

Two Russian reflexive constructions: does the expression of the base subject matter?

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Introduction: main purposes

- ⇒ To investigate some “traditional” and some “new” (or overlooked) Russian constructions with reflexive verbs
- ⇒ To check to which extent the marking of the base subject is relevant
- ⇒ To test the base subject for syntactic subject properties

Russian impersonal constructions

Russian: many constructions where verbs and non-verbal predicates which have no nominative argument – and, thus, no canonically-marked subject (see Subbarao & Bhaskararao 2004, Malchukov & Siewerska 2011). Here belong, for instance:

- ⇒ impersonal verbs in active voice (1)
- ⇒ constructions with short forms of adjectives / *kategorija sostojanija* (2), see also Tsimmerling (2003) and Saj (in press):
- ⇒ verbs marked by reflexive marker *-sja* (3):

- (1) *Menja toshn-it.*
I.ACC have.nausea-PRS.3SG
'I have nausea.'
- (2) *Tut tesn-o.*
here crowded-BR.SG.N
'It's crowded here.'
- (3) *Mne ne rabota-et-sja.*
I.DAT not work-PRS.3SG-REFL
'I cannot work.' (lit. 'It is not worked to me / it does not work to me).'

NB: many dubious cases, between impersonal (subjectless) and 'personal' constructions.

Constructions with *kategorija sostojanija* seem to divide into subjectless and standard: the former admit transformation into a construction with the full form under verbs like *ščitat* 'consider' (5), the latter do not (7) (see Letuchij in press).

- (4) *Mne neprijatno tut naxodi-t'-sja.*
I.DAT unpleasant-BR.SG.N here stay-INF-REFL
'It is unpleasant for me to be here.'
- (5) *On ščita-l-Ø neprijatn-ym tut by-t'.*
he.NOM consider-PST-SG.M unpleasant-PLN.SG.N.INS here be-INF
'He considered it to be unpleasant to be here.'
- (6) *Ploxo tak postupa-t'.*
bad-BR.SG.N so act-INF
'It is bad to do things like this.'
- (7) **On ščita-l-Ø plox-im tak postupa-t'.*
he.NOM consider-PST-SG.M bad-PLN.SG.N.INS so act-INF
Intended: 'He considered it to be bad to do things like this.'

Focus of the talk: constructions where impersonality is yielded by adding the suffix *-sja* to the verb.

The construction represented in (3) will be contrasted to a construction in (8) which has a nominative argument but is semantically rather close to (3):

- (8) *U menja diplom-Ø ne piš-et-sja.*

at I.GEN diploma-NOM.SG not write-PRS.3SG-REFL
 'I cannot write my diploma work' (lit. 'My diploma is not written at me').

Common semantics:

- (1) (In)ability (or difficulty or other characteristics of the situation) of the speaker of the Observer to carry out an action.
- (2) This inability usually results from the mood or internal state of the speaker, and not from any external factors.

In what follows, I will refer to the construction as in (3) IDC (Impersonal dative constructin) and to that in (8) PUC (Personal *u*-construction).

Some of previous works:

Impersonality and reflexivity, dative subject construction: Janko-Trinickaja 1967, Guiraud-Weber 1987, Gradinarova 2010, Fici 2010.

Russian personal *u*-construction: Paducheva 2001, Percov 2001.

My approach:

- (1) to compare them and to find out to which extent the two constructions are parallel and differ only in the transitivity of base verbs;
- (2) to test the arguments of these constructions for subject properties, namely, ability to control converbs (*deepričastija*), argument and possessive reflexives;
- (3) to find out whether the oblique argument in the dative case or inside the PP with the preposition *u* are oblique subjects or not;
- (4) to consider some shifts of distribution of these constructions observed in modern Russian and check whether the (un)expression of the subject is a crucial thing of the construction.

General problem: are passive constructions with and without an expressed agent instantiations of the same construction or not? (cf. many typological studies of valency change, such as Aikhenvald & Dixon (2000)).

