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## **The Pragmatics of Destiny in Russian and English (towards a description of fundamental cultural concepts)<sup>1</sup>**

Valentina Apresjan

Institute of the Russian Language, Moscow

[valentina\\_apresjan@hotmail.com](mailto:valentina_apresjan@hotmail.com)

*Byla sud'ba. Bylo russkoe ne-sud'ba (M. Cvetaeva)*

There was fate. There was the Russian “not-fated” (M. Cvetaeva)

### **0. Introduction**

This paper deals with the Semantics/Pragmatics distinction in a contrastive ethnolinguistic aspect. I argue for the validity of this distinction based on cross-linguistic data. My claim is that the specificity of the so-called language *key words* [Wierzbicka 1990:15-17] – linguospecific items particularly representative of a given language speakers' mentality – is due to *pragmatic* rather than semantic peculiarities. These pragmatic peculiarities distinguish the key words both from their synonyms within the same language and their counterparts in other languages. The languages under discussion are Russian and English, analyzed within a combined frame of Integral Language Description model [Apresjan 1995:8-238] and Wierzbicka's ethnolinguistic approach.

### **1. Framework**

Theoretically, this paper is based on the framework and methods presented in Ju.D. Apresjan's “Systematic Lexicography” [Apresjan 2000:453-538] and in other works by Ju.D. Apresjan [first of all, Apresjan 1995:8-238], further developed in books and papers of other representatives of the Moscow School of Semantics (I.M. Boguslavski, L.L. Iomdin, I.B. Levontina, E.V. Uryson, V. Ju. Apresjan and others). To some extent, I also employ Wierzbicka's ethnolinguistic approach. Linguistic examples used in this paper mostly come from the National Corpus of the Russian Language and the British National Corpus and are appropriately modified for my purposes.

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Apresjan's framework combines linguistic theory and lexicography and focuses on the following goals (quoted from [Apresjan 2000:II]):

“1) The search for the “naive” (language) picture of the world, or the pattern of conceptualizations underlying lexical and grammatical meanings of the given language.

2) The breakthrough into the linguistic macrocosm as manifested in the shift from the study of separate words to the study of large lexicographic types.

3) The breakthrough into the linguistic microcosm as manifested in the shift to “lexicographic portraits”, that is, meticulous studies of separate word senses in all of their linguistically relevant aspects.

4) The convergence of grammatical and lexicological studies which resulted in what may be called a unified, or integrated theory of linguistic description.”

In this paper, the first and the fourth of these goals are of paramount interest.

The linguistic picture of the world is a specific “world-view” reflected in the meanings and constructions of a given language. Classical examples of linguistic items reflecting Russian linguistic picture of the world are impersonal verbal constructions [Babby 1975:182, Apresjan 2006:36-39], the particle *avos* ‘perhaps with luck’ [Shmelev 2002:402-403] and other lexical items analyzed in [Apresjan 2000: 102-104, 104-127], [Bulygina & Shmelev 1997: 481-495], [Uryson 2003:21, 27, 34].

The expression *ne sud'ba* ‘not the destiny’ analyzed in this paper is another interesting example revealing the peculiarities of the Russian linguistic picture of the world.

Another important component of Apresjan's framework is his insistence on the necessity of *integrated* linguistic descriptions (IDL), with perfectly coordinated dictionary and grammar. In practice, among other things, IDL involves creating descriptions of linguistic items reflecting all their relevant linguistic properties: semantic, pragmatic, syntactic, communicative, combinatorial. Apart from being comprehensive, IDL has another advantage, namely, it possesses explanatory and predictive force: since semantics and pragmatics are predominant linguistic properties, they often explain other linguistic properties of linguistic items, such as syntax, combinatorial properties, sometimes even prosody. The expression *ne sud'ba* is particularly interesting in this respect, as it displays a number of unusual grammatical properties clearly triggered by semantics and pragmatics.

