

# Negative Concord in Russian

## An Overview

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**Abstract** In this article I will describe the general properties of Negative Concord in Russian, which is a strict Negative Concord language, where all negative indefinites must co-occur with sentential negation. However, there are several cases where the negation marker can be absent (like in fragment answers) or can appear in a non-standard position (like at the left of an embedded infinitival). I will take into consideration all these specific cases described by the literature on the negation system of Russian and analyse them according to current approaches to Negative Concord.

**Keywords** Negation. Russian. Slavonic. Negative Concord. Negative indefinites.

**Sommario** 1 Introduction. – 2 Fragment Answers. – 3 Freestanding n-words. – 4 The Boundaries of Negative Concord. – 5 On the History of Negative Concord in Russian. – 6 Concluding Remarks.

## 1 Introduction

According to the typology of Negative Concord introduced by den Besten (1986) and Giannakidou (1998; 2000), Modern Russian is a strict Negative Concord language. Negative indefinite expressions, e.g. bare pronouns (*nikto* ‘nobody’, *ničto* ‘nothing’) or complex constituents introduced by *ni* ‘not even’, and negative adverbs, like *nikogda* ‘never’, are always accompanied by the preverbal negation marker *ne* irrespectively of their position inside the clause. Multiple negative items in the same clause do not trigger a *double negation* (i.e. positive) interpretation. All the examples in (1) without *ne* are ungrammatical:



1	a.	Nikto nobody	* <i>(ne)</i> not	prišel. came				
	a'.	* <i>(Ne)</i> not	prišel came	nikto. nobody				
		'Nobody came.'						
	b.	Menja me.ACC.	* <i>(ne)</i> not	pozdravil greeted	ni not-even	odin one	drug. friend	
	b'.	Ni not-even	odin one	drug friend	menja me.ACC.	* <i>(ne)</i> not	pozdravil. greeted	
		'Not even one friend greeted me.'						
	c.	On he	nikogda never	* <i>(ne)</i> not	kuril. smoked			
		'He never smoked.'						

In this paper I illustrate some peculiarities of the Russian Negative Concord system and discuss them in the light of current analyses of Negative Concord.

The presence of multiple negative items in the same clause is a phenomenon with some consequences for both the syntax and the semantics of negation. Following Zeijlstra (2016) it is possible to individuate two main groups of analyses of Negative Concord systems. Some, like Haegeman and Zanuttini (1996), De Swart and Sag (2002), Watanabe (2004) and others, assume that all *n*-words, i.e. negative indefinites and adverbs, always introduce a semantic negation (i.e. they are negative quantifiers) and when multiple *n*-words are present some kind of absorption mechanism produces a unique sentential negation. The main problem of similar approaches is that they do not predict why in languages like Russian the preverbal negation must always be present (cf. Horn's 1989 *NegFirst* criterion). The other type of explanations (e.g. Ladusaw 1993; Giannakidou 2000; Zeijlstra 2004; Haegeman, Lohndal 2010) is based on the assumption that *n*-words are negative polarity items (NPIs) or a special type of NPIs: they are similar to English *any*-terms, which have to be licensed by a negative operator and do not convey a negative interpretation *per se*. The main problem for this approach is to explain the difference between strict Negative Concord languages like Russian and non-strict Negative Concord languages, like Italian, where preverbal *n*-words are not accompanied by preverbal negation:

2	a.	Nessuno nobody	(* <i>non</i> ) not	è is	venuto. come
	b.	* <i>(Non)</i> è not is	venuto come	nessuno. nobody	
		'Nobody came'.			

In what follows I examine the properties of Russian Negative Concord. In section 2 I present fragment answers with n-words. In section 3 I discuss some other cases where n-words appear without the preverbal negative marker. In section 4 I present some cases where n-words seem to be licensed by a lower negation. In section 5 I briefly present the diachronic development of Negative Concord in Russian.

## 2 Fragment Answers

An important property of Russian n-words is that they can appear in isolation in fragment answers and convey negative semantics:

- 3 a. Kto xodil za xlebom? Nikto  
who went for bread nobody  
'Who went out to buy the bread? Nobody'
- b. Kto tebja pozdravil? Ni odin drug  
who you greeted not-even one friend  
'Who greeted you? Not even one friend'
- c. Kuda on xodil? Nikuda  
where he went nowhere  
'Where did he go? Nowhere'

This is a context where these items encode negation without the preverbal negative marker *ne*. Pereltsvaig (2004) has proposed that these cases are to be analyzed as elliptical constructions, where the preverbal negation is elided with the verb. If Russian n-words are negative quantifiers, these data do not need a specific account, since it is assumed that they are inherently negative. Recall, however, that in standard non elided clauses the sentential negation is mandatory with all these items. On the other hand, approaches assuming that n-words are NPIs need to postulate that either the deleted negation or an abstract negative marker can license the n-word.

