

The role of verb valency in Croatian and Russian learning at B1 level

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Submitted: 15.04.2014.

Accepted: 02.11.2014.

Abstract

Difficulties in learning a second language (L2) may arise when a first-language (L1) speaker attempts to directly transfer a syntactic pattern from L1 into L2. Since there is a very high overlap in verb valency between Croatian and Russian, the generalization of syntactic patterns often leads to systematic errors. In this paper we analyze verbs that were selected from a list of verbs required for B1-level mastery in Croatian and Russian.

The analyzed verbs are divided into semantic groups according to Levin (1993), but the paper focuses on the verbs of social interaction, verbs of communication and psych-verbs. Each verb is associated with its syntactic pattern supported by a corpus attestation.

Within each semantic group, verbs are further divided into four groups based on the number of complements and their realization on the syntactic and morphological levels.

This paper aims to facilitate the acquisition of basic verb complements in Croatian and Russian, with emphasis on non-matching pairs between the two languages.

Keywords: Verb valency, Croatian language, Russian language, L2 acquisition

Introduction

Verb valency is the ability of a verb to determine the number of its complements, as well as their syntactic and morphological realization in a sentence. Herbst (2007) says that: “The phenomenon of valency is one part of the unpredictable, unsystematic aspects of language” (p. 15). The importance of this theory in second language acquisition was noted following the publication of Helbig and Schenkel’s dictionary

of German verbs in 1969. Since it is an unpredictable category, students cannot directly transfer every L1 syntactic pattern into L2.

This paper analyzes the valency of Croatian and Russian verbs needed for B1-level mastery according to CEFR, emphasizing differences in order to predict errors during the learning process.

We have focused only on matching and deviating prototypical verb complements. The verbs are divided into semantic groups, and each verb is associated with its syntactic pattern supported by a corpus attestation (Croatian Language Repository (<http://riznica.ihjj.hr/index.hr.html>), hrWaC (<http://nlp.ffzg.hr/resources/corpora/hrwac/>), Framebank.ru) that has been transformed for the sake of clarity. Within each semantic group, the verbs are further divided into four groups based on the number of complements and their realization on the syntactic and morphological levels. Verbs that have different complements in Croatian and Russian were selected.

Classification of verbs

The analyzed verbs were extracted from the corpora created for the compilation of the *Croatian Verb Valency database*, which is being developed at the Institute of Croatian Language and Linguistics (project leader: Matea Birtić). The corpora were compiled from relevant textbooks for B1-level Croatian learning. The analyzed verbs were divided into semantic groups according to Levin (1993). The verbs mostly belong to two or more semantic groups based on their polysemy. This paper only takes the basic meaning of the verbs into consideration, while other meanings have been omitted. Our study is founded on semantic analysis, based on the assumption that non-native speakers are unable to recognize essential verb complements if they are unaware of the semantic group the verb belongs to. Levin and Hovav (2005) state that “the syntactic realization of arguments – their category type and their grammatical function – is largely predictable from the meaning of their verbs” (p. 7). Verbs of social interaction, verbs of (verbal) communication, and psych-verbs were analyzed because of their role in B1-level of L2 acquisition.

Croatian is used as the source-language. Croatian verbs were associated with their aspectual pairs. The number of complements of each verb is defined, as is the type of complement and its semantic role. Each Croatian verb is then associated with its equivalent in Russian, which is further associated with its own aspectual pair and syntactic pattern. If no fully equivalent meaning exists, close equivalent meanings are mentioned in an endnote.

Syntactic patterns: complement types and semantic roles

It was assumed that syntactic patterns can be described with 10 types of complements provided in the description of syntactic verb structure in the *Croatian Verb Valency Database*. Those complements are: the nominative complement (NomC), which mostly correlates with the sentence subject and plays the semantic role of agent; the genitive complement (GenC) which mostly plays the role of the object; the dative complement (DatC); the accusative complement (AccC) with a role of direct object; the instrumental complement (InstC) as the most common complement among analyzed verbs of communication and psych-verbs; the prepositional complement (PrepC) that commonly correlates with the object; and adverbial complement (AdvC), which is further associated when nominal words or prepositional-case phrases can be substituted by an adverb. Infinitival, predicate, and clause complements are not analyzed here.

Complements are associated with semantic roles in which the morphological change of the verb causes a change in the syntactic function of participants while the semantic role remains the same. For example, reflexive verbs found among psych-verbs become transitive by losing their reflexive pronoun, which causes their complements and syntactic function to change while their semantic role remains unchanged. Unlike semantic roles, conceptual categories (animate-inanimate, human, etc.) that represent knowledge of the world, and are thus closer to both the non-native speaker and the native speaker non-linguist, do not depend on the meaning of the verb, but are inherent for the noun itself (see Herbst & Götz-Votteler, 2007, p. 40).

