Notes on Semantics Homework about NPIs and other Indefinites

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Notes on Homework 4 of my RGGU semantics class, spring 2004. Thanks to the following students in the class: Diana Forker, Ivan Zakharashev, Lena Osipenko, Julia Morozova, Marina Khoruzhenko. I am including some additional notes that have come from discussion with Elena Paducheva, Vladimir Borschev, Yakov Tseletes, and (possibly more to be added).

The parts of the homework that relate to the classification of Pereltsvaig’s idioms are recorded in a separate file about the idiom classification.

Note: both Diana Forker and Julia Morozova made use of the Tübingen corpus of Russian. There is a new searchable corpus at www.ruscorpora.ru which would be interesting to try.

1. Licensing by bez.

1.1 Bez nikogo: Change in progress in Russian?

The reported facts (Haspelmath, Przepiórkowski in (Przepiórkowski and Kupsc 1999)) are that bez does NOT license ni-words in Russian nor in Serbian-Croatian (S-C has an i-series that is used in that context, among others), whereas in Czech and Polish, the same word bez DOES license ni-words as well as the Czech and Polish equivalent of nikakoj, namely žadný (Cz.)/žadno (P.). Przepiórkowski proposes to treat this as an idiosyncratic fact about bez, to be specified in the lexicon – the meaning is the same in all these languages, but in Polish and Czech it is specified as introducing a ‘negative relation’ that makes the bez-phrase describe a ‘negative eventualty’, which Przepiórkowski takes to be the licensor of ni-words.

It remains an open and interesting question whether there is anything more systematic to be said about languages in which the word for ‘without’ does pattern together with S-negation and those in which it does not.

Ivan Zakharashev reports that in colloquial Russian, bez + ni-words is sometimes heard (in songs and in conversations).

(1) Bez nikogo; bez nikakoj. (state descriptions).

(2) -- On èto zdelal s čej-to pomocì? -- Net, bez nikakoj pomoci. (Definitely ok, and synonymous: Net, bez vsjakoj pomocì.)

*** It would be interesting to do a search and find out whether this usage is increasing.

(3) a. Bez nikakaj pomoci.
   b. Bez nikakoj pomoci.

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comparative numbers at different times for bez nikakogo and bez vsjakogo, similarly for other genders and number, and for bez ničego vs. bez loko-libo and bez nikakoj vs. bez kogo-libo.

There could be other relevant contexts where the indefinite is not adjacent to bez, but at least these would be easy to search for, even with just Google.)

Here’s a result from a search on that site for ‘bez nikogo’; only these three had the two words contiguous. They are all quite recent.

1. Нодар Джикия. Учитель (1980–1998) bez Всё контексты
   Bez никого, — освободился Мао. — Без никого?

2. Алексей Солженицын. Висельник (1994) (сомнения в снятости)
   Bez никого.

A search for bez nikakogo turned up nothing in that corpus, whereas bez vsjakogo turned up several hundred.

1.2 Lena Osipenko’s notes on bez with –libo and –nibud’.

See below, section 4.

2. Notes about xot’ and its role in this domain.

I put xot’ in the list of things to think about with respect to NPIs, because it has not been clear to me so far whether it is itself a kind of NPI (or other kind of ‘sensitive’ item), or whether it plays some role in licensing NPIs (and possibly other kinds of ‘sensitive’ items), or neither or both. I only know that when I am experimenting and asking native speakers of Russian questions about what is and isn’t possible in the realm of NPIs and related items, sometimes a sentence is considered bad but adding xot’ would make it good; or sometimes the presence or absence of xot’ seems to affect the kind of reading an indefinite pronoun can get.

Julia Morozova noted that none of vsjakij, xot’, liš’, vose can be considered an NPI, because all can occur in positive sentences that have no NPI-licensing elements:

(3) a. Vsjakij èto znaet.
   b. Xot’ odin celovek èto znaet.
   c. Liš’ Maša znaet èto.
   d. On vose sašel s uma.

And it’s true that these examples show that those are not NPIs. At the same time they seem to be relevant in some way. In this section of these notes, I will mainly report comments on xot’, but let me first mention an interesting observation of Julia’s. She notes that vose occurs mostly in contexts that are in some sense negative, but not necessarily in the formal sense of monotone decreasing – the relevant negativity may be “pejorative”.

(4) a. Mladšij vose byl durak. (iz skazki Eršova “Koněk-gorbunok”)
   b. *Staršij vose byl umnyj
2.1. Notes from Ivan Zakharyaschev about contexts licensing xot’.

The contexts that license xot’ most straightforwardly seem to be:

Irrealis Non-specific, Question, Conditional.

But sometimes it can be used in a simple past tense episodic sentence, but then it adds a special sort of meaning.

(5) (Na) xot’ kto-nibud’ prisel.

Ivan’s intuition about the sentence: it expresses a kind of relief about the fact that someone came.

