

Economically Correct: Verb Omission in Russian and Czech

The aim of my paper is to analyze finite verb omission in Russian and Czech. By comparing the possibilities for omission in the two languages, the unusual typological situation of Russian will be revealed. While the restrictions on empty verb strings in Czech are relatively strict, Russian allows for missing verbs in many contexts. Compared with other European languages, the Russian language appears almost exotic and deserves a special typological treatment.

In research on the different types of syntactic incompleteness, different terminology can be found and it is therefore crucial to first establish a precise set of terms. In this paper, I will use the terminology presented by Ju.D. Apresjan. An **ellipsis** must be recoverable unambiguously. Moreover, according to Apresjan, an ellipsis is an omission which is “compulsory in certain syntactic contexts, i.e. happens automatically” (Apresjan 1986: 112). Therefore, a distinction can be made between mandatory and optional ellipses. I will not pay much attention to ellipses in this paper.

On the other hand, a **zero**, according to Apresjan, is “an omission not required by its syntactic context and, therefore, a semantically relevant absence of a linguistic construct” (Apresjan 1986: 113). Every zero has a certain meaning, but it is not possible to reconstruct that meaning, since it does not match the meaning of any existing Russian lexeme (Apresjan 1986: 113). A classical example of a zero would be:

- (1) *Улицу засыпали песком.*
(Мельчук 1995: 180)

While it is clear that (1) must mean that some person or people must have covered the road with sand, the implement must be an abstract complex of semes; it is impossible to implement the sentence without changing the meaning.

This is different for example (2):

- (2) *Мне бы маму сюда!*

It is not possible to classify example (2) as an ellipsis, since the empty string in *мне бы маму сюда* is neither mandatory nor is there only one lexeme that fits the gap. What we are dealing with is rather a whole set of possible lexemes in different tenses and aspects that would do the job (e.g. *позвать, привезти, пригласить*). On the other hand, it is just as impossible to call this omission a zero, since the completion of the sentence with a concrete lexeme is possible and does not change its meaning. This means that this sort of omission can be assigned an intermediate status between an ellipsis and a zero – while the empty string represents an abstract complex of semes, it is possible to find matching verbs to complete the sentence. I would therefore classify most verb omissions as a case between an ellipsis and a zero. There are, however, also verbal gaps that can be filled with only one lexeme (e.g. *Как Вам Неаполь?*).

One of the first scholars to address the question of verb omission in Russian was E.N. Širjaev in the collective monograph *Русская разговорная речь* (1973: 288). He came to the conclusion that the omission of verbs is a characteristic of colloquial Russian. However, in this paper, I will try to show that such omissions also occur in other text genres, such as journalistic texts, internet communication and some fiction. The use of empty strings is frequent when the text genres are close to spoken language. To show that Russian allows for more omissions, I will compare different text genres in Russian and Czech.

The research draws upon a corpus of several hundred examples. The texts are mostly close to spoken language or trying to reflect it (movies, plays, comics, advertisements,

internet blogs, news coverages). In order to obtain parallel texts in Russian and Czech, synchronized versions of movies and translations of fictional texts were used.

An important theoretical approach to modelling missing verbs within the framework of dependency syntax was presented by I.A. Melčuk. Melčuk illustrates the degree of freedom Russian allows when it comes to empty verb strings by showing that it is possible to omit any verb as long as it denotes an action and requires an object (Melčuk 1995: 192). This result is insofar surprising, as it would seem important that a sentence preserves the root of its dependency tree. It is possible to omit verbs in the past tense, as well as of both aspects and even verbs in the conditional mood. The only restriction is that the omitted verb cannot be negated.

In this paper I will concentrate on the following topics:

1. Are certain texts more prone to verb omissions? Typically, political and advertisement slogans in both Russian and Czech frequently show verb omissions (see ex. 3 and 4).

(3) *Za naši svobodu! Ku předu s československou armádou!*

Czech propaganda poster from the Second World War
[http://www.vlastenci.cz/stah/obr/propaganda/1_zasvobodu.jpg]

(4) *Кто умен, а кто дурак! Один за книгу, другой в кабак*

Russian propaganda poster against analphabetism from 1926
[<http://eressea.ru/library/enter/gallery/index5.shtml>]

However, this paper will concentrate on other text genres to establish whether empty strings are also used outside of genres where a concise and laconic language is important.

2. This paper will also show that Czech verb omissions are more often ellipses and phraseologically established zeros. There are almost no free zeros. Typical for Czech (and other European languages) is, for instance, the omission of infinitives after modal verbs (e.g. *Tam nechci!*). Russian, on the other hand, is much freer and allows for many different omissions.

3. Is a particular instance of omission part of a phraseological unit, a free syntactic formation or something in-between?

This comparison will show how far Russian has evolved away from other Slavic languages when it comes to the omission of verbs.

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