

On subject-verb inversion in Russian

Anna Erechko

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

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.

- (2)a. Priexal Oleg
arrived Oleg-NOM
'Oleg arrived'
- b. Pozvonil Oleg
called Oleg-NOM
'Oleg called'
- c. Okno razbil Oleg
window-ACC broke Oleg-NOM
'Oleg broke the window'

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'.

- (3)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

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

phenomenon has been extensively discussed in the literature.² In these languages postverbal subjects have been analysed either as being right-adjoined 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

² See, among others, Rizzi (1982), Belletti (1999, 2001, 2002), Cardinaletti (2002) for Italian, Ordóñez (1998) for Spanish and Catalan. For the discussion of French and Italian data see Belletti (2002).

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) étu zadaču rešil každyj student
 this-ACC problem-ACC solved every-NOM student-NOM
 'Every student solved this problem'

(8) étu zadaču 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) étu zadaču 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'

- 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 of 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) moroženo l'jubjat 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?*

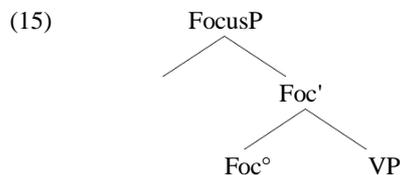
- (13)a. *Who broke the window?*
 okno razbil Oleg
 window-ACC broke Oleg-NOM
 'Oleg broke the window'
- b. *What happened?*
 #okno razbil Oleg
 window-ACC broke Oleg-NOM

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.

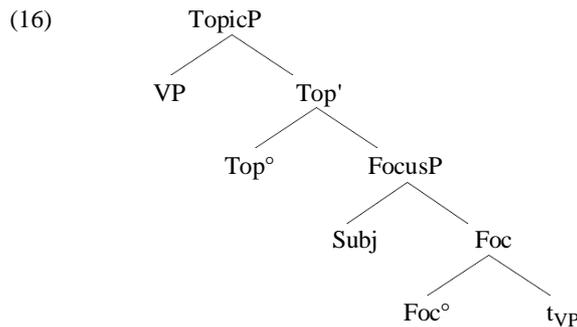
- (14)a. Chi ha capito il problema?
 who has understood the problem
- b. Ha capito il problema Gianni
 hasunderstood the problem Gianni

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.



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

topicalization' of the VP containing the trace of the subject to a clause internal Topic projection, also located in the low IP area.



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 cliticizes to the finite verb and therefore obligatorily precedes it in all contexts including inversion.

- (17) 'Prestuplenie i nakazanie' ne pročitali dva človeka
 crime and punishment neg read two people
 '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 étu knihu tol'ko Tanja i Andrej
 neg read this book only Tanja and 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 *vdrebezgi* '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 vdrebezgi razbil čašku
 Oleg-NOM to smithereens broke cup-ACC
 'Oleg broke the cup to smithereens'
 b. *Oleg razbil vdrebezgi čašku
 Oleg-NOM broke to smithereens cup-ACC

- (20)a. Lena xorošo govorit po-francuzski
 Lena-NOM well speaks French
 'Lena speaks French well'
 b. *Lena govorit xorošo po-francuzski
 Lena-NOM 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 vdrebezgi razbil Oleg
 cup-ACC to smithereens broke Oleg-NOM
 'Oleg broke the cup to smithereens'
 b. *čašku razbil vdrebezgi Oleg
 cup-ACC broke to smithereens Oleg-NOM

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.

- (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) mal'čiki (vse) pročitali (*vse) étu 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 XVO order is possible.⁶

- (24)a. mne podaril étu 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 étu 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 pozvonil 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^o (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_i 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_i Foc[°] t_{vP}]]

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

predication.⁷

(30) → [RefP okno_k ... [TopP [vP t_i razbil t_k] Top° [FocP Oleg_i Foc° t_{vP}]]]

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 constitutethetic 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

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 eě 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 každýj*
 this-ACC problem-ACC solved everyone-NOM
 ‘Everyone solved this problem’
 cf. *It was everyone who solved this problem
 b. *étu zadaču rešil daže 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

⁹ Kiss (1998) uses two tests. The first test, proposed by Szabolsci, 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.

subconstituent in this position.

- (34) *étu zadaču 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.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Artemis Alexiadou, Adriana Belletti, Anna Cardinaletti, Anders Holmberg, Ian Roberts and the audience at ConSOLE XI for their comments and fruitful discussions.

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