Polysemy or monosemy: Interpretation of the imperative and the dative-infinitive construction in Russian
Fortuin, E.L.J.

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CHAPTER V

Conclusion

In this dissertation I have given an analysis of the meaning, use and interpretation of the Russian imperative and the Russian dative-infinitive construction. The purpose of this analysis is to show how the different uses of these forms or constructions are related to one another, and how one can account for their interpretation.

In my analysis I have maintained the traditional structuralist distinction between meaning and interpretation. Meanings must be seen as abstractions from different uses of a form, where the context-specific information is abstracted; that is, they must be seen as belonging to that which is a variant. The notion of abstraction used here can be seen as the traditional Aristotelian notion of abstraction, namely the omission of qualities. In my analysis I have defined two types of interpretations:

(i) Specification
(ii) Adjusting

In the case of specification, the interpretation can be seen as a specification of the (relatively) underspecified abstraction by means of the context. This specification is the result of the interaction between the abstraction and the information provided by the context. Put differently: the abstraction can be seen as an abstraction from such interpretations.

In the case of adjusting, the interpretation does not fall directly under the concept, or abstraction. Under the influence of the context, some features of the abstraction are selected while others are backgrounded (in other words, the meaning is adjusted). This means that the abstraction cannot be seen as an abstraction from such adjusted uses,
but rather such uses must be seen as directly derived from the information contained in the abstraction.

This linguistic analysis must be seen as a systematization of the linguistic uses, and conventional linguistic structure, rather than as a description of the knowledge of the language user, or as a description of the processing of language. The systematization of the conventions is cognitively based, which means that conventions are not quite deliberate. Nevertheless, there is a sufficiently broad area of indeterminacy to leave open a choice between different cognitively possible conventions. The linguistic possibilities are cognitively restricted on the basis of similarity, or partial identity, and contiguity; these restrain the use of linguistic expressions on the grounds of previous cases of use. This means that the linguistic analysis shows something about the understandability of uses in the light of previous cases of use of these uses.

Before analyzing the forms under discussion, in Chapter II I explained the structure of meaning by discussing how meanings are learned, and how they function in the linguistic structure. Following Bartsch (1999), I argued that in order for the linguistic structure to be stable, it is necessary that forms are associated with different concepts; however, this is only possible if different perspectives enable the language user to differentiate between them. It is also important that concepts are not overextended under a perspective, and that the use of an expression is delineated by oppositional forms.

I have argued that although forms are associated with different uses, it is possible in many cases to abstract from these different uses on different levels, and to define a general meaning. The general meaning can best be seen as a frame within which the different uses of an expression may occur. Such a frame cannot be seen as a definition, as it does not predict the possible uses of a word, but rather describes the common features of a word, which may stand in opposition to other uses. The notion of ‘frame’ points to two things: (i) the frame can be seen as a restriction on the use of a particular form, or put differently, a restriction on the extensions of a particular form, securing stability of the linguistic system; and (ii) it is within the possibilities provided by the frame that different uses can be distinguished. I have also argued that it is not possible to give an adequate answer to the question of when uses of a form can be seen as different since there are no clear and discrete criteria for distinguishing different uses.

The general findings and notions discussed in Chapter II, served as the basis for the linguistic analyses given in the following chapters. For the specific conclusions of Chapters III and IV, I refer the reader to these chapters. Here, I will confine myself to a summary and some general remarks.
In Chapter III, I discussed the meaning and use of the Russian imperative. I gave a basic meaning of the imperative that can be seen as an abstraction from directive uses and hortative-optative uses. These uses have basic uses themselves, and extensions from these basic uses by the process of selection, and possibly in the case of the narrative imperative, cancelling of features under perspectives provided by contexts. The process of extension by feature selection (back grounding, highlighting, and in the case of the narrative possibly cancelling) occurs in different degrees (corresponding to the number of selected features), such that some instances of the imperative can be seen as borderline cases between different uses. The different uses should therefore be seen as usage types. These usage types correspond to context types. Context types are constituted by collections of formal features that correspond to clear examples of different semantic types.

Although it is not possible to give a necessary and sufficient definition for all the uses of the imperative it is possible to abstract from the uses on different levels, and point at shared features of the different imperative uses, that do not occur with oppositional forms. The approach to the study of the imperative that I have advocated is an intermediate position between monosemous approaches and polysemous approaches. It shares with monosemous approaches the idea that some collection of features (viz. directivity) can be seen as a necessary and sufficient condition for the correct understanding (rather than correct use) of the imperative, and it shares with polysemous approaches the idea that different uses have a more or less independent status, and can be analyzed in terms of extensions of other uses.

In Chapter IV, I discussed the dative-infinitive construction. I showed how the different modal uses of the construction can be derived from its component parts, and how the distribution of the construction can be motivated by its meaning. I argued that the assignment of the dative to the infinitive predicate is always connected to an ontic modal meaning, that is, the realization of the infinitive situation by the dative participant is presented as something which is in accordance with the normal or inevitable way things go, rather than as the result of the intention or tendency of the dative participant. More specifically, I argued that the idea of recipienthood of a situation presupposes an initial information state where the dative participant is not associated with the realization of the infinitive situation (or in the case of negation, where the dative participant is associated with the infinitive situation), which is then contradicted.

I argued that the verbal or predicative element of the construction cannot be seen as a meaning, but must rather be seen as the interpretation that is the result of the association between the non-expressed infinitive agent and the dative subject. It is therefore incorrect
to posit modal logic operators, or non-expressed modal elements for the construction.

In my analysis I pointed at the shared features between the dative-infinitive construction proper (with dative nouns or pronouns), and the occurrence of the second dative. I argued that if the second dative is analyzed as a special instance of the DI-construction, it is possible to motivate its distribution. Such an analysis provides a deeper level of understanding than syntactic analysis that do not take meaning into account in a systematic way.

There are a number of topics that I did not investigate thoroughly in my analysis. Among them are (i) the issue of idiomatization, and (ii) the specific relation between general cognitive capacities and norms of language. The issue of idiomatization plays a part in the case of both the imperative and the dative-infinitive construction. The study of these forms may therefore be greatly assisted by investigating idiomatization in relation to (a) the meaning of these expressions and the linguistic structure in which they occur, and (b) the process of language change. Further research should also focus on how different conventional linguistic structures place different boundaries on similar cognitive-functional domains across languages, and what these cognitive domains or capacities exactly are. In my analysis I have pointed out some areas where such research might be interesting; for example the difference in use between nominalizations and infinitives in contexts where they are oppositional forms. Only by independent analysis of proposed cognitive capacities such as type construal, scanning, Gestalt construal, etc., and the actual use of forms in language, can the relation between cognition and semantics be clarified, and an answer given to the question concerning to which extent cognitive notions can have an explanatory value in the linguistic analysis.