A Parameterized Choice Function Approach to “Narrow-Scope” -to Indefinites in Russian

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1. Russian -to indefinites: scope ambiguity

Russian has several types (sets) of indefinite pronouns, the distinction between which is based on at least three separate semantic characteristics: indefiniteness/definiteness for the speaker and listener; relation to the actual world (existence/non-existence), and distributivity (Lavrov 1983). When characterized along the lines of this three-dimensional system, -to indefinites are often described as not known to the speaker (as opposed to koe- indefinites) but possibly known to the listener (as opposed to -nibud’ indefinites), indicating the existence of the object/person (as opposed to -nibud’ indefinites), and non-distributed (as opposed to both koe- and -nibud’ indefinites). Researchers focus on different sides of this complex system (Lavrov 1983, Paducheva 1985, Seliverstova 1988, Sheliakin 1986, Cuto 2004 and others), generally contrasting -to and -nibud’ indefinites as ‘more specific’ and ‘less specific’ respectively, and using different terms to refer to this difference (e.g. ‘specific/non-specific, relatively indefinite/absolutely indefinite etc.). However, some data seem to provide counterexamples to this distinction. Seliverstova (1988) concludes a chapter devoted to the analysis of the indefinite pronouns with a somewhat pessimistic remark: “Although particular cases of using different indefinite pronouns are described quite well, the existence and nature of a general feature underlying their distribution and opposition is still an open question.” (translated from Russian, Seliverstova, 1988: 60). Due to the complexity and sometimes unclear and problematic nature of the semantic properties of each type of the indefinites they are sometimes described via their distribution: -to indefinites tend to occur in past and present tense declarative sentences; -nibud’ indefinites are used in questions, requests, future tense sentences etc. This distributional approach is common for textbooks teaching Russian as a second language (e.g. Golosa 2003). However, the choice of the indefinite is not merely syntactically dependent: a question,
request, or future tense declarative sentence requires a -to indefinite when it deals with someone or something known in the discourse instead of referring to 'just any' thing.

Taken out of context, (1a) contrasts with (1b) in a degree of acceptability; and (1c) with a -nibud’ indefinite seems to describe a future situation better than (1b):

(1) a. Etot student napisal kakoe-to stixotvorenie.
   This student write\textsubscript{AST} some\textsubscript{TO} poem.
   ‘This student wrote some poem.’

   b. Etot student napišet kakoe-to stixotvorenie.
   This student write\textsubscript{FUT} some\textsubscript{TO} poem.
   ‘This student will write some poem.’

   c. Etot student napišet kakoe-nibud’ stixotvorenie.
   This student write\textsubscript{FUT} some\textsubscript{NIBUD’} poem.
   ‘This student will write some poem.’

However, judgments about (1b) and (1c) may differ depending on a scenario. Let’s consider the following situation: The Department of Linguistics is planning to have a party in a month from now. For the party, the students want to write poems devoted to different areas of Linguistics. Student A. will write about Syntax, student B. – about Morphology, student C. – about Semantics etc. The students who are not good at poetry will sing karaoke/play the guitar/do charades etc. My friend asked me about the role of student B. in the party. I know for sure that he is doing some poetry, but I don’t remember whether it is going to be on Syntax, or Morphology, or Semantics, or Phonology. I can only answer my friend’s question with (1b); using a -nibud’ indefinite as in (1c) is not felicitous. The expression kakoe-nibud’ stixotvorenie can be used towards ‘just any poem’. The situation described above requires a reference to a particular poem (even though it is only ‘relatively particular’, since the poem has not been written yet; however, the fact that its topic has been assigned makes it more specific than ‘just any poem’); and kakoe-to stixotvorenie meets this requirement.

An out-of-the-blue question also needs a -nibud’ pronoun:
(2) Ty priglasil kogo-nibud’ novogo?
   You invite_{PAST} someone_{NIBUD’} new
   ‘Have you invited anyone new?’

   The question in (2) simply asks whether any new people were invited
   to the party. It requires a -nibud’ indefinite. However, (2) is not a good
   question to ask in the following situation: It is a party at my friend’s
   house and I know all the guests. Only one face seems unfamiliar. I
   wonder whether this person I do not recognize is someone new to the
   group. To ask about it, I have to use a -to indefinite:

(3) Ty priglasil kogo-to novogo?
   You invite_{PAST} someone_{TO} new
   ‘Have you invited someone new?’

