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Zero Linking in Colloquial Russian Relativisation

Some colloquial varieties of modern European languages show relativisation patterns that contrast sharply with the formal registers of the corresponding standard languages. It may suffice to mention the case of “français parlé”, which offers no less than three different relativisation strategies unknown to formal French (Gadet 1997, 115-123). The Slavic domain exhibits a heterogeneous picture, since besides the strategies typical of colloquial West and South Slavic, notably the construction with uninflected relative marker + resumptive pronoun, we also find zero linking in colloquial Russian. What makes the Russian picture so exceptional is the extensive use of this device: whereas Turkic and Celtic languages and (with direct objects) even English solely allow for the omission of the relative pronoun, colloquial Russian may as well elide the head noun and even combine these two strategies. The following series of examples illustrates these three cases:

- a) Девчонка_i $\emptyset_{\text{prepos}}$ \emptyset_{rel} он все пристаёт сидит впереди.
‘the girl [whom] he always molests is sitting in front [of us]’
- b) Вы справку даете только $\emptyset_{\text{dempr/N}}$ кто лежит.
‘you give the document only [to those] who are lying’
- c) Есть $\emptyset_{\text{dempr/N}}$ \emptyset_{rel} согласились.
‘There are [people] [who] agreed’

Due to the almost unlimited freedom of word order in colloquial Russian, the overt or missing relative pronoun may also precede the head noun with an intermediate chain of several word forms separating them from each other. Thus, one comes across such remarkably scrambled sentences, as

- d) Так совсем же есть \emptyset_{rel} не получают грудное молоко дети_i
So totally are not get breast milk children
‘So there are children that don’t get breast milk at all’

As can easily be seen, these facts boost the typological distance between colloquial and formal standard Russian. The same holds for the relationship between Russian and ‘Standard Average European’, all the more so as the relative pronoun strategy turns out to be a typical European property (Comrie & Kuteva 2013). As for the types b) and c), they may be considered reliable candidates for typological quirks. All three types corroborate the view that Russian is essentially an anti-analytical language. The ban on resumptive pronouns in relative clauses points in the same direction.

Said phenomena have been known since long (cf. Kručinina 1968, RRR 1973, Woolhiser 1990, Miller & Weinert 1998); yet, surprisingly enough, a qualitative and/or quantitative in-depth description is still lacking. My talk aims at (i) searching in available print and on-line corpora of spoken Russian for zero linkings of all three types, (ii) determining their relative statistic weight, (iii) defining possible structural constraints they have to meet and (iv) finding out what might be an adequate description in structural terms: are we dealing with separate constructions, with underlying ellipses or (as in example a) with intraposition of one clause in the other? Do all types invite the same formal analysis? How should we cope with structurally ambiguous cases? Does Keenan & Comrie’s (1977) accessibility hierarchy not hold, as the data suggest?

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Corpora

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