

***Pri vsjom X-e*: a Corpus Study of a Russian Syntactic Phraseme**

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Abstract

The paper presents a corpus study of the concessive syntactic phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* ‘with all X’ in Russian. The study demonstrates (a) a strong correlation between the semantics of the phraseme and its other linguistic properties; (b) pragmatic properties that are typical of syntactic phrasemes in general; (c) language-specific phraseological status. In particular, the combination of concession and intensification in its meaning explains its status as a negative polarity item; the fact that it refers to properties of objects explains its co-referential requirements. Pragmatically, like many other syntactic phrasemes, *pri vsjom X-e* entails a certain structured worldview. Its linguistic properties are not carried across languages: its closest English counterpart, the construction *with all X* does not manifest any of its properties. This proves that the status of a syntactic phraseme and all its linguistic consequences in one language cannot be predicted on the basis of the data from another language, and thus ought to be established on an individual basis.

Keywords

Semantics, syntax, pragmatics, syntactic phraseme, gradable property, negative polarity, anaphor, parenthesis, scalarity, entailment.

1 Introduction

The paper presents a corpus study of the Russian syntactic phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* which has concessive meaning. Concessive semantics is expressed in Russian by a variety of grammatical and lexical means (conjunctions – *xotja* ‘although’, prepositions – *nesmotrja na* ‘despite’, particles – *tem ne menee* ‘nevertheless’, verbs – *ustupat* ‘to concede’, etc.), as well as by means situated “between lexicon and syntax”, namely, syntactic phrasemes, or as they are sometimes called, syntactic phrasemes. The approach to syntactic phrasemes in this paper is based on the treatment of this phenomenon in Meaning-Text theory (Mel’čuk 1995, Iordanskaja & Mel’čuk 2007, Iomdin 2010), as well as in Construction Grammar (Fillmore et al. 1988). For the purposes of the present study, the main properties characterizing a syntactic construction as an phraseme are its non-compositionality, fixedness of its function component parts, and limited variability of its content component parts, with lexical constraints on the filling of the variables. The paper considers the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic properties

of *pri vsjom X-e* construction, establishes its phraseological status in contrast with its non-phraseological English counterpart *with all X*, postulates connections between its semantics and syntax, and formulates certain pragmatic properties typical of different syntactic phrasemes. Corpus approach¹ facilitates cross-linguistic comparison, as well as provides statistic foundation for the suggested analysis.

2 Semantics

First of all, the phraseological status of the Russian construction *pri vsjom X-e* needs to be established. The main criterion for a syntactic phraseme is its non-compositionality (Fillmore et al. 1988). However, according to (Iomdin 2010: 144), “non-standard constructions” have to satisfy an additional requirement in order to qualify for “syntactic phrasemes”, namely, lexical constraints. Either the construction has to contain inflexible lexical elements, that are more than a single function word, or there have to be semantic constraints on the filling of free variables. The phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* satisfies all the conditions. It is non-compositional, i.e. its meaning is not the sum of the meanings of *pri* ‘with’ construction, *ves* ‘all’ quantifier and the noun; two of its elements are lexically bound (*pri* and *ves*’); the variable noun X is restricted to a certain semantic set.

2.1 Non-compositionality

The free construction with the preposition *pri* can have multiple meanings. In the meaning closest to that of the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e*, the PP with *pri* expresses either a causal or a concessive connection with the predication of the main clause:

- (1) *Pri takom bol’som assortimente odeždy vybrat’ platj’e budet netrudno*
‘With such a large clothes collection, it will be easy to choose a dress’ [causal connection]
- (2) *Pri takom bol’som assortimente odeždy ej ne udalos’ vybrat’ platj’e*
‘With such a large clothes collection, she was unable to choose a dress’ [concessive connection]

The causal vs. concessive interpretation of *pri X-e* phrases is dependent entirely on the context. It would be natural to expect the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* ‘with all X’ to possess a similar semantic ambivalence, even more so because it appears semantically very close to the intensifier construction *pri takom X-e* ‘with such X’. However, that is not the case, as the construction *pri vsjom X-e* has only concessive interpretations. Consider the following sentences, where (3) with concessive interpretation is grammatical, but (4) with causal interpretation is not:

- (3) *Pri vsej svoix talantax, on ne smog sdelat’ karjeru*
‘With all his talents, he failed to make a career’

¹ The study avails itself of the data from the Russian National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American.

