

# Definiteness as a 'covert category' in Russian?

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Various phenomena of Russian grammar have so far been explained on the basis of the hypothesis that Russian nouns have the 'covert' category of definiteness. Usually, individual examples are cited to prove that certain phenomena depend on this category. In this paper corpus analyses are used to refute the hypothesis and prove that those grammatical phenomena that are frequently associated with definiteness can be better explained on the basis of other categories. For example, the choice of accusative or genitive case for the direct object under negation depends on whether the object is presupposed or asserted and which elements of the meaning are in the scope of negation. Not a single one of the phenomena inspected in this paper is based on definiteness as it exists in languages with a definite article.

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## 1. Introduction: 'Covert categories'

With this essay I neither want to nor can I make a further contribution to the difficult question of what definiteness actually is. Therefore, uncharacteristically, it will feature neither formulas of predicate logic nor bald French kings. The much more modest aim of this paper is to critically question whether what is commonly described as 'definiteness' in descriptions of Russian is actually comparable to definiteness in languages with articles.

Since Russian, as is well known, does not have a definite article, there is no obvious formal expression for definiteness. It is therefore often assumed that definiteness in Russian is a 'covert category':

„Will man den Artikel nicht, wie das im 19. Jh. vorgeschlagen wurde, als „Luxus der Sprache“ (LA GRASSERIE 1896) betrachten und will man umgekehrt auch nicht behaupten, daß artikellosen Sprachen – wie etwa dem Russischen – etwas fehle, so hat man von der Konstanz einer grammatischen Funktion auszugehen. Diese Funktion wird in jeder Sprache realisiert, jedoch in unterschiedlichen ‚grammatischen Gewändern‘. Kategoriale

“If one does not want to regard the article as a 'luxury of language', as was suggested in the 19th century (LA GRASSERIE 1896), and conversely, if one does not want to claim either that articleless languages—such as Russian—lack something, then one has to assume the constancy of a grammatical function. This function is realized in every language, but in different 'grammatical guises'. Categorical functions that are realized in com-

Funktionen, die in komplexen, noch unbekanntem und damit noch nicht dokumentierten Mustern realisiert werden, bleiben dem Betrachter in der Regel zunächst verborgen. Sie sind so gut getarnt [...], daß der Beobachter das Vorhandensein solcher Regeln nicht einmal vermutet.“ (Leiss 2000: 3)

plex, as yet unknown and therefore so far undocumented patterns usually remain hidden from the observer at first. They are camouflaged so well [...] that the observer does not even suspect the existence of such rules.”

The term *covert category*, incidentally, comes from Benjamin Lee Whorf, who first used it publicly in 1936 to describe a category “which has no overt mark actualized along with the words of the class but which operates through an invisible ‘central exchange’ of linkage bonds in such a way as □76 to determine certain other words which mark the class” (Whorf 1956 [1936]: 69).<sup>1</sup> Whorf calls this effect on other words, which replaces a direct linguistic expression, *reactance*. As a synonymous term for *covert category*, he also suggests *cryptotype*, “a name which calls attention to the rather hidden, cryptic nature of such word-groups” (Whorf 1956 [1937]: 92).<sup>2</sup> The following example given by Whorf (1956 [1936]: 71) demonstrates this cryptic peculiarity well:

“Another English cryptotype is that of the transitive verbs of a covering, enclosing, and surface-attaching meaning, the reactance of which is that UN- may be prefixed to denote the opposite. Hence we say ‘uncover, uncoil, undress, unfasten, unfold, unlock, unroll, untangle, untie, unwind’, but not ‘unbreak, undry, unhang, unheat, unlift, unmelt, unopen, unpress, unspill’.”

Anyone who has the 1996 Diane Warren song “Unbreak my heart” sung by Toni Braxton in their ears will already be taken aback by Whorf’s first counterexample. A search in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English (CoCA)* shows that most of the other supposedly impossible words are also used, e.g. “And here was Beatriz [...], using a long-handled hook to *unhang* a slinky black dress” (Johnny Payne, “The ambassador’s son”, 1995) or “She desperately wanted to *unheat* this guy, put him at ease” (Scott Turow, *Personal Injuries*, 1999). The following sentence from a scientific text shows that this is not only done with artistic intent: “It is much easier to restore a newly found mural than to try to *unrestore* and *rerestore* an old

<sup>1</sup> Whorf here uses grammatical gender in English as an example of a covert category, in contrast to Latin gender, which is an open category. On closer inspection, both statements seem to be problematic.

<sup>2</sup> According to *Google Books*, the term *cryptotype* is found in a 26-page pencilled manuscript by Whorf, dated 25 January 1930 and kept in New Orleans, entitled “‘Notes’ (on works in Aztec in the Department of Middle American Research, Tulane University of Louisiana)”. Unfortunately, the context in which the word is used here is not available online (on the advantages and limitations of *Google Books*, see Bunčić 2012 [English translation in this volume, pp. 55–69—D. B. 2026]).

one" (Mark Sullivan, *Archaeology*, 2003). The "cryptotype" found by Whorf is therefore not really a linguistic, i.e. grammatical or at least lexical, category but a purely semantic classification. As soon as the context indicates that the action denoted by a verb can be undone, the prefix *un-* can also be used.

