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ACCUSATIVE/GENITIVE UNDER NEGATION IN RUSSIAN: FROM SYNTACTIC MARKING TO SEMANTICS

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This study investigates the reasons for choosing the genitive or accusative case for propositional nouns with verbs in negative sentences. The probable reason for the recommendation in grammars to choose the genitive case with abstract nouns in negative construction is two constructions overlapping: the negative construction and the construction of descriptive predicate. The study examines 22 examples taken from the National Corpus of the Russian Language 2000-2017 with the propositional abstract object *otvet* (answer). The examples are divided into two groups – with the object included in the construction of the descriptive predicate and with the verb naming one proposition, and two-subject-constructions. The examples of both groups mostly contain genitive nouns, but for different reasons.

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To the origin of the question

In 18th-19th century, all Russian grammars required an accusative noun depending on a transitive verb, to be changed to genitive when the negative particle *ne* (not) was used [Lomonosov, 1755; Barsov, 1981 (1773); Vostokov, 1831; Grech, 1834]. At the beginning of 19th century speakers felt that the rule covered all negative sentences. Pushkin used the accusative case in his verses, feeling that the genitive did not agree with his feeling for the language. But even he did it with the understanding that he was breaking the rule and had to provide an explanation for this choice in answer to his critics [Vinokur, 1959].

As time passed the feeling that the accusative was appropriate in a negated sentence became stronger and stronger. In the 20th century plenty of scientific works appeared on this topic (e.g. [Paducheva, 2006; Ob'ektnyj genitiv..., 2008; Bailyn, 1997; Borschev, Partee, 2002; Pereltsvaig, 1999]). Russian grammars were forced to admit that there were some cases when the accusative is possible [Rossijskaya grammatika, 1819; Peshkovskiy, 1956; Shakhmatov, 2001]. Linguists were concerned with identifying pro-accusative and pro-genitive factors, including the reference status of the noun[2], the presupposition of nonexistence[3], the concrete or abstract meaning of the noun, and the perfective or imperfective aspect of the verb. Finally, in Russian Grammar 1980 [Russkaya grammatika, 1980] case variability was accepted and lists of pro-genitive and pro-accusative factors were given [Russkaya grammatika, 1980, 415]. The dominance of genitive-favourable rule was broken, and by the 21st century the abstract meaning of the noun was one of the last bastions of precise pro-genitive factors.

Now the walls of this fortress seem to stagger.

In popular reference books [Graudina, 1976; Rosental, 1981; Rosental, 2003; Rosental, 2012], not only stable collocations with negation and abstract nouns are considered as factors for the genitive case, but in general the abstract semantics of the noun. Stable collocations retain the genitive (like *ne svodit' glaz s chego-libo* – to keep one's eyes on smb.; *ne nakhodit' sebe mesta* – to find no place for oneself). Noun abstraction alone cannot be considered as a factor for the genitive. In the National Corpora of Russian Language almost every construction with an abstract noun mentioned above has some examples with the accusative; for constructions *ne daet osnovanij* (does not give grounds) and *ne upuskaet sluchaja* (do not miss a chance) the proportion of accusative case are 25:7 and 5:3 respectively.

The claim of Russian Grammar 1980 is more cautious. The author comments: "The fluctuation of the norm explains the possibility of using in similar combinations forms of the

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[2] A noun has a positive referential status when it denotes a concrete object in real communicative situation.
[3] A presupposition that the object doesn't exist in the world or in perception sphere of subject of sentence.

accusative case: *ne vozbuzhdaet zhalosti / zhalost'* (does not excite pity), *ne okazyvaet podderzhki / podderzhku* (does not provide support), *ne vyrazhaet nadezhdy / nadezhdu* (does not express hope), *ne ispytyvaet nedoverija / nedoverije* (does not feel distrust), *ne prinimaet neobkhodimykh mer / neobkhodimyje mery* (does not take the necessary measures). In written language in similar cases the genitive case is preferable" [Russkaya grammatika, 1980, 416].