Following [Apresjan 1995: 136], by pragmatics I understand “the attitude of the speaker towards reality, the content of the utterance, or the addressee which is embedded in linguistic items (words, affixes, syntactic constructions etc.)”. As one can see, this definition is somewhat broader than what is usually understood by pragmatics in Gricean approach or in Leech's theory of politeness; namely, pragmatic information is ascribed not only to contextual items – utterances within discourse, but also to separate linguistic items such as words. In this latter case, when pragmatics is not something that occurs only in a context, but is an inherent property of a given word, pragmatic information about this word, along with its semantic definition and information about its syntactic, communicative and combinatory properties is included in its integral linguistic description.

[Apresjan 1995:136-140] distinguishes among the following types of pragmatic information that linguistic items can incorporate:

a) The speaker's attitude towards reality – towards facts, situations, objects, etc:

- 1) **qualitative evaluation** (positive vs. negative evaluation). Consider pairs of lexical items: *to pry* (negative) vs. *to be curious* (neutral); *to snatch* (negative) vs. *to inform* (neutral); *to protect* (positive or neutral) vs. *to shelter* (neutral or negative, as in *to shelter swindlers*) etc.;

- 2) **quantitative evaluation**; cf. *He drank just a bottle of wine* [little] vs. *He drank a whole bottle of wine* [much];
- 3) **desirability vs. non-desirability**; *She always leaves her keys on the desk* (neutral) vs. *She's always leaving her keys on the desk* (undesirable); Russian *On prišel* ('He came') vs. *A on voz'mi da pridi* ('There he comes unasked and unexpected'; literally 'And he take and come');

b) The speaker's attitude towards the content of the utterance:

1) **evaluation of an utterance as true or false**: *of course, certainly, naturally, evidently* (true); *hardly, allegedly, ostensibly* (false);

2) **evaluation of the illocutionary function of an utterance** (reproach, threat, etc.): *Are you leaving me? Call yourself my friend* (reproach); Russian *Pogovori, pogovori u menja* ('Try talking more and you'll regret it', threat; literally: 'Speak, speak to me');

3) **The speaker's attitude towards the addressee** (e.g., status distinctions): Russian: *ty* 'thou' (informal, between equals) VS. *Vy* 'you' (formal, when addressing a person with a higher social or age status).

These types of pragmatic information certainly do not cover the whole multitude of possible pragmatic implications and subtleties but they provide good landmarks for research and, as such, are used in this paper.

Another tool provided by [Apresjan 1995] framework that I avail myself of are analytic semantic definitions, or explications fashioned in a specific kind of metalanguage which meets the following requirements [Apresjan 1995:466-472]:

"Metalanguage – a reduced and unified subsystem of a natural language which answers the following requirements:

(a) consists of semantic primitives and more complex words reduceable to primitives in one or several steps

(b) avoids synonymy, homonymy, stylistically and semantically non-neutral items."

Apresjan's notion of the "linguistic picture of world" which is aimed at accounting for linguospecific, culture-specific linguistic items can be to some extent paralleled to Wierzbicka's notions of a *key word* and *cultural script*.

By *key words* Wierzbicka understands "words that are particularly important and revealing in a given culture" [Wierzbicka 1997: 15-16]. Examples of key words, according to Wierzbicka, are, among others, the following linguistic items: Russian *duša* 'soul', *toska* 'yearning', *sud'ba* 'fate, destiny', *žalost* 'pity', *smirenje* 'humility', *sovest* 'conscience', *volya* 'physical freedom', *drug* 'friend', *obščenie* 'socializing', American English *compassion*, *self-esteem*, *privacy*, *commitment*. These words presumably express notions extremely important for Russian and English respectively and have no equivalent in other languages.

