

snippets

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An indicative null C in Russian, they said. But it is a slifting parenthetical

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A growing body of work assumes that Russian has an indicative null C that can be used in clausal embedding, as in (1); see for example Bailyn 1992, Stepanov and Georgopoulos 1997, Szczegielniak 1999, Antonenko 2006, Rojina 2011, Hansen et al. 2016, and Morgunova 2021. This assumption merits a closer look. This snippet reports on a series of tests that assess the presence of an indicative null C in complement clauses in Russian. The findings contribute to our understanding of Russian syntax and the general theory of complementation. It also provides a roadmap for researchers studying this phenomenon in other languages.

- (1) Ja znaju, Maša xočet stat’ veterinárom.
I know Masha wants to.become veterinarian
‘I know Masha wants to become a vet.’

Stepanov (2001) notes “a possibility that [the matrix clause in (1)] is some sort of a parenthetical constituent” (p. 190), but contends that it is impossible to decide without a definitive test. The tests below suggest that (1) should be analyzed as a sentence-lifting (*slifting*) parenthetical (2a) and not clausal embedding (2b). See Bresnan 1968, Jackendoff 1972, Ross 1973, Corver 1994, Rooryck 2001, and Potts 2005 on slifting parentheticals in English.

- (2) a. The Titanic, John knew, is unsinkable. (slifting parenthetical)
b. John knew the Titanic was unsinkable. (clausal embedding)

First, the structure in Russian does not allow local *wh*-movement (3a), which follows if *wh*-movement originates inside a syntactically-orphaned parenthetical, but is unexpected for a well-behaved matrix clause. Importantly, if an indicative null C were available, it would mask the parenthetical structure, rendering the *čto*-less option in (3a) grammatical, cf. (3b).

- (3) a. Kto skazal, *(čto) ja uvlekajus’ begom?
who said that I like running
‘Who said I like running?’
b. Who said (that) the Titanic was unsinkable?

Second, the structure cannot be embedded (4), typical for slifting parentheticals.

- (4) Maša uverena, čto Kolja dumajet, *(čto) lošadi ljubjat saxar.
Masha is.certain that Kolya thinks that horses love sugar
‘Masha is certain that Kolya thinks horses love sugar.’

Third, it blocks negation inside the slift, similar to slifting parentheticals; see Koev 2021:130ff.

- (5) Ja ne dumaju, *(čto) Kolja čital Montenja.
 I not think that Kolya read Montaigne
 ‘I don’t think Kolya read Montaigne.’

Finally, the parenthetical assertion cannot be weakened and included in the question under discussion (Simons et al. 2010, Koev 2022). In (6), adding a modal adverb to the slift highlights its not-at-issueness.

- (6) Katja verojatno znaet, Serëža opozdaet na vstreču.
 Katya probably knows Seryozha will.be.late for meeting
 ‘Seryozha will be late for a meeting, as Katya probably knows.’
 *‘Katya probably knows that Seryozha will be late for a meeting.’

A reviewer notes a potential issue: according to their judgments, only attitude/factive predicates conform to these tests, whereas other predicates show the inverse pattern (except for negation). If this observation holds, it would imply that in Russian, factive verbs block a null C, similar to English (Kiparsky and Kiparsky 1970). Unfortunately, no consultants corroborated this distinction. Therefore, more research is needed to determine the nature of this individual difference.

In conclusion, we have seen evidence that a string-identical Russian counterpart of a null C sentence in English is underlyingly a slifting parenthetical, which is only possible if Russian does not have an indicative null C.

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