

## One-Place Prepositions in Russian

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### Abstract

Usually, semantic prepositions function as two-place predicates. When only one actant is present the preposition can be analysed either as a true one-place predicate or as a two-place predicate with a suppressed first actant.

### Keywords

Semantic preposition, one-place predicate, suppressed actant, Russian.

## 1 Introduction

Prepositions may or may not occupy a node in the semantic graph. Accordingly, we distinguish semantic and syntactic use of the preposition. For instance, in *Ona spít na divane* the preposition *na* is a two-place predicate, taking *spít* as its first actant and *divan* as its second.<sup>1</sup> In *Ona nadeetsja na udaču* the same preposition is syntactic: it does not occupy a node of its own. Rather, the whole phrase *na udaču* forms the second actant of the verb.<sup>2</sup>

Many prepositions can, like *na*, occur in both functions. However, several prepositions, for example *blagodarja*, are exclusively used semantically. The preposition *o*, when used with the prepositional case (*Ona думаet o syne*), is always syntactic.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Gurevič (1992, 79) the first actant is rather the subject, *ona*. This seems to be a more indirect relationship, however. In any case, the situation ‘sleep’ is also “located” on the couch, and its only actant, the sleeper, cannot be elsewhere.

<sup>2</sup> In Seliverstova’s (2000) detailed investigation of *na* the attention almost totally centres upon the noun governed by the preposition. The distinction syntactic : semantic is not mentioned. Of course, even in cases when the choice of a preposition is automatic, it may well be semantically motivated.

Usually, semantic prepositions function as two-place predicates. Sometimes, however, a third actant is added. In the sentence *Zabastovki načalis' k jugu ot Kieva* the preposition *k* is a three-place predicate: the verb *načalis'* is the first actant, the noun *jugu* the second actant, and the phrase *ot Kieva* fulfills the function of the third actant.<sup>3</sup>

The topic of the present contribution are constructions with semantic prepositions functioning as one-place predicates. As we shall see, the analysis of prepositions seemingly requiring only one actant is often complicated.

The graph representation is a very important tool in this kind of investigations. I have chosen this time to describe the semantic structures verbally in the text. In graphic form the main analyses are presented in a separate appendix, which can be found at the end of this article (after Bibliography).

To avoid confusion and misunderstanding, it seems appropriate to point out that my way of analysing semantic structure is, in a significant way, different from the canonical MTT model. The entities occupying the nodes of the semantic graph are linguistic signs, not unilateral semes. For more details I refer to the introduction in my contribution to the first MTT conference (Lönngren 2003, 211-212).

## 2 The meaning 'approximately'

As mentioned above, it is not always easy to determine when a preposition functions as a one-place predicate. One relatively clear example, however, is the preposition *s* with the accusative case, as in *telo razmerom s Mars* (see Appendix). In the lexicon this preposition is defined through two adverbs that clearly take only one actant each, namely *počti* and *priblizitel'no* (let us concentrate here on the second definition, 'approximately'). The same is true of the more frequent synonym *okolo*, in phrases like *okolo trex metrov*, which can be paraphrased as *priblizitel'no tri metra*. So far as *okolo* is concerned it could, possibly, be argued that there is still some connection between the meaning 'approximately' and the primary meaning of location. Under such an analysis the first, always suppressed, actant would express the exact measure. This can hardly be said about *s*, which cannot be traced back to any primary two-place use.

Both *okolo* and *s* have the capacity of expelling other – semantic or syntactic – prepositions occurring in more basic expressions. For instance, *On priedet okolo času* can be compared with *On priedet v čas*: the semantic preposition *v* has been expelled. *Telo razmerom s Mars* can be compared with *telo razmerom v Mars*.<sup>4</sup> Here the syntactic preposition *v* has been expelled. The phrase *v Mars* occupies the second actant position of the predicate *razmerom*. The first actant is, of course, *telo*. The sentences *Oni šli okolo časa* and *S mesjac lošad' stojala vo dvore* (F. Iskander) can be compared with *Oni šli čas* and *Mesjac lošad' stojala vo dvore*, respectively. Here the insertion of the preposition has the effect that the two-place semantic accusative (meaning 'how long'), which functions as a predicate connecting the

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of three-place prepositions, see Lönngren (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Here is a more authentic example: *ogromnye vši, každaja razmerom v vorob'ja*.

situation with the time span, is replaced by the syntactic case required by the preposition. In the corresponding semantic graphs, however, the expelled two-place predicates must be retained, occupying their own nodes, but they must be marked as implicit: *On priedet «v» okolo času* (see Appendix), *Oni šli okolo časa «ACC»*.

