

On some distributional differences between clausal complements of nouns in Russian and English

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In this paper I discuss some differences in the licensing of clausal complements (of nouns) in languages like Russian and English and propose an account for these differences based on the difference in the respective complementizers.

In Russian clausal complements of nouns like *dokazatel'stvo* ‘proof’ and *verojatnost'* ‘likelihood’ cannot be generally realized as *čto*-clauses, as shown in (1a)–(2a), but have to be preceded by the correlative *to* (morphologically the neuter singular distal demonstrative) in the genitive case, giving rise to what I will call *to,čto*-clauses, shown in (1b)–(2b) (see Khomitsevich 2008 for some discussion of this construction). However, *čto*-clauses are exceptionally possible in certain linguistic contexts where the relevant noun forms a semantic unit with the higher predicate, as in (1c)–(2c); cf. ‘there is likelihood that p’ \approx ‘is likely that p’, ‘provide proof that p’ \approx ‘prove that p’.

- (1) a. *Oni obsuždali verojatnost', [čto Ivan priedet].
they.NOM discussed likelihood.ACC that Ivan.NOM will come
Intended: ‘They discussed the likelihood that Ivan will come.’
b. Oni obsuždali verojatnost' [togo, [čto Ivan priedet]].
they.NOM discussed likelihood.ACC it.GEN that Ivan.NOM will come
‘They discussed the likelihood that Ivan will come.’
c. Est' verojatnost', [čto Ivan priedet].
is likelihood.NOM that Ivan.NOM will come
‘There is likelihood that Ivan will come.’
- (2) a. *Oni proignorirovali dokazatel'stvo, [čto na Marse est' žizn'].
they.NOM ignored proof.ACC that on Mars is life
Intended: ‘They ignored the proof that there is life on Mars.’
b. Oni proignorirovali dokazatel'stvo [togo, [čto na Marse est' žizn']].
they.NOM ignored proof.ACC it.GEN that on Mars is life
‘They ignored the proof that there is life on Mars.’
c. Oni priveli dokazatel'stvo, [čto na Marse est' žizn'].
they.NOM provided proof.ACC that on Mars is life
‘They provided the proof that there is life on Mars.’

Interestingly, as shown by the English translations, *that*-clauses do not show such restrictions. The observed pattern raises two questions, namely (i) what is the reason for the restriction on Russian *čto*-clauses observed in examples like (1a)–(2a); and (ii) why this restriction is not observed with English *that*-clauses.

Starting from question (i), I would like to propose the following account. First, I assume, following Longobardi 1994, that referentiality is encoded by the projection of DP. Second, I assume, following Haegeman and Ürögdi 2010, the referential vs. non-referential distinction in the domain of clausal complements. From these two assumptions it follows that referential clausal complements will always project a DP-layer (see Takahashi 2010 for the DP-layer analysis of clausal complements).

Next if we compare the object position of nouns ‘likelihood’ and ‘proof’ in (1a)–(1b) and (2a)–(2b), on the one hand, and in (1c)–(2c), on the other hand, we may note a

semantic difference. In the former case this position is referential as it intuitively presupposes that there is some proposition under discussion whose likelihood/proof is discussed/ignored. In contrast, there is no such presupposition in the latter case. Given this difference (and the assumptions about referentiality), complement clauses in the unacceptable (1a)–(1a) will have to project a DP-layer, giving rise to the structure illustrated in (3) (for (1a)). Now in order to account for why the structure in (3) is blocked in Russian I would like to propose the following principle (partly inspired by Longobardi 1994).

- (3) Oni obsuždali verojatnost', [_{DP} D⁰ [čto Ivan priedet]].
 they.NOM discussed likelihood.ACC that Ivan.NOM will come
 ‘They discussed the likelihood [_{DP} D⁰ [that Ivan will come]].’

- (4) The D⁰ head (introducing clausal complements) has to be lexically filled.

Assuming that the correlative *to* in examples like (1b)–(2b) is an overt realization of D⁰, which is quite plausible given its function as a demonstrative (cf. Bailyn’s (2011) analysis of demonstratives as D heads), we derive the relevant difference between the unacceptable examples like (1a)–(2a) and the acceptable examples like (1b)–(2b). The unacceptable examples will involve violation of the principle in (4).

Turning to question (ii), I would like to suggest that in English referential *that*-clauses the D⁰ position is filled by the complementizer *that* itself in accordance with the principle in (4). This mechanism, however, is disallowed for the Russian complementizer *čto*. The reason for the difference between the two complementizers might be related to the fact that the complementizer *that* is etymologically a demonstrative and hence a D⁰ element (see, e.g., Bošković 1995), whereas the Russian complementizer *čto* is not as it is related to the *wh*-element ‘what’. Speaking in terms of nanosyntax, we may say that the complementizer *that* is able to lexicalize both heads (C⁰ and D⁰), whereas in Russian *čto* will not be able to lexicalize the D⁰ head, which thus will have to be lexicalized by the designated D⁰ head *to* (the alternative way to capture the difference between *that* and *čto* is by assuming that only *that* can underdo C-to-D movement).

Some evidence for the proposed account of the distributional differences between *čto*- and *that*-clauses comes from the distribution of sentential subjects in the two languages. Whereas in Russian sentential subjects cannot be realized as *čto*-clauses and have to surface as *to, čto*-clauses, as shown in (5a)–(5b), English *that*-clauses are fine in this construction, as shown by the translation. Assuming that (sentential) subjects are always DPs and can never be CPs, as argued in Davies and Dubinsky 2009 (see also Koster 1978), the DP-layer will be projected on top of the clause and, consequently, the *čto*-clause in (5a) will violate the principle in (4), as opposed to the *to, čto*-clause in (5b) and the *that*-clause.

- (5) a. *Čto on èto skazal, dokazyvaet ego nevinovnost'.
 that he.NOM this.ACC said proves his innocence.ACC
 Intended: ‘(The fact) that he said this proves his innocence.’
 b. To, čto on èto skazal, dokazyvaet ego nevinovnost'.
 it.NOM that he.NOM this.ACC said proves his innocence.ACC
 ‘(The fact) that he said this proves his innocence.’

To conclude, given some plausible assumptions about referentiality and the analysis of referential clausal complements, the proposed difference between the English complementizer *that* and the Russian complementizer *čto*, derives some intriguing contrasts in the distribution of *that*-clauses vs. *čto*-clauses in the two languages.