   The same contrast between -to and -nibud’ usages is observed in
   imperative sentences. Direct requests do not allow for -to indefinites.

(4) # Daj mne kakuju-to knigu
   Give me_{DAT} some_{TO} book
   ‘Give me some book.’

   There are two ways to make the request in (4) appropriate: 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:

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

   An indirect (embedded) request allows for both types of indefinites;
   but with different interpretations:

(6) a. On poprosil menja dat’ jemu kakuju-to knigu
   He asked me give_{INF} him some_{TO} 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 him some book
‘He asked me to give him a book (any book, doesn’t matter which).’

In a direct request, it is inefficient to ask for a particular thing using an indefinite. In this case, the required thing should be verbally identified. If just any book is sufficient, a -nibud’ pronoun has to be used. An embedded request allows for both pronouns because it provided different possible scenarios: a -nibud’ indefinite is used in a request of just any book, -to is used when a particular book is requested.

The examples above all share wide scope interpretation of -to indefinites. The sentences in (1b), (3) and (6a) imply, respectively, that there is a poem that this student will write; there is a new person invited to the party; and there was a book that I was asked to give.

From the data so far -to indefinites seem to be always used in ‘specific’ contexts, as opposed to -nibud’ indefinites used in ‘non-specific’ contexts.

However, this observation does not hold, because there are contexts where -to indefinites seem to receive a narrow-scope reading (7).

(7) On očen’ obščitel’nyj čelovek, on priglašaet kakix-to studentov, oni vmeste čitajut kakie-to knigi.
   He very sociable person, he invite some students, they read some books together.
   ‘He is a very sociable person, he invites some students, they read some books together.’

In (7), the students and the books can be interpreted as the same students and books; say, Ivan and Nadya come every time and they read Anna Karenina and War and Peace. However, the most natural interpretation of the sentence is the one where the students attending and the books read differ from meeting to meeting.
So, then from the data so far we can conclude that \(-to\) indefinites are specific in terms of apparent scope, but sometimes they seem to receive a narrow-scope interpretation as in (7). If they can be both specific and non-specific, then how does a non-specific variation of a \(-to\) indefinite differ from a \(-nibud\)' indefinite?

2. A Choice Function approach to Russian \(-to\) indefinites

Indefinites with a specific reading are often analyzed as choice functions. A Choice Function approach has been used to account for specific indefinites in different languages: in English (Reinhart 1997 and Kratzer 1998), Spanish (Alonso-Ovalle & Menendez-Benito 2003), German (Kratzer and Shimoyana 2002), and Lilooet Salish (Matthewson 1999).

Yanovich (2005) applies this approach towards Russian indefinites. He proposes that \(-to\) indefinites as instances of “mere choice functions”. In this, they are opposed to \(-nibud\)' indefinites, analyzed as obligatory Scolemized (parameterized) choice functions. The respective denotations for both types of indefinites are given below:

(#16) in Yanovich 2005:

a. \([\langle to \rangle \rangle_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} = \lambda p_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} f(p)\), where \(f\) is a GCF
b. \([\langle kto-to \rangle \rangle_{\langle t, c, r, c \rangle} = \langle to \rangle \langle\langle kto \rangle\rangle =
(\lambda p_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} f(p))(\lambda \text{human}(x)) = \langle\rangle_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle}(\lambda \text{human}(x))

(#21) in Yanovich 2005:

a. \([\langle nibud \rangle \rangle_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} = \lambda p_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} \lambda x_{\tau} f(x, p), \) where \(f\) is a GCF
b. \([\langle kto-nibud \rangle \rangle_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} = (\lambda p_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle} \lambda x_{\tau} f_{\langle t, c, c, r \rangle}(x, p)(\lambda \text{human}(y)) =
(\lambda \text{human}(y))

Scolemization, according to Yanovich, causes the contrast between \(-to\) and \(-nibud\)' indefinites. The denotation of the latter, then, includes the reference to the implicit parameter available for binding from above.

