Ambiguity or unification? A Choice Function approach to -TO indefinites in Russian

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1 Russian: different indefinites for different purposes

Russian has several types of indefinites. Traditionally, the types are considered to differ in a degree of specificity (Vsevolodova & Yudina 1963, Pete 1975, Paducheva 1985, Sheliakin 1986, Seliverstova 1988). Indefinites with postfix -to are usually described as “specific”. Sometimes it results in using a term “relatively indefinite” for the pronouns with the postfix -to (Cuto 2004) to emphasize their property to refer to something or someone not truly indefinite but, instead, known to some of the participants of the discourse.

The observation about a specific interpretation of -to indefinites in Russian becomes especially apparent in contrastive scenarios (1).

(1)  a. Maša prigotovit čto-to vkusnoe na užin.
     ‘Maša will cook something delicious for dinner’.

       b. “right scenario”: Maša told me that she found a fantastic recipe on-line and she wants to try it today. I am calling my friend inviting her to Maša’s place and say (1a)

       c. “wrong scenario”: Maša is my roommate and a good cook. We cook in turns. It’s her turn tonight and I have no clue what she is going to cook. I call my friend and say (1a)

In (1), the -to indefinite can be used felicitously only in case of (1b) where it refers to a specific dish – the one that Maša had chosen for today. It is infelicitous in the scenario given in (1c) when just any dish could be cooked.

In respect to specificity/non-specificity, -to pronouns contrast with the set of indefinite pronouns with postfix -nibud’. The latter are used in non-specific scenarios (2c), and are not allowed in specific ones (2b).

(2)  a. Maša prigotovit čto-nibud’ vkusnoe na užin.
     ‘Maša will cook something delicious for dinner’.

       b. “wrong scenario”: Maša told me that she found a fantastic recipe on-line and she wants to try it today. I am calling my friend inviting her to Maša’s place and say (2a)
c. “right scenario”: Maša is my roommate and a good cook. We cook in turns. It’s her turn tonight and I have no clue what she is going to cook. I call my friend and say (2a)

As the examples in (1) and (2) show, in the ‘distribution of labor’ between the different types of indefinites, -to pronouns in Russian are specialized in referring to specific individuals.

Indefinites with a specific reading are often analyzed as choice functions (a choice function is a function that takes a set X as its argument and returns a member of X as its value). A Choice Function approach has been used to account for specific indefinites in different languages: in English (Reinhart 1997 and Kratzer 1998), Spanish (Allonso-Ovalle & Menendez-Benito 2003), German (Kratzer and Shimoyana 2002), and Lillooet Salish (Mattewson 1999).

Yanovich (2005) applies this approach towards Russian indefinites. He proposes that -to indefinites as instances of “mere choice functions”. Such an analysis correctly accounts for the data in (1). However, it has an important consequence: under a “mere” Choice Function approach, a specific interpretation would be the only interpretation of -to indefinites whatsoever. A non-specific reading should not be available for Russian -to indefinites at all. This prediction, however, is not supported by the data.

2 Different interpretations of -to indefinites Sometimes -to indefinites seem to receive an interpretation other than specific. Under a standard choice-functional approach the case in (3) is completely unexpected.

(3) a. On očen’ obščitel’nyj čelovek, on priglašaet kakix-to studentov, oni vмесетe čitajut kakie-to knigi.

‘He is a very sociable person, he invites some students, they read some books together.

In (3), the students and the books can be interpreted as the same, specific, students and books; say, Ivan and Nadya come every time and they read Anna Karenina and War and Peace. This reading is exactly what is predicted under a standard choice-functional analysis; but this is not a default reading of (3). The most natural interpretation of the sentence in (3) is the one where the students attending and the books read differ from meeting to meeting. This interpretation cannot be accounted for by a (standard) choice-functional analysis.

The simplest solution of this problem would be to suggest (contrary to Yanovich 2005) that Russian -to indefinites are not always choice-functional, but can be also interpreted quantificationally. This would not be a unique case:
Reinhart (1997) and Kratzer (1998) claim that English *some* is ambiguous in the same way and can receive both choice-functional and quantificational interpretations. Adopting this approach would explain both specific (choice-functional) and non-specific (quantificational) instances of Russian *-to* indefinites.

To claim the ambiguity of *-to* indefinites, we must be able to find quantificational *-to* indefinites existing independently of choice-functional ones. We will look for this kind of evidence in different types of sentences.