This paper answers two questions: 1) why the genitive/accusative variability appears and 2) in what cases do abstract nouns with negation take the accusative.

1. Why does the variability appear?

The Russian negative construction with standard word order consists of a negative particle, a transitive verb and a noun phrase in the genitive or accusative case:

$$ne + V_{tr} + N_{Gen/Acc}$$

The construction begins with the negative particle *ne* and ends with the case ending of the noun. To mark the end of the construction the speaker changes the case of noun: accusative in affirmative sentences, genitive in negative sentences. This case change is a way of marking the right border of the construction, and the grounds for this case change are syntactical, at least until the middle of the 19th century.

If a speaker does not change the case ending of a noun phrase, it means that he (or she) does not consider the sequence of "ne + V_{tr} + $N_{Gen/Acc}$" as a unified construction and therefore does not feel it necessary to mark its border. This phenomenon (when a native speaker starts to consider the elements of the construction as single parts instead of one whole) can be called the **tendency towards analytism**. It is the reason why the variability of cases in negative construction has appeared.

When we deal with abstract nouns the construction has one more aspect to be considered. As the reference books and Russian Grammar 1980 say, some abstract nouns with transitive verbs form stable constructions. This is obvious if the noun is a **propositional name**.

A propositional, or predicative, name is a noun with the meaning of an event and semantically corresponded with verbs, like: *pomosch - pomogat'* (a help - to help), *reshenije - reshat'* (a decision - to decide), *vlijanije - vlijat'* (an influence - to influence). In constructions with these nouns a verb and a noun usually name a single notion, with semantics expressed by the noun and grammatical categories expressed by the verb. In other words the verb here has an auxiliary function and becomes more or less empty. Such collocations of a verb and a noun can be replaced by a single verb (e.g. *okasyvat' davlenije = davit'* (to exert pressure = to pressure),

provodit' issledovanije = issledovat' (to conduct research = to research)). Such collocations of propositional nouns and non-full-meaningful verbs are called **descriptive predicates**[4].

The connection between the noun and the verb in descriptive predicates is much stronger than in a collocation of a concrete-meaning noun and a full-meaning verb. Due to the expression of the same language sign, a verb and a noun as parts of a descriptive predicate are indissoluble.

When we put a negative particle before a descriptive predicate, the two constructions – the descriptive predicate and the negation – overlap. Consequently there is a greater chance that a speaker feels the connections within the construction and changes the case of the noun to mark the border of the construction.

Nevertheless, as Russian Grammar 1980 notes, in such cases the accusative is sometimes possible. We suppose that the reason is not just in a fluctuation in the norm.

Our hypothesis was checked on a sample of 534 examples with the abstract propositional noun *otvet* taken from the National Corpora of Russian Language 2000-2017. Examples with strong genitive factors (words *nikto* nobody, *nichto* nothing, *nikakoj* no (manner of), *ni razu* not once etc., conjunctions *ni… ni* neither … nor and the possessive verb *imet'* to have) and quotes "*Daj otvet. - Ne daet otveta*" (Give me the answer. - Does not give an answer) were selected.

2. When abstract nouns with negation are used in the accusative

To answer the question we look at these three sentences with a negative construction and an abstract noun as the object.

(1)   Ja sprosil jego, no *ne uslyshal otveta*. (genitive)

        "I asked him, but *didn't hear the answer*".

(2)   Ja sprosil jego, no on *ne dal otveta*. (genitive)

        "I asked him, but he *didn't give an answer*".

(3)   Ja sprosil jego, no moj vopros *ne nashel otveta*. (genitive)

        "I asked him, but my question *didn't find an answer*".

In these sentences the abstract noun is the same - *otvet* (answer), and in all the sentences its case is genitive, but it has different relations with the given verbs.