- (4) **Pri vsej svoix talantax, on sdelał blestjaščuju karjeru*
'With all his talents, he made a brilliant career'

All instances of parenthetical *pri vsjom X-e* construction in the Russian National Corpus have concessive interpretation:

- (5) *Pri vsjom staranii rukovoditelej Instituta eksperimental'naja baza stareet*
(S.Alekseev)
'With all efforts of-heads of-institute the experimental base ages'
'For all the efforts of the Institute leaders, the experimental base is growing obsolete'
'Despite all my compassion to the martyrs, their tragedy hasn't become my own pain'
- (6) *Bannikov pri vsej sile, xitrosti, iskušennosti v intrigax imel slabost'* (V.Valeeva)
'Bannikov with all strength, cunning, sophistication in intrigues had a weakness'
'For all his strength, cunning and experience in plotting, Bannikov had a weakness'

Its exclusively concessive meaning confirms the status of *pri vsjom X-e* as a non-compositional item, since, as demonstrated above, its closest non-phraseological correlate, emphatic construction *pri takom X-e* possesses two equally probable interpretations.

In this respect, the Russian construction *pri vsjom X-e* is different from its English counterpart *with all X*, which equally freely allows both causal and concessive interpretations; consider the following examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American:

Causal:

- (7) *With all these options, it won't be hard to find the perfect pair of jeans*
(8) *With all this information, you can soon learn to visualize mountains and areas*

Concessive:

- (9) *Uncle Cy with all his flaws was the closest thing he had to a father*
(10) *With all this money, they never seem to clean the place*

2.2 Negative Polarity

One more distinction of *pri vsjom X-e* construction which argues its non-compositionality and its phraseological status, is its negative polarity. Though by no means a classical negative polarity item, *pri vsjom X-e* tends to occur in explicitly or at least implicitly negative sentences:

- (11) *Počemu, tovarišči, my, pri vsjom našem veličii, ničego takogo ne proizvodim?* (V. Aksjonov)

'Why, comrades, we, with all our greatness, do not produce anything like that' [negative element 'not']

- (12) *Molodye vrad li potjanutsja tuda, gde nevozmožno, pri vsej slave, obespečit' sobstvennuju starost'* (N. Golovanova)

‘Young people are unlikely to relocate to places where it is impossible, with all the fame, to provide for one’s old age’ [negative elements – ‘unlikely’, ‘impossible’]

(13) *Nikolaj Trofimovič pri vsjom dobrom otnošenii ko mne i k kartine otkazalsja vystavljat’ na premiju* (E.Rjazanov)

‘Nikolaj Trofimovič with all his good attitude to me and to my movie refused to nominate it for an award [negative element ‘refused’]

As these examples demonstrate, the main clause is likely to contain negative elements, such as ‘not’, ‘difficult’, ‘impossible’, ‘unlikely’ and the like.

The English counterpart of *pri vsjom X-e*, the construction *with all X*, is not a negative polarity item:

(14) *With all this help, we soon finished the work* [causal interpretation, no negation]

2.3 Gradable properties

Another property of the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* which sets it apart from the free construction *pri X-e* and its English counterpart *with all X* is the lexical constraint on X. Lexical constraints of this phraseme require the noun X to denote a **gradable property** (such as ‘elegance’, ‘predictability’, ‘beauty’, ‘hatefulness’) or a **complex of properties** (such as ‘flaws’, ‘virtues’, ‘ambitions’, ‘difficulties’). The property X can be an attribute of an agent or a non-agent Y, who /which, in its turn, can have a property Z, perform an action Z or undergo an action Z:

Object Y has property X and property Z:

(15) *Pri vsej svoej odarjonnosti, on bezdel’nik*

‘With all his brightness, he is an idler’

(16) *Pri vsej svoej deševizne, eti mašiny očen’ nadjožny*

‘With all their cheapness, these cars are very reliable’

Object Y has property X and does action Z:

(17) *Pri vsej svoej odarjonnosti, on s trudom zakončil školu*

‘With all his brightness, he with difficulty graduated from school’

‘Bright though he is, he had hard time graduating’

Object Y has property X and undergoes action Z:

(18) *Pri vsej ego odarjonnosti, ego vygnali iz školy*

‘With all his brightness, him expelled from school’

‘Bright though he is, he was expelled from school’

The meaning of the phraseme can thus be formulated as follows:

(19) *pri vsjom X-e, Y is Z* ‘Object Y has property X to a high degree or object Y has many properties X; the speaker thinks that usually, if an object has property like X, it does not have property like Z, or cannot do action Z, or cannot undergo action Z; object Y has property Z, or does action Z, or undergoes action Z’

Again, the English construction *with all X* is different from *pri vsjom X-e* in that it does not require X to be a property:

(20) *With all these universities out there, he doesn't know where to apply*

This sentence would have been ungrammatical in Russian because the noun 'college' does not denote a property:

(21) **Pri vsej universitetax, on ne znaet, kuda postupat*
'With all universities, he doesn't know where to apply'

3 Syntax

Syntactically, the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* 'with all X' resembles, at first glance, an adjunct with a causal, temporal, concessive, or conditional meaning. In Russian, such adjuncts are typically formed with prepositions *pri* 'with, in case of' (as the phraseme under consideration), *s* 'with', and *v* 'in' (modifiers are italicized):

(22) *Pri takih nalogax melkij biznes ne vyderžit*
'With such taxes, small business won't survive'

(23) *S takoj figuroj ona mozet stat' model'ju*
'With such a figure, she can become a model'

(24) *V takix obstojatel'stvax trudno rassčityvat' na uspex*
'In such circumstances it is difficult to count on success'

3.1 Parenthesis

However, the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* manifests different syntactic properties than regular adjuncts with the preposition *pri*. First, it is necessarily parenthetical; cf. (25) but not (26):

(25) *Pri vsej podderške gosudarstva, ekonomike prihoditsja nelegko*
'With all the state support, the economy is going through difficult times'

(26) *Rabota vpolnena pri vsej podderške Fonda*
'The work has been carried out with all the support of the Fund'

3.2 Sentential position

Likewise, regular adjuncts *pri X-e* and the syntactic phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* have different sentential positions. Adjuncts tend to occupy either sentence-initial or sentence-final position,

with the latter prevailing² according to the general Russian tendency for SVO order in neutral sentences.

(27) *Pri vysokix temperaturax virus pogibajet*

‘At high temperatures the virus dies’

(28) *Virus pogibaet pri vysokix temperaturax*

‘The virus dies at high temperatures’

Only when *pri X* is topicalized, it can occur in midsentence (note the special contrastive prosody in this case):

(29) *Virus[↑] pri vysokix[↑] temperaturax pogibaet*

‘The virus at high temperatures dies’

‘At high temperatures, the virus dies’

The phraseme, on the contrary, as a typical parenthetical clause, favors midsentence and sentence-initial positions, and avoids sentence-final position³:

(30) *Pri vsjom ego bol’nom voobraženii, vrač on prekrasnyj*

(31) *Vrač on, pri vsjom ego bol’nom voobraženii, prekrasnyj*

(32) [?]*Vrač on prekrasnyj, pri vsjom ego bol’nom voobraženii*

3.3 Anaphor

Next, unlike regular adjuncts, *pri vsjom X-e* phraseme exhibits anaphoric relations between either the subject or the object argument of the noun X and the syntactic subject or the object of the main clause:

Subject-Subject coreference:

(33) *Pri vsej nedostatkax_i, ona čelovek_i nadjožnyj*

‘With all shortcomings_i she_i is a reliable person’

‘With all her_i shortcomings, she_i is a reliable person’

Object-Subject co-reference:

(34) *Pri vsej pomošč_i, Maša_i ne potjanet lečenje v častnoj klinike*

‘With all the help [to her_i], Masha_i won’t be able to afford treatment in a private clinic’

Sometimes word order plays a role in establishing the reference of *pri vsjom X-e* phraseme. Thus, the syntactic “co-reference with the subject” tendency can be semantically overridden in

² The Russian National Corpus registers approximately seven-fold numerical prevalence of sentence-final *pri*-adjuncts.

³ Sentence-final usages form only two percent of all the usages of *pri vsjom X-e* phraseme.

favor of co-reference with the object of the main clause in those cases where the clause with the phraseme immediately follows the object, helping to establish anaphoric relations:

(35) *Logiku antikrizisnyx mer_i pravitel'stva, pri vsej ix_i zaputannosti, rossijane v celom ponimajut*

‘Logic of anti-crisis measures_i of-government, with all their_i unclarity, Russians generally understand’

‘The Russians generally understand the logic of the government’s anti-crisis measures_i, despite their_i unclarity’

The co-reference requirement characterizes the Russian phraseme *pri vsjom X-e*, but not its English counterpart ‘with all X’:

(36) *With all this fine raw seafood, I was surprised to find that my favorite appetizer of all was the tender, emphatic skewers of beef heart* (Corpus of Contemporary American)

The syntactic co-reference requirement for the Russian *pri vsjom X-e* phraseme is a consequence of its semantics, namely, of the fact that it most frequently denotes a property of an object, which comes in contradiction with its other properties or its behavior.

4 Pragmatics

4.1 Scalarity and polarity

Pragmatically, the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e* entails a scale, where the object Y is characterized by the property X in a very high degree, and by a different property Z in a certain unspecified degree. Thus, it registers a certain level of abnormality in the object, according to the speaker’s opinion, since it is characterized by properties of different domains, or of different polarities, one of them in a high degree.

