

A Special Case of ‘Indefiniteness’ in Modern Russian: the Semantics of Pronouns *chto-to*, *pochemu-to*, *kak-to*

The category of ‘definiteness/ indefiniteness’ in modern Russian has always been a subject of detailed linguistic investigation. As a rule, much emphasis is put on how ‘indefiniteness’ is expressed in noun phrases and on the special role of ‘indefiniteness’ as a ‘semantic dominant’ of the Russian linguistic worldview. This work focuses on the special usage of *chto-to*, *pochemu-to*, *kak-to* in the sentences of the following type:

(1) *Zhit’ v takoy strane pochemu-to ne hochetsya*

‘Live-INF in this country **why-INDEF** not want-IMPERS

Zhit’ v takoy strane kak-to ne hochetsya

‘Live-INF in this country **how-INDEF** not want-IMPERS

Zhit’ v takoy strane chto-to ne hochetsya

‘Live-INF in this country **what-INDEF** not want-IMPERS

“**Somehow** one doesn’t want to live in this country”

The meaning of the above mentioned pronouns can be compared with that of English ‘somehow’, as can be seen in (1). In this paper we will propose an explanation for this special function of the indefinite pronouns *chto-to*, *pochemu-to*, *kak-to* and will try to single out the basic criteria for distinguishing between them.

1. Introduction

In some works ‘indefiniteness’ is viewed as a **semantic dominant** of the Russian linguistic worldview, i. e. one of the core notions for the Russian language (see e. g. Kuzmina 1989, Wierzbicka 1992, Arutyunova 1995, Paducheva 1995, Zaliznyak & Levontina 2005). It is introduced by both various lexical and grammatical means (Cf. such impersonal verbs as *udalos’*, *poluchilos’* ‘smth was managed to be done by smb’, etc., and special impersonal constructions *mne nuzhno* ‘it is needed for me’, *emu mozhno* ‘he is allowed to’, etc.). Due to this fact ‘indefiniteness’ is very well developed in Russian in comparison with some other languages. Russian linguists usually distinguish between 3 basic types of indefinite pronouns, which are singled out depending on the combination of 2 basic criteria – specific/nonspecific, known/ unknown to the speaker (Arutyunova 1976, Smelev 1984, Paducheva 1985, 1995, Kuzmina 1989):

- non-specific indefinite (no particular object is meant) (*-nibud’* series)
- specific indefinite, unknown to the speaker (*-to* series)
- specific indefinite, known to the speaker but not to the listener (*koe-* series, *odin*, *nekiy*).

Martin Haspelmath uses the term ‘indefinite pronouns’ in a broader sense, thus introducing 7 major series: (1-2) the specific *to-* and *koe-* series, (3-4) then non-specific *-nibud’* and *-libo-* series, (5) the negative *ni-* series, (6) the negative polarity¹ series marked by *WH* by *to ni bylo*, and (7) the free-choice series marked by *ugodno*, *lyuboy* (Haspelmath 1997: 272-273). The distribution of the basic series is shown in Fig.1.