It is not clear whether or not Yanovich implies that his “mere choice functions” for \(-to\) indefinites can also involve scolemization and due to that can be perceived as having a narrow-scope, like \(-nibud\)' indefinites.
He is aware of different scope options for -to indefinites (for instance, he has examples of conditional sentences where -to indefinites can scope out of if-clause but can be also interpreted lower). However, he never discusses how the narrow scope interpretation can be obtained. If the definition of a “mere choice function” implies optional parameterization, we should expect that a denotation for -to should look exactly as the denotation for ‘nibud’ and then it is not clear what the difference between the two types of the indefinites is and why they are not, in fact, interchangeable at least when the narrow-scope interpretation is involved. If the definition of a “mere choice function” does not imply optional parameterization (which is the case, say, for Reinhart (1997), and Winter (1997). Chierchia (2001), discusses the approaches that involve and does not involve parameterization and shows that they both have their own advantages and disadvantages in accounting for particular types of data) it still needs to be modified somehow to be able to predict any scope other than the widest one.

One possible 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 of typologically different variants of an indefinite: 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.

The argument that Yanovich uses to define -to indefinites as always choice-functional is that they behave as English a certain indefinites (which cannot be quantificational) but not as English a-indefinites (which can be of both types) in respect to negation: they have to be interpreted higher than negation. This, by itself, could be explained by an independent Russian-specific factor. Anything below negation in Russian has to follow the Negative Concord principle: thus, if we meant ‘Petia did not notice any of the girls in his class’ (i.e. NOT > Ǝ) we would have to use a negative pronoun instead of the indefinite. The only possible interpretation of an indefinite in a negative sentence has to be with the negation below the indefinite (Ǝ > NEG). Thus the whole argument may seem to be not very convincing. However, inability of to-
indefinites to be interpreted quantificationally is supported by different data, not just by the case of negation. If -to indefinites could be both choice-functional (facilitating a specific reading) and quantificational (facilitating a non-specific interpretation), any sentence with these indefinites should be potentially ambiguous. We would expect a non-specific interpretation to always be possible for -to indefinites. The summary of the data analyzed so far demonstrates that this is not the case.

(8) a. Etot student napišet kakoe-to stixotvorenie.
   This student write\textsubscript{FUT} some\textsubscript{TO} poem.
   ‘This student will write some poem.’
   *Just any poem will suffice

b. Ty priglasil kogo-to novogo?
   You invite\textsubscript{PAST} someone\textsubscript{TO} new
   ‘Have you invited someone new?’
   *Has anyone new been invited at all?

c. On poprosil menja dat’ jemu kakuju-to knigu
   He asked me give\textsubscript{INF} him some\textsubscript{TO} book
   ‘He asked me to give him some book.’
   *He wanted any book, doesn’t matter which.

In all cases, the indefinites in (8) do not get a non-specific interpretation. Such an interpretation can only be obtained if a -nibud’ indefinite is used instead. Stipulating existence of different types of -to indefinites would predict their appearance in the contexts where they are never used.

So, we have to stick to the conclusion that -to indefinites are always choice-functional. Then we will need to somehow explain the different apparent scope interpretations of these indefinites. A possible way to do so is to consider -to indefinites instances of parameterized choice functions. However, if at the same time we want to retain Yanovich-style denotation of -nibud’ indefinites, it will cause typological similarity of -to and -nibud’ sets. In any case, we will need to explain why -to indefinites are not used where -nibud’ indefinites are. This is the agenda of the next two sections.
3. A Parameterized Choice Function: parameterization over times and other cases of binding

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 (9a) and some book in (9b) are choice functions parameterized by husbands and professors respectively:

(9) 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 (9a) has the reading in (10):

(10) ∀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 (10) it maps every husband into a choice set of all dates, and picks that man’s wife’s birthday from that set.

Unlike (10), the sentence in (11) 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:

(11) 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 (9b), the choice function is parameterized to different professors and thus some book is perceived as having an ‘intermediate’ reading, different from a referential one in (12).

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

The sentence in (12) 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 (9) are interpreted in the same way as in (11) and (12) – via a parameterized choice function. The difference in readings comes from the difference in the contexts; in (9) the hidden parameter is bound by a quantifier and in (11) and (12) it is not.

