Bare NPs in Russian

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1 Plan

In article-less languages bare NPs are usually said to play the same roles that indefinite NPs (those carrying the indefinite article), definite NPs (with the definite article) and bare NPs play in languages that have articles, combined. We look at the analyses proposed in the formal semantics literature to those kinds of NPs for English, and see whether the same treatment can be given to Russian bare NPs.

2 Analyses

In the table below, I list one variant of a set of analyses that covers all the uses of the NPs in question in English (in argument positions only).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indefinites</th>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DRT discourse referent + novelty condition</td>
<td>1s</td>
<td>1p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice function</td>
<td>2s</td>
<td>2p</td>
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</tbody>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definites</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DRT discourse referent + familiarity condition</td>
<td>3s</td>
<td>3p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proper name for an established kind</td>
<td>4s</td>
<td>4p</td>
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</tbody>
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<th>Bare NPs</th>
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<tr>
<td>Proper name for a kind</td>
<td>5s</td>
<td>5p</td>
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</table>

3s, 3p I interpret most definites using the Discourse Representation Theory (DRT), as proposed by Kamp 1981 and Heim 1982. A definite NP contributes a discourse referent (similar to a variable, but the scope is determined using different rules), a predicate that the referent is required to satisfy (determined by the NP’s content), and a presupposition of familiarity — that is, the referent must not be new in the current discourse.

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1. There is no restriction to a singular instantiation.

3. ‘Existential’ bare NPs do not introduce kind-level discourse referents.


4. ‘Existential’ bare NPs can take scope over negation.

6. Molodoj čelovek v uglu ne skazal ni slova za ves’ večer. A young man in the corner did not say a word the whole evening.

and over other quantifiers

7. Včera v zooparke slon oblival každoga posetitelja vodoj. Yesterday in the zoo an elephant poured water on every visitor.
5. Bare NPs can receive *de re* reading with respect to opacity introducing operators.

(8) Kostja hočet ženit’sja na norvežke. No sam on dumaet, čto ona švedka.
    Kostya wants to marry a Norwegian. He thinks she is a Swede, though.

6. Bare NPs can give rise to donkey pronouns.

(9) Esli u krest’janina jest’ oslitsa, on vsegda ee bjet.
    If a farmer has a donkey, he always beats it.

All of these examples can only be explained if we assume that bare NPs in Russian can be true indefinites (for which I prefer the DRT analysis). This does not prove the unavailability of a kind reading in principle, but since all the evidence Dayal provides is based on the supposed *absense* of certain readings, it is very hard to prove that kind-based interpretation is available.

2s, 2p Indefinites in English sometimes seem to have exceptionally wide scope, violating the scope islands. Such indefinites have been called specific or referential. The best known exposition is perhaps Fodor and Sag (1982).

(10) If a girl from our class comes to the party, Peter will be happy. Her name is Julie.

DRT cannot handle these cases; the most popular approach for analysing them is currently choice functions (for example, Kratzer 1998). A choice function maps every predicate (specified by the content of the NP) to an individual satisfying that predicate. The choice function can be specified at the highest level of the sentence or taken from the context of the discourse, thus avoiding the scope island problems.

In Russian, bare NPs do not have exceptionally wide scope.

(11) Esli devuška iz našego klassa pridet na p’janku, Petja budet očen’ rad. #Ee zovut Julja.
    If a girl from our class comes to the party, Petya will be very happy. #Her name is Yulya.

The second sentence in (11) is only felicitous if there is only one girl in the class, and the NP is definite.

In English, in a lot of cases the choice-function analysis and the DRT analysis provide the same truth conditions. It is not clear that there is any fact of the matter which one is right. In Russian, there is no choice.

Note also that the absence of a choice function analysis does not mean that in Russian bare NPs cannot be specific indefinites; for example, koška in the first sentence of (1) is specific (in the sense that the identity of the cat is known to the speaker). What is missing is abnormally wide scope for specific bare NPs.
Bare plurals in Russian demonstrate most of the properties that led Carlson (1980) to his theory of kind reference.

1. They always take narrow scope with respect to negation.
   (12) Semen ne uvidel pjaten na polu.
   Semen did not see spots on the floor.

2. Narrow scope with respect to quantifiers is at least strongly preferred.
   (13) Kity napadali na nash korabl’ dvenadtsat’ raz
   Whales attacked our ship on twelve occasions.

3. Anaphora is possible between ‘existential’ bare NPs and ‘generic’ pronouns and vice versa.
   (14) Tykvy hranjatsja dolgo, poetomu Nikita kupil ih mnogo.
   Pumpkins can be stored for a long time, so Nikita bought a lot of them.

Unfortunately, it is possible to find counterexamples to some of Carlson’s tests. The following sentence is translated from a Hebrew example given in Dayal 2004 (attributed to Doron).

(15) Nikifor hoˇ cet priglasit’ k sebe militsionerov. On, pravda, ne znaet, čto oni militsionery; on s nimi poznakomilsja na rybalke.
Nikifor wants to invite some policemen to his house. He does not know that they are policemen, though; he met them on a fishing trip.

Here a bare plural NP militsionery has a de re use in the scope of an opacity inducing operator. This is predicted to be impossible by Carlson, and suggests that the NP in question is associated with some quantifier.

3 Conclusion

Singular bare NPs seem to have two kinds of uses in Russian: DRT-like, associated with discourse referents, and proper names for established kinds. In DRT-like uses, there is no familiarity or novelty conditions. (Such a description does not explain why referents introduced by definite bare NPs can escape scope islands. Perhaps the familiarity/uniqueness presupposition is what carries them outside.)

Plural bare NPs undoubtedly can be definite object-referring, and kind-referring in the style of Carlson. Some examples, however, point to a ‘quantificational’ existential indefinite reading. It is not clear under what conditions such a reading becomes available.

Finally, DRT seems to be right in treating indefinites with exceptionally wide scope as a special case — they are special, at least in Russian.
References