Fălăuș and Nicolae (2016) present an interesting property of n-words in strict Negative Concord languages (they mainly discuss Romanian data, but Russian behaves in a similar way). When isolated n-words are used as answers to negative questions, they are ambiguous between a Negative Concord and a double negation reading:

- 4 a. Kto ne prišel? Nikto... ty pervyj. NC reading  
who not came nobody... you first  
'Who did not come? Nobody... you are the first'
- b. Kto ne prišel? Nikto... vse zdes'. DN reading

who not came nobody... all here  
'Who did not come? Nobody... everyone is here'

This is unexpected since the double negation reading is not possible in the non-elided version of the answer. Fălăuș and Nicolae (2016) accept the hypothesis that n-words are a special type of NPIs, able to license a covert negation (CN) operator, as a last resort strategy, when the vP is not spelled out. The double negation reading corresponds to a structure where the n-word has moved to a higher position like focus, where it is c-commanded by the covert negation operator and the sentential negation (SN) is still present underlyingly:

5 [CN [n-word [SN [...]]]]

Notice however that this explanation is adequate for Romanian or Greek, where a double negation reading is marginally possible with multiple n-words<sup>1</sup>, while in Russian there is not an overt version of the structure in (5).<sup>2</sup> A possible alternative is to assume that in the double negation case there is a different type of covert negation which has scope only over the n-word and not over the whole clause. My proposal to analyze these cases assumes that the fragment answer, besides the elided part, can have a Theme/Topic projection containing a silent version of the stimulus question. The negation inside the

**1** Fălăuș and Nicolae (2016) point out that in some NC languages a Double Negation reading is possible in negative spreading contexts:

(i) Nimeni nu a citit nimic.  
nobody not has read nothing

'Nobody has read anything' (NC)

or 'Nobody hasn't read anything' = 'Everybody read something' (DN).

The authors argue that, since this is possible only in negative spreading, i.e. when there are multiple n-words, one n-word is licensed by the sentential negation, but the other one requires the covert negation operator. Notice that this type of reading is not available in Russian.

**2** Interestingly, the ambiguity disappears if in the stimulus question there is a modal verb and the negation appears before the infinitival (Letuchiy 2017):

(i) a. Kto mog ob etom ne uznat'? Nikto  
who could about this not know.INF nobody

'Who could not know it? Nobody'

OK: Nobody could be ignorant of it.

#: It could be the case that nobody knew it.

Letuchiy (2017) discusses this example in relation to the non elided version in (ii), where the subject n-word seems to be licensed by the embedded negation (see also Grenoble 1992 and Minor 2013):

(ii) Nikto mog ob etom ne uznat'.  
nobody could about this not know

'It could be the case that nobody knew it'

I will come back to similar cases in section 4.

topic has scope over the n-word in focus position, there is no sentential negation inside the elided clause, and this configuration triggers the double negation reading (6b). A necessary ingredient of this analysis is the assumption that the negation in the silent topic is too embedded to enter in a Negative Concord relation with the n-word. In the case of the Negative Concord reading, there is no silent topic or it does not contain a negative operator, and the elided part (here AspectP) contains the sentential negation (6a):

- 6 a. [TenseP nikto [AspP ~~ne~~ prišel]] NC  
 b. [TopicP Kto ~~ne~~ prišel? [FocusP nikto [TenseP [AspP prišel]]] DN

The advantage of a similar solution is that it does not require to postulate that n-words are semantically ambiguous between negative quantifiers and NPIs. Notice also that this account does not require a biclausal structure, which can normally contain a double negation configuration:

- 7 [Nepravda [CP čto Vanja ne prišel]]  
 not-truth that Vanja not came  
 'It is not true that Vanja did not come' (= Vanja came)

### 3 Freestanding n-words

Fitzgibbons (2008) has described two other environments where n-words can appear without the preverbal negative marker in Russian. The first type of construction involves the presence of a small clause with a copula or a verb like *sčitat'* 'to consider':

- 8 a. Kto byl ničem, tot stanet vsem  
 who was nothing that-person will-become everything  
 'Those who were nothing will become everything.'  
 b. Ja sčitaju tvoego brata nikem.  
 I consider your brother nobody  
 'I consider your brother a nobody.'  
 (Fitzgibbons 2008, 53)

The second type involves n-words inside PPs, like in (9):