*Cultural scripts* are commonly shared opinions about things that are reflected in language [Wierzbicka 1997: 17]. Some of the cultural scripts Wierzbicka postulates are:

"English: One can say to another person "I disagree with you"

Japanese: One cannot say to another person “I disagree with you”

Russian: It is good to tell other people what one feels”

Wierzbicka’s notion of a *cultural script* approximates Apresjan’s notion of a *key idea*; cf. “A mentality inherent in a given language is manifested in ethnospecific *key ideas* which are a kind of semantic leit-motifs, each of which is expressed by many linguistic means of diverse nature – morphological, word-formative, syntactic, lexical and even prosodic -- The greater the arsenal of such means, the more a key idea can claim to have an ethnospecific status” [Apresjan 2006: 34-36]. Apresjan formulates further criteria by meeting which an idea can claim its key status in language: “One can talk about ethnospecificity of linguistic mentality in a language L a) when there are in L simple linguistic items with a meaning that can only be expressed descriptively, i.e., by means of phrases or sentences in other languages or b) when some idea that is expressible by simple means in other languages, has a grammaticalized status in the language L” [Apresjan 2006:35].

## 2. The Pragmatics of Destiny in Russian and English

The paper considers two close Russian synonyms – (*ne*) *suzdeno* ‘it is (not) destined’ and (*ne*) *sud’ba* ‘it is (not) the destiny’, as well as their English counterpart (*not*) *to be destined*:

1a. *Vidno, ne sud’ba nam uvidet’sja vnov’*

‘seems not destiny to-us to see each other again’

‘It seems it’s not the destiny that we see each other again’

1b. *Vidno, nam ne suždeno uvidet’sja vnov’*

‘seems to-us not destined to see each other again’

‘It seems we are not destined to see each other again’

### 2. 1. *Sud’ba* and *ne sud’ba*

[Wierzbicka 1990:23-30] considers the significance of the concept of *sud’ba* ‘destiny, fate’ in Russian linguistic mentality. Compared to its English counterparts, the word *sud’ba* is considerably more frequent, appropriate in a larger range of contexts and overall seems to occupy a more central place in the speakers’ mentality<sup>2</sup>. It is, therefore, one of the key concepts in the Russian language. As will be shown below, all this is even more true of the expression *ne sud’ba* ‘not the destiny’ which on the surface seems merely a negation of the noun *sud’ba*. However, this simplicity is deceptive, as *ne sud’ba* differs from *sud’ba* syntactically, semantically, and pragmatically. I will first outline some of these differences and then proceed to the consideration of the three aforementioned expressions – (*ne*) *sud’ba*, (*ne*) *suzdeno*, *be* (*not*) *destined*.

*Sud’ba* in its primary meaning and usage is a noun, as in

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<sup>2</sup> Consider the following figures: the frequency of the word *destiny* in the British National Corpus (BNC) is 7,4 per million words, the frequency of the word *fate* is 21,3 per million words, whereas the frequency of the word *sud’ba* in the National Corpus of the Russian Language is 70,5 per million words.

2a. *Sud'ba nas razlučila*

‘The fate parted us’

2b. *Sud'ba podarila mne čudesnoe izbavlenie*

‘Fortune granted me a wondrous escape’

Apart from syntactic issues, these examples reflect the ambivalent nature of Russian *sud'ba* – it can be either unlucky or lucky, unlike *fate* or *fortune*, which are more fixed in this respect – more often fate is unlucky, whereas fortune is lucky.

Consider now the usage of the expression *ne sud'ba*:

3. *Vidno, ne sud'ba mne žit' na rodine*

‘Seems not fate to me to live in homeland’

‘It seems it is not fated that I live in my homeland’

It is immediately clear that this expression’s syntactic nature is very different from that of the noun *sud'ba*: it is a predicative that governs an entire proposition *mne žit' na rodine* ‘to me live in homeland’, with a noun phrase in the dative and a verb in the infinitive. In this respect *ne sud'ba* behaves very much like Russian impersonal verbs (such as *xočet'sja* ‘it wants’, *nado* ‘it is necessary’) or so-called categories of state (such as *grustno* ‘it is sad’). Interestingly, the quotation from Cvetaeva in the epigraph reflects this peculiar syntactic nature of *ne sud'ba*: while the noun *sud'ba* is feminine and is used with the feminine form of the verb, the impersonal predicative *ne sud'ba* is used in this quotation with the neutral form of the verb, like other impersonal predicatives. This grammaticalization of the combination *ne sud'ba* as an impersonal verb, a very typical and commonly used syntactic element of Russian, points both to its frequency and the centrality of its place in the linguistic mentality of a Russian-language speaker.

