OVS in Slavic: Novel Evidence for Overt Focus Movement Licensing vP Ellipsis

OVS word order (1B) has been of special interest to syntacticians due to its postverbal subject which has particular Information Structure-related properties, with Object (O) and Verb (V) being given and Subject (S) representing the New Information or Contrastive Focus.

(1) A: Kto kupil etu knigu?  B: Etu knigu kupila Nina.

\[ \text{WHO}\text{NOM} \text{ bought this book}^{\text{ACC}} \quad \text{This book}^{\text{ACC}} \text{ bought NiNa}\text{NOM} \]

‘Who bought this book?’

‘Nina bought this book’

Despite the straightforward relation between the word order and its IS-properties, deriving OVS has presented an outstanding challenge, with none of the existing accounts being able to derive all of its characteristic properties, such as Spec-TP/A-properties of the sentence-initial O, lack of WCO, discourse-related properties with O and S (O given, specific, see Aksénova 2016); S New Information or Contrastive Focus, apparent lack of V-to-T raising (contra Bailyn 2004), the ability of S to bind into O, inverse scope bias of OVS vis-a-vis surface scope bias of SVO (see Antonyuk 2015, Ionin and Luchkina 2018 i.a.)

Our analysis of OVS relies on several key assumptions, all supported by independent evidence: I. Following Gribanova (2013, 2017), Zanon (in progress) i.a. we assume that V in Russian undergoes head movement and can raise at least as high as Aspect (but arguably higher, as in Gribanova 2017); II. Based on the analysis of V NP PPLoc ditransitives, which derives their lack of surface scope freezing (Antonyuk 2015) we crucially assume that Light Predicate Raising (henceforth LPR, Larson 1989; 2014) is a type of head movement available to the V’ constituent (V+PPLoc).

III. The exceptional prominence/bias in favor of inverse scope in OVS in a language where surface scope is generally much more readily available (Antonyuk 2015, Ionin and Luchkina 2018) is an important property that any successful analysis of OVS should be able to derive.

Armed with these assumptions, we propose a novel analysis of OVS which crucially relies on insights derived from the Quantifier-stranding test (proposed in Bošković 2004), according to which Quantifiers cannot be floated in theta positions. Consider the distribution of Q-float in (2) and (3):

(2) Maks (vse) korobki s domašnej utvar’ju (vse) položil (vse) v mašinu (vse).

Max (all) boxes with home furnishings (all) put (all) in car (all)

‘Max put all of the boxes of home furnishings in the car’

(3) (Vse) korobki s domašnej utvar’ju (vse) položil (vse) v mašinu (vse) Maks * (all).

(all) boxes with with home furn. (all) put (all) in car (all) Max *(all)

‘MAX put all of the boxes of home furnishings in the car’

The contrast between (2) and (3) in the possibility of floating Q in sentence-final/post-S position is crucial: according to the analysis in Bošković (2004), the last occurrence of Q (all) in (2) indicates that this is a position derived by (object) movement and not the object’s theta position. Relative position of the V and the PP in (2) wrt the final occurrence of Q indicates that the V+PP complex has undergone head raising via LPR to the little v head at this point. This suggests that the lowest position in which the object raises in which Q can be floated is still inside the VP/is VP-attached (consistent with the verb phrase structure proposed based on the analysis of ditransitives in Russian and Ukrainian in Antonyuk 2015; 2017). This position then is the position in which Q cannot be stranded when S is postverbal (as shown in 3). While it could be objected that the impossibility of floating Q in its final position in (3) is simply due to the fact that S in OVS must be sentence-final (see Slioussar 2011), the contrast with the nearly identical (4), we argue, is telling: here a virtually identical string is associated with a drastically different prosodic contour and interpretation, with S, along with O PP and V being interpreted as given (e.g., by previous mention) while Q is the only non-presupposed, focused material.

(4) Programmy zagruzila na kompjuter Nina vse.

Programs downloaded on computer Nina all.

‘As for the programs, Nina downloaded them ALL to the computer’

We argue that (4) is associated with a crucially distinct structure from (3), representing essentially the workings of Diesing’s (1992) Mapping Hypothesis, with all given/presupposed material vacating the VP (vP for us, to account for S) and only non-presupposed material remaining inside the VP. Example
(4) then provides an answer to the question of why V, PP and O raise in (3) (as suggested by the Q float test): being given/presupposed, they vacate the domain of existential closure.

However, while (4) strongly suggests that Q remains floated inside the VP in (4), we argue that this is not the case for the similarly non-presupposed/focused S in (3), that is, that S in (3) crucially cannot be in its original Spec,vP position. Instead, we argue that S in OVS must undergo extraposition to the right, arguably to a high position above TP, Polarity Phrase, which has been argued to host focus features in Russian (Gribanova 2017). Furthermore, we argue that when S undergoes extraposition to the right, this instance of overt focus movement licenses obligatory vP deletion (thus providing novel cross-linguistic support for Thoms 2010; 2016).

These crucial additional assumptions about S extraposition and obligatory vP ellipsis can be deduced by examining our data in (2)-(3) more closely. As suggested by (2), the lowest occurrence of Q float is inside the VP, with the V+PP having undergone movement to adjoin to v via LPR. Crucially, Q cannot be floated in this position in (3). Assuming subject extraposition in OVS structures as in (3) provides a straightforward way to account for a number of OVS properties (see Bailyn 2012), but especially for the inverse scope prominence/preference in OVS sentences in a language in which surface QP scope is usually much more prominent. However, assuming S extraposition alone will not account for why Q cannot be floated in the pre-subject position marked with the star in (3). If we assume that S extraposition is followed by an obligatory vP ellipsis, the impossibility of Q float in this otherwise available position below the subject’s base position is then accounted for. Crucially, Thoms (2016) provides strong evidence that overt focus movement in English licenses vP ellipsis in English. Thus, our analysis of Q float in (3), if correct, seems to be another instance of overt focus movement licensing (and, in fact, forcing, vP ellipsis). The analysis is made even more plausible by the strong case made in Gribanova (2013; 2017) for the crucial role of head raising and subsequent by ellipsis in derived word orders in Russian.

We then compare our account to two other prominent accounts of Slavic OVS, the somewhat similar “hybrid” account of Bailyn (2012) and the copy-deletion account of Stjepanovic (1999, 2002). The former differs from our account in assuming subject extraposition and adjunction to vP, which we show is not sufficiently high to derive the data in (3). Stjepanovic (1999, 2002), on the other hand, is a radically different account, which derives the sentence-final position of S by assuming that the lower copy of the subject is pronounced, while the higher copies of moved O and V are selected, with the lower ones being deleted. Nevertheless, the latter account makes almost identical predictions to ours, which we show can nevertheless be teased apart and in doing so suggest that our account is in fact superior. Finally, we discuss the theoretical implications of our analysis, arguing that it provides a more adequate view of focus movement as being an instance of clearly syntactic, but nevertheless (and crucially), non-feature driven movement. In this respect we depart from most accounts of focus movement in Russian, including those we follow in other respects, such as Gribanova (2017).

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1 Assuming the V+PP Light Predicate Raising option in (3) we show that V raises (at least) as high as Aspect. If LPR option is not adopted and V raises separately, an option clearly available as well, as indicated by the penultimate stranded Q in (2), for instance, leads to the conclusion that the verb raises even higher (which is fully consistent with the proposal in Gribanova 2017).