Certain other prepositions have the same capacity of expelling a more basic preposition or ending, as can be seen in the following expressions: *ozero glubinoj do sta metrov*; *Emu uže za pjat’desjat*. If the meaning ‘approximately’ is expressed through inverted word order it can be combined with the meaning ‘nearly’: *staričok let pod devjanosto*. In the given context, these prepositions can also be regarded as one-place predicates.

Needless to say, a syntactic dependency tree is not capable of distinguishing between syntactic and semantic use and between primary two-place and secondary inserted one-place prepositions. It assigns the same structure to *On priedet v čas* and *On priedet okolo času*.

### 3 The distributive *po*

Now let us turn to the so-called distributive *po*, as in *Detjam dali po jabloku* (see Appendix). Here *jabloku* seems to be the only actant of the preposition. In the example just given the verb *dali* takes *jabloku* as its second actant and *detjam* as its third actant. The dative case of *jabloku* overrules the accusative case required by the verb; cf.: *Detjam dali jabloki*. Even if the accusative case is preserved, as in *Detjam dali po dva jabloka*, it is no longer controlled by the verb. In the semantic graph *po* takes the same position as, for instance, *krasnye* in *Detjam dali krasnye jabloki*, but *po* is more complicated: it in some sense establishes a connection between *jabloki* and *deti*. Should it not, then, be regarded as a two-place predicate? At first glance this seems to be a good idea, especially in view of the fact that the verb *raspredelit’* takes three actants: *Oni raspredelili detej po klassam*, but the syntactic *po* in this sentence is not attached to the same actant as the semantic *po* in *Detjam dali po jabloku* (cf. the awkward paraphrase *Jabloki raspredelili po detjam*). This makes one hesitate to regard *detjam* as the first actant of the semantic preposition *po*.

Note that we can add still one specification, the meaning ‘without exception’, to the example. Two pronouns are possible, *vse* and *každyj*: *Vsem detjam dali po jabloku* and *Každyj rebenku dali po jabloku*. In addition to the meaning ‘without exception’ the word *každyj* also conveys the meaning of distribution. If *každyj* takes any other actant than *rebenok*, this actant is the phrase *iz detej*, rather than the noun *jabloko* (cf.: *Každyj iz detej dali po jabloku*), so this is still one reason to regard distributivity expressed by *každyj* or *po* as an inherently one-place predicate.

One might expect that in the presence of the pronoun *každyj* the preposition *po* should be superfluous. But it is not that simple. There are two ways of translating the English expression *Each child got an apple*: with or without *po*. Sentences like *Každyj rebenku dali jabloko / dva jabloka* are also grammatical, and it is not clear to me if there is any semantic difference between the constructions.

With respect to the verb the noun governed by the preposition can be either the object, as in the examples given above, or – more seldom – the subject, for example: *S každyj dereva upalo po jabloku*. *Na každyj skamejke sidelo po molodoj pare*. In the latter case it is, of course, not the accusative but the nominative that is replaced with the dative.

Remotely related to this kind of constructions are sentences like *On rabotaet po subbotam*. The noun governed by the preposition must be in the plural, and the connection is established not with another (physical) object, but with a process: *rabotaet*. If we look upon *On rabotaet v subbotu* as more “basic” (which is questionable), we could say that the one-place predicate *po* on the surface has expelled the two-place *v*. These two predicates have separate expressions in the close paraphrase *On rabotaet každuju subbotu: každyj* and *<ACC>* (the semantic accusative), respectively. But perhaps another solution is more natural: the preposition *po* seems to combine two functions, the temporal and the distributive. Since these two lexemes differ in valency they must be separated and occupy each its own node in the semantic graph: *On rabotaet po<sub>1</sub> po<sub>2</sub> subbotam*. Then in the paraphrase given *po<sub>1</sub>* corresponds to *<ACC>* and *po<sub>2</sub>* to *každuju* (see Appendix).

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to mention the distributive prefixes *pere-* and *po-*. Like the preposition *po*, these come in two versions, one relating to physical objects and one to states or processes. The first type is found in verbs, for example *perebolet'*, *perecelovat'*, *povyxodit' замуž*. The second type is found in the adverb *podolgu*, for example *Nu, a podolgu li dljatsja štorma?* (Ju. Kazakov).

