

Minimal Unit Idioms, Quantifying Superlatives, and their Contexts

Notes from second part of April 22 RGGU class,
plus examples and discussion from Julia Morozova's Homework 4.

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In class on April 22, we discussed the distribution and interpretation of expressions of 'minimal quantity' like *kaplja* and *kopejka*, with possible accompanying *i*, and sometimes with accompanying *xot'*. And at the same time, we looked at "quantifying superlatives" (as discussed in Haspelmath Chapter 5, following Fauconnier). One goal was to find out if they have the same distribution, and the same pattern of where they can be used as NPis. From that discussion, plus some more follow-up, the answer seems to be YES.

1. *Kaplja* and *kopejka* as NPis.

For *kaplja* and *kopejka*, the clear places where they could occur with their idiomatic (scalar implicature) sense were contexts 4, 5, 6, 7: Conditional antecedent, Question, Indirect Negation, and Direct Negation. It also seemed that they could occur in context 3, Non-specific irrealis, but there they were getting a different ("positive") interpretation: "a very small amount", with no scalar implicature.

It was expected that they should also occur in context 8, Comparatives. But that turned out to be very difficult – perhaps we just couldn't think of appropriate examples. It didn't feel like 'grammatically impossible', it was just hard to figure out how to put a 'minimal unit' in an appropriate way into a *than*-clause of a comparative. But later I remembered some English examples with NPI idioms, constructed by using 'more often than' or 'would sooner xxx than': almost the analog of rhetorical questions:

- (1) John would sooner roast in Hell than give a penny to the Nader campaign.
- (2) Mary buys expensive presents for her assistant more often than she lifts a finger to help her husband.

We didn't think of that kind of comparative in class. Are there good Russian sentences like that with *kaplja* or *kopejka*? Then we would have the expected set of NPI contexts, 4,5,6,7,8 (assuming that context 3 involves a non-NPI kind of interpretation.) **YES:**

Added May 5: Analog of (1) with *kopejka*, thanks to Vladimir Borshev (p.c.):

- (3) *Petja skoree udavitsja, čem dast xot' kopejku svoej byvšej žene.*

Julia Morozova did some searching in the Tübingen Russian corpus for *kapli* and *malejšij*. For *kapli*, ignoring collocations that might be just the literal meaning (with liquids), she found that *ni (i) kapli* occurs only in contexts of direct negation. The examples in (4) are from Dostoevski.

- (4) a. ... *podvil, gde mnogo žertvy i ni kapli slavy* (= *sovsem net slavy*)
b. *Ty ni kapli ne viniš' sebja?* (= *sovsem ne*)

Julia suggests, and I agree, that the apparent equivalence of *ni kapli* and *sovsem* arises pragmatically: If we do not have "the smallest quantity" of something, then we have none. This is in fact the basic idea of the connection between negative polarity items and scalar implicatures.

Julia noted that *ni kapli* is restricted to contexts of direct negation, whereas *xot' kaplju* is a positive element: see next section. She did not separately discuss *i kapli*. I am not clear about the difference in distribution between *i kapli* and *kapli*, although I would suppose that since *i* is a scalar focus particle, *i kapli/ i kaplju* will have both NPI and 'positive small amount' uses.

2. About *kaplja* and *kopejka* as 'positive small amounts' in Non-specific irrealis contexts. Julia Morozova's examples.

There were good examples in the class of contexts characterized as 'non-specific irrealis' (Class 3). Those are not normally NPI contexts.

- (5) *Voz'mi xot' kopejku!* (no scalar implicature: means take at least a little)
- (6) *On èto prodat za kopejku.* (this one MAY have a scalar implicature; optional? Pragmatically ambiguous? (He will sell it for very little: (a) When he sells it, he is going to receive only a very small amount. No scalar implicature. (b) He's willing to sell it for a very small amount > he's willing to sell it for any price.)
- (7) *Oligarxi kupili zavody za kopejku.* (They were able to buy them at a very low price, perhaps only 10,000 rubles. No scalar implicature. Nice example of non-literal use of *kopejka*: 10,000 rubles can be "a kopeck" in the idiomatic use.)

Julia Morozova in her Homework 4 added the comment that the modified form *xot' kaplju* is not an NPI. It means "*nemnogo*" or "*čut'-čut'*". The examples (8a-b) below come from Dostoevski, and the other examples in (8) are Julia's own. But some of these examples are actually in NPI contexts, so I believe that *xot' kaplju* has a range of uses much as *kaplju* does.