Syntactic distribution of constructions

The constructions under analysis are very close semantically. Both of them denote (un)ability of the Experiencer to carry out a particular action.

NB: the syntactic distribution of the construction under analysis have never been analyzed in detail.

Generally:

In literary language the impersonal dative construction is formed from intransitive verbs, while the personal *u*-construction is built on transitive verbs.

Schema 1. Forming of IDC.

Base (intransitive) verb:	S	V
Reflexive verb:	IO / Dative subject	V- <i>sja</i>

Schema 1. Forming of PUC.

Base (intransitive) verb:	S	V	DO
Reflexive verb:	<i>u</i> + GEN	V- <i>sja</i>	S / Nom

For instance, in (9), with IDC, an intransitive verb is represented, whereas (10), with PUC, illustrates a transitive verb:

- (9) *Pet-e ne side-l-o-s' na meste.*
 Petja-SG.DAT not sit-PST-N.SG-REFL on place-LOC.SG
 'Petja couldn't sit on his place.' (IDC).
- (10) *U menja dver' ne otkryva-et-sja.*
 at I.GEN door-SG.NOM not open-PRS.3SG-REFL

‘I cannot open the door.’ (PUC).

If a verb is labile (having both transitive and intransitive uses) it can participate in the personal and the impersonal construction, being used with and without the object, respectively:

- (11) *U menja diplom-Ø ne piš-et-sja.*
at I.GEN diploma-NOM.SG not write-PRS.3SG-REFL
‘I cannot write my diploma work’ (lit. ‘My diploma is not written at me’).
- (12) *V tak-ie dn-i ne piš-et-sja.*
in such-ACC.PL day-ACC.PL not write-PRS.3SG-REFL
‘I cannot write in such days.’ (lit. ‘My diploma is not written at me’).

This can be an additional piece of evidence that two uses of labile verbs are different verbs, rather than different readings of one lexeme.

Shifts in contemporary language

In modern Russian, the situation changes. The distribution of the two constructions under analysis ceases to be purely syntactic.

NB: both directions of shift. But more often *u* + GEN is used instead of DAT.

U-construction instead of dative construction

In modern Russian, there are some uses of intransitive verbs which syntactically require IDC, but this construction looks strange:

- (13) a. *Ja voše-l-Ø na saj-t-Ø.*
I.NOM enter-PST-SG.M on site-SG.ACC
‘I entered the webpage.’
- b. *Mne ne vxod-it-sja na saj-t-Ø.*
I.DAT not enter-PRS.3SG-REFL on site-SG.ACC
‘I cannot enter the webpage.’

Vojti / vxodit’ ‘enter’ is intransitive!

But: the corresponding IDC in (13b) looks awkward. In contrast, with the Agent / Experiencer expressed by a *u* + GEN prepositional phrase is somewhat colloquial but sounds better and occurs in internet:

- c. *U menja ne vxod-it-sja na saj-t-Ø.*
at I.GEN not enter-PRS.3SG-REFL on site-SG.ACC
‘I cannot enter the webpage.’

The same is true for some other constructions, for instance with the verb *zvonit’* ‘call’:

- (14) *U menja ne zvon-it-sja na konnektor-Ø.*
at I.GEN not ring-PRS.3SG-REFL on connector-SG.ACC
‘I cannot ring to the connector.’

Thus, a new construction emerges in Russian, namely, impersonal construction with the Experience expressed by an *u*-PP

NB: Common feature of intransitive verbs / verb meanings allowing for this new construction have something in common:

they denote actions and events which are not entirely dependent on the will of the human, but require a particular mechanism or device (car, computer, telephone or so) to work properly to carry it out.

NOT USED: The subject does not want to enter the webpage or cannot enter it because of his / her psychological state.

ONLY reserved for the external possibility meaning where some circumstances (bad work of the device) prevent the subject from entering the webpage.

