On subject-verb inversion in Russian

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In this paper I examine some word order alternations in Russian and compare them to their Romance (mainly Italian) counterparts. I argue that in a language like Russian, which, as I demonstrate, does not have verb movement, SVO-OVS alternation can be derived in several steps, via movement of the subject out of its thematic position followed by remnant VP preposing.

1. Introduction

The basic word order in Russian is SVO. This means that SVO sentences are unmarked and they do not require any special context. This order usually occurs in presentational sentences, for example, the sentence in (1) can be uttered as an answer to the question ‘What happened?’.

(1) Oleg razbil okno
    Oleg-NOM broke window-ACC
    ‘Oleg broke a/the window’

Russian also allows for the subject of both transitive and intransitive (unaccusative and unergative) verbs to appear postverbally, yielding OVS or VS sentences respectively.¹

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¹ Although both VSO and VOS orders are also possible in Russian, they usually involve contrastive verb topicalization.

(i) Otravil Oleg pis’mo
    sent Oleg-NOM letter-ACC
    ‘What Oleg sent was the letter’ (…but he forgot to send the parcel)

(ii) Otravil pis’mo Oleg
    sent letter-ACC Oleg-NOM
    ‘The one who sent the letter was Oleg’ (…but he didn't write it)

In this paper, I will not consider such cases, restricting my attention to the sentences with no contrastive material.
However, transitive and intransitive sentences differ from the point of view of their information structure and discourse functions: while (2a) and (2b) can still be used in an ‘out of the blue’ context, (2c) cannot. As the question-answer pairs in (3) show, the OVS sentence requires its subject to be the only new information, and the rest of the sentence is already ‘given’.

(3a. Who broke the window?
Okno razbil Oleg
window-ACC broke Oleg-NOM
‘Oleg broke the window’

b. What happened?
#Okno razbil Oleg
window-ACC broke Oleg-NOM

In this paper I will mainly concentrate on transitive sentences and argue that in these cases the OVS order is derived via movement of the subject to the specifier position of a clause-internal focus projection, which is followed by remnant VP movement.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2 I present the analyses of subject inversion that have been proposed for Romance languages and introduce the problems that arise when these analyses are applied to the Russian data. I discuss these problems in the two subsequent sections: section 3 contains some arguments against VP-internal analysis that come from the interpretation of subjects in the postverbal position, and section 4 deals with the absence of verb movement in Russian. In section 5 I outline the analysis of inversion involving VP movement rather than verb movement. In section 6 I discuss the focus interpretation of postverbal subjects in some more detail and show that there is no evidence for contrastive interpretation of the subject in OVS sentences. Section 7 provides a conclusion.

2. The analyses of subject inversion in Romance

SV - VS alternations also exist in some Romance languages, and this
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Phenomenon has been extensively discussed in the literature. In these languages postverbal subjects have been analysed either as being right-adjointed to VP (for example, by Rizzi 1982) or occupying the right specifier of VP (Bonet 1990). However, Ordóñez (1998) argues for the antisymmetric approach to this phenomenon and suggests an alternative analysis of VSO and VOS alternations in Spanish. Following Koopman & Sportiche (1991), Ordóñez assumes the VP-internal subject hypothesis, and argues that in VSO sentences the subject is either inside the VP or in a specifier position of another projection, NeutP (which, according to Ordóñez, is only available in Spanish, but not in Italian or Catalan, and where the subject can remain prosodically neutral). The VOS order is derived via scrambling of the object across the position of the subject, since in VOS sentences the object c-commands the subject. In both cases, the verb moves to a position above the subject by head-movement.

A similar analysis has been proposed for Italian by Cardinaletti (2002) who argues that Italian postverbal subjects remain in their thematic position, i.e. the specifier of VP. The linearly postverbal position of the subject is due to verb movement in both intransitive (4a) and transitive (4b) sentences; in addition, movement of the object across the subject is also assumed in the latter example (Cardinaletti 2002:4).

(4)a. (Mi) ha chiamato un uomo
   me has called a man
   *’There called (me) a man’

b. Ha comprato il giornale Gianni
   has bought the newspaper Gianni
   *’There bought the newspaper John’

However, if one tries to apply this analysis to the Russian data, two problems immediately arise. First of all, postverbal subjects in OVS sentences do not receive what can be described as a VP-internal interpretation. The second problem is the absence of any evidence for verb movement in Russian, at least in declarative sentences. In the following two sections I will consider these problems in more detail.