- (8) a. *Ja vymalivala u nego xot' kaplju ljubvi.*
b. *Bud' èto xot' kaplju umnee vyskazano, i vsjak uvidal by točas vsju niščetu ètoj koroten'koj gluposti.* (Antecedent of a conditional)
c. Indirect negation: *Ja ne dumaju, čto u nego byla xot' kaplja žalosti.*
d. Question: *U tebja xot' kaplju ljubvi est'?*
e. Irrealis non-specific - modal: *Ty dolžen byt' xot' kaplju vospitanee.*
f. Irrealis non-specific - imperative: *Podari mne xot' kaplju ljubvy.*

These examples suggest that when a 'minimal amount' idiom is used in an irrealis context that is not an NPI context, it can still have its "very small amount" idiomatic meaning (cf. (7)), but it doesn't have the scalar implicature associated with NPI uses. I suspect that the ambiguity in (6), if there is one, reflects a difference between a relatively simple future (irrealis but no NPI licenser) and a conditional future: if someone offers him even the smallest amount, he will sell it. Cf English:

- (9) a. He is going to sell his car for a pittance. (He is going to sell his car. He is going to get very little for it. No scalar implicature.)

- b. He will sell his car for a pittance. (Ambiguous between (a) and (c¹))
 c. He would sell his car for a pittance. (If he were offered (even) a pittance (an exceedingly small sum) for his car, he would sell it.)

3. Minimal superlatives. Julia Morozova's examples with *malejšij*.

At first we had some trouble finding good examples at all with minimal superlatives. The adjective *malejšij* was said to be somewhat unnatural. Preferred substitute expressions tended to use diminutive suffixes – perhaps their availability in Russian makes the use of Russian equivalents of 'least' and 'slightest' less common than they are in English, which lacks diminutives. Eventually we found some normal sounding examples (I didn't get the actual Russian copied down – help!) using things like “know the least amount of mathematics”. That was also clearly fine in the NPI contexts 4,5,6,7. Not good in the non-NPI non-specific irrealis contexts like imperatives: I expect that even if we find the right sorts of phrases to try, we couldn't use minimal superlatives in sentences like (5) and (7), and if we could use them in (6), it would only be on the NPI-licensing 'conditional future' reading, not on a simple future reading.

In the case of comparatives, the behavior of superlatives, alike in English and Russian, I think, depends a great deal on the semantics of the particular comparison: implicatures may go 'upwards' or 'downwards' depending on the content.

- (10) (a) That truck is bigger than the biggest car. → That truck is bigger than any car.
 (b) That truck is smaller than the biggest car. (no implicature, but informative.)
 (c) That truck is bigger than the smallest car. (Feels uninformative, given that trucks are normally bigger than cars.)
 (d) That truck is smaller than the smallest car. → That truck is smaller than any car.

As in the case of *kopejka* and *kaplja*, we might have found good comparative examples if we had thought of “rhetorical comparatives” like those in (1), (2), and (3). As it was, while searching for good examples, Ivan Zakharyashev came up with one that has a superlative in the matrix clause, which gets a Free Choice interpretation. We weren't looking for those, but that's very relevant to the discussion in Haspelmath's Chapter 5 of Fauconnier's work linking scalar implicatures, quantifying superlatives, Free Choice interpretations, and NPI interpretations. I only had time to write down the English equivalent.

- (11) The person who knows the least amount of mathematics knows more than John does. → Anyone who knows any mathematics knows more than John does.

Julia Morozova constructed examples with *malejšij*².

- (12) a. Direct neg: *Ne imeju ni malejšego predstavlenija ob ètom*.
 b. Indirect neg: *bez malejšego straxa*
 c. Indirect neg: *Ja ne dumaju, što ego mučajut xot' malejšie ugrazenija sovesti*.

¹ I suppose the (c)-type reading for (b) is actually the variant with *If he is offered ... he will sell* rather than *If he were offered ... he would sell*; but the distinction between these is weakening in modern English, and anyway the distinction never was very strong in the future (as Jespersen noted).

² I have reclassified a few of the examples; in particular, I have labeled examples f and g “implicit conditionals”.