Note (this is me speaking now) that we don’t usually get –nibud’ words in simple past tense sentences unless they are being made implicitly modal. Perhaps the special interpretation we get in (5) is related to the ambiguity in the English sentence (6), discussed both by Larry Horn (Horn 1972) and Nirit Kadmon (Kadmon 1987).

(6) At least one person remembered.

a. I’m glad to see that at least there was one person who remembered.

b. At least one person, and possibly more, remembered.

In the “I’m glad to see” reading, at least is some sort of comment on the whole sentence, rather than a modifier of the numeral. That “sentence-comment” use of at least may be similar to the interpretation Ivan describes for (5).

What has not been discussed anywhere before, as far as I know, is in what sense this at least or xot’ acts like an irrealis operator (or causes us to postulate an implicit irrealis operator acting on the sentence) and makes the subject NP less referential, allowing the possibility of -nibud’ forms and making discourse anaphora impossible or at least harder.

2.2. Ivan Zakharyaschev: adding xot’ seems to remove specificity.

Ivan also looked at the effect of adding xot’ to a –to or –nibud’ form, and noticed that the addition of xot’ sometimes lets –to and –nibud’ forms be used in places where otherwise they could not be. We already saw an example of that above with (5), where xot’ kto-nibud’ can be used in what looks like a simple past tense sentence. Without xot’, kto-nibud’ would not be allowed there (unless …?).

And Ivan lists several examples where xot’ –to can be used, with a non-specific meaning, where otherwise either it could not be used or it could be used only with a specific meaning. (Without xot’, for instance, a question like (9) is the kind of example Haspelmath gives where “specific-unknown” is disallowed, because the listener wouldn’t be able to identify the question that should be answered. Similarly for the imperative in (7).)

(7) Spojte xot’ kakaju-to pesnju. (Irrealis non-specific)

(8) Esli Vy xot’ čto-to znaete, Vy smožete otvetit’. (Conditional)

(9) Videli Vy xot’ kakaju-to zvezdu? (Question)

As further evidence that xot’ kto-to is non-specific, he notes the impossibility of following it with an anaphoric pronoun (see 10a). But (BHP) note that this is not ‘discourse anaphora’, because the pronoun is in the same sentence, in a position where it would normally be ok with a non-specific antecedent in the conditional clause, so I’m not sure why it should be bad. Without the xot’, anaphora would be fine, as in (11).

(10) a. *Esli xot’ kto-to pridet, pozovite ego ko mne.

b. Esli xot’ kto-to pridet, soobščite mne ob ètom.

(11) Esli kto-to pridet, pozovite ego ko mne. On možet rasskazat’ to-to važnoe.

Hmm, I would be curious to know whether (12), with the intrinsically non-specific kto-nibud’, normal in conditional clauses, is fine. I think it is, which means there is more going on here than just making kto-to non-specific. Why is (10a) bad then? I would also like to know whether kto-to in (11) is really “specific unknown”: it seems to me it is not, because if it were, it should be as hard for the hearer to understand the instruction as it is to understand a question or an imperative containing a “specific unknown” form.

(12) Esli kto-nibud’ pridet, pozovite ego ko mne. (VBB: This is slightly strange.)

And what about the following? Is it good or bad, and why? What does it mean?

(13) Esli xot’ kto-nibud’ pridet, soobščite mne ob ètom. (VBB: it sounds ok.)

3. Apparent “prototype” behavior in indefinites and in their contexts.

3.1. Diana Forker on core and boundary functions for various indefinite series.

Diana is concerned about the fact that although the descriptions given by Haspelmath and by Tatevosov and others about which indefinites can occur in which contexts seem to match well with many examples and intuitions, there seem always to be some exceptional cases that don’t quite fit the map. Haspelmath and Tatevosov themselves mention that making semantic maps requires a certain amount of generalizing, sometimes perhaps overgeneralizing. Diana suggests that a prototype analysis might be a good way to look at it: “Both for nibud’-items and for libo-items, their core functions are indirect negation, conditional, and comparative.

1. In the case of the core functions the respective items are the best ones. Besides, sometimes the items can be used for the adjacent functions, which could be called boundary functions. The prototype functions and the boundary functions must be directly connected on the map. This explains why libo-items can be used in questions and irrealis sentences.

2. If there are sentences that seem to fulfill two functions, e.g. direct predicate negation and irrealis, as in (14), maybe one could argue that there is a kind of hierarchy of these functions. If one function (in this case the irrealis function) does not allow for a certain item, then another “stronger” function “can help”. In other words, a combination of two and more functions can allow for more than only the core functions of an item.”

(14) V ètom dele ne dolžno byt’ kakoj-libo volokity i provoloček.

Diana continues: “I have no idea how to explain the direct predicate negation of –nibud’ items, as in (15). In case of –libo items, one could argue that this is a boundary function. But
for –nibud’ items this isn’t possible, unless you can find cases of indirect negation sentences for these items.¹

(15) Vidimo, ptency načali uže letat’, i teper’ roditeli bojalis’, čto po neoplynosti ptency privlečú k sebe vnimanie, i osobennou zorko sledili, čtoby k nim koe-nibud’ ne približili.