Dative construction instead of the u-construction

The cases where the normative *u*-construction is replaced by a dative construction are less numerous and sound much more dubious for native speakers. They mainly contain indefinite NPs in the object position, such as *nikakie stixi* ‘no poems’, or universal and indefinite pronouns such as *ničego* ‘nothing’:

(15) *Mne stix-i ne piš-ut-sja.*
I.DAT poem-PL.NOM not write-PRS.3PL-REFL
‘I cannot write poems.’

(16) *Mne nič-ego ne slušaj-et-sja.*
I.DAT nothing-SG.GEN not listen-PRS.3SG-REFL
‘I cannot listen anything (of music).’

In most of these cases, the construction can be replaced by a PUC. However, the PUC based on the same verbs is usually understood as expressing another meaning. For instance, in (17) the native speakers we have asked tend to understand it as ‘the computer does not work and I cannot listen music’

(17) *U menja nič-ego ne slušaj-et-sja.*
at I.GEN nothing-SG.GEN not listen-PRS.3SG-REFL
‘I cannot listen anything (of music).’

Sentential arguments

Note that in construction with *u* + Gen, sentential arguments with complementizers like *čto* cannot be used:

(18) **U menja skaza-l-o-s’ čto on durak.*
at I.GEN say-PST-SG.N-REFL that he.NOM fool.SG.NOM
‘I said unintentionally that he is a fool.’

(18) **U menja ne piš-et-sja čto nado*
at I.GEN NOT WRITE-PRS.3SG that necessary.NOM
smeni-t’ vlast’-Ø.
change-INF POWER-SG.ACC

‘I cannot write that the power should be changed.’

This means perhaps that sentential arguments are not classified as direct objects in this criterion (note that the base non-reflexive verb in *u* + Gen should be transitive).

This is not true for another, ‘pseudo-anticausative’, construction:

(19) *Sam-o sob-oj reši-l-os’, čto my*
self-SG.N.NOM oneself-INS decide-PST-SG.N that we.NOM
ide-m v kino.
go-PRS.1PL in cinema.SG.ACC

‘It was decided all by itself that we are going to the cinema.’

In other words, for two different reflexive constructions, sentential arguments are treated differently. For our *u* + Gen construction, sentential arguments are not treated as DOs (18), while pseudo-anticausatives treats them as DOs (19).

Modal constructions where the Experiencer cannot be expressed

In most studies, elliptical structures where some language material is omitted are supposed to be variants of full structures:

Knjazev 2007 for Russian;

McShane 2001 and others typologically.

NB: some constructions are only elliptical.

The former subject cannot be expressed.

If the verb can be transitive or intransitive, and the sentence denotes a non-specific indefinite object argument which is left unexpressed, in the derived construction the Experiencer cannot be expressed.

- (20) *Posovetuj-te kak-uju-nibud' interesn-uju knjig-u*
 advise-IMV.PL some-F.SG.ACC interesting-F.SG.ACC book-SG.ACC
i čtob čita-l-o-s' legko.
 and in.order.to read-PST-SG.N-REFL easily
 'Please advise me some interesting book which (lit. 'in order to') reads easily.'

(20): the patient of *čitat* 'read' is not expressed.

The verb is in neutral gender ('pseudo-impersonal').

The Experiencer (person who will read the book) cannot be expressed in either by the dative NP *mne* or by the PP *u menja*.

Other examples of this sort is represented by examples like (21) and (22):

- (21) *Xoče-t-sja prosti-t', no ne prošča-et-sja.*
 want-PST-SG.N-REFL forgive-INF BUT NOT forgive-PRS.3SG-REFL
 'I want to forgive (him), but it is impossible for me to forgive.'
- (22) *Delaj, poka dela-et-sja.*
 do.IMV.SG while do-PRS.3SG-REFL
 'Do (it), while you can' (lit. 'Do, while it is done').

The verb is transitive, but the DO is omitted.

Dative is impossible because there is a definite DO (though omitted).

U + Gen is impossible because there is no expressed object.

Subjecthood tests

Now let us test the constructions under analysis for subjecthood. Each of them will be checked for its ability to control (1) argument and (2) possessive reflexives, and (3) to control converbs.