As concerns the co-existing properties themselves, *pri vsjom X-e* cannot describe objects possessing properties which are exact polar opposites, i.e. belong to the opposite poles of the same domain, such as *kind* and *wicked*, *mature* and *childish*, *sad* and *cheerful*. In this respect, it is different from the double conjunctions *i...i* ‘and...and’ or the adverb *v to že vremja* ‘at the same time’⁴:

(37) **Pri vsej svoej dobrote, on zloj*

‘With all his kindness, he is wicked’

(38) *On i dobryj, i zloj*

⁴ However, some polar opposites, such as **tall and short*, **wide and narrow*, **fat and slim* cannot be conjoined under any circumstances, because it contradicts one’s knowledge about the real world, where objects cannot simultaneously possess several observable characteristics that contradict one another.

‘He is both kind and wicked’

(39) *On dobryj i odnovenno zloj*

‘He is at the same time kind and wicked’

For obvious reasons, *pri vsjom X-e* cannot introduce properties of the same polarity and the same domain (which is possible for coordinative conjunction *i* ‘and’):

(40) *Pri vsej svoej nasmešlivosti, on ironičnyj*

‘With all his sarcasm, he is ironical’

(41) *On nasmešlivyj i ironičnyj*

‘He is sarcastic and ironical’

It can assign properties of the same polarity but different domains:

(42) *Pri vsjom svojom intellekte, on očen’ skromnyj čelovek*

‘With all his intellect, he is a very modest person’

However, *pri vsjom X-e* cannot ascribe properties that are totally unrelated (again, unlike coordinative conjunction *i* ‘and’):

(43) **Pri vsej svoej tolščine, on byl glupyj*

‘With all his bulk, he was stupid’

(44) *On byl tolstyj i glupyj*

‘He was fat and stupid’

Thus, *pri vsjom X-e* requires the two co-existing properties to belong either to different polarities of close, but not coinciding domains, or belong to the same polarity in different domains. Yet this is a semantic requirement that in each case has to be “endorsed” pragmatically, i.e. the co-existence of those properties in one object should be possible, but unusual.

4.2 Evaluation and anthropocentricity

One more pragmatic peculiarity of *pri vsjom X-e* is that even neutral properties tend to gain positive or negative flavor when used in this syntactic phraseme, and this positive or negative evaluation is the result of the anthropocentric perspective it entails. In this perspective, every property can be evaluated as either positive or negative, good or bad, convenient or inconvenient for people. Consider pragmatic awkwardness of sentences that resist evaluative interpretation:

(45)[?] *Pri vsej svoej beskonečnosti, Vselennaja ne bezgranična*

‘With all its infinity, the Universe is not limitless’

Consider also the following pair of sentences with the phraseme *pri vsjom X-e*, where the same noun X is impossible in an objective non-evaluative context and becomes appropriate in an “anthropocentric” evaluative context:

(46) ²*Pri vsej svoej uzosti eta jubka očen' korotkaja*

‘With all its narrowness, this skirt is very short’

‘Though the skirt is narrow, it is very short’

(47) *Pri vsej uzosti svoix vzgljadov on čelovek vpolne zdravomysljaščij*

‘With all the narrowness of his views, he is quite a sensible man’

‘Though he is narrow-minded, he is quite sensible’

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study proves that syntactic phrasemes are language-specific, which should be reflected in their lexicographic treatment, as the presence of a correlate construction in another language does not necessarily signify the presence of a corresponding syntactic phraseme.

Different syntactic phrasemes share certain properties; one of them is the tendency towards negative polarization. Another important property concerns pragmatics, namely entailment. Many syntactic phrasemes introduce scalar gradation, establish connections between situations or in other ways structure the representation of the world in the mind of the speaker.

Thus, *pri vsjom X-e* introduces both a scale of properties and an idea of their connection with the behavior of the object they characterize; *let alone* introduces a scale of objects that possess certain properties to different extents; the Russian syntactic phraseme *X-X, a Y Z (Kto-kto, a Vanja ne podvedjot* ‘Who-who, but Vasya will not let one down = Don’t know about others, but John will not let one down’) introduces a scale.

The presence of an entailment reflecting the speaker’s opinion and assessment of the situation, that is typical of syntactic phrasemes, is likely the consequence of their phraseological status. While regular syntactic means of expression present an “objectified” picture, syntactic phrasemes, like other phraseological means of expressions, reflect certain wisdoms, certain worldviews, even though in a much more abstract form than lexical phrasemes or proverbs.

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