3.2 Possible prototype behavior in notions of ‘specific’, ‘non-specific’, ‘free choice’.

This is a related issue that I will discuss in the regular lecture notes. Neither the boundaries of the contexts nor the boundaries of the semantic properties involved seem to be totally sharp; and there is a certain amount of cross-linguistic variation, suggesting that different languages ‘sharpen’ (grammatize) these notions somewhat differently.

4. Multiple licensing, and more general questions about ‘licensors’, ‘sensitive items’, and ‘cues’.

If quite a few of these indefinites need to be “licensed”, and a given sentence may happen to contain several “licensors”, then we have to be careful about how we approach the data. Giannakidou used the terms “licensing” and “anti-licensing”. We need to distinguish, for instance, between the issue of whether a given element MAY occur in, for instance, a question, and the issue of whether it can occur in a question that contains no other potential licensors. In Haspelmath’s chart, those issues are not clearly distinguished.

Here is an example of a “multiple licensing” problem that VBB and I discovered and reported on in a joint paper of ours; it presents an apparent counter-example to common beliefs about Genitive of Negation and scope of negation:

(16) Možet byť cego-nibud’ u nego net.

Maybe there is something he doesn’t have. (Said when trying to imagine what we could get for him for a present, for instance.)

This example is a puzzle because it seems that the Genitive of Negation must be licensed by Direct (clausemate) negation, but –nibud’ normally cannot occur with clausemate negation. Somehow it seems that the –nibud’ is licensed by možet byť, while the genitive is licensed by direct negation, even though those are two parts of the same complex word-form.

So there is no simple recipe for filling in “questionnaires” like the one I gave you with homework 4. The questionnaire is a reasonable starting point, but detective work is needed, and discussion of puzzling examples can be at least as important, often more so, than filling in the chart.

Ivan notes that the test for superordinate negation is not very clear, because a “higher clause”, such as Ja ne damaju, čto ...contains a verb which creates a modal context, and then we can’t tell for sure whether some indefinite in the embedded sentence is licensed by the negation or by the modal verbs. This is another place where detective work is needed – I don’t know any simple answers.

Sometimes it seems that the line between licensors and licensees is not clear. And that in fact can be true for the language itself, not only for linguists. French personne, pas, etc., used to be NPIs but are gradually evolving into expressions of negation themselves. And some of you have remarked that –nibud’ itself sometimes makes a sentence non-veridical. How could that be? Answer: “coercion”. If –nibud’ needs to be licensed by a non-veridical operator, and there exist implicit, phonetically null, non-veridical operators, then it is natural that whenever we hear –nibud’ we will imagine the presence of a non-veridical operator in the context.

Ivan, for instance, discussed the “licensing” of –nibud’ with just word order change or the addition of da, and the question of whether –nibud’ really does have any ‘sensitivity’ features, or rather just has a meaning of a kind that doesn’t fit everywhere. I think that relates closely to the notion of coercion that I mentioned just above.

This is a good place to mention one of Lena Osipenko’s examples:


b. On ne smožet ètogo sdelat’ bez kakoj-nibud’ umnoj knižki.

Haspelmath said that –nibud’ words don’t occur with bez. Lena notes that these are also irrealis contexts. This is probably a good example for discussing “licensing” and “anti-licensing” and trying to explain what is going on. But there is a lot going on in these examples: there is also higher sentential negation, and that plus bez might even be a case of two negatives making a positive.

In addition to possible unclear lines between ‘licensors’ and ‘licensees’ (‘sensitive items’), there seem to be items that may be neither (xov’, contrastive stress (focus)) but which by virtue of their own requirements may give cues to the presence of a silent operator, and because of that may gradually evolve into operators themselves. Hence at any given time their status might be in flux.

5. Are specific indefinites excluded from imperatives? Lena Osipenko’s counterexample and what Haspelmath could say about it.

Specific indefinites, like proper names, can usually occur almost anywhere. Haspelmath worked hard to find some contexts where they are excluded, to help test whether an item is a specific indefinite. He concluded that imperatives are pragmatically incompatible with specific indefinites, because the hearer would not be able to identify what command he was supposed to fulfill. Similarly with most questions.

Lena Osipenko has constructed an interesting counterexample, an imperative which is fine with a koe-form in it.

(18) Kupi mne koe-kakie lekarstva, ja tebe sejčus spisok napišu.

What would Haspelmath say? Assuming that he agrees with us that a specific indefinite is inherently specific and does not need to be “licensed” by anything, I think Haspelmath would...
say that this example actually helps to prove his point that the usual impossibility of using specific indefinites in imperatives has a pragmatic basis. In this example, what “saves” it is the second clause: the speaker is implicitly acknowledging that the command would be impossible to carry out without further information, and in the second clause promises to provide exactly that missing information. The first clause by itself would be saying something like “Buy me some medicines – I know which ones but you don’t.” And that would indeed be anomalous.

References


