

WHAT THE RUSSIAN SUBJUNCTIVE MARKER TELLS US BUT DOESN'T SAY*

Emilia Melara
University of Toronto

This paper asks why the Russian subjunctive marker *by* licenses the past tense and infinitive forms of verbs but not non-past forms. I propose that in Russian, the past tense, rather than the non-past, is the default unmarked tense. The analysis stems from not only the licensing patterns of the subjunctive marker *by*, but also the temporal freedom exhibited by subjunctive constructions.

1. Introduction

Subjunctive matrix clauses in Russian are generally formed with the particle *by* and the past tense morpheme, *-l*, suffixed to the predicate (Mezhevich 2006:118).

- (1) Ty **by** uš-I-a domoj.
you **BY** leave-PST-FEM home.
'You would go/have gone home.' (Mezhevich 2006:152)

- (2) Zavtra ya s udovol'stviev poshe-I **by** v teatr
tomorrow I from pleasure go-PST **BY** at theatre
'I would very much like to go to the theatre tomorrow.'¹

In this paper, I propose that *by* is the morphological spell-out of an irrealis head in the Russian inflectional domain. The projection of this head will be argued to be semantically incompatible with the specification of any feature that situates a clause at the utterance context. I propose that non-past morphology in Russian spells out a feature in Infl that associates a clause to the utterance context. Consequently, if the proposal is on the right track, Russian is a language whose tense system treats non-past, rather than past, tense as the default, unmarked tense.

The outline of this paper is as follows. The next section provides a snippet of the Russian inflectional system, describing tense and the subjunctive mood in the language. It presents the data central to the analysis of the Russian Infl domain that is proposed in section 4. Section 3 addresses a flaw in the way subjunctives have traditionally been analyzed, while also presenting the theoretical tools employed in the analysis proposed in this paper. In section 5, I summarize the analysis, discuss it, and conclude.

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¹ Examples without references indicated are my own.

2. The Russian System

2.1 Russian Tense

Russian makes a three-way morphological tense distinction, expressing past, present, and future.²

- (3) a. Vasja čita-**I** knigu.
 Vasja IMP.read-**PST** book
 ‘Vasja was reading/read a/the book.’
- b. Vasja čitaj**et** knigu.
 Vasja IMP.read-**PRS** book
 ‘Vasja is reading a/the book.’
- c. Vasja pro-čitaj**et** knigu.
 Vasja PRF-read-**FUT** book
 ‘Vasja will read a/the book.’
- (Mezhevich 2008:373)

Unlike Modern Russian, Old Russian made a distinction among four past tenses, namely, the aorist, the perfect, the pluperfect, and the imperfect (Mezhevich 2006:38). Perfect and pluperfect constructions contained an inflected form of *byti* ‘be’ and a form commonly referred to as the *l*-participle: a verb containing the *-l* suffix. The distinction among the four past tenses was lost over time. What has remained is the *-l* suffix as the sole marker of past tense (ibid.).

Although, historically it was the case that the *-l* suffix of the *l*-participle did not mark past tense itself, it has been argued that the suffix has been reanalyzed as the past tense morpheme in Modern Russian (see Mezhevich 2006 for a discussion and references). Additionally, its distribution and interpretation in Modern Russian contrast with what are considered to be non-past predicate forms. I therefore treat the *-l* suffix that attaches to verbs as the past tense form here.

2.2 The Subjunctive in Russian

The subjunctive is traditionally taken to be a mood (regardless of whether it is associated with specific morphology in a given language) that expresses an eventuality as hypothetical, advisable, desirable, or obligatory (Harrison & le Fleming 2000:142) with respect to the sentential subject. For example, the desire to go is held by the third person subject in (4a). Similarly, (4b) expresses the first person singular subject’s desire to be home.

- (4) a. They would like [to go].
- b. I wish [I were home].

² I am ignoring aspectual contrasts here as they are not directly relevant to the discussion at hand.

In Russian, these semantic notions are expressible in matrix independent clauses with the particle *by* and the past-tense form of the predicate.