## 4 Direction

Let us now consider prepositions occurring in phrases of direction, which are usually under the direct command of a verb. These prepositions are primarily syntactic, for example *v/iz* in *Ona priedet v Moskvu / iz Moskvy* and *na/s* in *On položil knigu na stol / vzjal knigu so stola*.

What about sentences like *Ona perestavila cvety so stola na okno*? Do we have to regard *s* and *na* as semantic? No, in this case we have to do with different actant positions (semantic roles). These prepositions are just as syntactic as *na* in *Ona nadeetsja na udaču*, or the accusative ending in *Ona čitaet knigu*. Even the “perlative” meaning connected with (directed) motion can be rendered by a syntactic preposition, as in *Oni šli po ulice* (cf. the syntactic instrumental in *Oni šli lesom*).

It is true that the verbs *priexat'* and *polozhit'* in the sentences given above are also rather void of information, in the sense that they are predictable, but it seems more natural to let the verb rather than the preposition carry the meaning of directed motion. We can compare these sentences with the prepositionless expressions of direction in *Korabl' dostig Filippin* and in the perfectly transitive *Oni pokinuli London*. Even if we have to infer an implicit verb of motion I prefer to regard the preposition as syntactic: examples are not only elliptical sentences like *Tatjana v les*, but also phrases like *doroga v/na Moskvu*, where the inferred implicit predicate is «vesti». So Puškin's famous line *K nemu ne zarastet narodnaja tropa* begins with a syntactic preposition.

As soon as the preposition carries some information, not predictable from the verb, it ceases to be syntactic. This is what happens if we change *na stol* in *On položil knigu na stol* into *v stol* or *pod stol*. What valency do these semantic prepositions have? One possibility is to regard them as two-place predicates under the direct command of the verb; even if we have to do with a graph of the «vine» type, i.e. not a tree, the possibility of mutual dependency must be rejected. So, since the first actant position of the preposition cannot be filled with the verb, it must be considered empty, or – better – suppressed.

The other possibility is to regard the prepositions as one-place predicates specifying the orientation. This means that we could paraphrase the last-mentioned example as something like ‘On položil knigu ne na, a pod stol’. The third actant of *položil* is then the noun *stol*, not the preposition *pod*. The normal orientation has been overruled by an unnatural one. The “expected” preposition *na* can be regarded as expelled. The position of *pod* in the graph is very similar to that of *s* (+ Acc.) and *po* (+ Dat.) in the constructions discussed earlier (see Appendix).

In cases where there is no natural orientation primacy and thus the preposition is always semantic the first solution – a two-place predicate with suppressed first actant – seems preferable.

## 5 Location

A prepositional phrase commanded by a verb can also express location. The preposition can be either syntactic or semantic. For example, the verb *žit’* (in the sense ‘to live in a certain place’) is clearly a two-place predicate. So in *Ona živet v Moskve* it takes *v Moskve* as its second actant. The preposition *v* conveys no additional information, and should therefore be regarded as syntactic.<sup>5</sup> However, in *Kniga – na stole* we may feel tempted to let the preposition carry the semantic burden, rather than the copula.

In many cases both the verb and the preposition seem equally void of information. For example, the natural way of connecting a picture and a wall is through the verb *hang* and the preposition *on* (cf.: *Kartina visit na stene*). Of course, the verb and the preposition interact; with an appropriate verb even the orientation *pod stolom* may seem natural: *Kniga valjaetsja pod stolom*.

If, however, either preposition or both are semantically loaded, they can no longer be syntactic. Such a case is *Ona živet pod Moskvoj*. The same analysis can be applied here as in the case of direction. So it seems appropriate to distinguish location and orientation. The former meaning is carried by the verb, which now takes only the noun *Moskva* as its second actant. The latter meaning is carried by the preposition *pod*, which is here a one-place predicate, taking *Moskva* as its only actant: it does not relate two entities. However, more often than with direction it seems to be a fact that we have to choose between several orientations, none of which has a clear primacy. This is often the case with prepositions such as *u*, *okolo*, *vozle* and adverbs such as *daleko* (*ot*), *rjedom* (*s*); cf.: *Ona živet daleko ot Moskvy* (where *ot Moskvy* occupies the second actant position of the adverb). Accordingly we prefer to regard such predicates as having two actants, the first of which is suppressed.

