Polysemy or monosemy: Interpretation of the imperative and the dative-infinitive construction in Russian
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

In the literature there has been much debate concerning the question whether forms are principally monosemous or polysemous; however, many of the studies are highly theoretical, and do not support their empirical claims with extensive analyses of specific empirical data. The focus on the theoretical aspect of the phenomenon of meaning leads, in some cases, to particular shortcomings. Monosemous approaches frequently leave the process of interpretation of abstract meanings unexplained, and in many cases definitions of meanings are so abstract that they also describe oppositional forms. In polysemous analyses, however, the criteria for distinguishing different uses are not always clear, and intermediate uses are often not accounted for. Moreover, polysemous analyses often fail to point at the shared features of different interrelated uses, which may stand in opposition to other forms.

My aim is to provide further insight into the phenomenon of polysemy and monosemy by giving a detailed analysis of the interaction between meaning and context against the background of the semantic system in which the forms occur. The expressions that I will analyze are the imperative and the dative-infinitive (DI) construction in modern Russian. I have chosen to analyze the Russian imperative and the Russian dative-infinitive construction because in the literature different uses are distinguished for these expressions, while the question of how these uses are related is rarely addressed, or at least not put forward as the main question. The choice of these two expressions is further motivated by their shared 'modal' semantics; that is, both forms express such notions as necessity, wish, etc. It should be noted, however, that these expressions also differ in important aspects, since the modality of the Russian imperative is expressed by one form, whereas the dative-infinitive construction consists
of two forms, namely the dative and the infinitive, that together express modal notions such as necessity, wish, etc. I will therefore treat the combination of the dative and the infinitive as a construction, but I will focus on the meaning of the imperative in abstraction from the construction in which it occurs (subject-predicate construction, universal concessive construction, etc.).

I would like to emphasize that the main aim of the study is not primarily to present new empirical data from Russian: the Russian imperative and the Russian modal infinitive construction have been thoroughly studied by many authors, and it seems unlikely that many new facts about the use of these forms will be found. It is, rather, the analysis of the relation between these uses that is my main concern. In particular, I will address the question of how the array of uses of these expressions are structured, and I will try to motivate the interpretation of these forms. The framework used in my analysis is the functional-cognitive framework, especially as provided by Bartsch (1998).

The book has the following structure. In Chapter II, I will discuss the structure of meaning in general. The aim of this section is to provide a background to my research and to underline the theoretical framework that I have chosen to work with. In Chapter III, I will give my analysis of the Russian imperative. In Chapter IV, I will discuss the dative-infinitive construction. In Chapter V, I will give a short conclusion and make some further remarks.

Finally, I would like to make a brief comment on the Russian data used in my analysis. Three types of Russian data are used in this book, viz. (i) data taken from the linguistic literature, (ii) data taken from original sources (books, internet, corpus), and (iii) data proposed by myself and checked by native speakers. In all cases I have indicated the source of the data; the period, style and register of the examples are mentioned where relevant. In the case of data from the linguistic literature, I have indicated the original source of the data, since this is relevant for determining period and style. The format for such references is the following: (author of the cited extract, year: page/original source of the cited extract).

I have translated the Russian sentences into English. The purpose of the translation is primarily to give a general idea of how the sentences should be interpreted for those readers who do not have a command of Russian; I am aware that occasionally the translations may not be fully adequate according to more strict literary norms of translation. In all cases I have provided the Russian sentences with glosses. The purpose of these glosses is to indicate the relevant grammatical structure of the sentences; grammatical information that is not relevant for the discussion at stake is not given. For the glosses I have used the following abbreviations:
Due to technical reasons I have represented ‘c’ with ‘ch’, ‘s’ with ‘sh’, etc.