- 9 Ty isčez v nikuda.  
 you disappeared into nowhere

'You disappeared into nowhere.'  
(Fitzgibbons 2008, 53)

An interesting observation made by Fitzgibbons is that these constructions can have also a double negation reading if there is another negative item, like the sentential negation. She provides the following example:

- 10 Vanja ne sčital Iru nikem  
 Vanja not considered Ira nobody  
 DN: 'Vanja did not consider Ira a nobody.' (he considered her a worthy person)  
 NC: 'Vanja did not consider Ira anybody.' (i.e. had no opinion of her)  
 (Fitzgibbons 2008, 55)

The analysis proposed by Fitzgibbons (2008) for these cases is similar to the analyses of elided structures I have discussed in the previous section, as she proposes a phonologically null negative head  $\emptyset_{\text{NEG}}$  present in small clauses and PPs, different from the sentential negation in TenseP or AspectP and able to enter in double negation configurations with n-words. The locus of  $\emptyset_{\text{NEG}}$  is a Polarity projection optionally present above the PredicateP of small clauses and PPs. Under this view the ambiguity of (10) corresponds to the following two different structures. In (11a) there is only the higher Polarity projection containing the whole clause, while in (11b) there is also the lower one, which contains only the small clause.

- (11) a. NC:  $[_{\text{PolarityP}} \text{nikem ne sčital Iru}_i [_{\text{PredicateP}} \text{t}_i [_{\text{Predicate}} [_{\text{NP/AP}} \text{nikem}]]]]$   
 b. DN:  $[_{\text{PolarityP}} \text{ne sčital Iru}_i [_{\text{PolarityP}} \text{nikem } \emptyset_{\text{NEG}} [_{\text{PredicateP}} \text{t}_i [_{\text{Predicate}} [_{\text{NP/AP}} \text{nikem}]]]]]$

Notice that in this approach the licensing of embedded n-words is computed assuming their covert movement to either the projection containing *ne* or the one containing  $\emptyset_{\text{NEG}}$ . This movement is based on the Agreement theory proposed by Bošković (2007), according to which the uninterpretable feature is carried by the moving element. What is relevant for the general discussion about Negative Concord is that under this view small clauses can be of two types. In the first type there is no internal polarity and n-words are computed together with the matrix negation, while in the second type there is an internal polarity which can license n-words (and produces a double negation reading when combined with a matrix negation).

According to Fitzgibbons (2008) the same is true also for PPs, since the following example is ambiguous:

- (12) Dokladčik ne obraščaeťsja ni k komu.  
speaker not addresses NEG to who.DAT.  
NC: 'The speaker does not address anybody' (He just likes to listen to his own voice)  
DN: 'The speaker does not direct his talk to nobody' (The thing is, he is almost blind  
and is not sure where the audience is)  
(Fitzgibbons 2008, 57)

A consequence of this analysis is to admit that PPs can have an independent polarity projection and are similar to clauses in this respect. The presence of a separate projection for the encoding of polarity above PPs could be related to the splitting, triggered by the preposition, of the negative morpheme *ni-* and the *wh* component of the negative indefinite (Harves 1998), a phenomenon attested in Old Church Slavonic and other Slavic languages (East Slavonic and partially South Slavonic):

- (13) i ni o komiže ne rodiši  
and NEG about who.LOC not care.PRES.2SG  
'and you do not care about anyone' (ocs) (*Codex Marianus*, Matt. 22:16)  
(Willis 2013, 378)

#### 4 The Boundaries of Negative Concord

In this section I present some constructions where an *n*-word appears to be licensed by a negation lower than Tense/Aspect, i.e. lower than the main finite verb. Letuchiy (2017) has labeled these constructions non-standard Negative Concord cases. There are three main types: adjectival constructions, constructions with *moč* 'can' and other subject control verbs, and constructions with object control verbs. The two latter types are called inter-clausal Negative Concord constructions by Kholodilova (2015).

Adjectival constructions have a semi-copular verb as matrix predicate (e.g. *okazat'sja* 'turn out to be') and an adjective in the short form:

- (14) Nikto iz nas okazalsja ne nužen.  
nobody from us turned out not necessary  
'Nobody of us turned out to be necessary.'

According to Letuchiy (2017) these are cases of raising, i.e. the *n*-word appears in the matrix portion but is interpreted in the small clause, where the Negative Concord configuration is licensed. In oth-

er words, (14) is a marked version of the more common (15) with the adjective in the full form:

- (15) Nikto iz nas ne okazalsja nužnym  
nobody from us not turned out necessary

Since adjectival constructions involve copular predicates, I propose to analyze them according to Fitzgibbons' (2008) idea about polarity in the structure of small clauses, assuming that in similar cases the negative marker *ne* preceding the adjective overtly realizes the small clause polarity. In (16) I represent the structure of (14) with movement of *nikto* to the matrix subject position.