This type of grammaticalization, including switching from a noun to a verb-like item is rather rare in Russian, and the fact that it takes place in the case of *sud'ba* – *ne sud'ba* does prove a certain special status of this expression.

The impersonal verb *ne sud'ba* does have a positive counterpart *sud'ba*, as in

4. *Vidno, sud'ba mne vsjudu s nim vstrečat'sja*

‘Seems destiny to me everywhere with him to meet’

‘It seems it is destined that I meet him everywhere’

However, it is so rarely used as to be virtually non-existent. This fact is in itself interesting, especially since the Russian synonym of *ne sud'ba*, an impersonal verb *ne suždeno* ‘it is not destined’, as well as its English counterpart *it is not destined* have perfectly legitimate affirmative parallels *suždeno* ‘it is destined’ and *it is destined*. Analogous to *ne sud'ba* in this respect is the English expression *it is (was) not be*; though different in many other aspects, it is similar in that it cannot be used in the affirmative. It seems there is a need in language to express

the idea of unrealizability, and the negative expressions *ne sud'ba* and *it is (was) not to be* serve precisely this purpose.

However, the frequency of occurrence of *ne sud'ba* in Russian, its colloquial status as opposed to the rarity of the high-style expression *it is (was) not to be* suggest that the former can be considered as a candidate for a key word, while the latter can not<sup>3</sup>.

## 2. 2. Semantics and pragmatics of (*ne sud'ba*, (*ne suždeno*, *be (not) destined*)

I will presently turn to the consideration of three expressions describing the idea of destiny in Russian and English - (*ne sud'ba*, (*ne suždeno*, *be (not) destined*).

The three expressions look to be identical semantically. In fact, consider the following definition which seems to fit all of them:

5. (*ne sud'ba* / (*ne suždeno* *X/ X is (not) destined* = 'X does (or does not) happen because a certain force which controls humans' lives does not permit it'

However, this definition does not account for numerous differences in usage which are presented below. These differences are of pragmatic nature.

### 2. 2. 1. Time reference

To begin with, these expressions differ with respect to the time reference they imply. The verbs (*ne suždeno* and (*not) be destined* are most often used in retrospective narrative contexts, such as the one below:

6a. *Ovidiju ne suždeno bylo vernut'sja na rodinu*

'Ovid was not destined to return to his homeland'

The phrase in (6a) is not only retrospective but refers to events of a very remote past.

(*Ne) sud'ba*, on the other hand, points to events in the recent past (reminiscent of the French tense *Passé Immédiat*), cf. acceptable (6b) and unacceptable (6c):

6b. *Oj, opozdali na samolet. Nu, vidno ne sud'ba mne popast' na rodinu*

'Oh, we've just missed the plane. It looks like it's not my destiny to return to my homeland'

6c. \**Ovidiju ne sud'ba byla vernut'sja na rodinu*

'It was not the destiny for Ovid to return to his homeland'

*Ne sud'ba* cannot be used to speak of events long past.

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<sup>3</sup> Compare the respective frequencies: *not fated* 0,01 per million words, *not destined* 0,18 per million words, *it was not to be* - no occurrences in the BNC, 1 occurrence of *it was not to be* per million words in the Collins Wordbank Online English corpus, whereas the frequency of *ne sud'ba* in the National Corpus of the Russian Language comes to 14,71 per million words.

Overall, *ne suždeno* and *be not destined* are retrospective, while *(ne) sud'ba* is prospective or refers to the recent past. Consider:

7a. *Dumaju, tebe ne sud'ba (budet) poexat' v Moskvu* = 'I think you will not be able to go to Moscow because destiny is/will be against it'

7b. \**Ja dumaju tebe ne suždeno budet poexat' v Moskvu*

\*'I think you will not be destined to go to Moscow'

This difference in time reference can be explained by certain other pragmatic distinctions that exist between *ne sud'ba* and *ne suždeno*.