▣77 Of course, it is true that a grammatical category does not require a concrete morpheme to express it directly (cf. also Fillmore 1968: 3). With purely semantic definitions in the style of Whorf, however, anything and everything can be classified as a 'category'. Hulanicki (1973), for example, analyzes the general factual meaning of the Russian imperfective aspect as a 'covert perfect'. If the concept of 'covert categories' is to be given any meaning at all, it must be restricted to regular grammatical effects of linguistically defined classes. An example of such a category could be countability, which has grammatical effects in many languages and which is clearly linguistically, i.e. lexically, and not semantically defined—as can be seen from the fact that Russian *gorox* and *kartofel'* (and several similar words) are uncountable, while their English equivalents *peas* and *potatoes* are countable. (To denote and count individual peas or potatoes, the derivatives *gorošina* and *kartofelina* or *zerno goroxa* 'a grain of peas' and *kluben' kartofelja* 'a bulb of potatoes' are needed in Russian).

## 2. Definiteness

Sometimes definiteness is understood as a logical and thus universal category which, as a generic term, encompasses the entire continuum from generic to specific to definite expressions in the narrower sense (cf. Daiber 2012: 214–217). Of course, this article does not deny that there is also a logical difference for speakers of Russian between generic and non-generic expressions, for example, and that this difference sometimes manifests itself linguistically. (For example, the use of a demonstrative pronoun such as *ëtot* 'this' indicates that the qualified nominal phrase is not to be interpreted generically.) Rather, the point is to show that definiteness *in the narrower sense*, as a grammatical category marked by the definite article in article languages, is not present in Russian (cf. Birkenmaier's 1979 title *Artikelfunktionen in einer artikellosen Sprache* 'Article functions in an articleless language').

Christopher Lyons (1999) still saw the definite article as expressing two functions at once: on the one hand, it denotes identifiability for the recipient (e.g. in *I bought the car this morning* or *They've just got in from New York. The plane was five hours late*; *ibid.* 2–3) and on the other hand it marks "inclusivity" (e.g. in *Beware of the dog* or *You are the first visitors to our house*, *ibid.* 9–10). However, Klaus von Heusinger (1996, 2006) has 'reunited' definiteness by tracing all its effects back to a basic function: a definite marking indicates that reference is made to the *most salient* representative ▣78 of the category denoted by the NP in a given situation. In many languages, definiteness is marked by a definite article. Indefiniteness is

simply expressed by the absence of this definite article; an ‘indefinite article’ is not necessary (and in many languages, such as Bulgarian and Macedonian, it does not exist). Where there is such an article, it obviously takes on other functions, e.g. indicating countability. Lyons (1999: 34) therefore calls this article a “cardinal article”. Vater (2005: 106–107) is even more explicit, calling it a “quantifier” (“Quantor”) and thus placing it in the same category as *some, all, every*, etc. This observation is important because it makes the assumption of a ‘zero article’ superfluous.<sup>3</sup>

What is important for our further analysis is the distinction between definiteness and specificity (cf. von Heusinger 2011). Abstracting from the many subtypes of specificity, it is traditionally summarized in such a way that a specific expression refers to a referent ‘that the speaker knows and/or refers to’. However, von Heusinger (2011: 1046) points out that specificity can also be based on the perspective of another person who is salient in the given context. In any case, specific expressions refer to referents for which the information necessary for their identification—in contrast to definite expressions—is inaccessible to the hearer.

### 3. Definiteness in Russian?

At least in German-speaking Slavic Studies, definiteness in Russian has been discussed at least since 1979, when the two monographs *Artikelfunktionen in einer artikellosen Sprache* ‘Article functions in an articleless language’ by Willy Birkenmaier and *Die Determination des Substantivs im Russischen und Deutschen* ‘The determination of the noun in Russian and German’ by Wolfgang Gladrow appeared almost simultaneously (the former in West Germany, the latter in East Germany). In a very similar way, using a large number of individual examples from fiction, both authors attempt to show that various mechanisms in Russian fulfill the same functions as definite articles in translations of these text passages (or in the originals from which □79 the Russian examples are translated). However, no comprehensive corpus analysis is carried out. Whether there is also counter-evidence that contradicts the claimed function remains unclear. Moreover, the argument is based exclusively on equivalence in translation, without any closer examination of the phenomena within the language.

Despite the methodological difficulties of these monographs, which, to be sure, were quite up to date 34 years ago, the view that definiteness exists in Russian is

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<sup>3</sup> The difference between *Sie ist eine Lehrerin* and *Sie ist Lehrerin* ‘She is a teacher’ in German therefore has nothing to do with definiteness—both NPs are indefinite due to the absence of the definite article. The assumption of a zero article in languages with definite and ‘indefinite’ articles produces absurd results, such as the following statement from an Italian–Serbo-Croatian comparison (Stifanić 1980: 56): “Kontrastivna analiza pokazuje da je najveći broj imenica sa nultim članom preveden bez formalnog obeležja za član” (“The contrastive analysis shows that the majority of nouns with zero articles are translated without formal article marking”).

still widely held today. For example, Vater (2005: 110) says about “‘articleless languages’ (such as Latin and the Slavic languages)” (“‘Artikkellose Sprachen’ (wie das Lateinische und die slawischen Sprachen)”):

„In solchen Sprachen wird offenbar Definitheit besonders im Bereich der Deixis angezeigt, während sie in den anderen Bereichen unmarkiert bleibt oder durch andere Mittel – z. B. durch Wortstellung und Aspektgebrauch – mit bezeichnet wird.“

“In such languages, definiteness is apparently indicated especially in the area of deixis, whereas it remains unmarked in the other areas or is co-indicated by other means—e.g. by word order and use of aspect.”

