

Why construction variation in morphology? The case of the Russian attenuative constructions

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Is complete synonymy possible in language? Does Goldberg's Principle of No Synonymy (1995: 67) apply to constructions other than syntactic? The aim of the present paper is to show that it does. Following Goldberg's (2006: 18) idea that constructions are not limited to syntax and exist "all the way down", I focus on morphology and study morphological variation.

In Russian, attenuatives – verbs that describe secondary and low-intensity events – are formed either by means of prefixation (*pod-zabyt* 'forget slightly'), or prefixation and suffixation (*pri-krik-iv-at* 'shout slightly from time to time'). I argue that it is fruitful to analyze Russian attenuatives in terms of morphological constructions (Booij 2010, 2012). The meaning of prefixed attenuatives is not always compositional, and the semantics of attenuativity often emerges from the interaction of the semantics of the prefix with the verbal base.

The two most frequent markers of attenuativity in Russian are the prefixes *pri*- 'next to' and *pod*- 'under'. Although different, the spatial prototypes of both prefixes motivate attenuative meaning and are used as grammatical markers of attenuativity (Makarova 2014). A corpus investigation reveals that the two prefixes in their attenuative uses are unevenly distributed across verbal stems. Some stems are attested with both prefixes, while some verbs are only attested with one prefix. A detailed analysis of the corpus data and a subsequent experimental study indicate that this uneven distribution is semantically motivated. Four types of prefix-stem interaction are attested:

1. Motivated choice: Certain elements in the semantic structure of the verb motivate the choice of the prefix and attenuative construction.
2. Contrastive use: Verbal semantics combines well with both prefixes, and the prefixes specify the overall meaning of the verb; the use of the prefixes is contrastive.
3. Near synonymy: Verbal semantics has overlapping semantics with both prefixes and the prefixes are used as near-synonyms.
4. Blocking: The meaning of the base verb is in conflict with the meaning of one of the prefixes, as a consequence the use of this prefix is blocked.

My study suggests that even in type 3 above the choice between possible constructions is never completely free and involves consistent patterns. A crucial generalization holds the four types described above: the semantics of the prefixed attenuative verb is not compositional, but is a result of the interaction of the semantics of the verbal stem and the prefix. The proposed analysis of Russian attenuatives as morphological constructions contributes to the studies of Russian verbal prefixation, and indicates that the Principle of No Synonymy applies to morphological constructions.

References:

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