Pseudo-incorporation in Russian? Aspectual competition and bare singular interpretations

In the paper, I will show that, in certain well-defined contexts, Russian bare singular object arguments entertain “pseudo-incorporation behavior”. I will describe these contexts and offer an explanation of the effects. The paper complies with Dayal's (2011) observation that pseudo-incorporation is sensitive to aspect choice.

Russian displays two morphological aspects, perfective (pf) and imperfective (ipf). Reference to single completed events is usually the realm of pf. In certain contexts, however, also ipf can be used to refer to a single completed event („aspectual competition“): (1) shows a minimal pair. Syntactic objects of „completed ipf“ are known to show specificity/definiteness effects (2), (3). Could this be due to (pseudo-)incorporation? The syntactic autonomy of bare singular objects, as in (3a), is beyond doubt (case marking, no strict verb adjacency). To check their semantic status, let us run the canonical test battery (e.g. Van Geenhoven 1998, Dayal 2011).

Bare singulars display number neutrality in combination with ipf, but not in combination with pf (4). Moreover, there are lexical gaps – number neutrality is not attestable for any lexical item. The difference between (4) and (5) is that ‘eating a cockroach’ normally does not count as an institutionalized activity, while ‘eating a shrimp’ does. If “institutionalization” is not met, the number neutrality effect disappears. How about plurals? If aspect is ipf, the situation is not so clear. Some informants would accept (6a) in case the speaker had eaten only one shrimp, some would not. In contrast to that, if aspect is pf, the nominal definitely must denote a plurality of entities. No informant would accept (6b) as adequate if the speaker had in fact eaten only one shrimp. Bare singulars also stand out with respect to scopal behavior. While bare plural objects obligatorily get a narrow scope interpretation under negation (7), bare singulars get wide scope readings (8), (9). With one exception: if aspect is ipf, bare singulars can also have a narrow scope reading (9). Bare singular nominals show a reduced discourse transparency if aspect is ipf.

When asked to judge the coherence of (10a), speakers of Russian disagree. In clear contrast to that, the pf version (10b) is accepted by every informant. Judgements concerning pronominal anaphora show even more clear results. Bare singulars in the context of ipf provide no support for pronominal anaphora. In sum, bare singulars as thematic arguments of “completed ipf” meet the criteria for pseudo-incorporation. Concluding that the object always semantically incorporates would be premature, however, as there are clear cases of “completed ipf” with specific/definite object nominals (12).

To account for these facts, I argue (in line with modern Russian aspectology, e.g. Padučeva 1996, Gronn 2004) that a “completed ipf” expresses a proposition about the existence of an event. It integrates three components: a pivot (expressing the event whose existence is under discussion), an existential predicate (expressing the claim that the event realizes), and a topic component (expressing the topic time relative to which the truth of the existence claim is evaluated). A pf serves a different function. It expresses a proposition about the completion of an event (whereby the initial part of the event is existentially presupposed).

I propose that the pivot constituent is the VP and that it supplies an entity correlate of a property, in analogy to what McNally (1998, 2011) advocates for ordinary existential sentences. Not any property is possible, however. As is well-known, the VP of a “completed ipf“ cannot describe a unique event (13),(14). This prescription of uniqueness naturally follows if we assume that the pivot expresses a property that corresponds to an event kind. Recall that, according to Chierchia (1998:348), the mapping from a property to a kind is possible if „we can impute to them [=the entities that have the respective property] a sufficiently regular behavior“. This rules out properties that describe only one entity.

Wrt consumption verbs in “completed ipfs“, the proposed analysis predicts that the thematic argument must not be consumed in the run of the event. Otherwise the VP would describe a unique event. It is to the satisfaction of this constraint that the bare singulars in (3) – (5) and (9) get a non-specific reading. In (12), where there are no consumption verbs, a specific/definite
interpretation of the bare singular is possible without reservation. The proposal furthermore predicts institutionalization effects because “what counts as a kind is not set by grammar, but by the shared knowledge of a community of speakers” (Chierchia 1998:348). Note that if we modify (5a) such that the singular nominal forms a kind term (Arsenijević et al., to appear), the number neutral interpretation is available again. This is because now, as the object-refering reading of the nominal is unlikely, the interpreter is ready to accommodate an event kind 'eating a Spanish cockroach'.