3. The interpretation of postverbal subjects

3.1. VP-external properties

The aim of this section is to show that the interpretation of postverbal subjects in subject-verb inversion contexts in Russian is different from the one of genuine VP-internal subjects of other languages. The subjects in OVS contexts

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do not display the main properties that VP-internal subjects are predicted to have by Diesing’s Mapping Hypothesis.

(5) Mapping Hypothesis (Diesing 1992:10):
Material from VP is mapped into the nuclear scope.
Material from IP is mapped into a restrictive clause.

The Mapping Hypothesis predicts that presuppositional subjects (e.g. definite/specific and quantified DPs) do not stay inside the VP. As Diesing herself shows, this prediction is born out in languages like English and German. The contexts where the so-called ‘definiteness effect’ shows up can be exemplified by English there-sentences: it is a well-know fact that definite and strongly quantified DPs are not acceptable in such sentences.

(6)a. There arrived a student
   b. *There arrived the student/every student/many of the students

In Russian, however, postverbal DPs in OVS sentences are not subject to the definiteness restriction. The examples below show that quantified DPs like každyj student ‘every student’ or mnogie studenty ‘many of the students’ are allowed to surface in this position.3

(7) ėtę zadačę rešil každyj student
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved every-NOM student-NOM
   ‘Every student solved this problem’

(8) ėtę zadačę rešili mnogie studenty
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved many-NOM students-NOM
   ‘Many students solved this problem’

The presuppositional nature of Russian postverbal subjects can be easily seen in negative sentences, where the subject can have a wide scope interpretation.

(9) ėtę zadačę ne rešili dva studenta
   this-ACC problem-ACC neg solved two-NOM student-GEN

3 In Russian different morphological forms of the weak quantifier ‘many’ can be used to distinguish the two readings: the non-agreeing form mnogo (which behaves like a numeral with respect to case assignment) corresponds to the existential/cardinal reading and the form that shows adjectival agreement mnogie corresponds to the partitive reading.

   (i) v parke bylo mnogo detej /*mnogie deti
       in park was many children-GEN many-NOM children-NOM
       ‘There were many children in the park’

   (ii) mnogie deti /*mnogo detej byli v parke
       many children-GEN many-NOM children-NOM were in park
       ‘Many children were in the park’
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a. ‘Two students didn’t solve this problem’
b. *‘It is not the case that two students solved this problem’

The sentence in (9) has an interpretation where the subject is outside the scope of sentential negation, meaning that there were two of the whole group of students who didn’t solve the problem. Crucially, it does not have the meaning indicated in (b), which would correspond to the narrow scope reading of the subject (in such a case the sentence would have been true if, for instance, only one of ten students in the group solved the problem, but nine didn’t).

Another context where postverbal subjects differ from genuine VP-internal ones is provided by sentences with individual-level predicates. According to Diesing, subjects of individual-level predicates are base-generated in the higher subject position (i.e. the specifier if IP) directly, so these predicates do not permit the option of having a VP-internal subject. The following examples from Greek support this claim: in Greek VSO order, where the subject has been argued to occur inside the VP (by Alexiadou 1999), is only possible with stage-level predicates, but not with individual-level ones.

(10) ehtise i Maria to spiti
    built the-Mary-NOM the-house-ACC
    ‘Mary built the house’

(11)a. *kseri i Meropi Ispanika
    knows the-Meropi-NOM Spanish
    b. I Meropi kseri Ispanika
    the-Meropi-NOM knows Spanish
    ‘Meropi knows Spanish’

However, subjects of individual-level predicates are not excluded from inversion contexts in Russian. Generic interpretation is also available for bare plural subjects in that position, so the sentence in (12) can have a meaning in which children in general are those who like ice-cream.

(12) moroženoe ljubjad deti
    ice-cream-ACC like children-NOM
    ‘Children like ice-cream’

To sum up, all the facts discussed in this section point in one direction, namely that in Russian postverbal subjects in OVS sentences do not have a proper VP-internal interpretation, therefore it does not seem plausible to analyse them as occupying their thematic position inside the VP.

3.2. Focalization

Subjects of OVS sentences obviously differ from preverbal subjects in their
discourse properties. As I mentioned already, an OVS sentence like the one in (3), repeated here as (13), is only felicitous as an answer to the question *Who broke the window?* but not to the question *What happened?*

(13)a. *Who broke the window?*
   
   okno razbil Oleg
   
   window-acc broke Oleg-nom
   
   ‘Oleg broke the window’

b. *What happened?*
   
   #okno razbil Oleg
   
   window-acc broke Oleg-nom

From this example it is clear that the OVS order is only appropriate in contexts where the subject can receive narrow focus interpretation.