- d. Question: *Ty imeeš' xot' malejšee predstavlenie ob ètom?*
 e. Conditional: *Esli by u nego bylo xot' malejšee predstavlenie ob ètom, ...*
 f. Implicit conditional: *V slučaj malejšej neobxodimosti, obraščajtes' ko mne*.
 g. Implicit conditional: *Pri malejšix somnenijax sprašivajte u menja*.
 h. Irrealis non-specific: *Dostatočno malejšego tolčka, čtoby on poterjal ravnovesie*.
 i. Irrealis non-specific: *On dolžen imet' xot' malejšee predstavlenie ob ètom*.

As Julia notes, sometimes the sense is *nikakoj* or *kakoj-libo* (NPI) and sometimes it is *ljuboj* (free choice). And these uses seem to be derivable from a combination of the semantics of the minimizing superlative and a scalar implicature:

- (13) a. I don't have even the smallest X → I don't have any X. (NPI *any*)
 b. The smallest X would be sufficient → Any X would be sufficient (Free choice *any*.)

Additional examples that Julia found from Ogonek:

- (14) a. (Implicit cond.) *V derevne sčitajut veličajšim grexom ispolnjat' xot' malejšee podobie raboty v samye ničtožnye cerkovnye prazdniki*.
 b. Conditional: *Esli pacient vo vremja procedury vyskazyvaet xot' malejšee koebanie, meroprijatie ostanavlivajut*.
 c. Question: *Imeem li my xot' malejšee predstavlenie o tom, kak nadležit pomogat' "otstalym"?*

Examples that Julia found from Andrei Tamancev:

- (15) a. (A mon ↓ environment because of *vsemi*): *S kem vy razgovarivali? – So vsemi, kto imel xot' malejšee otnošenje k nemu*.
 b. Ind. neg: *Èto vrjad li moglo dostavit' komu-libo xot' malejšee udovol'stvie*.

Julia also found examples without *xot'*.

Quite a few examples that have no “obvious” operators in them, and might be thought to be irrealis non-specific, can probably best be analyzed as something like implicit conditionals: the item in question can be analyzed as occurring in the “restrictor” part of a “tripartite structure”: Operator (Restrictor, Nuclear Scope). If so, then most of the examples Julia found with *malejšee* without *xot'* are NPI examples with *malejšee* in an explicit or implicit conditional construction. Some could alternatively be analyzed as free choice interpretations in generic contexts – these two possibilities are actually quite similar.

- (16) a. *Komp'juter registrirujet malejšee peremeščenie jadernyx materialov*. –from Ogonek. (= if there is the slightest displacement of the nuclear materials, the computer will register it. -BHP)
 b. *Ja prekrasno znaju, kak karalos' malejšee pojavlenie šovinizma v sovetske obščestve*. – from Ogonek.
 c. *Kazalos', što malejšee dunovenie oprokinet èto neustojčivoje sooruženie*. –from Klueva.
 d. *Èta dva čeloveka byli tak rodny i blizki drug drugu, što malejšee dviženie, ton golosa, govorili dlja nix bol'se, čem vsě, što možno skazat' slovami*. – from Tolsoi, *Anna Karenina*.

4. Notes on *i* and *xot'*.

I did not manage to get written down the details about which contexts strongly favor or disfavor the use of *i* or *xot'* with *kaplja*, *kopejka*, and quantifying superlatives. I think that information contains some very important clues, but I didn't manage to capture it. I hope I can either find someone who took notes during discussion, or someone who can help reconstruct the data.

Yes, see Ivan Zakharyashev's comments about *xot'* in my handout on notes from Homework 4.

Basic idea: although I don't understand *i* and *xot'* in detail, both of them appear to be scalar focus particles, which then force the elements they combine with to be understood as relatively extreme points on a scale. That can help to disambiguate or possibly even 'coerce' expressions that might not otherwise be understood as minimal or maximal points on a scale. (Similar remarks can be made about *ni*, which can help explain why modification with *ni odin* has the effect of increasing the ratio of Genitive (vs. Nominative or Accusative) choices in contexts where Genitive of Negation is possible but not obligatory.)

Larry Horn and others have written about the association of *even* with scalar implicatures; there is a summary of that idea included in the two papers by Adam Werle about typology of negative indefinites (available on my RGGU course website), and in Haspelmath's Chapter 5.