In first sentence the negative construction "ne uslyshal otveta" has two propositions: 1) he is answering and 2) I do not hear. Each proposition has its own subject of action – *he* and *I* respectively. The reason for choosing the genitive case is the presupposition of nonexistence. For

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[4] In the scientific literature there are also terms: lexicalized combinations [Ozhegov, 1957], verbal-descriptive expressions [Mordvilko, 1961], stable verbal combinations [Silukova, 1963], substantive descriptions [Dmitrieva, 1971], paraphrases [Shubina, 1973], verbal-nominal combinations [Deribas, 1983], periphrastic stable combinations [Zhulinskaya, 1975], analytic predicates [Lekant, 1976], verbal-nominal periphrastic turns [Pokhmelnykh, 1985], descriptive predicates [Kanza, 1991].

nouns of concrete meaning: I did not hear the answer, because he didn't answer (the answer does not exist) or because the answer was quiet (the answer does not exist in my perception).

The second sentence is descriptive predicate: *ne dal otveta = ne otvetil* (did not give an answer = did not answer). It has one proposition: he does not answer – with one subject – *he*. The reason for choosing the genitive case is to underline the border of the negative constructions and the descriptive predicate construction.

The negative construction in the third sentence – "ne nashel otveta" – is regarded as a descriptive predicate too, but conversed. "The question does not find an answer" = "the question is not answered". The difference in these two sentences is only in the voice: the first is active, the other is passive. The proposition in both variants is the same, with one subject. Notice that the subject of the sentence here is not the subject of action: subject of sentence is *vopros*, subject of action is *he*. As in a standard descriptive predicate the conversed form has the genitive case showing the underlying border of the construction.

We have thus two kinds of negative construction with an abstract noun: 1) with two subjects; 2) with one subject.

2.1. Negative construction with one subject

The one-subject construction is a negative construction in which the actions of the verb and the noun are performed by the same subject. The verb and the noun in such constructions form a descriptive predicate.
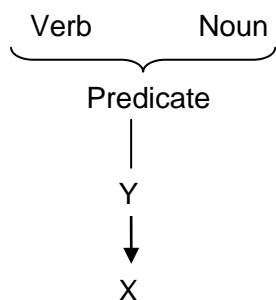
The propositional structure of a descriptive predicate can be illustrated with Schema 1, where X is the subject expressed by descriptive predicate.
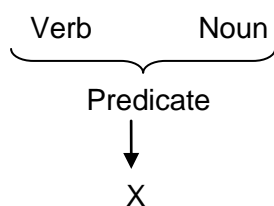
Schema 1. Propositional structure of a descriptive predicate.

Conversed descriptive predicates are included in the group of one-subject constructions. The structure of a proposition with a conversed descriptive predicate is similar to a normal descriptive predicate, but the action is performed by a subject usually unmentioned in the sentence, not the subject of the clause. While the subject of clause accepts the action of predicate aimed at it – it is the semantic object of action. The action "returns" to the subject of clause. This

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structure is illustrated in Schema 2, where X is subject of clause and Y is subject of action in the predicate.

Schema 2. Propositional structure of "conversed" descriptive predicate.

The difference between the descriptive predicate (*dat'/davat' otvet*) (examples 4-5) and conversed predicate (*poluchit'/poluchat' otvet*) (examples 6-7) is in the voice and the member of sentence performing the action. Lexical and grammatical function in both are divided between parts of construction, which is what holds the genitive case.

(4)   Книга *не дает ответов*, как жить, но она дает понимание, что ты не одинок в своих несчастьях, и что все они разрешимы, рассказывает об опыте более сотни двадцати-тридцатилетних людей. [Павел Лебедев. Раньше люди взрослели за 40 лет. Теперь — за 20 // «Пятое измерение», 2002] (genitive)

The book *does not give answers* on how to live, but it gives an understanding that you are not alone in your misfortunes and that all of them are solvable, it tells about the experience of more than a hundred twenty- or thirty-year-old people.