Similar facts have been observed for Italian, where subjects of both VSO and VOS sentences are always interpreted as a part of new information. As far as VOS sentences are concerned, Belletti (2001, 2002) notes that to the extent that they are acceptable, the only interpretation that they allow is with the narrow focus on the subject. She uses the same question-answer test to show that the VO part of the sentence must be ‘given’, i.e. it is necessarily interpreted as a topic.

(14)a. Chi ha capito il problema?
   
   who has understood the problem

b. Ha capito il problema Gianni
   
   has understood the problem Gianni

Belletti (1999, 2001, 2002) proposes an analysis that accounts both for the VP-external properties and for the narrow focus interpretation of inverted subjects. Under this analysis sentences with subject-verb inversion are taken to be instances of clause internal focalization. Belletti assumes that Focus is a syntactic feature heading a functional projection in the clause structure and creating a regular checking configuration. A clause internal Focus projection is located above VP, in the low IP area.

(15) FocusP

   Foc'  

   Foc°  VP

According to Belletti, in VS sentences the subject does not remain in its thematic position within the VP, but moves to the specifier of FocusP, and the verb moves across it. The derivation of VOS sentences differs only in that in the latter case the movement of the subject is followed by ‘remnant
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topicization' of the VP containing the trace of the subject to a clause internal
Topic projection, also located in the low IP area.

(16)

\[ \text{TopicP} \]

\[ \text{VP} \]

\[ \text{Top}' \]

\[ \text{Top}\circ \]

\[ \text{FocusP} \]

\[ \text{Subj} \]

\[ \text{Foc}\circ \]

\[ t_{\text{VP}} \]

Similar account for VOS sentences is proposed in Ordóñez (1998), first for
Italian and Catalan, and then also for Spanish. Under Ordóñez’ analysis
subjects in VOS structures move to an external focus projection above IP.
Scrambling of the object follows, and then the whole IP moves even higher
(probably to some position in the CP area).

It should be noted, however, that the focus projection in the left periphery
of the clause is usually associated with contrastive interpretation (see, for
example, Rizzi 1997). But, as many researchers point out, postverbal subjects
in Romance are not necessarily contrastive. I will come back to this issue in
section 6, and argue that in Russian as well postverbal subjects are not
contrastive, but rather new information foci.

4. Absence of verb movement

Given that Russian postverbal subjects have the same interpretation as their
Italian counterparts, it seems promising to apply Belletti’s analysis to Russian
data. However, it cannot be done straightforwardly since this analysis crucially
involves verb movement across the position of the subject, and in this section I
will argue that in Russian verb movement is not generally available.

4.1. The position of adverbs and floating quantifiers

Since Pollock (1989) the well-known tests for verb movement have been the
position of the verb relative to the negative markers, adverbs and floating
quantifiers. In Russian sentential negation is realized as a pro-clitic which
criticizes to the finite verb and therefore obligatorily precedes it in all contexts
including inversion.
(17) ‘Prestuplenie i nakazanie’ ne pročitali dva čeloveka  
‘Two people didn’t read ‘Crime and Punishment’

However, this fact alone cannot be taken as evidence against verb movement, 
since in some contexts the verb and the negative particle can move together, 
e.g. under contrastive topicalization, which is shown in (18).

(18) Ne pročitali etu knigu tol’ko Tanja i Andrej  
‘Only Tanja and Andrej didn’t read this book’

Adverbs, on the other hand, provide more reliable information about the 
position of the verb. As the examples below show, adverbs in Russian never 
interfere between a lexical verb and its complements. Even aspectual adverbs, 
like v drebezgi ‘to smithereens’, which presumably occupies the same position 
as completely, or the adverb xorošo ‘well’ (one of the lowest ones in Cinque’s 
adverbs hierarchy), precede the verb.\(^4\)

(19)a. Oleg v drebezgi razbil čašku  
‘Oleg broke the cup to smithereens’

b. *Oleg razbil v drebezgi čašku  
‘Oleg broke the cup to smithereens’

(20)a. Lena xorošo govorit po-francuzski  
‘Lena speaks French well’

b. *Lena govorit xorošo po-francuzski  
‘Lena speaks well French’

There is no reason to suggest that the position of the verb is higher in 
sentences with inversion, since in these cases adverbs still precede the verb. 
Crucially, they do not intervene between the verb and the subject, as the 
following examples clearly show.

