What I will tell you about “matrix” wh-“exclamatives”!

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Summary

Claim: Strings like How smart she is! and Who came! are both grammatical in Russian, but they have distinct form (prosody) and meaning (affective & epistemic), warranting distinct analyses.

Lesson: No “secondary” aspects of form or meaning!

Background

English matrix wh-exclamatives (cf. exclamations of other sentence types) require degree readings (Elliott 1974; Rett 2011, a.o.):

(1) a. How smart she is! / What a terrible friend you are!
   b. *Who came! / *What I will tell you!
   c. Look who came! / You won’t believe what I will tell you!

Nouwen & Chernilovskaya 2015: Sentences like (1b) are grammatical, a.o., in Dutch; both (1a) & (1b) involve scales, but languages & wh-items vary in what types of scalar meanings they can express.

ME: Strings like (1a) & (1b) are both OK in Russian, but have different structures: the latter are more like (1c); languages vary in whether they have prosodically exposed mirative predicates.

Type 1 vs. 2 in Russian: examples

Type 1:
(2) Kakaja (že) ona umnaja!
   (5) Kto (*že) prišel!
   who (*že) came
   [Look] who came!
(3) Do čego (že) na naglyj!
   (6) Kuda (??že) mojedom!
   to what (že) he audacious
   to-where (??že) we will-go
   ≈[You won’t believe] where we are going!
(4) Kak (že) on menja dostal!
   (7) Čto (??že) ja s čas raskazal!
   how (že) he me reached
   what (??že) I now will-tell
   ≈[You won’t believe] what I’m about to tell you!

Type 2:
(8) Skol’ko u nizdil
   how-much at them money
   ≈[You won’t believe] how much money they have!

Type 1 vs. 2 is about form & meaning, not degrees. Non-degree wh-items are incompatible w/Type 1, degree ones can occur in both:

(8) Skol’ko u nix disgen! HOW-MUCH AT THEM MONEY
   ≈[You won’t believe] how much money they have!

Type 1 vs. 2 in Russian: form

Type 1 prosody: falling boundary contour; contrastive focus on the wh-item and additional prominence on the associated predicate:

Plateau Type 2: singsongy mid-plateau boundary contour; no prominence can occur on the wh-item:

Rising Type 2: sharp rise(-fall) boundary contour; the wh-item can bear a high tonal target (different from contrastive focus marking):

Also: Type 2 are often preceded by interjections/vocalizations, which can be accompanied by a clap in rising Type 2.

Type 1 within a larger typology

Utterances that encode the speaker’s AFFECT about some CONTENT:

A. primary AFFECT; expressive AFFECT: Type 1: Fuck she’s smart!
B. primary CONTENT; expressive AFFECT: She’s fucking smart.
C. primary CONTENT; truth-conditional AFFECT: I am {surprised / happy / sad / infuriated / ...} that she is very smart.
D. primary CONTENT; truth-conditional AFFECT: {Surprisingly / fortunately / sadly / much to my dismay / ...}, she is very smart.

Also, B v. A in Russian:
(10) Ona pizdec (kakaja) umnaja.
(11) Pizdec (kakaja) ona umnaja!
   she FUCK (what) smart FUCK (what) she smart
   ≈She’s fucking smart. ≈Fuck she’s smart!

Selected references


Type 1 vs. 2 in Russian: meaning

Type 1 semantics: old information, varied affect:

• The primary goal is to express one’s immediate affect about a proposition about a (typically high) degree.
• This proposition can’t be completely new information (but you can be reacting to new evidence that further supports it).
• The affect can range from anger to awe, w/gradient aspects of prosody & facial expressions reflecting further nuance.

Type 2 semantics: new information, fixed affect:

• Always involves acquisition of new info (by speaker or addressee).
• Type 2 convey mild/prettend amusement (e.g., ironic or child-directed); cf. (12). Rising Type 2 convey genuine excitement.
• Both are incompatible w/negative emotions: (13) vs. (14).
• Cf. English “calling contour” (e.g., Jeong & Condoravdi 2017).

(12) Ogo kto prišel!
   ≈I can’t believe who came!
   (new info, genuine surprise)
   (cf. Wow that she left! in Zyman 2018—but is this abt old info?)

(13) Čto sejčas so mnoj proizošlo! (plateau or rising)
   what now with me happened
   ≈How smn’t believe] what just happened to me!
   ✓ I ran into a celebrity. X I almost got hit by a truck.

(14) Pizdec čto sejčas so mnoj proizožilo! (prosody like (12))
   ≈I’m fucking shock by what just happened to me!
   ✓ I ran into a celebrity. ✓ I almost got hit by a truck.

Type 1 vs. 2 in Russian: conclusion

Type 1 are matrix exclamatives, i.e., sentences w/special syntax whose main goal is to express immediate affect about a proposition.

Type 2 are interrogatives embedded under a complex mirative predicate exposed prosodically (+ via other “secondary” means).

Future: how do its meaning components (info acquisition, surprise, lack of speaker investment, etc.) map onto specific sub-exponents?