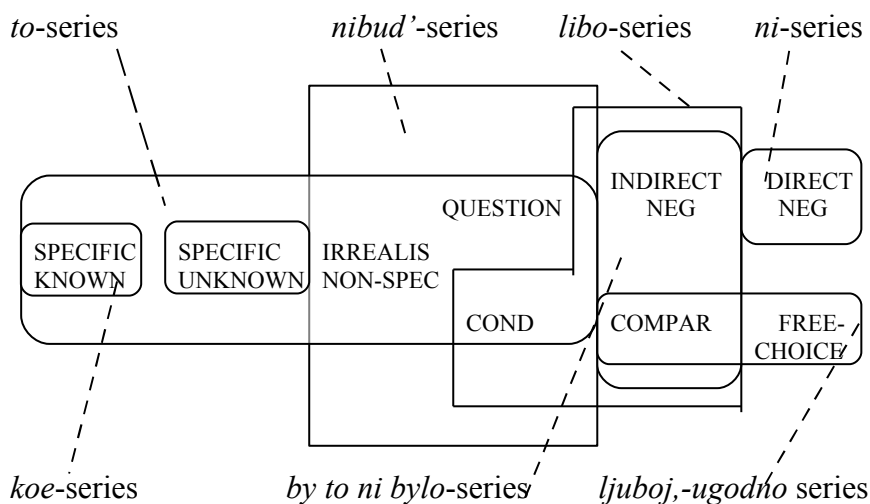


Fig.1

In addition to their typical usage, specific unknown *to-* series can be used in a special metalinguistic function. This function is performed when the speaker can’t think of an appropriate word for a certain nomination, or when the nomination is inexact and the speaker is aware of it (Cf. Nikolaeva 1983, Kuzmina 1989, Arutyunova 1995, Paducheva 1995):

- (2) *Yubka byla kakaya-to gryazno-belaya* (Arutyunova 1995:184)
 Skirt was **some kind of** dirty-white
 ‘The skirt was of some dirty-white color’ (?The skirt was somewhat dirty-white)
- (3) *On kak-to nehorosho postupil*
 He how-INDEF badly acted
 ‘It was not nice of him to do that’

However, examples with full adjectives are also possible:

- (4) *Naskol’ko Kornev pri etom vozvysilsya v ego glazah, nastol’ko zhe sebya on pochuvstvoval kak-to unizhennym pered Kornevym*
 ‘As much as Kornev rose in his eyes he felt somewhat humiliated before Kornev’

¹ By **Negative polarity items** (coined by Baker 1970) linguists generally mean the series of indefinite pronouns that are associated with negative environments like the negative pronouns, but are not restricted to the expression of non-existence. In addition to negative clauses, they can also be used in conditional and interrogative clauses, in the standard of comparison and in some further environments. For this reason Haspelmath suggests that it will be more appropriate to use the term **scale reversal** (Haspelmath 1997:33-34).

Thus, we could say that in Russian indefiniteness can be expressed:

- 1) on the level of a noun phrase (*V komnatu voshel kakoy-to chelovek* ‘A (some) man entered the room’);
- 2) on the metalinguistic level (see (2));
- 3) on the level of the whole predication. E.V. Paducheva speaks about indefiniteness as a “propositional aim”, which is revealed in such units as *dolzno byt’* (‘it must be smth’, ‘probably’), *vrode by* (‘it seems that’, ‘probably’), *kak by* (‘as if’, ‘as though’), etc.:

- (5) *Moim detyam vrode by ne stoit eto chitat’* (Paducheva 1995:175)
My-DAT PL children-DAT probably not should-SG this read-INF
‘My children **probably** should not read this’

At the present moment the list of such markers is being enlarged by *to*-indefinites, such as *pochemu-to*, *chto-to*, *kak-to* (See Example (1)).

The basic meaning of these words in the function considered here is ‘somehow’.

2. The Problem and its Explanation

The question is: how can we account for this special usage of *pochemu-to*, *chto-to*, *kak-to*, and what is the difference between these pronouns in this function?

In the majority of cases the units under consideration are used in negative predicates. Our hypothesis is that these lexemes serve to soften the illocutionary force of the speech act, what is quite often connected with the problem of “politeness” (see e. g. Tek-Gyu Khong 2003:333-335). They introduce the negative sentences expressing disagreement, or refuse and thus make the utterance less strong or flat:

- (6) *Vot ya kak-to ne veryu*
Here I how-INDEF not believe
‘I somehow don’t believe (this)’ (Cf. *Vot ya ne veryu!* ;I don’t believe (this)’)

Thus, the following lexical units, particularly *chto-to* and *kak-to*, become discourse markers. In fact *chto-to* is already listed in the Dictionary of Russian particles (Shimchuk, Shchur 1999). However the context and the explanation for the phenomenon doesn’t look quite satisfactory: a modal particle used in negative declarative sentences; indicates that what the speaker says or supposes he evaluates as something doubtful and unreliable.

- (7) *Eto Pravda? Chto-to ne verutsya.*

It truth? What-INDEF not believe-IMPERS

‘Is it true? It is difficult to believe it. (Somehow I don’t believe it)’

However, such particles can be used in positive contexts as well:

(8) ***Chto-to*** *ty sovsem razbolelsya...*

What-INDEF you completely fell ill

‘You have really fallen ill...’