(21)a. čašku v drebezgi razbil Oleg  
‘Oleg broke the cup to smithereens’

b. *čašku razbil v drebezgi Oleg  
‘Oleg broke to smithereens’

\(^4\) The grammaticality judgements given below are valid for the cases when the sentences are 
pronounced with neutral, non-interrupted intonation and contain no contrastive focalization.
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(22)a. po-francuzski xorošo govorit Lena
French well speaks Lena-NOM
‘Lena speaks French well’
b. *po-francuzski govorit xorošo Lena
French speaks well Lena-NOM

The position of floating quantifiers when they occur to the right of the verb can also indicate that verb movement has taken place across the position of the subject. And again, floating quantifiers never follow the lexical verb in Russian.

(23) malčiki (vse) pročitali (*vse) ětu knigu
boys-NOM (all) read (*all) this-ACC book-ACC
‘The boys all read this book’

This suggests that lexical verbs in this language either do not move at all or move very locally (presumably to the v head).5

4.2. The position of subjects with respect to other complements

Another important fact to notice is that in sentences with inversion the subject of the sentence must be final. Apart from narrative inversion and contrastive verb topicalization contexts, Russian, unlike Italian or Spanish, does not allow either VSO or XVSO orders, though XVOS order is possible.6

(24)a. *mne podaril ětu knigu moj sosed
me-DAT gave this-ACC book-ACC my-NOM neighbour-NOM
‘My neighbour gave me this book’
b. *mne podaril moj sosed ětu knigu
me-DAT gave my-NOM neighbour-NOM this-ACC book-ACC

The examples in (25) show that any other complements of the verb, be it direct, indirect or prepositional object, must precede the inverted subject.

(25)a. *posle obeda vstretil Oleg direktora
after dinner met Oleg-NOM director-ACC
b. *posle obeda pozvonił Oleg direktoru
after dinner called Oleg-NOM director-DAT

5 Apart from the considerations of uniformity of the derivation, there is no evidence either for or against V-to-v movement.
6 As far as contrastive verb topicalization and narrative inversion are concerned, I would assume that in these constructions VSO order is derived from SVO via verb movement to the left peripheral Topic projection in the former case and to Force° (with an empty operator in the specifier of ForceP) in the latter case.
c. *posle obeda pogovoril Oleg s direktorom
   after dinner talked Oleg-NOM with director-INSTR

It should be noted that VSO is the order that one can expect to be available in a language with verb movement and the subject in its thematic position. It is attested in Spanish as well as in other languages with verb movement outside Romance. Greek, for example, allows VSO in presentational contexts (the following examples are from Alexiadou 1999).

(26)a. ehtise i Maria to spiti
    built the-Mary-NOM the-house-ACC
    'Mary built the house'

b. kerdhise i Maria ton aghona
    won the-Mary-NOM the-race-ACC
    'Mary won the race'

In Russian, however, the subject, when postverbal, always appears in sentence final position. This fact, together with the position of adverbs and floating quantifiers discussed in the previous section, provides strong evidence against a verb-movement analysis of inversion in this language.

5. The Analysis

Since, as we have seen in the previous section, verb movement in Russian is not available, I am going to suggest that in this language inversion is uniformly derived via verb projection movement. Following Belletti (1999, 2001, 2002), I propose that, assuming the starting configuration in (27), the derivation of OVS sentences proceeds as follows.

(27) [vP Oleg razbil okno ]
    Oleg-NOM broke window-ACC

(i) the subject moves to the specifier of the clause internal Focus projection above vP.

(28) \[FocP Oleg Foc \[vP t_i razbil okno \]]

(ii) the remnant vP moves across the subject (presumably to one of the topical positions in the IP field that host ‘old information’ topics).

(29) \[TopP \[vP t_i razbil okno \] Top \[FocP Oleg Foc \[t_{IP} \]]\]

At this point one would get the exact counterpart of Italian VOS sentences, but in Russian the derivation proceeds one step further: (iii) some element (e.g. the object) moves to the specifier of RefP to fill the position of the subject of
Generalizing this analysis to all inversion contexts, one should keep in mind that in Russian VS sentences are systematically ambiguous between presentational reading and the reading with the narrow focus on the subject. In the former case such sentences constitute thetic expressions where RefP is not projected at all (as it is argued by Kiss 1996). In the latter case, I assume that they have the same derivation as OVS, with the subject moving to the focus projection and the specifier position of RefP being filled by the empty locative argument $\emptyset_{LOC}$ (cf. Pinto 1997).8

6. Identificational or information focus?

In this section I would like to consider the focus interpretation of postverbal subjects in OVS sentences in some more detail and try to identify the type of focus that is associated with this position in Russian.