(1)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ \{ \ \text{obeda/} \ \text{poobedal}\}.\]
I already dined.ipfv dined.pfv
'I had already dinner.'

(2)  
\[Ty \ \{ ????el / s''el \} \ \text{dve konfety, kotorye le\`zali na stole?}\]
you ate.ipfv ate.pfv 2 candies.acc which lied.imp on table
'Did you eat the two candies, which were lying on the table?' [Vogeleer,s. Grunn 2004]

(3)  
(a)  
\[Ja \ delal \ \text{remont v kvartire}.\]
I did.ipfv renovation.acc in room
'I have performed a renovation in the apartment'

(b)  
\[Ja \ sdelal \ \text{remont v kvartire}.\]
I did.pfv renovation.acc in room
'I have performed the renovation in the apartment' [after Mehlig 2001]

(4)  
(a)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ \text{el krevetu}.\]
I already ate.ipfv shrimp
'I have already eaten (a) shrimp.' (one or more)

(b)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ s''el krevetu.\]
I already ate.pfv shrimp
'I have already eaten the/a shrimp.' (only one)

(5)  
(a)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ \text{el tarakana}.\]
I already ate.ipfv cockroach
'I have already eaten a cockroach.' (only one)

(b)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ s''el tarakana.\]
I already ate.pfv cockroach
'I have already eaten the/a cockroach.' (only one)

(6)  
(a)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ \text{el krevetki}.\]
I already ate.ipfv shrimps
'I have already eaten shrimps.' (one or more (??))

(b)  
\[Ja \ u\`ze \ s''el krevetki.\]
I already ate.pfv shrimps
'I have already eaten the shrimps.' (more than one)

(7)  
\[Ja \ e\`s\`e \ \{ \ \text{el / s''el} \} \ \text{tarakanov}.\]
I still not ate.ipfv ate.pfv cockroaches
("There are cockroaches such that I did not eat them yet.")
'It is not yet the case that I ate cockroaches.'

(8)  
\[Ja \ e\`s\`e \ \text{ne s''el tarakana}.\]
I still not ate.pfv cockroach
'There is a cockroach such that I did not eat it yet.'
("It is not yet the case that I ate any cockroach.")

(9)  
\[Ja \ e\`s\`e \ \text{ne el tarakana}.\]
I still not ate.ipfv cockroach
'There is a cockroach such that I did not eat it yet.'
'It is not yet the case that I ate any cockroach.'

(10)  
(a)  
\[Ja \ pojmal \ \text{odnogo tarakana \ i dvuch \ `zukov}.\]

I caught.pfv one cockroach and two beetles
Ja el tarakana.
I ate.pfv cockroach
??I have caught a cockroach and two beetles. I have eaten the cockroach.'
(b) Ja pojmal odnogo tarakana i dvuch žukov.
I caught.pfv one cockroach and two beetles
Ja s’el tarakana.
I ate.pfv cockroach
'I have caught a cockroach and two beetles. I have eaten the cockroach.'
(11) (a) *Ja uže el tarakana. A teper’ me ego žalko.
I already ate.pfv cockroach but now me him sorry
'I have already eaten a cockroach. Now I am sorry for him.'
(b) Ja uže s’el tarakana. A teper’ me ego žalko.
I already ate.pfv cockroach but now me him sorry
'I have already eaten the cockroach. Now I am sorry for him.'
(12) (a) Začem ty moes’ pol? Maša tol’ko čto myla pol.
Why you clean.prs.ipfv floor M. just clean.ipfv floor
'Why are you cleaning the floor. Masha has just cleaned it.' [Padučeva 1996]
(b) Ėtot mal’čik, prestavljaes’, pobeždal Kasparova.
this boy imagine! beat.ipfv K. Kasparov
'This boy has beaten Kasparov. Imagine!'
(13) V 1492 godu Kolumb {*otkryval / otkryl} Ameriku.
In 1492 K. discovered.ipfv discovered.pfv A.
'In 1492, Columbus discovered America.'
(14) Do Kolumb na primer ešče Eriksson otkryval Ameriku.
Before K. for instance also E. discovered.ipfv A.
'Before Columbus, also Eriksson discovered America.' [after Mehlig 2001]
(15) Ja uže el ispanskogo tarakana.
I already ate.pfv Spanish cockroach
'I have already eaten a Spanish cockroach.' (one or more)

References