

Constructional synonymy – does it exist? The Russian decade constructions and double motivation

A central tenet of Construction Grammar is Goldberg's (1995: 67) Principle of No Synonymy: "If two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct". The present paper discusses an apparent counterexample from Russian, whereby temporal adverbials involving decades occur in two constructions, which have traditionally been considered synonymous. Thus, an expression like *in the twenties* corresponds to either *v dvadcatye_{ACC.PL} gody_{ACC.PL}* with the *v* 'in' + accusative construction or *v dvadcaty_{XLOC.PL} goda_{XLOC.PL}* with the *v* 'in' + locative construction.

A number of apparent counterexamples to the Principle of No Synonymy have been discussed in the literature – and refuted (e.g. Goldberg 1995, Gries & Stefanowitsch 2004, Wulff 2006). However, while earlier works have predominantly considered English data, we analyze a language with rich morphology where the category of case is pivotal.

Another property that sets our study apart from previous studies is the fact that both the accusative and locative constructions receive motivation for decades. As shown in Nessel 2004 and Makarova and Nessel 2013, the locative construction is used for time spans that are long (month or longer) and bounded, as in *v ètom_{LOC.SG} godu_{LOC}* 'in this year'. The accusative construction is the rule for NPs in the plural: *v èti_{ACC.PL} gody_{ACC.PL}* 'in these years'. Since decades represent both long time spans and involve plural NPs, we are dealing with an example of "double motivation".

The question that concerns us in the present paper is whether constructional synonymy is possible under the kind of "double motivation" discussed above. We think not and pursue what we call the "Information Structure Hypothesis", whereby the *v* + locative construction is characteristic of given information, whereas the *v* + accusative is used for new information. While preliminary findings lend support to this hypothesis and thus corroborate the Principle of No Synonymy, we are in the process of carrying out a large-scale investigation of data from the Russian National Corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru) to test the hypothesis empirically.

In addition to testing the Principle of No Synonymy and shedding new light on Russian grammar, the present paper has important consequences for the study of spatial and temporal cognition, since our findings suggest that the well-known conceptual link between the morphosyntactic category of case and information structure/definiteness also applies when spatial prepositions like *v* 'in' are used in the domain of time.

References:

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