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Strong and Weak Pronouns in Russian: Lexical, Structural, or Pragmatic Difference?

The theory of structural deficiency (Cardinaletti, Starke 1999a) suggests a tripartite typology of pronouns (and apparently not only pronouns): clitics vs. weak vs. strong elements. Clitics are deficient with respect to weak pronouns which are in turn deficient with respect to strong pronouns. The differences involve syntactic distribution (only strong pronouns can be coordinated or modified by adverbs; only clitics occur in head positions, etc.), semantics (strong pronouns denote human referents only, weak pronouns and clitics must have an antecedent prominent in the discourse, may be impersonal, or expletive), morphology (more reduced as deficiency increases), and prosodic features (restructuring like liaison or reduction is found only with clitics and weak pronouns; clitics cannot bear lexical word stress). In Cardinaletti & Starke's analysis, deficient pronouns correspond less to syntactic structure than strong pronouns. Strong elements have a CP (the topmost part of the traditional DP), but deficient elements lack it; clitics, unlike weak pronouns, are categories of the X^0 level. Only full, i.e. strong, structures are generable; the existence of deficient structure is attributed to a reduction process in syntax motivated by a general Minimize Structure principle. Demonstrative pronouns stand apart from the tripartite classification: they have a special morphological marker (like *th-* in English); they must be disjoint from any c -commanding antecedent (while personal pronouns must be disjoint only from local antecedents); demonstratives may refer to non-human entities in contexts requiring strong forms like coordination: *Which flowers? Those, and those* (Cardinaletti, Starke 1999b).

According to Cardinaletti & Starke's theory, in Russian, like in English, a covert distinction between homophonous weak and strong personal pronouns must be found. However, the expected correlation between semantic and distributional characteristics, i. e. the inability of pronouns with nonhuman referents to be coordinated, is only partly supported by Russian data (counterexamples are found in other languages too, cf. Diesing 1999; Holmberg 1999). In fact, nonhuman personal pronouns can occur as leftmost conjuncts (1), although they are infelicitous as non-leftmost ones (2). Moreover, even this weaker restriction for nonhuman pronouns, contrary to Cardinaletti & Starke, cannot be explained by the structure of pronominal constructions. In fact, coordinations with a non-leftmost conjunct containing a personal pronoun with a nonhuman referent are very often infelicitous (3), a fact which may be accounted for by pragmatic factors.

In the absence of reliable correlation between semantics and distribution of the two classes thought to be homophonous, one single class of full pronouns can be postulated instead. The difference observed between "strong" and "weak" pronouns must be rather attributed to two different classes of positions, similar to the distinction between nominal CPs and IPs, two levels that replace the traditional DP in Cardinaletti & Starke's theory. Strong positions are available for pronouns, and not only personal ones, weak positions are either unavailable for them, cf. (Švedova (ed.) 1980: 455) or available under special conditions like discourse prominence of their referents. A strong position is mostly "what may be taken to be the base, or th-position" (Cardinaletti & Starke 1999a: 150). Strong positions include 1) arguments (4); 2) some PP adjuncts like those with prepositions *dlja, s, iz-za* (5); 3) some NP adjuncts like (6); the latter in accordance with Cardinaletti & Starke cannot be expressed by pronouns with nonhuman referents (7). Weak positions are those within other PP adjuncts (8b, 9), other nominal adjuncts (8a, 10) and some predicate arguments that lack theta-marking even if nominalized; the latter context is available for demonstrative pronouns (11).

Data

- (1) (Molotok ležit na stole.) Da-j mne ego i gvozd-i
hammer lie.PRS.3SG on table give-IMP me.DAT it.ACC and nail-PL.ACC
‘(The hammer is on the table.) *lit.*: Give it and the nails to me!’
- (2) a. I on, i ona krasiv-ye.
and he/it.NOM.M and she/it.NOM.F nice-PL.NOM
‘He and she are nice’ (e.g. *mal’cik* ‘boy’ and *devočka* ‘girl’)
*‘It and it are nice’ (e.g. *nož* ‘knife’, M and *vilka* ‘fork’, F)
- b. ?? Da-j mne gvozd-i i ego
give-IMP me.DAT nail-PL.ACC and it.ACC
lit.: ‘Give me the nails and it’
- (3) ?. ? Polož-i knjig-i na stol i v nego (škaf)
put-ACC book-PL.NOM on table and in it.ACC (bookcase)
lit.: ‘Put the books on the table and into it (bookcase)’
- b. ?Ja ostavil ee i zabral ego
I.NOM left it.ACC.F and took it.ACC.M/N
lit.: ‘I left it (e.g. *sumku*, F ‘bag’) and took it (e.g. *cemodan*, M ‘suitcase)’
- (4) a. da-t’ odn-u minut-u (ee)
give-INF one-ACC minute-ACC (it.ACC)
‘to give one minute (it)’
- b. skuca-t’ po druž’-jam (po nim)
miss-INF PR friend-PL.DAT (PR they.PL.DAT)
‘to miss (one’s) friends (them)’
- (5) a. zapiska dlja Saš-i (dlja nego/ kogo?)
message for S.-GEN for him/ whom?)
‘a message for Saša’
- b. otsustvova-t’ iz-za bolezn-i (iz-za nee/ cego? ...)
be.absent-INF because.of illness-GEN (because.of it/ what?)
‘to be absent because of the illness’
- (6) prigotovit’ obed syn-u (emu/ komu? ...)
cook-INF dinner.ACC son-DAT (him.DAT/ who.DAT?)
‘to cook a dinner for the son (him/ whom?)’
- (7) kupi-t’ ej steklo
buy-INF she/it.F.DAT window-glass.ACC
‘to buy a window-glass for her (*for it)’
- (8) a. govori-t’ odn-u minut-u (*ee)
speak-INF one-ACC minute-ACC (it.ACC)
‘to speak one minute (*it)’
- b. xod-it’ po gost’-jam (*po nim)
walk-INF PR guest-PL.DAT (PR they.PL.DAT)
‘to pay visits’
- (9) a. besedova-t’ v gostin-oj (?v nej/ *v cem?)
talk-INF in lounge-PR (in it.PR/ in what.PR)
‘to talk in a lounge (?it/ *what?)’
- b. lekcija iz istori-i (*iz nee)
lecture from history-GEN (from it.GEN)
‘a lecture from history (*it)’
- (10) še-l les-om (*im/ *cem?)
walk-PST.SG.M forest-INSTR (it.INSTR/ what.INSTR)
‘he walked through the forest (*it/ *what?)’
- (11) spas svo-im vmešatel’stv-om (*im/ et-im)
save.PST his-INSTR intervention-INSTR (it.INSTR/ this-INSTR)
‘saved by his intervention (*it/ this)’

References

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