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### **Word order affects uniqueness: experimental data<sup>1</sup>**

**Background.** It has long been discussed [King 1995, Brun 2001, Geist 2010, a.m.o.] that in some Slavic languages, preverbal bare NPs with unaccusative verbs are always interpreted as definite, i.e., presuppose existence and maximality (uniqueness). This fact has usually been explained in terms of information structure: the preverbal NP is topical, and topicality requires determinacy [Geist 2010]. If such NP bears focus accent, the constraint seems to be lifted.

- (1) Upal METEORIT  
came-down meteorite  
<sup>OK</sup>The / <sup>OK</sup>a meteorite came down.
- (2) Meteorit UPAL  
meteorite came-down  
<sup>OK</sup>The / \*a meteorite came down.
- (3) METEORIT upal  
meteorite came-down  
<sup>OK</sup>The / <sup>OK</sup>a meteorite came down. (Russian, [Geist 2010])

On the other hand, Šimík [2021] proposes a theory for Czech where only the structural relation plays a role in the interpretation, while IS does not. This predicts that sentences like (3) only allow the definite interpretation.

Šimík & Demian [2020, 2021] conducted two experiments, for Polish and for Russian, to test the correlation between NP position, focus accent, and maximality presupposition. Both failed to find any significant correlation.

The first experiment used a covered box design, and the referents of the target NPs were novel to the participant. As the authors acknowledge, it is possible that because of this, NPs were never interpreted as topics. The second experiment was production-based, with forced choice between sentences with two word orders. The referents were given on an image. Reflecting on the results, the authors note that there is a bias against verb-initial sentences in Polish [Siewierska 1993]; and, since prosody was not controlled, all sentences might have been interpreted asthetic.

**Our design.** IS correlates with word order in Slavic in intransparent ways: it affects word order, but does not fully determine it: both VS and SV orders are available, with prosodic marking always placed on the (unaccusative) subject, and their distribution is unclear. To test the effect of word order on interpretation independently of IS, a special context is required. E.g. in the antecedent of conditionals, the preverbal subject is stressed only when narrowly focused (6)<sup>2</sup>, and still, both word orders are available (4–5).

- (4) Esli upadet METEORIT, ...  
if comes-down meteorite  
'if (a/the) meteorite comes down'
- (5) Esli meteorit UPADET, ...  
if meteorite comes-down, ...  
'if (a/the) meteorite comes down'

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<sup>1</sup> The results of the project “Crossmodal interaction in the grammatical theory: modeling grammatical features based on the data of the languages of Russia”, carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) in 2024, are presented in this work.

<sup>2</sup> The stress contour is also rising, which is likely the reason it follows different projection principles.a

- (6) Esli METEORIT upadet, ...  
only 'if it is (a/the) meteorite that comes down'

Such contexts also exclude the verb-initial bias, and thus allow us to avoid the pitfalls of the previous experiments. Using these, we conducted an experiment on Russian (N=42) to test uniqueness, as well as existence presuppositions of pre-verbal singular subjects. We provided a picture with a set of mini-situations and a context sentence, and offered a forced choice between two conditional sentences with subject-verb and verb-subject orders, as in (7). Three types of pictures were used, each featuring a different number of referents per mini-situation. E.g. for (7), there were 5 children in the picture, and each one carried either exactly one (baseline), one or two (uniqueness), or one or no baskets (existence).

- (7) {Schoolers are going to the forest to forage mushrooms}.  
Esli korzinka poterjaetsja / poterjaetsja korzinka, mama budet serditsja  
if basket gets lost / gets lost basket mom will be angry  
'If a / the basket gets lost, mom will be angry'

Topicality is preserved in all variants of the stimuli, since the referent is always present on the image. The fact that images illustrate the context, not the stimuli, ensures that participants' attention is on all objects, not only on those that participate in the action.

**Results.** The results show a significant correlation between word order and uniqueness, but not existence. The first fact proves that the interpretation of an NP indeed depends on the word order, and this effect is independent of IS. For the second part, it can be proposed that the conditional is only evaluated for those situations in which it is non-absurd. That is, mini-situations where there is no basket are excluded from evaluation since no basket cannot be lost, including the evaluation of the uniqueness presupposition. Indeed, this holds for English as well (8). Uniqueness and maximality presuppositions thus behave differently in conditionals.

- (8) John sometimes smokes a cigarette at the bus stop. If he doesn't finish the cigarette when the bus comes, he gets upset.

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