Uniqueness / maximality in Russian bare nominals

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One of the general questions that arises with respect to languages without articles, like Russian, is whether a certain interpretation of bare nominals in argument position is the "default" one and the other ones are derived (cf. Dayal (2004): a definite interpretation as default vs. Heim (2011): an indefinite interpretation as default) or whether such nominals are ambiguous between a definite and an indefinite interpretation (Partee 1987, Chierchia 1998, Geist 2010).

   Empirical facts from Russian show, contra Dayal (2004), that bare nominals (both singular and plural) in this language can be *bona fide* indefinites: they are able to take different scopes in opaque contexts, as in (1), to introduce discourse referents, they are found in existential constructions.

(1) Vasja xočet ženit'sja na norvežke,
    Vasja wants marry   on Norwegian
       a. potomu čto oni krasivye.
       b. no poke ešče ne poznakomil eë s roditeljami.
       "Vasja wants to marry a Norwegian a. because they are beautiful."
                                        b. but he hasn't introduced her to his parents yet."

Furthermore, two identical (except for the case marking) non-coreferential bare singulars are able to appear in the same sentence (cf. Carlson's (1977/1980) tests from indefiniteness), as illustrated in (2):

(2) Durak duraka vidit izdaleka.
    Fool.NOM fool.ACC sees from afar

If an indefinite interpretation was not easily available for the bare nominal *durak* (fool) and a definite reading was the default one, the example would be predicted to be odd (cf. *The fool sees the fool from afar*).

   Following Heim (2011), we claim that definiteness, which may also be expressed by bare nominals in Russian, is a cancellable implicature, which appears as a result of pragmatic strengthening of indefinites. The hypothesis that Russian bare nominals are semantically indefinte should make a prediction that uniqueness / maximality presupposition (cf. definiteness as uniqueness by Frege (1982), Russel (1905) Strawson (1950)) should not be inherent to them. This prediction is borne out as Russian bare nominals are not easily acceptable those contexts which suggest definiteness by uniqueness (cf. Lyons 1999).

(3)   a. The house is mine.
        b. #A house is mine.
(4)   a. #Dom moj. (house.NOM mine)
        b. Etot dom – moj. (this house.NOM mine)

(4a) shows that a bare nominal *dom* patterns with an indefinite in English (3b). However, the sentence is fine if the nominal is preceded by a demostrative.

   Moreover, the following pair of examples shows the lack of uniqueness of the Russian bare nominal, used in the context that suggests uniqueness.

(5) *The author* of this book gave an interview. #The other author/#the second author/another
        author appeared in a TV show.
(6) *Avtor* etoj knigi dal intervju Novoj gazete. Drugoj avtor vystupil v ėfire Ėxa Moskvy.

author this.GEN book.GEN gave interview to NG. Another author appeared on radio 'EM'

We argue that the example in (6) also provides empirical evidence against the claim that bare nominals in Russian are semantically ambiguous between a definite and an indefinite interpretation. The default interpretation of the first subject in (6) without any continuation is likely to be interpreted as definite, although, as the full example shows, this 'definiteness', in contrast to English, does not presuppose uniqueness. Non-embedded presuppositions are generally not cancellable, so the results in (6) are unexpected if the subject of (6) is a 'true' English type definite. The uniqueness of the author is only an implicature in Russian, given that 'another author' can refer to another author of the same book. In English, however, the expression 'another author' in the second sentence can refer to another author of another book, so that the uniqueness of the subject of the first sentence cannot be cancelled.

These empirical facts suggest that the uniqueness effects, to the extent they exist in Russian, do not come from a hardcore semantic operation that define definiteness, because they are cancellable. However, the kind of definiteness expressed by bare nominals in Russian can be interpreted in terms of familiarity (Christophersen 1939; Heim 1982) or identifiability by the speaker and hearer (Lyons 1999). A special case of familiarity is anaphoricity (Heim 1982), when there is an antecedent provided by the previous context.

The *indefinite as default* hypothesis also got some empirical support from an experiment that we conducted in order to test the adequacy of bare plural nominals in preverbal and postverbal subject positions in contexts that suggest definiteness (anaphoricity or bridging contexts) or indefiniteness (absence of anaphoricity or bridging, discourse-new referents) of the NPs. It has been observed (as expected) that the participants favoured preverbal subjects in contexts suggesting their definiteness and postverbal subjects in context suggesting their indefiniteness. But additionally, and most relevant for this talk, it has also been observed that indefinite contexts (independently of their NPs position) have an overall superior adequacy compared to definite ones. This result is perfectly compatible with the hypothesis that bare nominals in Russian are default indefinites and, thus, are felicitous in a wider range of uses.

Other recent experimental findings (Šimík & Demian, in prep.) also support the *indefinite as default* hypothesis showing the absence of uniqueness/maximality presupposition in Russian bare nominals.

To conclude, we suggest the following interpretation of the data discussed in this abstract. In Heim's (2011) proposal, an indefinite interpretation is taken to be the default one for articleless nominal arguments. It does not impose any requirements on how many individuals must satisfy the common noun predicate: "the speaker may be aware of multiple instances or may be agnostic about the matter." This can explain why bare nominals interpreted indefinitely are more easily accepted by native speakers in different syntactic positions (cf. the results of the experiment: indefinites had overall higher acceptability judgments in any syntactic position).

Selected references:
Chierchia, G. (1998) Reference to kinds across languages. *Natural Language Semantics* 6: 339–405 • Dayal, V. (2004) Number marking and (in)definiteness in kind terms. *Linguistics & Philosophy* 27: 393–450 • Heim, I. (2011) Definiteness and Indefiniteness. In C. Maienborn et al. (eds.), HSK 33.2, De Gruyter Mouton • Geist, L. (2010). *Bare Singular NPs in Argument Positions: Restrictions on Indefiniteness.* International Review of Pragmatics 2: 191 – 227 • Lyons, C. (1999) *Definiteness*. Cambridge University Press. • Partee, B. (1987) Noun phrase interpretation and type-shifting principles. In J. Groenendijk et al. (eds.), *Studies*

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