- (5) vy pro-chita-**I**-i **by** gazetu (Advisability)
 you PRF-read-PST-PL **BY** paper
 ‘You should (have) read the paper.’ (Harrison & le Fleming 2000:142)
- (6) zavtra ya s udovol’stv^{em} poshe-**I** **by** v teatr (Desirability)
 tomorrow I from pleasure go-PST **BY** at theatre
 ‘I would very much like to go to the theatre tomorrow.’

Despite typically co-occurring with the past-tense form of the predicate, however, constructions containing *by* show no semantic tense contrasts whatsoever (Spencer 2001:298).

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

Additionally, *by* can co-occur with the infinitive form of the verb in matrix clauses. Again, the clause *by* appears in is temporally unrestricted.

- (8) Oj s”est’ **by** Pete (včera/zavtra) jabloko!
 oh PRF.eat.INF **BY** Peter (yesterday/tomorrow) apple
 ‘Would that Peter had eaten an apple yesterday!’/
 ‘Would that Peter ate an apple tomorrow!’ (Asarina 2006:10)

On the other hand, *by* is completely illicit with non-past finite forms of the predicate.

- (9) a. *Ja propuskaj-**u** **by** etot doklad.
 I miss-1.SG(IMP/PRS) **BY** this talk
- b. *Ja ujd-**u** **by** domoj.
 I leave-1.SG(PRF/FUT) **BY** home (Mezhevich 2006:132-3)

The following sections explore why the Russian subjunctive particle *by* appears licitly with the finite past tense and infinitive, but not finite non-past, forms of a matrix predicate. The lack of temporal restriction held by subjunctive constructions serves as evidence for *by*’s incompatibility with any feature that links the clause it appears in to the utterance context.

3. The Subjunctive Mood

The subjunctive has frequently been considered a defective tense (e.g. Picallo 1984, Giannakidou 2009) or at least impoverished semantically with respect to the indicative

(see Cowper 2002, 2005; Schlenker 2005). As a defective tense, the subjunctive is claimed to be dependent on some higher structure for its temporal interpretation (Wiltschko n.d.:2). Evidence for the mood's defectiveness comes from subjunctives being unable to be used in matrix clauses (e.g. in Spanish and Catalan). In these languages, where the subjunctive appears in a complement clause, the time of the embedded clause is interpreted relative to that of the matrix clause (Wiltschko n.d.).

A problem with the analysis under which the subjunctive is a defective tense comes from Upper Austrian German – a language with the subjunctive but no tense marking (Wiltschko n.d.). In Upper Austrian German, matrix clauses lack tense morphology and are unrestricted with respect to a temporal interpretation.

- (10) I koch grod/gestan/moagn.
 I cook now/yesterday/tomorrow
 'I am cooking now.'
 'I was cooking yesterday.'
 'I will cook tomorrow.'
 (Wiltschko n.d.:13-14)

Upper Austrian German, however, has a subjunctive-indicative distinction in main independent clauses (Wiltschko n.d.).

- (11) a. nua du kumm-**at**-st
 only you come-**SBJ**-2SG
 'Only you would come.'
 b. nua es kumm-**at**-ts
 only you.PL come-**SBJ**-2PL
 'Only you guys would come.'
 (Wiltschko n.d.:17)

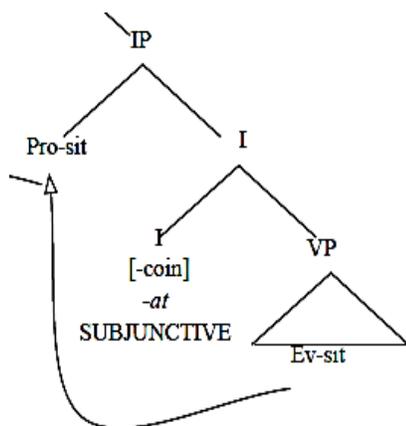
The problem with the defective tense analysis that Wiltschko raises is that if the subjunctive is a defective tense, then a tenseless language, like Upper Austrian German, shouldn't have subjunctive morphology. She proposes, alternatively, that the indicative-subjunctive contrast in this language is essentially equivalent to the past-present contrast in Standard German. Under her proposal, following Ritter & Wiltschko (2009, 2014), Infl, the locus of clausal anchoring, contains a binary uninterpretable feature, [uCoin(cidence)], which establishes a relation of overlap/coincidence between Infl's two arguments (one involving the deictic centre of the utterance, the other the deictic centre of the event described) (Ritter & Wiltschko 2005, 2014).