### 2. 2. 2. Interpretation

Consider the following, extremely typical beginning for a phrase containing the expression *ne sud'ba*: *Vidno, ne sud'ba* 'It looks like it is not the destiny'.

The use of *it looks like* conveys the idea of opinion; while *ne suždeno* and *it is not destined* introduce the statement of facts, *ne sud'ba* introduces their interpretation.

Consider further examples along these lines from contemporary Russian authors:

8. *Ona ušla, značit, ne sud'ba*

'She left, it means not the destiny'

'She left, therefore, it's not the destiny [to do something – e.g., to talk to her]'

9. *Bol'se tuda ne ezdili, rešili, čto ne sud'ba*

'More there not went, decided that not the destiny'

'We didn't go there anymore, we'd decided it was not the destiny [to do something there]'

10. *Esli telefon propal – značit, čto nazyvaetsja, ne sud'ba*

'If telephone lost means what is called not destiny'

'If someone's phone number gets lost it means it's not the destiny [to call that person]'

These phrases all contain interpretative expressions, such as *značit* 'it means', *rešili* 'they decided' etc.

In fact, phrases with *ne sud'ba* mostly focus not on some event X which is not going to happen, but on the reason why that is so. The speaker suggests a reason by interpreting certain facts as meaning that X is not bound to happen. X itself might not even be mentioned in the utterance; as in the phrases (8)-(10), *ne sud'ba* is often used elliptically.

*Ne suždeno* and *be not destined* focus on the event X that was not bound to happen. Therefore, elliptic usage is not possible for *ne suždeno* and *be not destined*: they absolutely cannot be used without an explicit mention of X; consider the ungrammatical examples below:

11a. \* *Ona usla, značit, ne suždeno*

‘She left means not destined’

\*‘She left and it means not destined’

Another manifestation of the interpretative, subjective nature of *ne sud’ba* is its “unquotability”: this expression can only be used in direct speech, not in reported speech, whereas for the objective *ne suždeno* and *not be destined* reported usage is perfectly possible:

11b. \**On ponjal, čto ej ne sud’ba spastis’*

\*‘He realized it is not her destiny to escape’

11c. *On ponjal, čto ej ne suždeno bylo spastis’*

‘He realized she was not destined to escape’

Thus, the primary function of *ne suždeno* and *be not destined* is to state that something has not happened because destiny was against it, and the primary function of *ne sud’ba* is to interpret certain facts as meaning that something is not going to happen because destiny is against it.

It is now easy to explain the differences in the time reference: the remote past is appropriate for statements of facts, while the immediate past is appropriate for interpreting events as they take place.

### 2. 2. 3. Negation

Another important distinction concerns the use of negation. *(Ne) suždeno* and *(not) be destined* are equally often used in the affirmative and in the negative, with X being either a desirable or undesirable event:

12a. *Emu bylo (ne) suždeno stat’ znamenitym*

‘He was (not) destined to become famous’

12b. *Emu (ne) suždeno bylo pogibnut’ na vojne*

‘He was (not) destined to perish in the war’

*(Ne) sud’ba* is rarely used in the affirmative; when so, X is an undesirable event; when it is used in the negative, X is always a desirable event; consider:

13a. *Ne sud’ba mne uspet’ na poezd’*

‘It is not my destiny to catch my train’



In (13a) *ne sud'ba* is used in the negative; the event which is not bound to happen is desirable; the phrase is acceptable.

13b. \**Mne sud'ba uspet' na poezd'*

'It is my destiny to catch my train'

In (13b), *sud'ba* is used in the affirmative; the event which is bound to happen is desirable; the phrase is unacceptable.

13c. *Vidno, sud'ba mne opozdat' na samolet*

'It is my destiny to miss my plane'

In (13c), *sud'ba* is used in the affirmative; the event which is bound to happen is undesirable; the phrase is acceptable.

