

Semantics of Two Russian “Aboutness” Prepositions (*o*+LOC and *pro*)

In the present study I examine, for the purpose of comparison, the semantic content of two primary prepositions in Russian which translate ‘about, concerning’: *o*+LOC and *pro*. Historically, several scholars have acknowledged that *o*+LOC and *pro* are not exact synonyms; they express slightly different nuances, although the exact nature of these nuances appears to have become less clear over time (Peškovskij 1928/2001, Vinogradov 1947/2001). K.S. Aksakov (1880) described *pro* as having a weakening nuance of remoteness and in general, of striving toward a goal, remarking that this preposition had in the past generally signified a “moral goal [directed toward] somewhere” (*ustremlenie npravstvennoe kuda nibud’*), but this emotional connotation had faded over time, such that in Aksakov’s view, *pro* carried only an area/topic sense.

I have identified several selectional restrictions—the types of verbs and nouns (and features within them) with which these prepositions occur—associated with *o*+LOC and *pro*, in sample texts written between 1890 and 2009, from the Russian National Corpus. The quantitative study I conducted consists of Fisher’s Exact tests performed on approximately 7,000 tokens (which consist of argument phrases with these prepositions). Results indicate that in many instances, *pro* is associated with nouns which are animate, proper, unmodified, and non-deverbal. Qualitative analysis of the types of verbs associated with ‘aboutness’ PP’s as complements reveals that *pro* is mostly limited to verbs whose ‘aboutness’ object referent codes the semantic role of Topic. In contrast, with verbs that depict an emotional state (*bespokoit’sja* ‘be worried’, etc.), the object referent codes the semantic role of Cause; with verbs that depict requesting or supplication (*prosit’* ‘ask (for), request’, *umoljat’* ‘beseech’, etc.) the object referent codes the role of Proposition. Object referents of *pro*, however, rarely occur in these semantic roles, being generally limited to the semantic role of Topic; the verbs with which such a referent is associated depict one or more parts of the signal path of a message—speaking, writing, reading, inquiring, hearing (about), or cognitive activity. The performing of activities associated with a Topic object referent do not entail a change of state in any of the participants in the discourse, as is the case with emotional states and requests. I have also examined ‘co-occurrence’ examples of the two prepositions, in which *o*+LOC and *pro* PP’s occur in the same syntagma or sentence, both subordinate to the same verb. Close readings of these co-occurrences show that in many of them, the semantic/pragmatic opposition between the *o*+LOC and *pro* object referents is such that the former are presented as being larger in scope, and more analyzed than the *pro* entities. This type of study may be useful in revealing the extent of convergence and divergence of semantic nuances of other pairs or sets of near-synonyms in other languages.

Throughout this study I use René Dervin’s (1993) model of the metaphorical extensions of prepositions, each semantic extension of meaning radiating outward from a fundamental spatial meaning.

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