³ In this structure, "Utt-sit" represents the utterance context, "Ev-sit" the event situation.

In Upper Austrian German, subjunctive morphology values [*u*Coin] negatively and Infl's arguments are interpreted as being disjoint; indicative morphology values the feature positively and the arguments are interpreted as coinciding. Past tense morphology in Standard German patterns like the subjunctive in Upper Austrian German, while Standard German present patterns like the Upper Austrian German indicative.

(13)⁴



(Wiltschko n.d.)

Ritter & Wiltschko's (2005, 2014) [-Coin] roughly corresponds to Iatridou's (2000) exclusion feature: ExclF, defined in (14). Essentially, ExclF and the negatively valued [Coin] feature share the property of establishing that two elements are disjoint. For ExclF, when present, the times or worlds being discussed are interpreted as not coinciding with those of the speaker and the clause is interpreted in the past tense or the irrealis mood.

(14) ExclF: $T(x)$ excludes $C(x)$

...where $T(x)$ means Topic(x) ("the x that we are talking about") and $C(x)$ means Context(x) ("that x that for all we know is the x of the speaker").

- a. Ranging over times, $T(t)$ is the set of times under discussion and $C(t)$ is the set of times that for all we know are the times of the speaker (i.e. the utterance time). What this yields is the interpretation: The topic time excludes the utterance time.
- b. Ranging over worlds, the interpretation the ExclF yields is: The topic worlds exclude the actual world.

The next section presents an analysis of the Russian subjunctive data, employing a variation of Ritter & Wiltschko's coincidence feature, specifically as a privative feature. In it, I propose that the particle *by* used in Russian to express the subjunctive is the spell-out of an irrealis head in Infl that is incompatible with the morphosyntactic specification of [Coin].

⁴ "Pro-sit" is simply the situation the event is evaluated against, whether it is the utterance situation or that described by some embedding predicate.

4. Proposal

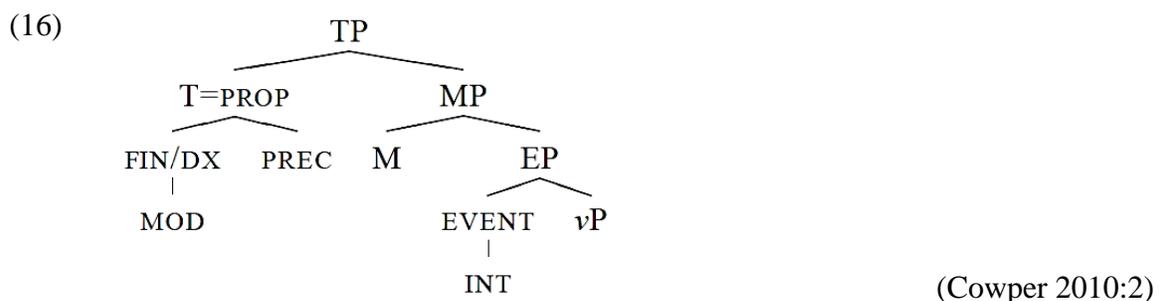
4.1 Theoretical Framework

The analysis to be presented adopts the inflectional system proposed by Cowper (2010), based on the feature geometry of the inflectional domain proposed in Cowper (2005). Her framework and the one presented here are rooted in Distributed Morphology (DM) (Halle & Marantz 1993, Embick & Noyer 2007, Bobaljik n.d.), a theoretical approach according to which the syntax operates on feature bundles (i.e. lexical items or LIs) taken from the lexicon, combined in terminal nodes. Vocabulary items (or VIs) spell these features out at the phonological interface.

The interpretable, privative features of the Infl domain proposed by Cowper (2005) are divided according to mood, narrow tense, and viewpoint aspect, as shown in (15), where in $\alpha > \beta$, β is a dependent of α . The specification of [Proposition] contrasts propositions from bare events or states. [Finite] is a syntactic feature that licenses nominative case and verbal agreement. [Deixis] anchors a clause to the moment of speech. [Modality] carries the semantics of necessity or possibility. [Precedence] encodes the meaning of past versus non-past. [Event] encodes the eventive (as opposed to stative) property of a predicate. Finally, the specification of [Interval] derives imperfectivity versus perfectivity.