As a Slavist, Kempgen (2009: 10) not only knows better that there are also Slavic languages with articles, but is also much more cautious with his wording in other respects:

„Die Definitheit tritt nur in einem Teil der slavischen Sprachen auf [...]. Als ‚Ersatz‘ dienen den slavischen Sprachen Möglichkeiten unterschiedlicher Wortstellung.“

“Definiteness occurs only in some of the Slavic languages [...]. As a ‘substitute’, Slavic languages use the possibilities of different word orders.”

Although Kempgen distances himself from the word *substitute* here by using gnomic quotation marks, it should be noted that current Slavic linguistics also assumes a certain functional equivalence between the word order in Russian and the article in German. The assumption of a universal grammar can also lead to the postulate that a category which is expressed by the article in some languages is also “definitely present in the deep structure” in other languages (“in der Tiefenstruktur auf jeden Fall vorhanden”, Obst 1981: 19). An even stronger thesis is put forward by Leiss (2000: 14): “Aspect and article are realizations of one and the same grammatical function” (“Aspekt und Artikel sind Realisierungen ein und derselben grammatischen Funktion”, see Section 3.2 below). However, the still ‘current’ Academy Grammar of Russian from 1980 (Švedova et al. 1980: §§2667, 2671, 2672) also refers to “definiteness” (“opredelennost”) to describe the object case of negation (see Section 3.5 below).

Overall, definiteness in the extant literature is claimed to be responsible for a variety of phenomena. These include word order (NP-VP = definite vs. VP-NP = indefinite) and the opposition of nominative (= definite) vs. genitive (= indefinite) in the subject of negated existential clauses. However, if both formal phenomena express the same grammatical category (whether covertly or overtly), they must always **80** behave in the same way in one and the same sentence. Accordingly, only the following two combinations should be possible:

- (1) *moroz ne čuvstvovalsja.*  
frost.NOM not was.felt.M

‘The frost was not felt.’

(definite → NP-VP and NOM)

- (2) *Ne čuvstvovalos' moroza.*  
 not was.felt.N frost.GEN  
 'There was no frost to be felt.' (indefinite → VP-NP and GEN)

The following two sentences should accordingly be impossible, since the two expressions for definiteness contradict each other, but the frost can hardly be definite and indefinite at the same time:

- (3) *Moroza ne čuvstvovalos'.*  
 frost.GEN not was.felt.N (NP-VP = definite, but GEN = indefinite)
- (4) *Ne čuvstvovalsja moroz.*  
 not was.felt.M frost.NOM (VP-NP = indefinite, but NOM = definite)

However, as native speakers confirm and corpus research shows, (3) and (4) are completely grammatical and sentences of this type are documented many times. From this we can only conclude that the word order and case in these sentences must fulfill *different* functions. At least one of the grammatical phenomena *does not*, as claimed, express definiteness. Incidentally, Christa Hauenschild (1985: 238), who in the context of machine translation is interested in the coding of referential identity between a noun phrase and a preceding noun phrase, also assumes that different factors can contradict each other, which is why she works with different degrees of probability for reference identity.

In the following, we will therefore examine the functions of the most important grammatical phenomena in Russian that have so far been explained with reference to definiteness or have been suspected of expressing definiteness, with a view to find out for which of them this might be the case and for which it is not.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The selection of phenomena considered is not exhaustive, but to me this selection seems sufficient to invalidate the basic idea that definiteness must also have grammatical functions in an articleless language like Russian. Among other things, I have not dealt with the genitive-accusative alternation in affirmative sentences with verbs of giving, taking and wishing. Schlund (2011) has examined this in detail: Based on a very careful corpus analysis, she manages to severely challenge the traditional view that definiteness is decisive for the choice of case. In her opinion, definiteness only plays a subordinate role here as one of many factors influencing the statistical probabilities for case selection, and even that only as a result of metaphorization, in that the function of the genitive to denote partitivity in mass nouns is transferred to count nouns. However, even this last concession to definiteness can still be questioned. For example, Schlund (2011: 203f.) paraphrases a comment by Levontina (2007) on the sentence *Ona ždět avtobusa* 'She is waiting for the bus' (in which the bus is in the genitive) as follows: "the genitive implies that the person is not waiting for a concrete bus but that she is simply waiting (hoping) for some bus to pass by that would take her closer to her destination." As the wording *a concrete bus* (instead of e.g. *the bus already mentioned*) suggests, this is obviously more about a form of specificity than about definiteness in the sense of identifiability for the addressee. It remains to be inves-

▢81 Incidentally, Svetlana Friedrich (2009: esp. 36–58, 191–197) also argues against this explanation of many of these phenomena. However, her arguments are mostly based on a terminological misunderstanding (cf. Daiber 2012), a narrow focus on single sentences (which, however, she shares with many of the criticized authors) and on her incorrect counter-hypothesis that definiteness in Russian is expressed by the sentence accent (see Section 3.3). I will therefore not go into the details of her arguments.