The different readings of Russian -to indefinites can be explained in a similar way. Any instance of a (always choice-functional) -to indefinite in Russian contains an implicit argument which can be bound from outside. The interpretation of the indefinite depends on what in the context binds the implicit argument: 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. If there are other binders available, the sentence becomes ambiguous:

(13) Každyj professor poxvalil každago studenta, kotoryj pročital kakuju-to knigu, kotoruju on porekomendoval

Every professor praisePAST every student which readPAST someTO book which he recommended

‘Every professor praised every student who read some book that he recommended’

(i) wide scope (‘some particular book, but the speaker doesn’t care/know which one’)

(ii) intermediate scope (‘there is some particular book for every particular professor’)

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(i) wide scope (‘some particular book, but the speaker doesn’t care/know which one’)

(ii) intermediate scope (‘there is some particular book for every particular professor’)
The binder does not have to be explicit. A seemingly non-specific interpretation can in principle occur in any sentence which does not have an explicit reference to a specific time when the event described in the sentence took place (using perfective aspect on the verb counts as such a reference because it indicates a one-time activity). In these cases, a -to indefinite can be interpreted as a choice function parameterized by times (it does not have to be interpreted in this way though; usually the whole discourse situation helps in disambiguating the sentence interpretation).

This is what is happening in (7) 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…
   \( CF(f) \land \forall t [\text{he invites } f(t(\text{students})] \)

   b. … oni čitajut kakie-to knigi
   ‘… they read some books’
   \( CF(g) \land \forall t [\text{they read } g(t(\text{books})] \)

The interpretation of the indefinite remains specific, but multiple occurrences of different specific (for given times) individuals become possible, facilitating the seemingly narrow scope reading. This (and not the ‘default’ wide-scope) interpretation is the most salient for (7) because the other choice (“the same people come and read the same books all the time”) is somewhat odd (how long could one read the same books?).

This analysis predicts that any limitation on times (yesterday, at 5 pm, tonight, perfective aspect on the verb 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 \( t \) (yesterday) the choice function can only choose ones, and so only one specific set of students and one specific set of books can be selected.

It is important that in all the cases (even when a -\( to \) indefinite seems to be perceived as having a narrow scope) it remains specific (a specific book for every professor, a specific set of books per visit etc.). So, -\( to \) indefinites are used when a specific entity is meant. Now it is time to look at the cases when -\( to \) indefinites are not used and -\( nibud' \) indefinites are used instead and to see what can account for the difference in the interpretation and distribution of the two types of indefinites.

4. -\( to \) vs -\( nibud' \) – similar or different?

As we already saw, -\( to \) indefinites are not used in the contexts where the speaker does not have any specific entity (or multiple specific entities for multiple times/people/worlds etc.) in mind. A scenario when just any poem could be written requires a -\( nibud' \) indefinite in (1c). A question about presence of any new people does not allow for -\( to \)- indefinite in (2). Indirect requests with -\( to \) and -\( nibud' \) differ in their interpretation exactly in the same way in (6). All explanatory dictionaries of the Russian language use -\( nibud' \) or -\( libo \) (a stylistic variant of -\( nibud' \)) indefinites in their definitions and none of the dictionaries uses -\( to \) indefinites:

\[
(16) \text{Šveja – rabotnica po šit’ju čego-nibud’} / *čego-to. \\
\text{Seamstress – worker in sewing something NIBUD'/*TO} \\
\text{‘Seamstress is a worker (specializing) in sewing something’.} \\
\text{(Explanatory Russian Dictionary by Dmitry Ushakov)}
\]

Different dictionaries prefer either -\( nibud’ \) or -\( libo \) (the largest one, Contemporary Standard Russian Dictionary uses -\( libo \) through all 17 volumes), but no one chooses to use -\( to \) indefinites. The reason for the choice is the same: -\( to \) indefinites have to refer to specific entities. And this is not what a dictionary definition does. The purpose of using a -\( nibud’ \) indefinite in (16) is an indication that regardless of what exactly the seamstress sews, she is called a seamstress if she sews anything at all. Using a -\( to \) indefinite would imply that a seamstress has to sew some specific thing(s) to be a seamstress. So, being choice-functional by
nature, -to indefinites remain specific and are used when a specific indefinite is needed. How about -nibud’ indefinites, then?

Yanovich (2005) claims that they are instances of obligatory scolemized choice functions. The main claim of why a choice-functional interpretation is needed is to account for intermediate scope, which, according to him, these indefinites can take. His example of the intermediate-scope interpretation of a -nibud’ indefinite is given below:

(#19) in Yanovich 2005:

Každyj mal’čik budet rad esli vstretit kogo-nibud’ iz svoix odnoklassnic.
Every boy will be glad if [he] will-meet whoNIBUD’ of his girl-classmates.