- (15) Mood: [Proposition] > [Finite/Deixis] > [Modality]
 Narrow tense: [Precedence]
 Viewpoint aspect: [Event] > [Interval] (Cowper 2010:1)

The features in (15) are realized on multiple functional heads, together comprising the inflectional domain of the clause. The structure of English Infl proposed by Cowper (2010) is shown in (16). T in this structure is the projection of the feature [Proposition] given that only in propositions may the past/non-past distinction be realized; M is the head that hosts modals.

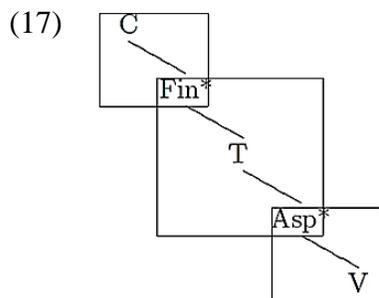


I assume here the TP, MP, and EP⁵ projections from Cowper (2010) along with the features [Finite] and [Event]. Rather than [Modality] though, my proposal contains the feature [Irr(ealis)], which is relatively semantically impoverished 1) to avoid making any claims about any relation subjunctivity may have to modality, and 2) because the

⁵ See Melara (2016) for a more detailed discussion of this head's role in Russian Infl.

semantics of *by* allow for modal interpretations within a superset of additional irrealis readings. I therefore refer to the irrealis phrase simply as IrrP, projected by the instantiation of [Irr].

Finally, I follow Ramchand & Svenonius (2014), assuming that propositional content is encoded higher in the clause, namely in the CP domain, rather than within Infl. For Ramchand & Svenonius, clauses are comprised of event (VP), situation (TP), and proposition (CP) domains, with transitional projections establishing relations among them. Specifically, AspP – essentially Cowper’s (2010) EP – establishes a relation between the *v*/Vp and TP, where an event is converted to a situation, while FinP (the lowest projection in Rizzi’s (1997) split CP) establishes a relation between TP and CP, where a situation is converted to a proposition. It is in the CP that the propositional content of the clause becomes anchored to the utterance context personally, since that is the domain where speaker-oriented parameters reside.



(Ramchand & Svenonius 2014:164)

The proposal presented in the next section adopts [Coin] as an interpretable privative feature of T, in place of Cowper’s [Deixis].^{6,7} [Coin], when specified in T, situates a proposition to the utterance context temporally and is spelled out by a non-past tense form of the verb. The incompatibility between *by* and the Russian non-past tense follows from the contradictory semantics of *by* and [Coin]: the former requires that the proposition expressed not be situated at the utterance context whereas [Coin]’s role is precisely that – it places the event described at the utterance context.

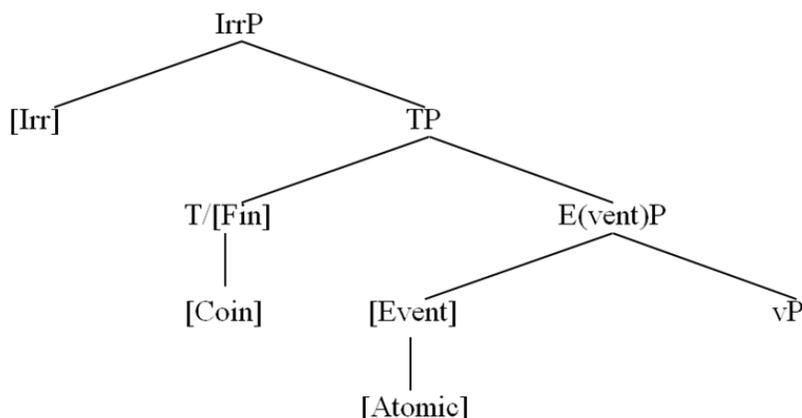
4.2 *By* as the Spell-out of [Irr]

Adopting the tools from Cowper (2005, 2010), I propose the following fully articulated structure for the Russian Infl system.