### 3.1 Determiners

Determiners, i.e. demonstrative and indefinite pronouns, are the most obvious expressions that can have something to do with definiteness, because articles, where they exist, have generally developed from them. However, the Russian determiners can be dealt with quickly here, as *étot* and *tot* clearly have a deictic function. Although they can also be used anaphorically (just like demonstrative pronouns in languages with articles), they are—in contrast, for example, to their Polish and Czech counterparts—generally unsuspected of being articles (cf. e.g. Berger & Weiss 1987: 15), although of course “due to the absence of the article [...], demonstrative pronouns fulfill some of the tasks that are typical of the article in other languages” (“auf Grund des Fehlens des Artikels [...] erfüllen die DPr [= Demonstrativpronomina] einen Teil der Aufgaben, die typisch für den Artikel in anderen Sprachen sind”, Kordić 2002: 90).

▢82 The indefinite pronouns could be suspected of being ‘negative definite pronouns’, but as mentioned above, definiteness is universally marked, not indefiniteness (cf. Lyons 1999: 34). More detailed studies of the determiners *koe-kakoj*, *kakoj-to*, *kakoj-nibud’*, *odin* and *nekij* show that they have other functions, including the marking of specificity (cf. Geist 2010; Gorishneva 2014).

### 3.2 Aspect

The idea that aspect and article correspond to each other and both express a form of definiteness is, as mentioned above, the central thesis of Leiss (2000).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Dickey (2000: 19–27) also describes the basic function of the Russian perfective aspect as “temporal definiteness” (in contrast to more western Slavic languages, where the main function is “totality”). Examples of this correspondence can already be found in Birkenmaier (1979: 114):<sup>6</sup>

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tigated whether the observed statistical effect of definiteness is not in fact only a side-effect of a regularity that is actually based on specificity.

<sup>5</sup> On the lack of a Germanistic foundation for her thesis, cf. the review article by Hans Ulrich Schmid (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Previously, on the basis of a few very specific examples, exactly the opposite relation-

- (5) *Vj uže perevodili francuzskie stixotvorenija?*  
 you already translated.IPFV French poems  
 'Have you ever translated French poems?'

 (6) *Vj uže pereveli francuzskie stixotvorenija?*  
 you already translated.PFV French poems  
 'Have you translated the French poems yet?'

Indeed, a certain correlation between the temporal definiteness and the definiteness of the object cannot be dismissed out of hand. In (6), the perfective aspect refers to a concrete situation that is clearly delimited in time, and in such a situation it is probable that the poems in question are also very likely concrete poems. However, one can ask oneself how one would express another—admittedly less frequent—situation in Russian, in which, for example, a lecturer has given the (temporally determined) task that all students in a seminar should choose any three (and therefore indefinite) poems from **83** anthologies of French poetry and translate them.

But there is no need for theoretical speculation. A corpus search quickly yields real counterexamples (here, for example, one from Lev Tolstoj's novel *Voskresenie* 'Resurrection' and its English translation, found in the parallel subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus):

- (7) *Nexljudov perevodil slova angličanina [...],*  
 Nexljudov translated.IPF words of the Englishman [...],  
*ne vnikaja v smysl ix [...].*  
 without paying attention to their meaning [...].  
 "Nekhludoff translated the Englishman's [...] words without paying any attention to their meaning [...]."


Using the methods of aspectology, it is easy to explain why Tolstoj uses the imperfective aspect here: The sentence gives a more precise description of the way in which a longer-lasting action in process is being carried out. This is the processual meaning of the imperfective aspect. The assertion that the imperfective aspect expresses the indefiniteness of the object does not help here at all, because the object is clearly definite.

For anyone who is seriously interested in the functions of the Russian verbal aspect, this example should be enough to get back to the study of aspectology and away from the idea that temporal definiteness and nominal definiteness are basically one and the same thing.

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ship had been assumed, namely that the perfective aspect correlates with an indefinite object and the imperfective with a definite object (cf. Obst 1981, 87–92).

### 3.3 Word order and sentence accent

As is well known, the word order of Russian is not limited by the need to mark case roles as in English, nor by something like the verb-second rule in German, nor by enclitic position rules as in Serbo-Croatian.<sup>7</sup> Instead, it is available almost exclusively for the expression of information structure. Junghanns & Zybatow (2009) have described even more precisely what the Prague linguists tried to summarize under the headings “functional sentence perspective” (“funkční větná perspektiva”) or “aktuální větné členění” (“actual division of the sentence”) with the terms *theme* and *rheme* by distinguishing between the topic-comment structure and the  focus-background structure. Leiss (2000: 6), however, also sees this as a covert expression of definiteness:

„Es dürfte kein Zufall sein, daß die Vertreter der Funktionalen Satzperspektive Sprecher einer artikellosen slavischen Sprache waren. Was sie mit der Thema-Rhema-Gliederung entdeckt haben, ist in erster Linie die unsichtbare Enkodierung von Definitheit/Indefinitheit in artikellosen Sprachen.“

“It is probably no coincidence that the proponents of the Functional Sentence Perspective were speakers of an articleless Slavic language. What they discovered as theme-rheme structure is first and foremost the invisible encoding of definiteness/indefiniteness in articleless languages.”