3 Ambiguity: problem of overgenerating If *-to* indefinites can be both choice-functional (facilitating a specific reading) and quantificational (facilitating a non-specific interpretation), any sentence with these indefinites should be potentially ambiguous. A non-specific interpretation should always be possible.

At least with the data in (1) this is definitely not the case. As we saw, only the “specific” scenario (1b) allows for usage of the *-to* indefinite. If the quantificational interpretation of the indefinite were available, it would be possible to utter (1a) in the situation of (1c).

The same distinction is mirrored in questions: *-to* indefinites are only used if questions refer to ‘specific’ entities; for example, (4a) is only felicitous in the scenario of (4b).

(4) a. Ty našel čto-to interesnec? Did you find something interesting?
    
    b. “right scenario”: *In a bookstore, to your friend who holds something in his hands.*
    
    c. “wrong scenario”: *When asking your friend about his visit to a new bookstore.*

The scenario in (4c) does not suggest an existence of a specific thing/book the speaker can refer to. The question deals with ‘any interesting book at all’ and requires a quantificational indefinite. Again, *-to* indefinite cannot be used; the change of the indefinite to a *nibud’* pronoun would ‘switch’ the question into the required mode and make it fit the situation in (4c).

The same contrast is observed for negation. According to the principle of the Negative Concord, Russian requires special negative pronouns instead of the regular indefinites in the scope of negation. Thus, a Russian equivalent of English *I didn’t tell anything to anyone* requires negative elements on the verb and on both indefinites (5):
However, the sentence in (5) cannot be used to describe the following situation: My friend complains that his family thinks he is a liar. I asked him why. He says they are exaggerating. It only happened once, a long time ago, when he failed to tell something important to someone. Since then they don’t trust him anymore even though no one cares who that person was and what wasn’t said. To describe this situation correctly, the sentence in (6) should be used instead:

(6) Ja komu-to čto-to ne skazal
I who-to what-to not told
‘I did not tell something to someone’.

In (6), the indefinites are specific, they are not under the scope of negation, and so the Negative Concord does not occur. Again, the only cases of grammatical usage of -to indefinites come from “specific” contexts.

An evidence for the specific nature of -to indefinites also comes from imperative constructions. A request for ‘just any, doesn’t matter which’ book does not allow for a -to indefinite:

(7) # Daj mne kakuju-to knigu
‘Give me some book’.

There are two “right” ways to make a request in (7): it is either to define the book (this, the blue, Shakespeare etc.) or, if it is not of importance which book will be given, to ask for any book using a -nibud’ indefinite:

(8) Daj mne etu/sinjuju/kakuju-nibud’ knigu
Give me this/blue/which-nibud’ book
‘Give me this/blue/any book’.

It is not the case that -to indefinites in Russian are not compatible with requests at all (for some independent language-specific reason); they can be easily used in indirect requests implying ‘specific’ entities (9a). However, if a request is about ‘just any’ thing, both, direct and indirect speech only allow for a -nibud’ pronoun (9b).

(9) a. On poprosil menja dat’ jemu kakuju-to knigu
He asked me give-INF him some book
He asked me to give him some book (and he told me which one, but now I don’t remember).

b. On poprosil menja dat’ jemu kakuju-nibud’ knigu
He asked me give-INF him some book
He asked me to give him a book (any book, doesn’t matter which).

The limitation on -to indefinites in direct requests is pragmatic: it is inefficient to ask for a known thing using an indefinite. If a requested thing is a particular one, this thing should be verbally identified. A request for any member of a given class requires a different type of indefinite. Apparently -to indefinites cannot freely acquire a quantificational interpretation to meet the purpose of the request for just any thing.

Thus, none of the considered above types of sentences provides any evidence in support of the quantificational -to indefinites. The initial hypothesis of ambiguity does not hold. It overgenerates allowing for -to indefinites in the contexts where they are never used.

The “mere choice function” approach by Yanovich only predicts ‘specific’ instances of -to indefinites, as in (1). However, the cases of perceived non-specific interpretation as in (3) still need to be accounted for. They can be accounted for if a particular (Kratzer-style) approach to a Choice Function is taken and further extended.

