

Transitive constructions under negation in Russian: a usage-based approach to the genitive-accusative competition

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It is a well-known fact that Russian transitive sentences under negation display some variation in case patterning, including nominative-accusative and nominative-genitive options (Timberlake, 1975; Bailyn, 1997; Borschev, Partee, 2002; Paducheva, 2006; Fesenko, 2016; and others), as shown in the examples below:

(1) *ne ob"javit' vojn-u*
NEG declare war-ACC

(2) *ne ob"javit' vojn-y*
NEG declare war-GEN

Under several perspectives, linguists have tried to understand which factors impact the choice of one or another case pattern. Some studies (Schvedova 1980, Paducheva 2006, Fesenko 2017) have shown the existence of contexts in which only one of the options is possible, contexts in which one of them is preferable and contexts displaying variation between both patterns (Schvedova 1980). Some scholars suggest that the nominative-accusative pattern is spreading over the original nominative-genitive, assuming some kind of competition between those forms (Timberlake, 1975). However, despite the available efforts to solve this question, the reasons to justify preferences for one case or another in Russian remain not totally unclear. This paper aims at providing an empirical analysis of the variation of case patterning in transitive negative constructions in Russian under a usage-based constructionist account. According to this view, language is conceived as a complex adaptive system, consisting of multiple agents interacting with one another, including the interrelation among experience, social interaction and cognitive domain-general processes (Bybee 2010). In a Construction Grammar approach, the basic unit of language is the construction, a symbolic unit pairing form and meaning (Croft 2001, Goldberg 2006, Diessel 2015). Nominative-accusative and nominative-genitive patterns will be analyzed as different pairs of form and meaning, which may be in some kind of competition in Russian. In this research, real instances of negative transitive constructions in Russian oral discourse, extracted from Russian National Corpus (available at www.ruscorpora.ru), are collected and then a factor analysis is applied, considering aspects like gender inflection, animacy, verbal semantics, genres of discourse, etc.. Preliminary results suggest that nominative-accusative pattern displays a greater type frequency of verbs occurring in the construction, an evidence that the accusative option may be a more productive and schematic construction, maybe as a result of its associative link to the positive transitive construction, which displays the combination nominative-accusative as its preferable pattern.

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