(5)   Динамовские боссы уже провели переговоры с Зинэтуллой Билялетдиновым, который хотя и *не дал положительного ответа*, но и не ответил отказом. [Евгений Чежегов. Чужой среди своих. Тренера «Динамо» уволили собственные болельщики (2002) // «Известия», 2002.01.28] (genitive)

Dynamo bosses have already held talks with Zinatulla Bilyaletdinov, who did not refuse, although *he did not give a positive answer*.

(6)   По прошествии некоторого времени она напомнила Арсению о своей просьбе, но *не получила ответа*. [Евгений Водолазкин. Лавр (2012)] (genitive)

After some time she reminded Arseny about her request, but *hasn't received any answer*.

(7)   Один из таких вопросов, на которые страна *не получает убедительных ответов,* — цена электроэнергии, тарифы […]. [Андрей Илларионов: Содержание реформы важнее ее темпов (2003) // «Российская газета», 2003.05.15] (genitive)

One such issue, for which the country *does not receive convincing answers*, is the price and tariffs of electricity […].

The genitive case in descriptive predicates is a consequence of the constructions' integrity and is very frequent: a noun in the genitive case is used in 93% (149) of the examples with a descriptive predicate and in 98.6% (146) of examples with a "conversed" descriptive predicate[5].

Nevertheless examples with accusative exist[6]:

(8)   [Гога] А вот Вы до сих пор так и *не дали ответ* на вопрос ЧТО ТАКОЕ ЛЕСЕНКА? Это ТОЛЬКО лесенка в ТКС[7]. [коллективный. Форум: Вклады в ТКС. Преимущества и недостатки (2010)] (accusative)

[Goga] But you still have *not given an answer* to the question WHAT IS A LADDER? This is ONLY the LADDER in TCS.

(9)   Однако уже отмечалось, что действующее законодательство *не дает однозначный ответ* на вопрос о том, кого же рассматривать в качестве истца. [Производные иски в России и за рубежом (2003) // «Арбитражный и гражданский процессы», 2003.03.24] (accusative)

However, it has already been noted that the current legislation *does not give an unambiguous answer* to the question of who is to be considered as a plaintiff.

(10)   Агент вправе отступить от указаний Принципала, если по обстоятельствам дела это необходимо в интересах Принципала и Агент <...> *не получил ответ* на свой запрос в течение 10... рабочих дней <...>. [Агентский договор (2001)] (accusative)

The agent has the right to depart from the instructions of the Principal if, in the circumstances of the case, this is necessary in the interests of the Principal and

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[5] The ratio of genitive and accusative cases is 14:1 with the pair of verbs *dat' / davat'* and 73:1 with the pair *poluchit' / poluchat'*.

[6] But there are no accusative examples with the imperfective verb *poluchat'* (to get).

[7] Tinkoff Credit Systems.

Agent [...] *has not received a response* to his request within 10 ... business days
[...].

These examples demonstrate two constructions overlapping. According to our idea, the genitive case is expected here. So, how could the accusative be explained?

The origin of example (8) is an online forum. Such texts are usually written in conversational style; the author often does not check the text before posting and cares little about the language. The speaker probably does not feel the wholeness of the constructions (of either the negative or the descriptive predicates), he compiles it in parts and as a result, the object has not taken the genitive[8].

Examples (9) and (10) are far from being colloquial; these are journal articles. Presumably, the accusative case marks the expectations of the authors: an unambiguous answer should be given. In the authors' expectations the answer is referential, they imagine it clearly. In spite of the absence of the object it gets a positive referential status, and the accusative case is used.

The accusative case in descriptive predicates with negation is a consequence of a tendency towards analytism, when a construction is not regarded as a whole anymore but is "gathered" in parts, or of the author's aspiration to mark the positive referential status of the object. That is why there is no need to mark the beginning and the end of construction; semantics are more important now.