There is no shortage of examples of this connection. Here is one of them (from Birkenmaier 1979: 55):

(8) *Iz       perednej       donosilsja       šěpot.*  
from antechamber came whisper  
'A whisper came from the antechamber.'

(9) *Šěpot       donosilsja       iz       perednej.*  
whisper came from antechamber  
'The whisper came from the antechamber.'

So the rule seems to be: NP-VP → definite NP; VP-NP → indefinite NP. It should be noted, however, that this only applies to neutral intonation, where the intonational center is located towards the end of the utterance (cf. also Birkenmaier 1979: 57). In colloquial speech in particular, however, the intonational center is often at the beginning of the utterance. (In a sense, following the stream of thought, the most important new information is conveyed first and then the remaining information necessary for the understanding and grammaticality of the utterance is 'handed in later'; cf. Zemskaja in Zemskaja & Kitajgorodskaja & Širjaev 1981: 33–34).

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean, however, that there are no rigid positional rules at all. For example, prepositions must always immediately precede the noun phrase they govern, *ne* 'not' must immediately precede the verb or the negated constituent, etc.

In this respect, Friedrich (2009: 200) establishes the following alternative rule after excluding several special cases:

„Liegt keiner der ausgeschlossenen Fälle vor, so richtet sich die Möglichkeit von definiten und indefiniten Bedeutungen – generische sind immer möglich – nur noch nach der Akzentuiertheit des referentiellen Ausdrucks (ohne Satzakzent – definit, mit Satzakzent – indefinit).“

“If we are dealing with none of the excluded cases, the possibility of definite and indefinite meanings—generic ones are always possible—depends only on the accentuation of the referential expression (without sentence accent—definite, with sentence accent—indefinite).”

However, Daiber (2012: 212, 220) notes in his review of this monograph that the author does not distinguish clearly enough between definiteness and information structure. This is related to the fact that the example sentences cited, on which her argument is based and which almost never include the context, can easily be transformed into evidence that contradicts the argument by □ 85 manipulating the context accordingly. For example, Friedrich (2009: 168) illustrates her “preliminary hypothesis” (“Vorläufige Hypothese”) with the following sentence, which she apparently considers to be completely unproblematic:

- (10) *Včera my smotrelī novyj fil'm.*  
 yesterday we saw new movie

If the sentence accent is on *fil'm* with neutral intonation and there is no contrasting accent, (10) is, according to Friedrich, to be interpreted as ‘Yesterday we watched a new movie’. However, this is by no means mandatory. If there is a preceding context, according to which, for example, several possibilities for evening activities were discussed at length, including an exhibition opening, two interesting theater plays, an evening of games and also a new film in the cinemas (which has thus already been mentioned and possibly named by title and described in more detail), and that a decision was finally made, then sentence (10) (with an accent on *fil'm*) can easily be expressed to mean ‘Yesterday we watched the new film’ (with a definite direct object). This does not require a contrasting accent, nor does the definite meaning have to be expressed by a “definiteness qualifier” (“Definitheitsqualifikator”, Friedrich 2009: 179–182) such as *étoť (novyj fil'm)* ‘this (new movie)’. This would merely be a context in which the referent of the noun phrase is already known (definite), but the information about what was watched is new (rhematic, focused). Similarly, many sentences on which Friedrich’s argument is based can be dismantled, so that, for example, *pevica podarila cvety vosxiščěnnomu zritelju* (ibid. 184f.) can also mean ‘The singer gave the flowers to the enthusiastic spectator’, etc.

In the literature to date, hardly any counterexamples against the connection between definiteness and word order or sentence accent are discussed. Friedrich (2009: 49–55) also does not provide any really conclusive counterexamples against word order as a definiteness marker, but merely refers to “expressive” sen-

tences in which the sentence accent is on the beginning. Obst (1981: 190) concludes on the basis of a detailed analysis of individual textual evidence that word order is not a reliable definiteness marker:

„Ob ein Subjekt indefinit ist, läßt sich letzten Endes immer nur auf Grund eines negativen Kriteriums angeben, nämlich auf Grund des Kriteriums, daß [...] der außersprachliche Referent der betreffenden Subjekts-NP im gesamten vorhergehenden Text noch nicht vorgekommen ist.“

“Whether a subject is indefinite can ultimately only ever be stated on the basis of a negative criterion, namely based on the criterion that [...] the extralinguistic referent of the subject NP in question has not yet occurred in the entire preceding text.”

▮86 However, Obst (1981: 74) has previously excluded intonation from his consideration, which makes his analysis vulnerable to Friedrich's (2009) argument.