To sum up, we have to distinguish not only syntactic and semantic uses of prepositions but also, in the semantic use, two-place and one-place predicates. Since it is more typical for a two-place preposition to express a static relation than a movement we usually regard prepositions in dynamic (directional) phrases as either syntactic or as one-place predicates, not governed by the verb. A semantic two-place preposition can be under the command of a two-place static verb of location, as in *On sidel vozle/okolo nee*. In that position the first actant of

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<sup>5</sup> Širjaev (1997, 578) points out that, for example, with the verb *poselit’sja* the appropriate “form” (i.e. the preposition) is dependent on the noun chosen: *poselit’sja v doline*, but *na xolme*.

the preposition is suppressed. A very clear case in this connection are phrases of measure: *On stojal v pjati metrax ot menja* (see Appendix). Here the three-place preposition *v* occupies the second actant position of the verb. The first actant of the preposition is suppressed.

With prepositions expressing direction there is a close connection between syntactic use and normal orientation. Contrary to this, prepositions expressing location often combine semantic use and normal orientation; cf. examples like *Ona spit na divane*, *Oni vstretilis' na mostu*. The same opposition can be observed with transformations which eliminate prepositions. Outside static location the elimination generally affects syntactic prepositions; cf.: *Oni dumali ob uslyšannom* – *Oni obdumyvali uslyšannoe*; *Oni uexali iz Londona* – *Oni pokinuli London*. Within the meaning of location also semantic prepositions can be eliminated, provided they express normal orientation: *Na pustyryjax postroili doma* – *Pustyri zastroili domami* (where the meaning ‘na’ is contained in the prefix *za-*). This specific kind of transformation is also compatible with direction: *Na pol brošili okurki* – *Pol zabrosali okurkami*. The example *Oni selilis' v doline* – *Oni zaseljali dolinu* is, maybe, a borderline case between direction and location.

## 6 Expressions like *Nam ne do šutok*

Finally, a possible use of the preposition *do* as a one-place predicate can be seen in the following sentence: *Nam ne do šutok*. One can imagine three possible analyses:

1. The dative is assigned by the copula. This solution must be rejected for several reasons. The copula is no predicate and should not be entitled to occupy a node in the graph. In similar copulative constructions – *Mne skučno*, *Mne žal' tebja* – it is the predicate *skučno*, *žal'* etc. that imposes the dative, not the copula.

2. We have to do with a semantic dative which takes *nam* as its second actant and *do* as its first actant. Semantic datives in copulative sentences do occur. The best examples are constructions like *Mne sorok let*. However, to postulate a semantic dative in this case would mean to “deprive” *do* of its first actant: it must be regarded as a two-place predicate with a suppressed first actant, or as a true one-place predicate.

3. The preposition has two actants: *nam* (the first actant) and *šutok* (the second actant). This means that it has control not only over its second actant, which is normal, but also over its first actant. We have to admit that here *do* governs two case forms, the genitive and the dative. This is the analysis I prefer (see Appendix). It is justified as an exception considering the fact that *do* is modified by *ne*, and these words form one unit.

## 7 Implicit actants

One final remark should be made about implicit actants. The second actant of a two-place or a three-place preposition and the only position of a one-place preposition can be implicit only in elliptical expressions: – *P'eš' kofe s saxarom?* – *Net, bez.* A third actant can be implicit: *V dvux šagax* (i.e. «ot menja», «ot nas») *ničego nel'zja bylo razobrat'*. A first actant can be implicit in elliptical expressions, see the example above (– *Net, bez.*), and in cases when it is suppressed, as I have argued in this paper. These cases must be distinguished from cases when the first actant of a two-place preposition is explicit, but “unfree”, incorporated, for

example: *Mne v ètom godu sorok let* (see Appendix). The second actant of *v* is, of course, *godu*. The first actant of this preposition is the inflectional morpheme <DAT> which, in its turn, takes *sorok* as its first actant and *mne* as its second.

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## APPENDIX. Semantic graphs

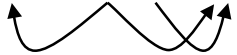
telo razmerom s Mars



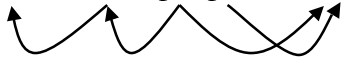
On priedet «v» okolo času.



Detjam dali po jabloku.



On rabotaet po<sub>1</sub> po<sub>2</sub> subbotam.



On položil knigu pod stol.



On stojal v pjati metrax (ot) menja.



Nam (∅) ne do šutok.



Mne<DAT> v ètom godu (∅) sorok let.



Note: When a numeral phrase functions as actant, dependency arrows are directed to the syntactic heads of such phrases (*pjati METRAX* vs *SOROK let*).