Argument reflexives

The dative argument of IDC can host argument reflexives.

- (23) *O sebe ne piš-et-sja v posledn-ee vremj-a.*
 about self.LOC not write-PRS.3SG-REFL in last-N.SG.ACC time-SG.ACC
 'I cannot write about myself in the last time.'

However, this test is not easily applicable, since IDC rarely occurs with modifiers. Note that in (23), the Experiencer is not expressed. However, there are some examples where the dative argument is expressed:

- (24) *Vam o sebe ne piš-et-sja i vs-e.*
 you.DAT about self.LOC not write-PRS.3SG-REFL and all-SG.NOM
 'You cannot write about yourself, and that's all.'

NB: the absence of examples is significant. It means that the dative NP is not a prototypical subject: it can bind reflexives but does not in general do it.

The argument of PP in PUC are unable to host argument reflexives. The hypothetical example could look like (25), but no examples of this sort are found in Internet:

- (25) *Kniga o sebe ne piš-et-sja.*
 book-SG.NOM about self.LOC not write-PRS.3SG-REFL
 '(I) cannot write a book about oneself.'

The only examples found in Internet are like:

- (26) *O sebe nič-ego ne piš-et-sja.*
 about self.LOC nothing-SG.GEN not write-PRS.3SG-REFL
 ‘I can write nothing about myself.’

However, this example is not fully illustrative because not only the impersonal dative construction, but also the new construction illustrated by (15) and (16) can be used with negative pronouns. Maybe in (26) we deal with the new construction, while the personal *u*-construction blocks argument reflexives.

The new constructions cannot be tested for argument reflexives – at least, no examples have been found in Internet.

Possessive reflexives

The situation with possessive reflexives is also complicated. For instance, IDC is able to some degree to control this type of reflexives, but in most cases the possessive reflexive *svoj* can be replaced with a ‘usual’ (non-reflexive) possessive pronoun:

- (27) *Mne v svo-ej /mo-ej kvartir-e ne rabota-et-sja.*
 I.DAT in own-F.SG.LOC/MY-F.SG.LOC flat-SG.LOC not work-PRS.3SG-REFL
 ‘I cannot work in my flat.’

In PUC, the argument in the PP cannot control possessive reflexives (the possessive reflexive in (28) is ungrammatical):

- (28) *U menja v *svo-ej/mo-ej kvartir-e*
 at I.GEN in *own-F.SG.LOC/my-F.SG.LOC flat-SG.LOC
diplom ne piš-et-sja.
 diploma not write-PRS.3SG-REFL
 ‘I cannot write my diploma in my flat.’

This seems to be an argument for that the nominative NP (*diplom* in (28)) has subject properties in personal *u*-constructions. However, this assumption seems to be doubtful because the nominative argument is not able to control possessive reflexives either.

QUESTION: do new constructions show any subjecthood properties for the dative argument as in (13c), (14), and arguments of *u*-PP, as in (15)-(16)?

The answer seems to be yes, though only one example of this sort is found in Internet:

- (29) *Ne zaxod-it-sja v svoj-Ø profil'-Ø.*
 not enter-PRS.3SG-REFL in own-M.SG.ACC profile-SG.ACC
 ‘I cannot enter my profile.’

Interestingly enough, the same is possible for a special type of impersonal constructions often used when the unexpressed subject is a name of device or computer (the suffix *-sja* is not employed in this case):

- (30) *Ne zaxod-it v svoj-Ø profil'-Ø.*
 not enter-PRS.3SG in own-M.SG.ACC profile-SG.ACC
 ‘I cannot enter my profile.’

In (30), both arguments (the Experiencer and the name of the device) are omitted without adding the suffix *-sja*. However, though the name of the device (e.g. *program*, *computer*) should be in the nominative case, the subject property is demonstrated by the Experiencer, since the possessive reflexive *svoj* is controlled by the Experiencer (the user of the computer).

For the latter construction, no examples of possessive reflexives have been found.