A more systematic analysis would therefore be desirable here, and so I looked for evidence in corpora. Since it is not possible to search for definite or indefinite noun phrases in a corpus of Russian, I used parallel corpora for this purpose: *ParaSol (Parallel Corpora of Slavic and Other Languages)* and the parallel subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus (*Nacional'nyj korpus russkogo jazyka, NKCRJa*). In them, I searched in article languages e.g. for English *A* or German *Ein(e)* at the beginning of a sentence (i.e. after a period). Three of the examples found in this way (all of which have no expressive intonation and their focus at the end of the sentence) are given below.

The first comes from the novel *Piknik na obočine (Roadside Picnic)* by Arkadij and Boris Strugackij, which can be found in the NKCRJa. The sentence we are interested in is preceded by the following context: «Сердце стучало бешено, он поставил портфель на асфальт, торопливо разорвал пачку сигарет, закурил. Он глубоко затянулся, отдыхая, как после драки [...]» (“His heart was beating wildly. He put the briefcase on the pavement and impatiently tore open the pack of cigarettes. He lit one, inhaled deeply, and rested, as if after a fight [...]:”)

- (11) *Dežurnyj polismen      ostanovilsja      rjadom      i      sprosil:*  
 A cop                      stopped              near him              and              asked:  
 — Vam pomoč', mister?  
 “Need help, mister?”

This is an example of a sentence with *maximum focus* (cf. Junghanns & Zybatow 2009: 689f.): A new character appears (the policeman) and immediately performs a new, unexpected action (he stops and asks a question). Neither the NP nor the VP is therefore in the background. In the sense of Junghanns & Zybatow (2009: 689), “the entire sentence can thus be understood as an answer to questions of the type *What is going on? What happened?*” (“der gesamte Satz [kann] als Antwort auf Fragen der Art *Was ist los? Was ist passiert?* aufgefasst werden”—and not as an answer to the question *What did the policeman do?* or *Who stopped next to him?*).

The following passage from Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* found in *ParaSol* contains two sentences in direct succession that contradict the postulated rule. Iešua says shortly after the sentence «Я советовал бы тебе, Игемон, оставить на время дворец и погулять пешком» (“I’d advise you, Hegemon, to leave the palace for a while and go for a stroll”): □ 87

- (12) *Groza načnëtsja* [...] *pozže k večeru*.  
A storm will come [...] later on, towards evening.
- (13) *Progulka prinesla by tebe bol’suju pol’zu* [...].  
A stroll would do you much good [...].

Sentence (12) can again be analyzed as maximum focus. The walk in (13), however, is not in focus, as it has already been mentioned. It forms the topic of the sentence, while the focus is on *bol’suju pol’zu* ‘great benefit’. However, although the walk is mentioned, it is not definite, since it is only suggested and therefore not yet realized and thus not identifiable for the listener (i.e. Pilate).

- (14) *Poslyšalis’ dva golosa. Bas skazal bezžalostno*: [...]  
were.to.hear two voices bass said mercilessly  
„Zwei Stimmen wurden laut. Ein Baß sagte erbarmungslos: [...]“  
‘Two voices were raised. A bass said mercilessly: [...]’

In this example, again from *Master i Margarita* (this time with a German translation), *bas* ‘bass’ is topical, as it is a hyponym of the mentioned *golosa* ‘voices’. However, this concrete bass voice is not yet known to the reader, not yet identifiable for him or her, so that *bas* is indefinite.

All in all, it can therefore be stated that the information structuring that determines Russian word order in the form of topic-comment structure and focus-background structure has a completely different function than definiteness. The former is primarily a category of text linguistics, the latter a semantic-pragmatic one. Although there are certain statistical correlations between these two categories (e.g. topics are frequently definite NPs), (12)–(14) have shown that they are fundamentally independent categories. In addition, the two categories are expressed quite differently: while the definite article allows binary marking of each NP as definite or indefinite, independent of the further co-text, so that there can be several definite or several indefinite NPs in a sentence, word order must have something on the left and something else on the right, so that it only allows a relative marking of ‘newer’ information compared to ‘older’ one.

### 3.4 Negated existential clauses

□ 88 These last two subsections deal with the genitive of negation, which can occur with subjects and direct objects. In negated existential clauses, the subject can be

in the genitive case. For a start, this is illustrated by a standard example (Apresjan 1985: 292; Partee & Borschev 2007: 148; Späth 2008: 163):

(15) *Otvet*            *ne*    *prišël.*  
 answer.NOM    not    came.M  
 'The answer did not come.'

(16) *Otveta*            *ne*    *prišlo.*  
 Answer.GEN    not    came.N  
 'There was no answer.'

Another much-discussed example, which was already cited at the beginning of this article, is repeated here with the interpretations mentioned by Partee & Borschev (2007: 149, 160):

(1') *Moroz*            *ne*    *čuvstvovalsja.*  
 frost.NOM    not    was.felt.M  
 'The frost was not felt.' (For example, we were dressed warmly.)

(3') *Moroza*            *ne*    *čuvstvovalos'.*  
 frost.GEN    not    was.felt.N  
 'No frost was felt.' (There was no frost.)