Belletti (2002) assumes that in Italian the clause internal focus projection, unlike the left peripheral one, is not associated with any special contrastive interpretation, and the postverbal subject that appears in its specifier is merely new information subject. This assumption, however, contradicts the claim made in Kiss (1998) that only identificational focus occupies the specifier of a special functional projection, while information focus is VP-internal and involves no syntactic reordering.

According to Kiss, ‘identificational focus represents a subset of the set of contextually or situationally given elements for which the predicate phrase can potentially hold; it is identified as the exhaustive subset of this set for which the predicate actually holds’. This kind of focus can be exemplified by English cleft constructions or by the elements that occupy the preverbal focus position in Hungarian.

On the other hand, information focus is merely ‘a part of the sentence that conveys new, nonpresupposed information marked by one or more pitch accents’ (Kiss 1998:245-246). Thus, information focus is present in every sentence, but not every sentence necessarily contains an identificational focus.

Identificational focus differs from information one in a number of respects, one of them being the availability of exhaustive interpretation. Russian postverbal subjects lack this interpretation, since they do not pass either of the

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7 A. Belletti (p.c.) suggested to me that the necessity of this additional step in Russian could be attributed to the unavailability of referential pro in this language, while pro could be assumed to occupy the specifier of RefP in Italian. I would rather leave the question of the reason for the movement to the specifier of RefP open here, since this issue requires special investigation.

8 Another alternative would be to suggest, in line with Raposo & Uriagereka 1995, that the remnant VP itself can function as the subject of predication.
tests for exhaustivity given in Kiss (1998). 9

(31) a. étu zadaču rešili Dima i Oleg
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved Dima-NOM and Oleg-NOM
   'Dima and Oleg solved this problem'
=> b. étu zadaču rešil Dima
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved Dima-NOM
   'Dima solved this problem'

(32) A.: Étu zadaču rešil Dima
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved Dima-NOM
   'Dima solved this problem'
B.: %Net, Oleg eče tože rešil
   no Oleg-NOM it-ACC too solved
   'No, Oleg solved it, too'

There are also no distributional restrictions with regard to universal quantifiers
or even- phrases which identificational foci in other languages show.

(33) a. étu zadaču rešil každyj
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved everyone-NOM
   'Everyone solved this problem'
cf. *It was everyone who solved this problem
b. étu zadaču rešil dažje Dima
   this-ACC problem-ACC solved even Dima-NOM
   'Even Dima solved this problem'
cf. *It was even John who solved this problem

On the other hand, postverbal subjects exhibit some properties of
identificational focus as well. One, for instance, is being unable to project their
focus to the rest of the sentence; another one is the ungrammaticality of a

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9 Kiss (1998) uses two tests. The first test, proposed by Szabolcsi, consists of two sentences:
the first sentence contains two coordinate DPs in focus, and in the second sentence one of these
DPs is dropped. The focus is exhaustive if the second sentence does not belong to the logical
consequences of the first one.
(i)a. It was a hat and a coat that Mary picked for herself.
=> b. It was a coat that Mary picked for herself.
(ii)a. Mary picked a hat and a coat for herself
=> b. Mary picked a hat for herself.
The second test used by Kiss involves the following dialog, describing a situation when Mary did
pick a hat for herself, therefore the negation can only be interpreted as the negation of exhaustivity.
(iii) A: It was a hat that Mary picked for herself.
   B: No, she picked a coat, too.
(iv) A: Mary picked a hat for herself.
   B: %No, she picked a coat, too.
These tests show that exhaustive interpretation is available for focused constituents in English cleft
constructions, but not for postverbal information focus.
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Subconstituent in this position.

(34) *étu zadaçu mal'čik rešil umnyj
    this-ACC problem-ACC boy-NOM solved clever-NOM
    ‘The boy who solved the problem was clever’

Yet both these properties could follow if we assume that in Russian, like in
Italian, focus interpretation always arises as the result of movement to the
specifier position of some special projection. The absence of exhaustive
interpretation can be explained if the features [+exhaustive]/[+contrastive] are
only associated with the left peripheral focus projection, but not with the clause
internal one.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I argued that the derivation of OVS sentences in Russian consists
of three steps: (i) movement of the subject to the specifier position of the focus
projection located in the IP area, (ii) subsequent movement of the remnant vP
across the position of the subject, and (iii) filling the position of the subject of
predication. I also discussed the interpretation of postverbal subjects in this
language and showed that movement of the subject to the clause internal focus
projection is associated with information rather than identificational focus,
despite the fact that it involves syntactic reordering.

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