

Distinguishing Existentials: Modal Possessive Constructions in Russian

Modal Existential Constructions (MECs), exemplified in Russian in (1), have recently received much attention in the literature. I will argue that in Russian two superficially similar constructions have been conflated under the label of MEC: true MECs with a dative subject, as in (1), and possessive constructions with *u* + (Genitive) DP in place of the dative subject (2), which I will refer to as Modal Possessive Constructions (MPCs).

Crosslinguistically MECs share a number of properties (Izvorski 1998, Grosu 2004 among others): an infinitival or subjunctive clause with a fronted *wh*-word is embedded under a verb of existence or possession, the *wh*-word receives a narrow-scope indefinite interpretation, and the lower clause expresses the modality of possibility. Since (1) and (2) share all of the above properties, they have either been implicitly assumed to be the same construction (Grosu 2004) or posited to differ only in the meaning associated with dative case and *u*+DP respectively (Rappaport 1986). I will argue that previous analyses have failed to address important structural distinctions between the two constructions: unlike MECs, where the dative subject originates inside the *wh*-clause, *u*+DP is a possessor, which is first merged outside the clause. Therefore, in MECs the *wh*-clause is a complement of *be* directly, while in MPCs, it is in the complement of a small clause whose specifier hosts the possessor DP.

The corresponding structural differences between the constructions are depicted in (3). I follow Grosu (2004) and Izvorski (1998) in analyzing MECs as a bare CP complement of the verb *be*, akin to interrogatives. By contrast MPCs are best analyzed as a possessive construction. I build on the analysis of Russian possessives in Jung (2008), in the spirit of Kayne (1993), where the existential verb *be* takes a PP complement which contains a small clause relating the possessor and possessee. I follow Jung in placing a low Focus Phrase (in the sense of Belletti 2004) just below the BeP in Russian, which attracts the possessee before the possessor remnant-moves to subject position.

There are three separate arguments that *u*+DP, unlike the dative subject of MECs originates outside the *wh*-clause. First, MECs do not allow a second subject in the lower clause (4a), in contrast to MPCs (4b). Second, the dative subject of MECs, but not *u*+DP, can appear in the lower clause between the *wh*-word and the verb (5). Finally, MECs and MPC are possible with other predicates of existence or coming into being. Some of these, like *find*, are transitive verbs, and as a result the matrix clause has a nominative subject of its own. In such cases, the dative subject remains in the infinitival clause (6a), while *u*+DP is disallowed (6b). (Due to space limitations I cannot address an alternative locative interpretation for *u*+DP in this abstract.)

Furthermore, I provide evidence that the possessive small clause does not take the *wh*-clause as its complement directly, but parallel to other possessive constructions, the complement of the small clause is a DP, in this case a silent PERSON or THING modified by a relative clause: MPCs do not allow a *wh*-clause with a complex *wh*-phrase (7a). This restriction to bare *wh*-words is inconsistent with the complement being a bare CP, and, as expected, there is no similar restriction in MECs (7b).

