

**The Genitive of Negation in Russian:
Multiple Perspectives on a Multi-Faceted Problem**

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The Russian Genitive of Negation construction (Gen Neg) involves case alternation between Genitive and the two structural cases, Nominative and Accusative. The construction has had the attention of theoretical, descriptive, and applied linguists of many sorts for more than a century. Many insights have been gained, and the construction has figured in broader theoretical discussions as well as in studies of language acquisition, language loss in emigrant communities, typology, and historical change.

All this research has led to an understanding of many factors governing the syntactic distribution and semantic interpretation of Gen Neg in Russian and other Slavic languages. At the same time, especially among those whose goal is to “explain” the distribution of Gen Neg in terms of some theoretical framework, there remain many ongoing debates, and a sense that our understanding of the construction is still incomplete.

In this talk, we reflect on why the problem is so difficult. As our title suggests, we believe that part of the reason is the difficulty of putting together a coherent picture of the interaction of the several different *kinds* of factors that interact in determining the distribution and interpretation of Gen Neg sentences. It is well known that there are syntactic, semantic, and morphological factors that play a role, and probably pragmatic and stylistic factors as well, and that there are some frozen or semi-frozen collocations that may not fit the current productive rules. We will focus on our main area of interest, the integration of lexical and compositional semantics, within the context of their interaction with a variety of other factors.

What many, starting with Jakobson, have aimed for is to try to relate Gen Neg to other uses of the genitive. The goal itself is controversial, since although the uses of the genitive probably form a non-random collection, they are not necessarily unified synchronically. It is instructive to contrast the Moscow school tradition of trying to identify and describe each separate use of the genitive, with skepticism towards the existence of any common denominator, while it is more common in the West to want to “explain” why it is the genitive that is used in all these places.

Those broader issues will frame our discussion of two more specific aspects of the Gen Neg problem. One is the relation of Gen Neg to ‘quantificational’ and ‘partitive’ Genitives and to Genitives in intensional contexts: can any formal account possibly capture the informally describable similarities without predicting even more similarity than is actually found? The other is the family of issues surrounding the idea that a Gen Neg NP is syntactically ‘demoted’ or ‘lower’ than a corresponding Nom- or Acc-marked NP, and that it is correspondingly ‘less referential’ or ‘less individuated’. Some such claim is generally agreed on across widely differing frameworks, but for virtually every theory some kinds of NPs present major stumbling blocks, including proper nouns, pronouns, and various kinds of quantified NPs. Both problem areas illustrate the difficulty posed by “interacting factors”; we will try to illuminate them but we will not solve them.