4 A Parameterized Choice Function in English: following Kratzer

Kratzer (1998) implements a notion of a Parameterized Choice Function to account for (pseudo-) scope effects in English. For her, a choice function is parameterized when it has an implicit argument (parameter) that can be bound by a quantifier. In her analysis, a certain date in (10a) and some book in (10b) are choice functions parameterized by husbands and professors respectively:

(10) a. Every husband had forgotten a certain date – his wife’s birthday.
    b. Every professor rewarded every student who read some book he had recommended.

The sentence in (10a) has the reading in (11):

(11) ∀x (husband x) → had forgotten (x, f_x (date))) (Kratzer, 1998)

The determiner a certain is interpreted as a parameterized choice function f. Its implicit argument appears as a subscripted variable. Possible values for f are functions mapping individuals into choice functions. In (11) it maps every
husband into a choice set of all dates, and picks that man’s wife’s birthday from that set.

Unlike (11), the sentence in (12) can only have a referential reading. It does not contain any quantifier to bind the implicit argument of a certain; the value of the argument has to be assigned by the speaker:

(12) Is Richard dating a certain woman?

The (rudimentary) choice function, then, picks out a woman that the speaker has in mind, creating the impression of the widest scope for a certain woman.

In the same way, in (10b), the choice function is parameterized to different professors and thus some book is perceived as having an ‘intermediate’ reading, different from a referential one (13).

(13) Every professor rewarded every student who read some book I had recommended.

The sentence in (13) does not provide a way to parameterize the choice function (since the 1st person singular pronoun is used instead of the 3rd person singular), because of that the choice function picking out a book has to be parameterized by the speaker: ‘the book that the speaker has chosen’.

Thus, a certain and some indefinites in (10) are interpreted in the same way as in (12) and (13) – via a parameterized choice function. The difference in readings comes from the difference in the contexts; in (10) the hidden parameter is bound by a quantifier and in (12) and (13) it is not. A possibility of different readings for Russian -to indefinites can be explained in a similar way.

5 Parameterized CF in Russian – parameterization over times

We assume that -to indefinites in Russian are always choice-functional and their interpretation depends on what in the context binds the hidden parameter. The specific reading is obtained if the context does not provide any binders for the implicit argument, and the choice function variable has to be parameterized to the speaker. This is the most common, ‘default’ interpretation of the -to indefinites.

However, in particular contexts, a different, seemingly non-specific interpretation can occur. It often happens in present and past tense sentences, which do not contain any explicit references to a specific time when the event described in the sentence took place. In these cases, a -to indefinite can be interpreted as a choice function parameterized by times.
This is what is happening in (3) above. The sentence is interpreted as (14), where ‘students’ and ‘books’ are specific students and specific books for “time1”, specific students and specific books for “time2” etc.

(14) a. … on priglašajet kakix-to studentov …
‘… he invites some students…
CF(f) ∼ ∀t [he invites f(t(students))]

b. … oni čitajut kakie-to knigi
‘… they read some books’
CF(g) ∼ ∀t [they read g(t(books))]

The interpretation of the indefinite remains specific, but multiple occurrences of different specific (for given times) individuals became possible, facilitating the seemingly non-specific reading.

This analysis predicts that any limitation on times (yesterday, at 5 pm, tonight, etc.) should suppress the ‘non-specific’ interpretation. This appears to be the case: the sentence in (15), for example, can only mean that some specific students were invited and some specific books were read.

(15) Včera on priglasil kakix-to studentov, oni vmeste čitali kakie-to knigi.
‘Yesterday, he invited some students; they read some books together’.

Since the implicit time parameter can only be satisfied with one given time \( t \) the choice function can only choose ones, and so only one specific set of students and one specific set of books can be selected.

6 Conclusions

Russian -to indefinites are not ambiguous between choice-functional and quantificational interpretation, they are always choice-functional (‘specific’), but can be perceived as having different interpretation. The unified account for different interpretations of -to indefinites can be given by using the notion of a parameterized choice function and extending it to parameterization by times.

Russian has different lexical items for ‘specific’ and ‘non-specific’ indefinites. It allows us to clearly see the differences in the cases where other languages have to deal with ambiguity of the same lexical units. Analysis of the Russian data shows that what is perceived as “a narrow-scope indefinite” can “hide” very different things, including genuine quantificational indefinites and inherently specific indefinites with a quasi-narrow scope.
References

Russian for foreign students. Moscow. 1960