Firstly, there are at least 2 particles – *chto-to* and *kak-to* - with the meaning of *pochemu-to* (See examples 6 and 7). Secondly, they can occur in positive sentences. Let us try to account for this.

3. The *chto-to*, *kak-to* contexts

I. Semantics of the predicate.

As it was verily indicated in the Dictionary of Russian particles, the most preferable context for *chto-to*, *kak-to* is the negative context (these units are used to soften the utterance). However, positive contexts are also possible, but here the semantics of the predicate comes forth and puts certain restrains. *Chto-to* and *kak-to* usually deliver the meaning of deviation from some norm, from the positive scenario (Nikolaeva 1983):

(9) *Ya kak-to/chto-to ne pomnyu* (but I am supposed to remember);

kak-to/chto-to ne veritsya (but I am expected to believe it);

kak-to ya razuchilsya risovat’ (negation is included in the semantics of the verb itself: I do not remember how to draw)

‘Somehow I forgot how to draw’ (but I was supposed to remember);

kak-to/chto-to ty razbolelsya (unexpected))

Preference is given to those predicates which denote sense-perception, feelings, the condition of the speaker: *verit’* (believe), *(pri)pomnit’* (remember), *dumat’* (think), *hotet’* (want), *zhal’* (it’s a pity, I wish), *poluchaetsya* (works out), *moch’* (can), etc.

Compare: (10) *Trudnyy vopros. Ya kak-to ne znayu, chto otvetit’*

Difficult question. I how-INDEF not know what answer-INF

‘It’s a difficult question. I don’t even know what to answer’

**Trudnyy vopros. No ya kak-to znayu, chto otvetit’*.

‘It’s a difficult question. But somehow I know what to answer’

I. Tense

The lexemes *chto-to*, *kak-to* are usually used in the present or past indefinite or perfect tenses (as a rule there is a certain connection with the speech act):

(11) *I dazhe esli sprashivaemyy tverdo stoit na tom, chto on takoye mneniye vyskazyvat’ ne upolnomochen, a mozhet govorit’ tolko ot sebya, eto kak-to ne slyshat, ne zamechayut*

‘And even if the person interviewed insists that he has no authority to express such opinion and can speak only for himself, (somehow) nobody hears him or notices him’

(12) *No selskohozyaystvennyy den’ u Mikhaila Kasyanova kak-to ne zadalsya: podvela pogoda*

‘But somehow the agricultural day didn’t turn out well for Mikhail Kasyanov: the weather let him down’

See also examples (7), (8).

Future is not typical. In this case it performs the function of a regular indefinite adverbial modifier.

(13) *Vozmozhno intervyyu s avtorom kak-to zapolnit informacionnyuyu “dyru”*

Possibly interview with author how-INDEF fill-FUT information-ADJ gap

‘Perhaps an interview with the author will somehow fill the information gap’

The ‘why’ member of the *to*-series in Russian lacks most of the contexts typical for that series.

1. Conditional

(14) *?Esli tebe pochemu-to/nibud’ ne nravitsya, chto my zdes’, my seychas uydem* (superfluous)

‘If for some reason you don’t like that we are here we’ll leave’

(15) *?Esli ty pochemu-to vdrug zabudesh emu pozvonit’, ya sdelayu eto sam*

‘If for some reason you will forget to call him I will do it myself’

2. Indirect negation

(16) **Ya ne dumayu, chto on pochemu-to/nibud’ vse vremya otkladyvaet vashu vstrechu. (?po kakoy-to/nibud’ prichine)*

‘I don’t think that for some reason he always postpones your meeting’

3. Non-specific

(17) **On pochemu-to/nibud’ da ne smozhet priyti k nam zavtra*

‘There will definitely be some reason why he won’t be able to visit us tomorrow’

Only specific known reading is possible:

(18) *On pochemu-to opozdaet*

‘He’s going to be late for some reason’ (He told me that he would be late but I don’t know why)

Maybe this accounts for the fact that some languages, such as English and German for instance, lack this pronoun (there are no pronouns **someswhy* and **irgendwarum*, corresponding to *why* and *warum* (Haspelmath 1997: 31)).

