjectively construed by the speaker and the lexical meaning of a verb serves as a baseline of the construal. Accordingly, the licensing of the UNACC is not a matter of black and white, but a gradual continuum of likelihood or probability.

References

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