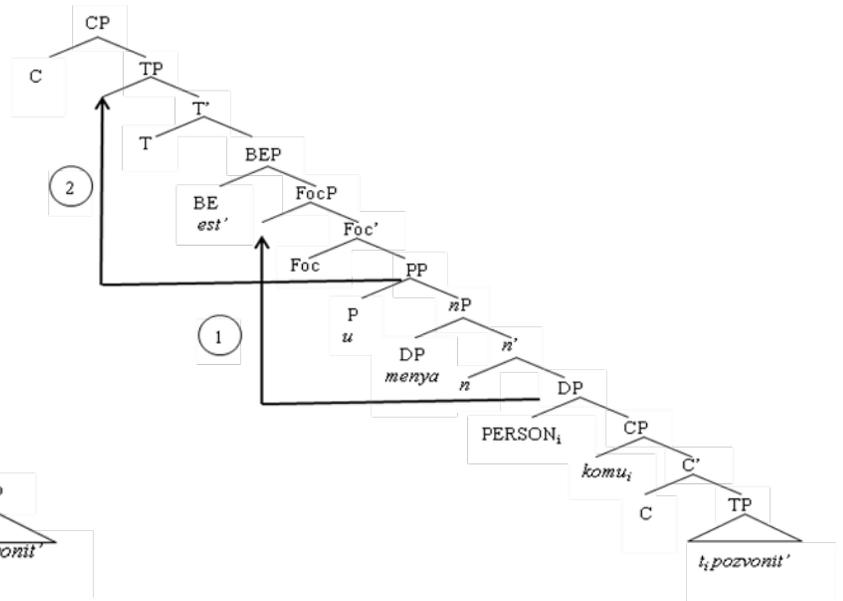
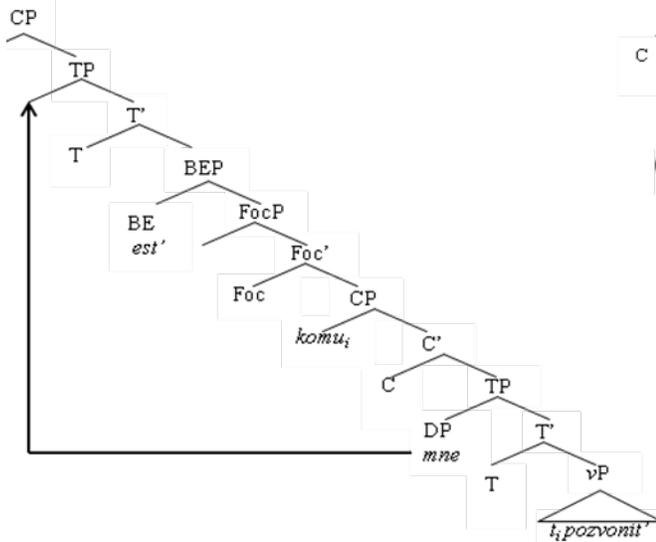
The restriction to bare *wh*-phrases argues for a relative clause analysis, since relative clauses pattern like MPCs (8). Based on the necessity of an indefinite interpretation and the absence of matching effects, a free relative structure is ruled out (as argued for MECs by Izvorski and Grosu). The nature of the *wh*-words (identical to interrogative pronouns and unlike relative pronouns) suggests that the silent head of the relative clause is a light head in the sense Citko (2004). This is further confirmed by the fact an overt light head is possible with a finite *wh*-clause, but only for MPCs and not MECs (9).

These data lead us to reconsider prior approaches to MECs which have relied on a bare CP analysis to account for the unique behavior of the construction, since they cannot account for the existence of identical properties in MPCs. To my knowledge this is the first discussion of the salient structural distinctions between possessive and existential modal constructions. Unlike languages with identical marking for possessors and MEC subjects, Russian conveniently allows us to tease apart the two constructions through case marking. But the existence of a structurally distinct modal possessive construction in Russian suggests a potential ambiguity in MECs crosslinguistically, which opens up new areas for further investigation.

(1) *Mne est' komu pozvonit'*
 me.DAT is who.DAT call.INF
 'There is someone for me to call',
 'I have someone I can call'

(2) *U menya est' komu pozvonit'*
 At me.GEN is who.DAT call.INF
 'There is someone for me to call'
 'I have someone I can call'

(3)



(4) a. **Mne est' gde tebe spat'*
 me.DAT is where you.DAT sleep.INF

b. *U menya est' gde tebe spat'*
 at me.GEN is where you.DAT sleep.INF
 'I have somewhere for you to sleep'

(6) a. *Ya nashla chto mne podarit' pape*
 I found what.ACC me.DAT give.INF dad.DAT
 'I found something to give my dad'

b. **Ya nashla chto u menya podarit' pape*
 I found what.ACC at me.GEN give.INF dad.DAT

(8) **Ya nashla chto-to, kakuju knigu ya prochtu*
 I found something which book.ACC I will read
 'I found something, which book I will read'

(5) a. *Zdes' est' chto mne delat'*
 here is what.ACC me.DAT do.INF
 'There is something for me to do here'

b. **Zdes' est' chto u menya delat'*
 here is what at me.GEN do.INF

(7) a. **U menya est' kakuju knigu chitat'*
 at me.GEN is which book read.INF

b. *Mne est' kakuju knigu chitat'*
 me.DAT is which book read.INF
 'I have some book to read'

(9) a. *U menya est' to, chto ya khochu*
 I me.GEN is that, what.ACC I want
 'I have what I want'

b. **Mne est' to, chto ya khochu*
 me.DAT is that what.ACC I want.

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