13d. \**Ne sud'ba mne opozdat' na samolet*

'It is not my destiny to miss my plane'

In (13d) *ne sud'ba* is used in the negative; the event which is not bound to happen is undesirable; the phrase is unacceptable.

Therefore, *ne sud'ba* contains a pragmatic implication: bad events are difficult to avoid, good events are difficult to bring about.

#### 2. 2. 4. Resignation

The pragmatic structure of *ne sud'ba* involves the following crucial elements:

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- a. the speaker interprets certain facts in the recent past as a sign that destiny is against a good event X;
- b. the speaker assumes that X cannot take place;
- c. therefore, the speaker deems actions aimed at bringing X about useless and abstains from such actions.

The first two elements of this structure have already been discussed: the interpretative nature of *ne sud'ba*, the recent past orientation, the positive evaluation of X which is something desired by the speaker. What has not been discussed so far, is the speaker's attitude to this: the fact that (s)he gives up on X.

Consider the following examples with their implications:

15a. *Sobiralis' domoj, no, vidno ne sud'ba*

'We were going to go home, but it seems it is not the destiny' [implication: 'We will not try to go home now that we've realized it's not the destiny']

15b. *Ja proždal ee tri časa na vokzale i vernulsja domoj, rešiv', cto ne sud'ba*

'I waited for her for three hours at the station and then went home, having decided it is not the destiny' [implication: 'I've stopped waiting now I've realized it's not the destiny to meet her']

### 3. Conclusions.

As we can see from the evidence presented above, the differences between *(ne) suždeno* and *(not) be destined*, on the one hand, and *(ne) sud'ba*, on the other, are not of semantic, but of pragmatic nature. The difference concerns not the actual setting, but the implied attitude of the speaker towards reality, facts, and his or her own actions. While *(ne) suždeno* and *(not) be destined* are pragmatically neutral, *(ne) sud'ba* is heavily loaded with pessimistic pragmatic implications: good events don't happen, bad ones do. Moreover, *(ne) sud'ba* implies a passive, resigned, but at the same time reconciled attitude of the speaker towards reality: since fate conspires against one's intentions, one cannot and should not fight. In this respect, it makes an interesting contrast to another Russian key word *avos'* 'perhaps with luck', which also implies lack of action, but for the opposite reason: the speaker counts on his or her good fortune and thus deems activity unnecessary. In addition, *ne sud'ba* can be pragmatically compared to Russian impersonal verbs which also imply passivity on the part of the agent, caused by the impossibility to control situations and events; consider (16), where the speaker sheds responsibility for his or her lack of action, pointing to some obscure outside factor that prevented him or her from doing the needed work<sup>4</sup>:

16. - *Počemu ty ne zakončil statju? - Mne ne rabotalos'.*

'Why you not finished article? To-me not worked'

'Why haven't you finished writing your paper? I didn't feel like working'

The fact that the word *ne sud'ba* is a very frequently used, colloquial expression, that it has a grammaticalized status in Russian, that the ideas it conveys are found in other lexical and grammatical items as well, points to its status as a key concept in the Russian language, expressing certain key ideas. The fact that these ideas are not expressed directly by semantic means, but rather occur in the form of pragmatic implications is interesting but not altogether surprising. Since pragmatics is mostly about speaker-hearer interaction, and the key ideas in language are presumably shared by all speakers of that language as inherent in it, it makes sense to express them in the implicit form of pragmatic implications, as part of the shared speaker-hearer consensus, rather than to draw particular attention to them by expressing them semantically.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Apresjan's analysis of the construction *X-u P-sja* 'To-X it is doing something; to feel like doing something and do it well' in [Apresjan 2006:39]: 'X is doing P [presupposition]; X is in such an inner state when P does not require great efforts from him/her [assertion]; in the speaker's opinion, this state occurred not because X wanted it to occur but as a result of the impact of some force, vague and detached from X' [Apresjan 2006:39].

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