- (16) [<sub>TP</sub> [*nikto iz nas okazalsja*]<sub>[PolarityP</sub> *ne* [<sub>PredicateP</sub> *nikto nužen* ]]]

Letuchiy (2017) also points out that an example like (17) is ambiguous. This means that the elided part of the fragment answer can correspond to a full negated Tense/AspectP or just to the small clause:

- (17) Kto okazalsja ne gotov? Nikto.  
who turned.out not ready nobody  
(i) 'Nobody was not ready.' (from *Nikto ne okazalsja ne gotov.*)  
(ii) 'Nobody was ready.' (from *Nikto okazalsja ne gotov.*)

The two other types of non-standard Negative Concord involve a matrix control verb and an embedded non-finite verb form. They can be classified according to the control type of the matrix verb. In (18) I provide two examples with a subject control verb (*starat'sja* 'to try') and on object control verb (*prosit'* 'to ask'):

- (18) a. Nikto staralsja ob etom ne  
nobody tried about this not  
'Everyone tried not to think of it'  
(from Kholodilova 2015)  
b. Ja nikogo prosil tuda ne xodit'  
I. nobody asked there not go  
'I asked that nobody goes there' (lit. 'I asked nobody to go there')  
(Letuchiy 2017, slightly modified from Minor 2013)

These cases are problematic since in general n-words require clause-mate negation, and a negation in an embedded finite clause cannot license an n-word in the matrix clause:



- (19) \*Učitel' skazal nikomu čtoby sjuda ne zaxodil  
teacher told nobody that here not enter  
'The teacher asked that nobody enters here'  
(from Minor 2013)

There are different possible analyses to account for these constructions (even if it should be pointed out that there is variation regarding their acceptability by speakers). The first possibility is to assume n-word raising as in adjectival constructions. However, Neg-raising is not normally blocked with embedded finite verbs, as the contextual equivalence of the following examples shows:

- (20) a. Ne dumaju čto on prišel  
not think that he came  
'I don't think that he came'  
b. Dumaju čto on ne prišel  
think that he not come  
'I think that he did not come'

Kholodilova (2015) also points out that the matrix verbs allowing this type of non-standard Negative Concord are different from those found in typical Neg-raising cases (for instance *obeščat'* 'to promise' displays non-standard Negative Concord but not Neg-raising).

A second possibility is to assume that these constructions are in fact monoclausal and the matrix verb is a type of semi-auxiliary verb. According to this view these cases are instances of syntactic restructuring into a single clause or grammaticalization of the matrix verb. Obviously, this analysis applies only to the subject control type. Some evidence in favor of this approach is provided by the fact that the acceptability of the clause significantly degrades if the matrix verb is associated with an intentional energy consuming activity or if there is another overt argument of the matrix verb.

Kholodilova (2015) proposes a third possibility, namely that the matrix verb undergoes pragmatic bleaching (Partee et al. 2011). In other words, the core semantics of the verb does not change, but it forms a *latu sensu* modal frame, which does not influence the proposition. In this account, Negative Concord is computed only semantically and the morphosyntactic component is not relevant. However, as pointed out by Letuchiy (2017), a purely semantic approach cannot explain why in elliptical contexts only the interpretation corresponding to the standard Negative Concord configuration is possible.

- (21) Kto staralsja etogo ne delat'? Nikto  
 who tried this not do nobody  
 'Who tried not to do that? Nobody'  
 (i) 'Nobody tried not to do it'  
 (ii) # 'Everybody tried not to do it'

In (21) the answer *nikto* can be interpreted only as corresponding to *nikto ne staralsja etogo ne delat'*, with the n-word licensed by the negation on the elided matrix verb (or a covert negative operator as discussed in section 2) and triggering a double negation interpretation with the elided negated infinitive.

