

Russian shortenings in *-ka*: the case for constructions

The shortening of lexemes is a widely known and variegated phenomenon that is attested in many languages. Booij (2007:20-21), for instance, identifies four main types of what he calls “word creation” or “word manufacturing”: a) blends (also called portmanteau words) (*brunch* < *breakfast+lunch*); b) acronyms (*NATO* < *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*); c) alphabetisms (*SMS* < *Short Message Service*); d) and clipping (*mike* < *microphone*), or truncation, including hypocoristics (*Elizabeth* < *Liz*). Besides, he adds the shortening of compounds (*electronic mail* < *e-mail*) and ellipsis (Dutch *VU-Ziekenhuis* < *VU* ‘Free University [VU=Vrije Universiteit] Hospital’).

Often, shortening mechanisms are regarded as atypical word formation processes, due to a number of reasons. First of all, they make use of “reduction for the creation of new words, unlike normal morphology” (Booij 2007:21). Secondly, they generally give rise to new expressions that cannot be properly considered as new words or lexemes, but as stylistic variants of already existing words (Thornton 2004:557-558). Thirdly, the outputs of shortening mechanisms are very often completely opaque, since there is nothing in their form that can suggest something about their semantics, contrary to most synchronic word formation mechanisms.

This notwithstanding, shortening mechanisms are rather active in a variety of languages. Moreover, they are a privileged field of investigation, since they pose intriguing theoretical problems, among which:

- i. How can we represent formally these shortening mechanisms?
- ii. How can we account for the semantic relation that holds between the shortened lexeme and its base?
- iii. Which are the motivations behind the formation of shortened lexemes?

We would like to contribute to the discussion on this (often neglected) topic by presenting a case-study from Russian, which poses interesting specific questions in addition to the ones just mentioned, and which in our view might ultimately improve our understanding of shortening in general. Russian has a wide range of shortening mechanisms, however here we focus on a specific type, exemplified in (1).

- (1) a. визитка *vizitka* ‘visiting card’
b. маршрутка *maršrutka* ‘minibus, fixed route taxi’
c. газировка *gazirovka* ‘sparkling water’

What is special about the lexemes in (1) is that they are formed by shortening phrases of the Adj+N type, rather than single words, as illustrated in (2). However, the Adj+N combinations in (2a'-c') are not canonical Adj+N phrases, but so-called “lexical phrases” (Booij 2009) or “phrasal lexemes” (Masini 2009), namely constructions that have a phrasal structure, but a lexical nature.¹ The shortened lexemes in (2a-c) are therefore formed via three operations (cf., among others, Hooker 1999): a) ellipsis of the head noun (*vizitnaja kartočka* > *vizitnaja*); b) truncation of the adjective (e.g. *vizitnaja* > *vizit*); c) suffixation with *-ka* (*vizitka*).

- (2) a. визитка *vizitka* < a'. визитная карточка *vizitnaja kartočka* (lit. visiting card)
b. маршрутка *maršrutka* < b'. маршрутное такси *maršrutnoe taksi* (lit. route_{ADJ} taxi)
c. газировка *gazirovka* < c'. газированная вода *gazirovannaja voda* (lit. gas_{ADJ} water)

In the full paper we explore in greater detail the formal and semantic properties of these truncated lexemes in *-ka*. Moreover, using the tools of Construction Morphology (Booij 2010) and Construction Grammar in general (e.g. Goldberg 1995), we propose an analysis of these shortened lexemes as morphological constructions. The analysis is intended as a possible answer to problems (i) and (ii) above, but it might shed some light on problem (iii) as well.

¹ The phenomenon was already noticed by Vinogradov (1947), although it was obviously described in other terms. Cf. Benigni & Masini (2010) for an overview of phrasal nouns in Russian.

References

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