Späth (2008: 168) uses precisely this sentence, among others, to demonstrate that the case here by no means directly expresses definiteness:

(17) *Na gore*            *byl moroz.*            *No moroza*            *ne*    *čuvstvovalos'.*  
 on mountain    was frost.NOM            but frost.GEN    not    was.felt.N  
 'There was frost on the mountain. But the frost was not felt.'

Here, the genitive is the natural choice in the second sentence, although the frost introduced immediately before is definite. For further details, refer to the comprehensive account by Späth (2008). He comes to the conclusion that the case change between nominative and genitive not only has nothing to do with definiteness (89) but also cannot be captured by specificity: "Rather, an event is asserted as non-localizable in a given situation" ("Ein Ereignis ist vielmehr in einer gegebenen Situation als nicht lokalisierbar behauptet", *ibid.* 173).

Hauenschild (1985: 234) concludes with respect to the genitive of negation and the identity of reference between a nominal phrase (NP<sub>2</sub>) and a preceding nominal phrase (NP<sub>1</sub>) in the text: "If NP<sub>2</sub> as a subject or direct object is in the genitive, identity of reference with NP<sub>1</sub> is relatively unlikely" ("Wenn NP<sub>2</sub> als Subjekt oder direktes Objekt im Genitiv steht, ist Referenzidentität mit NP<sub>1</sub> relativ unwahrscheinlich"). This observation is quite compatible with localizability. If the genitive marked indefiniteness, one would expect that reference identity is not "relatively unlikely", but excluded.

### 3.5 The case of the direct object under negation

Transitive verbs exhibit a similar competition of cases to existential sentences, but this time it concerns the direct object. In affirmative sentences, the latter is in the accusative case, but under negation it traditionally has to be marked as genitive. In addition to the genitive, it has increasingly become possible to retain the accusative under negation. Since language change is ongoing, the genitive of negation is basically always possible according to the old rules. Therefore, the only relevant question is in which cases the accusative is (now) possible (or even preferable) and in which it is not. Traditionally, definiteness is used to explain this, including e.g. the Academy Grammar of 1980:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| «На выбор падежа оказывает влияние также определенность или неопределенность объекта.» (Švedova et al. 1980: §2667) | “The choice of case is also influenced by the definiteness or indefiniteness of the object.” |
|---|--|

“There is, however, a growing tendency in Russian for genitive case in negative contexts to be restricted to indefinites.” (Lyons 1999: 201)

This connection can be illustrated by the following sentences (Birnbaum 1970: 23):

(18) *Ja ne vižu devuški.*  
 I not see girl.GEN.SG  
 ‘I do not see a/the girl.’ □90

(19) *Ja ne vižu devušku.*  
 I not see girl.ACC.SG  
 ‘I do not see the girl.’

The semantics of the verb obviously also plays a role here: while the retention of the accusative under negation is possible without problems with *verba afficiendi*, it seems questionable with *verba efficiendi*, in which the direct object thus only comes into existence through the activity expressed by the verb, as the following sentences (from Birkenmaier 1979: 139f.) show:

(20) *On ne заметил ошибку.*  
 he not noticed mistake.GEN.SG  
 ‘He did not notice any mistake.’

(21) *On не сделал ошибку.*  
 he not made mistake.GEN.SG  
 ‘He did not make any mistake.’

(22) *On не заметил ошибку.*  
 he not noticed mistake.ACC.SG  
 ‘He did not notice the mistake.’

- (23) *ʔOn ne sdelal ošibku.*  
 he not made mistake.ACC.SG

Sentence (23) can only be interpreted with a semantic repair by reading *ošibka* 'mistake' not as a concrete mistake, but as a generic term for a certain kind of mistake: 'He did not make this (i.e. this kind of) mistake.'

As with the existential clauses (cf. 3.4 above), the question of the existence of the direct object seems to have something to do with the choice of case: With the *verba efficiendi*, where the genitive of negation is obviously still obligatory, the creation of the object is assertive, i.e. in the scope of negation. With the *verba afficiendi*, on the other hand, which allow the accusative under negation, the existence of the object is presupposed, i.e. not in the scope of negation.

□91 However, the following two examples not only show that the accusative under negation is also possible with indefinite objects but also require a revision of the interpretation just presented:

- (24) *Počemu vy ne poslali zapisku s sovoj?*  
 why you not sent message.ACC with owl  
 'Why didn't you send us a letter by owl?'

- (25) *Spasibo skazi, čto ne pišu protokol* [...] .  
 Thank\_you say.IMP that not I\_write report.ACC  
 'You can thank me for not writing a report [...].'