For this reason I propose here a syntactic account based on a strong version of the theory of restructuring, namely the cartographic account developed by Cinque (2006). Under this approach, the syntactic transparency of some structures involving a matrix verb and an infinitival form (like for instance the climbing of object clitics in Romance) is observed precisely because the whole structure is monoclausal and the matrix verb realizes one of the functional heads of the articulated and hierarchical clause structure. Intuitively, the matrix verb is functionally equivalent to an adverb modifying the embedded lexical verb. For instance the verb *starat'sja* 'to try' in cases like (18a) encodes Conative aspect (Cinque 2006, 47n4):

- (22) [<sub>TP</sub> Nikto [<sub>ConAspP</sub> staralsja [<sub>vP</sub> [ob etom ne vspominat']]]]

In (22) I assume for simplicity that the constituent [ob etom ne vspominat'] corresponds to the vP. A similar analysis requires to postulate that *ne* can surface in the lexical layer of the clause structure (an assumption in line with the idea that also small clauses have an internal polarity). This is not strange since a sentence with a modal verb can have a 'constituent negation' *ne* under a sentential *ne*, with a double negation interpretation:

- (23) On ne mog ne znat'  
 he not could not know  
 'It is impossible that he did know that'

A potential problem is the fact that the inter-clausal Negative Concord is possible also with some object control verbs (like *prosit'* 'to ask'). However, Cinque (2006, 24-5) discusses some cases of apparent object control verbs allowing clitic climbing in Romance. The solution he proposes is based on the idea (first discussed by Kayne 1989) that these cases are a special type of causative constructions. In my opinion, a similar analysis can be extended to Russian cases

like (18b): here the n-word corresponds to the causee and is licensed at the vP level.

(24) [<sub>TP</sub> Ja [<sub>CAUSP</sub> nikogo prosil [<sub>vP</sub> [tuda ~~nikogo~~ ne xodit']]]]

In general, all the constructions where the licensing negation surfaces with an embedded adjective or infinitive can be considered as monoclausal and the generalization that Negative Concord is clause-bound is not contradicted. Interestingly, what all these phenomena show is that the item licensing Negative Concord words does not have to be the sentential negation marker on the finite verb in TenseP/AspectP.

All the phenomena discussed so far can be captured by the two following generalizations:

- (25) Russian Negative Concord
- a. Negative Concord is clause-bound
  - b. N-words are licensed by a negated verb form or small clause

## 5 On the History of Negative Concord in Russian

In this section I provide a brief description of the diachronic development of Negative Concord in Russian. The negative cycle in Russian has been described and analyzed by Tsurka (2009) and Willis (2013). All Slavic languages display a negation derived from the inherited preverbal negative marker \**ne*. This item usually precedes the inflected verb, but in some languages (e.g. Slovak) it appears before the participle and not before the auxiliary in complex past forms. Interestingly, Old East Slavonic had the same pattern:

- (26) a knjazju esme zla ne stvorili nikotorago že  
 and prince.DAT. be.PRES.1PL evil not done none PRT  
 ‘...and we have done no harm at all to the prince’  
 (OES) (*Novgorodskaja pervaja letopis’*, from Willis 2013, 346)

This suggests that *ne* is a verb prefix, merged in the low portion of the clause structure (AspP or even vP).

Strict Negative Concord is clearly an innovation in Slavonic. Tsurka (2009) describes the following stages for Russian:

- a) In Early Russian of the 11th and 12th centuries n-words appearing in the preverbal space could encode negation without the preverbal marker *ne*, as in (27a), even if there are cases where it is present (27b):



can be split in their two components (*ni-* plus the *wh* restrictor) with prepositions, which is evidence of their origin as two separate words, with *ni-* bearing a [Neg] feature (Willis 2013). The univerbation of the two parts clearly correlates with the emergence of the optional presence of *ne* before the verb when the n-word is preverbal (cf. also Brown 1999; 2003). My proposal to explain this configuration is to assume a hierarchy of features, similar to Relativized Minimality effects (Rizzi 1990 and subsequent work): with univerbation the [Neg] feature on n-words is not sufficiently salient to signal the presence of a negation operator and *ne-*, i.e. negative morphology, must be present on Tense/AspectP or vP as a last resort strategy. In other words, if the n-word checks broadly quantificational features like [Focus] or [Existential], it cannot make visible the covert/LF negative operator at the interfaces. See Garzonio (2019) for this type of analysis applied to optional Negative Concord systems.

## 6 Concluding Remarks

In this article I have discussed some issues about Russian Negative Concord. While the general system is a strict Negative Concord one, some recent contributions have shown that it has some interesting peculiarities. In general, while it is true that Negative Concord is clause-bound, in the sense that overt negative items in different clauses result in double negation interpretations, the obligatory negative morpheme *ne* can appear in different structural positions. This means that an analysis of Negative Concord in terms of a simple Agree operation should be revised, as one should expect *ne* to appear in all the potential positions where it can surface (see also Haegeman and Lohndal 2010). A possible solution is to assume that a negated verb or small clause is a kind of last resort strategy when n-words cannot be licensed, i.e. agree with the negative operator. An analysis of this type could explain systems where Negative Concord is not based on the position of the n-word, but on different types of n-words (e.g. Hungarian, cf. Szabolcsi 2018).

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