

## Modelling variable government in Russian pseudosynonymous verb-preposition constructions: a Construction Grammar approach

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This study focuses on 3 groups of Russian verb-preposition constructions: 1) constructions with “verbs of speech and thought”: *govorit' o Y<sub>Loc</sub> / govorit' pro Y<sub>Acc</sub>* meaning ‘to speak about Y’; 2) “verbs of sorrow” constructions: *skuchat' o Y<sub>Loc</sub> / skuchat' po Y<sub>Dat</sub>* meaning ‘to miss Y’; 3) constructions with “verbs of directed contact”: *bit' v Y<sub>Acc</sub> / bit' po Y<sub>Dat</sub>* meaning ‘to bang against Y’.<sup>1</sup> The constructions in every group differ in preposition and case. They used to be considered synonymous from the formal, verb-centered perspectives [Russkaya grammatika 1980], [Zolotova 2001], [Zaliznyak Anna 2006], [Iomdin 1991], [Apresyan Y. D.: 1999]. Besides, as far as constructions with “verbs of speech and thought” are concerned, it is usual to speak of stylistic differences between them. Indeed, the interchangeability of these two constructions in every group is possible in overwhelming majority of examples, but according to Ruscorpora<sup>2</sup> data, there are contexts that make this interchangeability impossible. Having analyzed Ruscorpora data from the CxG perspective as presented in [Fillmore, Kay, O’Connor 1988], [Fried, Östman 2004], [Goldberg 1995], [Leino, Östman. 2005], we come to the following conclusion.

As for the first type of constructions, there are only two of them on the surface syntax level. But the situation differs when these constructions are approached from the C×G point of view. The prepositions *o* and *pro* are linked to different semantic roles. The preposition *o* is connected with the role of theme, while the preposition *pro* is linked to a complex role of theme and content. This additional role of content makes the following examples different:

1. *Rasskazhi o Parizhe.*      2. *Rasskazhi pro Parizh.*  
‘Speak about Paris.’      ‘Speak about Paris.’

The first example focuses on some predictable information about Paris: its history, architecture, etc., while the additional role of content in the second example makes it possible to focus upon some additional information, f.e. a trip to Paris with friends. This additional role of content requires the agent argument in the position of the subject, while the role of theme doesn’t impose such restrictions. Thus, we have four constructions which have their own meanings and restrict their elements in a certain way.

- 1)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role agt} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right] \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role theme} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Loc} \end{array} \right]$       2)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role agt} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right] \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role theme+content} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Acc} \end{array} \right]$

*Masha govoriła pro knigu.*  
‘Mary spoke about the book.’

*Masha govoriła o knige.*  
‘Mary spoke about the book.’

- 3)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role instr} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right] \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role theme} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Loc} \end{array} \right]$       4)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role stim} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right] \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role theme} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Loc} \end{array} \right]$

*Pis'mo govoriło o vstreche.*  
‘The letter was about the meeting.’

*Otpechatki pal'tsev govoriły o ego uchastii v prestuplenii.*  
‘The fingerprints testified to his taking part in the crime.’

To sum up, the constructions with “verbs of speech and thought” tend to impose some restrictions on the type of the subject.

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<sup>2</sup> [http:// www.ruscorpora.ru](http://www.ruscorpora.ru)

As for constructions with “verbs of sorrow”, this case is very similar to the previous one. They aren’t interchangeable in all contexts because the prepositions *o* and *po* are linked to different semantic roles. The preposition *o* is connected with the role of theme and requires the agent argument in the position of the subject, while the preposition *po* is linked to the role of stimulus and requires the experiencer in the subject position.

- 1)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role agt} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right], \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role theme} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Loc} \end{array} \right]$  2)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role exp} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right], \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role stim} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Dat} \end{array} \right]$

*On tuzhit o brate.*

‘He worries about his brother.’

*Ya skuchayu po tebe.*

‘I miss you.’

Thus, the *o*-construction implies a more controlled action than the *po*-construction, and the ability of a verb to build into this or that construction depends on the degree of control in its semantics, which is indicated by some collocation tests.

As regards the third group of the constructions, it is the type of object that is restricted by this or that construction. The preposition *po* here is connected with the role of patient and  $Y_{\text{Dat}}$  refers to a kind of surface, while the preposition *v* is linked to the role of goal and  $Y_{\text{Acc}}$  refers to a kind of plane covering the cavity that is the place of destination. That’s why *stuchat’ v dver’* means ‘to knock at the door to be admitted’, while *stuchat’ po dveri* means ‘to bang against the door to make a noise’. These two constructions are as follows:

- 1)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role agt} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right], \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role goal} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Acc} \end{array} \right]$  2)  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf subject} \\ \text{theta-role agt} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Nom} \end{array} \right], \left[ \begin{array}{l} \text{gf obl} \\ \text{theta-role pat} \\ \text{cat NP} \\ \text{case Dat} \end{array} \right]$

*On dolgo stuchal v dver’, chtoby ego vpustili.*

‘He was knocking at the door for a long time to be admitted.’

*Rebyonok gromko stuchal igrushkoy po stolu.*

‘The child was banging against the table with his toy.’

Thus, a C×G approach to the Russian pseudosynonymous verb-preposition constructions makes it possible to explain the semantic differences lying beneath variable government.

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