Control of converbs

The ability to control converbs is a diagnostic property for any nominatively-marked NP in Russian. Non-surprisingly, dative and *u*-phrases in the constructions under analysis are unable to control converbs.

NB: the nominative argument in PUC (cf. *dver* 'door' in examples like (10)) are not able to control converbs either.

Example (31): the nominative NP (*torgovyj centr* 'trade centre') in usual passive construction is able to do it, but in (32), the same proves to be impossible or awkward for the nominative argument in the PUC construction:

- (31) *Buduči* *sozda-n-Ø* *dv-a* *god-a*
be.CONV create-PART.PASS.PST-SG.M two-M.ACC year-SG.GEN
nazad, *torgov-yj* *centr-Ø* *ne* *ispol'zu-et-sja.*
ago trade-M.SG.NOM centre-SG.NOM NOT use-PRS.3SG-REFL
'The trade centre, having been created two years ago, is not used.'

- (32) **Buduči* *zaplanirova-n-Ø* *a* *ijul'-Ø,*
be.CONV plan-PART.PASS.PST-SG.M for july-SG.ACC
roman- Ø *u* *menja* *ne* *piš-et-sja.*
novel-SG.NOM, at I.GEN not write-PRS.3SG-REFL

Intended: 'The novel, having been scheduled for july, is not written to me / I cannot write the novel which has been scheduled for july.'

Thus, this test shows that neither the dative argument of IDC and the *u*-argument in PUC, nor nominative arguments really have subject properties. All constructions under analysis do not seem have a proper subject for all criteria.

Participial form

The criterion of possibility of active participle form is not a test for any argument.

BUT: shows whether THERE IS a subject at all:

⇒ Of course, impossible for dative impersonal construction and the new *u menja* + GEN impersonal construction:

- (33) **rabotaj-ušč-ij-sja* (based on (3)) [work-PARTCP.ACT-M.SG.NOM-REFL]

- (34) **ne vxodjaščijsja* (based on (13c)) [enter-PARTCP.ACT-M.SG.NOM-REFL]

⇒ Surprisingly, (almost) impossible in personal *u*-construction

- (35) ??? *ne čitaj-ušč-aja-sja* *u* *menja* *knig-a*
not read-PARTCP.ACT-F.SG.NOM-REFL at I.GEN book-NOM
'The book which I cannot read.'

Different analyses are possible for (35):

⇒ The nominative NP is not a subject

⇒ The personal *u*-construction is a sort of 'main clause phenomenon', this is why it is not transformed into a participial variant.

Conclusions

1. Along with the normative constructions marked in grammars (the construction with dative NP of intransitive and with PP with the preposition *u* of transitive verbs) two other constructions exist. They are used in modern colloquial speech and in Internet. The construction with dative NP of transitive verbs is rare, while one with *u*-PP of intransitive verbs is rather frequent and is used in special context of external (im)possibility caused by some mechanism or device.

2. There are cases when the Experiencer cannot be expressed either by a dative NP or by an *u*-PP. Their existence is typologically relevant and posits the following

question: to which extent, in Russian and typologically, the way of expression of the arguments is relevant for the semantic properties of the constructions. It seems plausible to propose that sometimes the elliptical variant where some arguments are omitted has the conditions of use different from those of the full variant.

3. Neither of the arguments of the constructions under analysis has the whole range of subject properties (for instance, neither the nominative arguments of the Personal *u*-construction, nor the Experiencer marked by dative or an *u*-PP, can control converbs). This means that not only the Impersonal dative construction, but also the Personal *u*-construction does not have a canonical subject.

NB: the reason of this ‘non-canonicity’ can be different:

⇒ **Absence of canonically case-marked subject.**

⇒ **Absence of semantically canonical subject (the former agent in all of these constructions is no longer agent, while the patient is not a prototypical patient, it’s rather a bearer of the property).**

Possible typological issue

? To which extent is the Russian situation with elliptical constructions widespread in languages like Icelandic and other ones described in Aikhenvald, Dixon and Onishi (2001)?

Do they have many (syntactic) situations where no of the non-canonical subject marking options is available?

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