* Ǝ > ∀ > if (There is a girl that every boy will be happy to meet)
OK  ∀ > Ǝ > if (For every boy, there is a girl he will be happy to meet)
OK  ∀ > if > Ǝ (For every boy, if there is a girl he meets, he will be happy)

I do not share this judgment: for me the only interpretation this sentence can get is the last one (the narrow scope). However, since it is sometimes not easy to elicit semantic judgments I decided to check myself and tested a range of sentences similar to the one cited from Yanovich on several informants in Russia. The test situations, presented in Russian, were in the following format (let’s use the same example from Yanovich for simplicity).

There are three boys: Vasja, Petja and Ivan. They go to school together. Tanja, Anja and Marina are their classmates. The boys went to a party. You hear the following sentence about them: Každyj mal’čik budet rad esli vstretit kogo-nibud’ iz svoix odnoklassnic. What situation or situations does this sentence describes:
A. Anja is so nice! Every boy will be happy to meet her (but not Tanja or Marina).
B. Vasja will be happy to meet Anja (but not Tanja or Marina).
C. Vasja will be happy to meet Anja, Tanja or Marina.

With several people participating and different sentences, no one chose A or B as possible scenarios. So, I am not convinced that *-nibud* indefinites can have intermediate scope and thus – that they need to be interpreted choice-functionally.

This paper is not about *-nibud* indefinites, but about what *-to* indefinites are or are not; and I cannot get into to a detailed analysis of the former for sake of space. However, there is some evidence of quantificational behavior of *-nibud* (they are a lot like English polarity sensitive *any*). They can never be specific, they are only used in the contexts which all together can be characterized as non-veridical (questions, conditionals, subjunctives, generic sentences, direct requests etc.). *-Nibud* is also licensed in before-clauses (and not licensed in after-clauses) in the same way as English *any* as in *They left the country before / *after anything happened* (see Zwarts 1995 for details). The semantics of *-nibud* indefinites is in agreement with the semantic properties of *any* such as “the intuition that *any* statements support counterfactual inferences and do not involve existential commitments” so that their “domain of quantification is not a set of particular individuals but the set of possible individuals of the relevant kind” (Dayal 1998). Indefinites with postfix *-nibud* demonstrate domain-widening comparing to the bare nouns:

(17) a. U tebia est’ kot?
   ‘Do you have a cat?’ (*animal*)

   b. U tebia est’ *kakoj-nibud*’ kot?
   ‘Do you have any cat?’ (*a toy cat or a picture of cat will do, too; there is a child here who doesn’t know what a ‘cat’ means*).

The quantifier story will have to deal with the fact that *-nibud* can only be existential and can never be interpreted as a Free Choice item (Russian has separate lexical items for a FC: *kto/čto/kakoj-ugodno* and ljuboj). It might be beneficial by itself because it might shed some light on ‘division of labor’ between FC items and existential quantifiers.

There are other ways of looking at *-nibud* indefinites: e.g. to think of them as of introducing alternatives in a way question words do (the
indefinites include *wh*-words as a part of their structure and importantly it is *-nibud* (not *-to*) expressions that, in colloquial speech, allow for eliding the postfix and only preserving the question word (*Grammar of Russian* 1960). If we want to still have the choice-functional interpretation of *-nibud* proposed by Yanovich we will need to somehow make it ‘less choice-functional’ than parameterized choice-functional *-to*, because even the most narrow-scope-like interpretation of (7) is still different from the same sentence with a *-nibud* indefinite where the interpretation becomes ‘just any / whatever / doesn’t matter which students come and read just any / whatever / doesn’t matter what books’. One will also need to limit the licensors for both *-nibud* and *-to* indefinites, in case if they are both considered parameterized choice functions, to make sure that the distribution is predicted correctly. If *-to* indefinites are interpreted as choice-functional (i.e. inherently specific) their usage in non-specific contexts is banned without any extra stipulations. If *-nibud* indefinites are existential quantifiers their usage in specific contexts is also banned without any extra stipulations. The details of the comparison will have to be left for the further research, as well as the contrast with *koe-* indefinites.

Let us conclude for now stating that *-to* indefinites differ from other types of Russian indefinite pronouns in being always specific (even when the interpretation opens the possibility of different specific entities for different times/people etc.). Kratzer-style parameterized choice function approach makes it possible to account for their different interpretations in a unified way.

**References**