⁶ The difference between [Deixis] and [Coin] lies in [Deixis] having been proposed as a feature that in English links temporal and speaker properties to the utterance context, whereas what [Coin] associates to the utterance context depends on where in the syntactic spine it is specified à la Ramchand & Svenonius (2014).

⁷ [Interval], I claim, is also absent in Russian. Instead, the feature [Atomic] is a dependent of [Event], as I have argued based on the fact that stative predicates in Russian cannot bear non-derivational perfective morphology. See Melara (2014) for further discussion.

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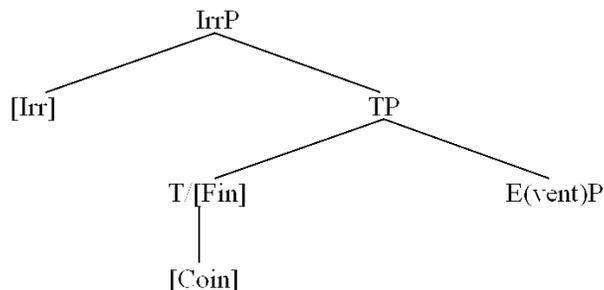


The highest phrase in Russian Infl is an Irrealis Phrase. *By*, I propose, is the spell-out of its head *Irr*, which is the specification of the [Irrealis] feature – my version of Cowper’s [Modality] feature. *T*, here, is the projection of the feature [Fin(ite)]. Overall, I assume a functional head cannot be projected in the absence of any specified features. Russian does not have [Precedence] in its Infl feature inventory. Rather, Russian has the feature [Coin] (Ritter & Wiltschko 2005; Wiltschko 2013, 2014) as a dependent of [Finite], and does not have [Deixis]. Unlike Ritter & Wiltschko’s feature, as previously described, [Coin] is privative. The specification of [Coin] here establishes a relation between the event described and the utterance context. Given that it is within the Infl domain, Ramchand & Svenoniu’s temporal domain, the specification of [Coin] is spelled out by non-past morphology.

The fact that the Russian subjunctive is compatible only with the past marker *-l* or the infinitive results from the selectional requirements of the functional heads in the Infl system. The past/non-past distinction is attributable to the presence or absence of [Coin]. Specified in Infl – the temporal domain – [Coin] semantically situates the event described by the clause to a non-past time and is spelled out by non-past morphology.

The feature that *by* spells out encodes irrealisness and is therefore semantically at odds with the binding established by [Coin]. When *IrrP* is projected, [Irr] scopes over the entire Infl domain and essentially has the semantics of *ExclF* scoping over times, proposed by Iatridou (2000). As described in section 3, *ExclF* is equivalent to [-Coin] from Ritter & Wiltschko’s (2005, 2014) proposals. Thus, under an analysis according to which [Coin] is a privative feature, its specification coincides with the [+Coin] valuation and the feature situates the clause at the utterance context. In case [Irr] and [Coin] were to be specified together, the Infl domain would be specified, in essence, for both [-Coin] and [+Coin] and therefore be semantically contradictory, hence the impossibility of getting both *by* and non-past morphology to appear together.

(19)



temporal dependency matrix subjunctive clauses exhibit. The fact that *by* cannot appear with non-past morphology stems from the proposal that non-past-tense morphology is the spellout of [Coin].

If the analysis presented in this paper is on the right track, then Russian non-past tense is marked, past is unmarked. While the standard line of thought generally takes the present tense to be the default in tensed languages, an account under which past is the marked tense would be incapable of explaining why it is that *by* licenses the past and infinitive forms of the verb to the exclusion of non-past forms. That is, the account would need to explain why it is that despite both non-past and infinitive forms being distinct at least with respect to tense, *by* treats them differently. The analysis proposed here captures *by*'s selectional properties more parsimoniously than an account stipulating that the non-past bears featural similarity with an infinitival form and dissimilarity with the past yet behaves distinctly from both.

Finally, *by* spelling out a head whose semantics are inherently irrealis, the analysis presented here also captures the modal-like interpretations of the Russian clauses that contain *by*, which namely express obligation, desire, advisability, hypothesis, and so forth on the part of the subject. In essence, overall, the subjunctive-indicative mood (or better yet, the irrealis-realis) distinction in Russian, as proposed in this paper, is one that lies in the projection or non-projection of [Irr].

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