

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 the Russian 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.

Matrix subjunctive clauses in Russian are generally formed with the particle *by* and the past tense form of the predicate (Mezhevich 2006:118) in which the past morpheme *-l* is suffixed to the verb. Despite co-occurring almost exclusively with the past-tense verb form, however, constructions containing *by* show no semantic tense contrasts whatsoever (Spencer 2001:298).

- (1) Ja ujeta-**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)

By additionally licenses a verb in its infinitive form.

- (2) Oj s'est' **by** Pete (včera/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!' (Asarina 2006:10)

However, *by* is completely illicit with non-past finite verb forms.

- (3) 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)

I propose that Russian *by* is incompatible morphosemantically with non-past morphology. The Russian Infl domain contains an irrealis head and T^0 . *By* is the spell-out of the irrealis head, whose semantics contradict those of [Coin(cidence)] (cf. Ritter & Wiltschko 2005; Wiltschko 2014), a feature of T^0 that temporally anchors the event described by the v/VP to the utterance situation. Specified on T^0 , this feature is spelled out by non-past tense morphology, semantically linking the clause to the utterance context, coercing the clause to be interpreted in non-past tense. The projection of T^0 unspecified for [Coin] is spelled out by the past morpheme, *-l*.

The specification of the irrealis head does the opposite of [Coin]. It semantically dissociates the proposition denoted by the clause from the utterance context. Hence, if *-l* is the spell-out of a T^0 lacking [Coin] and infinitive forms of the verb are the spell-out of an Infl with no TP projection, as I argue, we can capture the behaviour between *by* and co-occurring verb forms. That is, *by* is able to merge with a TP unspecified for [Coin] or vP itself because *by* requires what it merges with to not be associated to the utterance context.

The temporal freedom of subjunctive clauses falls out from this proposal. If the irrealis head spelled out by *by* is instantiated, [Coin] cannot be specified. Despite the past morphology surfacing, the semantics of *by* (or not, with the infinitive forms of the verb) allow for any temporal interpretation of the clause since the semantics of the irrealis head in combination with the clause not being linked to the utterance context leave the clause unrestricted temporally.

While perhaps controversial, the analysis presented here is able to capture why, unlike other languages with the subjunctive mood (Wiltschko n.d.), 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.

Selected references

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