2.2. Negative constructions with two subjects

In negative constructions with two subjects the actions of the verb and of the noun are performed by two different subjects. The verb and the noun form different propositions; the subjects are different participants. The propositional structure of two subject negative constructions is illustrated with Schema 3.

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Verb        Noun
 |           |
 X           Y
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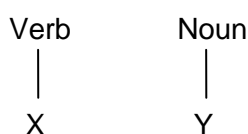
Schema 3. Propositional structure of two-subject-construction.

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[8] There is no forum example with genitive in our sample.

The genitive case in these constructions is used to mark the presupposition of nonexistence.

(11)   Честно говоря, я сам *не знаю ответа* на поставленный вопрос, но думаю, что тут может быть усмотрена большая группа собственно научно-психологических проблем <...>. [Е. А. Климов. Психология в XXI веке // «Вопросы психологии», 2003] (genitive)

Frankly, I myself *do not know the answer* to the question posed, but I think that there can be seen a large group of actually scientific and psychological problems [...].

(12)   Ученик *не просит конкретных ответов* на злободневные вопросы, он всевластно исповедуется... [Александр Архангельский. Александр I (2000)] (genitive)

The student *does not ask for specific answers* to the questions current interest, he confesses all-powerfully...

In this group 83% (205) of the examples are genitive. The ratio is notably less than in one-subject constructions[9].

The accusative case is used in such examples to underline the referentiality of the object. This explanation is obvious in examples (13-14): from the context the answers are implied to exist, and subject of the sentence does something with them (does not prompt and does not write down). QWER

(13)   Тогда учительница быстро прячет руки за спину, чтобы *не провоцировать ответы* ученика. [Коллекция анекдотов: хохлы/украинцы (1970-2000)] (accusative)

Then the teacher quickly hides her hands behind her back, *so as not to prompt the student's answers*.

(14)   Он *не записывал их ответы* словами, а придумал шифр и, по крайней мере, раз в месяц менял его, хотя работал один. [Алексей Левинсон. Социография и ее герои // «Знание - сила», 2006] (accusative)

He *did not write down their answers* in words, but invented a cipher and at least once a month changed it, although he worked alone.

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[9] The ratio of genitive and accusative cases is much less than in one-subject constructions: 8:1.

(15) Я заполнила необходимый бланк зимой 1990 года в редакции «Московских новостей», но *не ожидала получить ответ* <...>. [Елена Ханга. Про все (2000)] (accusative)

I filled in the necessary form in the winter of 1990 in the editorial office of the Moscow News, but *I did not expect to receive an answer* [...].

(16) Знаю, что никогда *не найду ответ*, но каждый раз вопрошаю. [Александр Сокуров. Японский дневник (2000)] (accusative)

I know that *I will never find the answer*, but every time I ask.

The objects in examples (15-16) are referential too, but they include additional accusative factors. The example (15) has two verbs before the object, one of them is infinitive – this is a strong accusative factor. The word *nikogda* (never) in example (16) is a strong genitive factor; nevertheless the accusative is used. It seems that the referential status of the noun in (16) is so strongly positive that the opposite strong factor is disregarded.

The abstract noun in a negative construction with two propositions is applied as a concrete noun: the genitive case is used when there is a presupposition of nonexistence; the accusative is used for referential objects.

From syntactic function to semantics

As shown above, despite abstract nouns still using the genitive case in the vast majority of examples, the accusative case is widespread. It seems that the abstract meaning of a noun cannot be regarded as an absolute genitive factor. Inside the group of negative constructions with an abstract noun its own rules take effect.

When a verb and a noun form a descriptive predicate or a conversed descriptive predicate, the connection inside the negative construction is stronger, and genitive is used in a large number of examples. The accusative is used to underline the positive referential status of an object.

When a verb and a noun form different propositions, the integrity of the negative construction breaks, and semantic factors take over. When it is important to mark a presupposition of nonexistence, the genitive is chosen; for a referential object, the accusative is preferable.

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