Both (24) (from *Harry Potter* by J. Rowling, found in ParaSol) and (25) (from *Pinočēt* by B. Ekimov, found in NKRJa) contain *verba efficiendi*, because *poslat'* 'to send' is not meant here in the sense of *otoslat'* 'to send off', but also encompasses the writing of the letter itself. Consequently, in both sentences, the object does not exist at all due to the negation. Nevertheless, the accusative is used here. Why? The context shows that the speakers assume that the action and therefore the emergence of the letter or the report would have been the 'default case'. In other words, what is presupposed is not the *existence* of the object but a kind of 'defaultness' of this object. The scope of negation is thus perhaps restricted to something like the realization of an assumed plan. The object is already imagined as a very concrete, finished final result of the activity: The teacher in (24) does not intend her question as a vague 'write to me again some time' but knows very precisely what should have been in the letter Harry should have sent her. Similarly, the policeman in (25) knows exactly what the contents of the report should have been. Only the transfer of these objects from their very concrete existence in the imaginary world to the real world is negated.

A similar interpretation was already suggested by Tomson (1903: 218) in an earlier phase of the gradual extension of the accusative to negation:

- «Отрицательныя повѣствовательныя «Negative declarative sentences with the  
 предложения с В[инительнымъ] п[ред- object in the accusative case occur when

жомъ] объекта являются тогда, когда    an action is negated that is assumed with  
отвергается дѣйствіе, съ увѣренностью    certainty, expected or desired by the  
предполагаемое, ожидаемое или же-    speaker or hearer.”  
лаемое говорящимъ или слушателемъ.»

▢92 However, the many examples Tomson (1903: 218–220) gives of this observation can for the most part also be explained by definiteness, topicality or existential presupposition. The only one of his proofs to which this does not apply, similarly to (24) and (25), is the following (ibid. 219):

(26) *Ona nam obed ne prigotvila.*  
she us.DAT lunch.ACC.SG not cooked  
'She did not cook lunch for us.'

Unfortunately, I cannot offer a formalization of these regularities. It seems to me that they could be understood as a kind of specificity (the concrete form of the object is accessible to the speaker without the object being identifiable for the addressee). Ueda (1992: 97) summarizes the many factors he analyzed, which seem to have varying degrees of influence on the choice of case, in a sense that could point in this direction:

“The examples from this section confirm that G[enitive case] is correlated with reference to a general set which consists of members, without presenting any of them as distinct, while A[ccusative case] is correlated with reference to a distinct member of a set.”

Perhaps, however, a solution similar to the one proposed by Späth (2008) for existential clauses makes sense. But for the argument made in this paper it is only relevant that the choice of the object case under negation is determined by categories other than definiteness in the sense defined in Section 2.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Russian determiners mark deixis, specificity, and similar categories; verbal aspect expresses temporal definiteness, which is different from nominal ▢93 definiteness; word order expresses information structure, which, unlike definiteness, is a text-linguistic function; the opposition between nominative and genitive in negated

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<sup>8</sup> Since the displacement of the genitive of negation is a linguistic change that is currently underway, there is of course still a lot in flux here, which makes it difficult to recognize an emerging system. Moreover, a case form may be avoided in some places because it leads to an ambiguity in number. In both the inanimate feminines and the inanimate neuters, the endings of the GEN.SG and ACC.PL have merged (the forms are therefore homonymous, or homographic with different accents), which in this case, where in principle both a genitive and an accusative are possible, can lead to ambiguity about the number. Sometimes the accusative singular or the genitive plural is chosen to avoid this ambiguity.

existential sentences is based on the localizability of the referent in a given situation; and the opposition between accusative and genitive for the direct object in negated sentences seems to have something to do with presupposition and the scope of negation. All five of the phenomena examined here thus turned out not to be based on definiteness, but to have a better explanation based on other categories. Consequently, the category of definiteness is not necessary to describe the Russian language system. Therefore, according to the principle of economy, it can be assumed that definiteness is not a category of Russian.

The existence of definiteness in article languages, where there is a morpheme that seems to serve only this one purpose, apparently obscures the wide variety of options available to languages to narrow down the set of possible referents that an NP can refer to: In addition to the definite vs. indefinite opposition, there are also specific vs. non-specific NPs (with various subtypes, e.g. scopally specific or epistemically specific), presupposed vs. asserted, background vs. focus, topic vs. comment, existence vs. location, and many others. The expression of each of these oppositions contributes equally to understanding by giving the recipient clues as to how to select the referent meant in the given situation from the set of possible referents of an NP. A language that does not express definiteness (but perhaps specificity or elements of information structure) therefore lacks nothing. *The Russian language is complete without definiteness as well.*

The communicative function that all these categories have in common, namely ensuring that the receiver understands which real-world referent the sender means, is so fundamental that it is difficult to speak of equivalence based on this common function. The individual pragmatic contents expressed—such as 'I have not yet mentioned the referent of this NP', 'this information is new to you', 'this NP refers to any representative of its extension', etc.—are so different that their intersections are relevant only as statistical quantities. Hastily equating these functions will not increase our knowledge about them.

Since definiteness is often regarded as a 'covert category' in Russian and it now turns out that this 'covert category' does not exist, the question arises whether the concept of 'covert categories' makes sense at all. Perhaps it would be more appropriate to speak only of grammatical categories in general. If a category is part of a language system, it should also be recognizable in [§ 94](#) morphological or syntactic regularities. From a linguistic point of view, assuming a category that cannot be detected using scientific methods—which also include examining the entire linguistic material, including possible counterexamples and the search for alternative explanations—because it is supposedly so well 'hidden' makes no sense.

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