

(In)definiteness in Russian bare nouns: evidence from presentational contexts

Introduction The three argument introducing operations, ι , \exists and *nom*, are supposed to be sufficient to denote any NP in any language. Article-less languages do not have special morphology for them, therefore their nominals are usually ambiguous between definite and indefinite. This study addresses this ambiguity of bare nouns in Russian. I investigate uniqueness as one of the two core ingredients of definiteness, and I am focusing on the interpretation of bare nouns in presentational contexts, which are least likely to invoke definiteness. I provide experimental evidence for Russian bare singulars (SG) being interpreted uniquely, and Russian bare plurals (PL) being interpreted maximally. I support my claim by testing English data as well, and I show that Russian bare nouns align with English definite NPs rather than with English indefinite NPs. Thus, my results fully support the theory proposed by Dayal (2004), and contradict the opposite view that Russian bare NPs are born indefinite and derive uniqueness as a pragmatic presupposition (Šimík&Demian 2020, Borik et al. 2019, Borik et al. 2020, Seres&Borik 2021). I suggest that Russian bare arguments are always introduced by a null argument-forming operator realized as *nom*/ ι . Their indefinite readings occur in focus-marked positions, and arise because the *Foc* operator attaches below D hosting ι/σ , which results in \exists -closure.

The experiment The goal was to determine whether Russian bare nouns are unique/maximal in presentational contexts, and to compare them to English definite and indefinite NPs. The participants ($n = 30$ for each language) judged the acceptability of a text stimulus for a visual stimulus. The visual stimuli manipulated uniqueness/maximality of the referent, its number, and its prominence in the picture/video (see Table 1). The study consisted of two sub-experiments: E1 investigating subject NPs and E2 investigating object NPs; E2 only used video stimuli to avoid pluractionality. Textual stimuli manipulated syntactic position of the NP (subject vs. object), its number and, for English, definiteness (1–4).

Results Russian bare nouns pattern together with English definite nouns, both in SG and PL and both in subject and object position (Figure 1). The difference in their distributions is statistically insignificant (linear mixed-effects model; $p > 0.05$). Another important result for Russian is that in subject position, a bare SG can refer to a non-unique but prominent individual. In English DEF.SG subjects, the prominence effect is significantly weaker.

Analysis The striking similarity between Russian bare NPs and English definite NPs in presentational contexts is a strong evidence in favor of Dayal’s theory. I adopt the view that Russian bare nouns in argument positions are DPs with a null head D (Lyutikova 2018 ao). I further propose that this null head contains an null proform-like operator ARG that may be realized as *nom*/ ι , reflecting the hierarchy proposed by Dayal: $\{nom, \iota\} > \exists$. Contexts where Russian bare NPs do receive an indefinite reading can be restricted to three cases: introduction by a focus operator (5), post-verbal focus (6), or intonation focus (7). I further follow Schwarzschild (1999) in postulating a *Foc* node in the LF of F-marked (accented) phrases. But crucially, I propose that in Russian, *Foc* is placed below D (8). If the DP is focus-marked, it gets existentially closed before D0 is merged. This results in an indefinite reading. F-marked constituents adjoin to *vP* and non-F-marked constituents adjoin to TP, as proposed in Baylin (2012). Importantly, focused nominals in focus contexts determined above still project up to the DP level in most cases.

Conclusion I showed that Russian bare NPs are unique and maximal in presentational contexts and proposed that in all cases, Russian bare arguments are introduced with a null operator ARG realized as *nom*/ ι but never as \exists . The indefinite readings are restricted to focus-marked contexts, and can be handled by introducing a *Foc* operator below D. In this way, my data supports the hierarchy proposed by Dayal: $\{nom, \iota\} > \exists$.