4. Distribution of *pochemu-to*, *chto-to*, *kak-to*

The contexts where such lexemes are usually used can be divided into 4 groups, depending on the following criteria:

- a) primary or secondary character of this egocentric. By a primary egocentric E. V. Paducheva means a linguistic element oriented to the speaker only. Secondary egocentrics allow two interpretations in narration: through the speaker and through the character. Thus, unlike primary egocentrics, they can be used in reported speech (see Paducheva 1995: 175-177).
- b) evidence of the cause or the reason for the action in the predicate. In this respect, the reason can be expressed explicitly, implicitly or can be unexpressed.

The basic 4 contexts for this special usage of the indefinite pronouns are:

- 1) contexts which can't be used with *chto-to*;
- 2) contexts which forbid *pochemu-to*;
- 3) contexts which forbid *pochemu-to* and *chto-to*;
- 4) all three lexemes are possible

Let us account for this difference in usage on certain examples.

1) (19) *Gale eto **pochemu-to/ kak-to** ne ponravilos', ona otobrala pistolet I polozhila ego v pohodnuyu sumku* 'Galya, **for some reason**, didn't like it, she took the gun away and put it in her field bag'. *Chto-to* can't be used in this context due to the primary character of this egocentric. Cf. *Chto-to mne eto ne ponravilos* '**For some reason**, I didn't like it'.

2) (20) *Ya **kak-to/ chto-to** ne gotov k etomu voprosu* '**Somehow**, I am not ready for this question'. The sentence * *Ya **pochemu-to** ne gotov k etomu voprosu* is not typical because the reasons for the state expressed by the predicate should be known to the speaker. Cf. *On ('he') **pochemu-to** ne gotov k etomu voprosu*. In sentence (20) the reason for the indicated state could be viewed as implicit. Thus, it is possible to use both *kak-to* and *chto-to* in this context.

3) (21) *U nego byla svoya moral i svoya sobstvennaya religiya – slovo eto **kak-to** ne podhodit k absolyutnomu agnostiku, kakim byl Aldanov* 'He had his own moral philosophy and his own religion – this word somehow doesn't suit such a complete agnostic as Aldanov'. In this context we have an explicit evidence of the reason why "the word doesn't suit Aldanov": he was an agnostic. If the cause is expressed explicitly it's not typical to use *pochemu-to* and *chto-to*.

4) Finally, we can use all the 3 units in contexts which permit both types of egocentrics and have no evidence for the cause of the action expressed by the predicate.

5. Individual semantic differences

The lexeme *kak-to* usually stands closer to the predicate, thus retaining to some extent its adverbial features:

(22) *Nikto me imeet prava diktovat' tebe, kak vyglyadet', chto govorit' i chto dumat'. I uzh tem boele pytat'say podtverzhdad' kakie-to tupye glyancevye stereotipy. **Chto-to kak-to** slishkom pafosno vyhodit. ...*

'Nobody has the right to dictate to you how to look, what to say and what to think. And even less to try to prove some kind of stupid glamorous stereotypes. It's becoming somewhat too pathetic...'

6. Final Remarks

Although English has no why-INDEF pronoun it appears that the how-INDEF can be used in this meaning, thus resembling the situation in Russian. Cf.:

(23) *I am also **somehow**, I should say, very much fond of the British countryside*

(24) *But **somehow** we know they are not to be trusted*

(25) *Math is (**for some reason**) the only work I can do while listening to music, **for some reason** my brain works like that.*

Moreover, English produced one more indefinite used to express pragmatics – *somewhat*:

(26) *I was **somewhat** surprised to see him*

(27) *He sounded **somewhat** confused*

However, although the expression plain reminds us Russian *chto-to* the translation is closer to *kak-to* (neskolko, dovolno): (26) 'Ya byl neskolko (kak-to) udivlen, uvidev ego'; (27) 'On govoril neskolko (kak-to) ozadachenno'

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