The syntactic patterns of verbs in Croatian and Russian

Since Croatian and Russian are genetically related languages, verbs can completely overlap at the semantic and syntactic levels. However, sometimes they do not overlap in one of their meanings, and this can cause a difference in syntactic pattern.

Within a semantic group, verbs are divided based on their number of complements (quantitative valency) and on their realization on the syntactic and morphological levels (qualitative valency).

These criteria resulted in four groups of verbs. The difference in syntactic pattern as a result of a change in meaning is not taken into account in the classification of verbs, but it is pointed out in the endnote.

Verbs with matching complements on the syntactic and morphological levels

(cro) *Rastala se od muža.*

(ru) *Она рассталась с мужем.*

s mužem.
(cro)separate from (with)

(ru)separate with

These verbs have two complements in both languages: the nominative and the prepositional (realized as *od+genitive* or *s+instrumental* in Croatian and as *s+instrumental* in Russian).

Verbs with matching complements on the syntactic level, but different on the morphological level

(cro)Nisam **sumnjala u** njegove namjere.

(ru)Не **сомневайся в** моих словах!

(cro)Liječnici **sumnjaju na** zarazu.

(ru)doubt in

(cro)doubt in (on)

These verbs have two complements in both languages: the nominative and the prepositional (realized as *u+accusative* or *na+accusative* in Croatian and as *v+locative* in Russian).

Verbs with different complements on the syntactic and morphological levels

(cro)Nadamo se pomoći Grada.

(ru)Я надеюсь увидеть вас сегодня.

These verbs have two complements: the nominative and the dative in Croatian, and the nominative, infinitival, or prepositional complements in Russian. When they appear with the prepositional complement *na+accusative*, the meaning of these verbs changes to 'rely on, expect'.

Verbs with a different number of complements

No examples of quantitative valency were found in the corpora examined.

Verbs of communication

We analyzed the verbs *pitati* (ask), *odgovoriti* (answer), *čestitati* (congratulate), *ispričati se* (apologize) and *raspraviti* (discuss), all of which can be classified in other semantic groups. However, we decided to place them in the group of verbs of communication due to their syntactic pattern, which includes an agent, goal, and theme.

It was observed that, within the class of verbs of communication, verbs match according to their number of complements (trivalent), while the analyzed verbs do not match in their type of complements. The verbs differ in the types of complement

associated with the role of a goal (*ispričavati se/извиняться* (*apologize*): Croatian – DatC, Russian – PrepC), the role of a theme (*raspravljati/обсуждать* (*discuss*): Croatian – PrepC, Russian – AccC (direct object)), and the role of a goal and a theme (*čestitati/поздравлять* (*congratulate*): Croatian – DatC (indirect object, goal) and AccC (direct object, theme), Russian – AccC (direct object, goal) and PrepC, theme).

The verb *pitati/sпрашивать* (*ask*) has one nominative and two accusative complements. The difference between the two languages is that the goal can be expressed in Russian not only through the dative case, but also by the prepositional complement *u+genitive* (*at+genitive*). If the verbs appear with *s+genitive* (*with+genitive*), the meaning changes to ‘make responsible/answer (for)’.

The verb *odgovarati/отвечать* (*answer*) has nominative, dative, and prepositional complements. The preposition *za* (*for*) in Croatian is followed by the accusative case, and this corresponds to three different prepositions in Russian: *za*, *na* and *dlya* (*genitive*), depending on the verb.

Verbs with matching complements on the syntactic and morphological levels

(cro)pitati/u(za)pitati : (ru)спрашивать/спросить (*eng*)ask

a) *Profesorica me pitala teško pitanje.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative AccC:accusative

Учитель спрашивал всех такие вещи.

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative AccC:accusative

b) *Novinari su ga pitali o planovima za budućnost.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative PrepC: o+llocative

Журналисты спрашивали его о планах на будущее.

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative PrepC: o+llocative

Difference:

Ты можешь спросить у своего друга совет?

NomC:nominative PrepC:u+genitive AccC:accusative

Если что-то будет не так, спрашивать будут с тебя.

NomC:nominative PrepC:s+genitive PrepC:o+llocative

(cro)odgovarati/odgovoriti : (ru)отвечать/ответить (*eng*)answer

Ona mi nije odgovorila na pitanje.

NomC:nominative DatC:dative PrepC:na+accusative

Verbs of social interaction

Levin (1993, p. 200) defines verbs of social interaction as verbs that describe activities always involving more than one participant. These verbs can be monovalent or divalent depending on whether the subject is singular or plural.

The verbs *vjenčati se* (*get married*), *oženiti se* (*marry*), *rastati se* (*separate*), and *razvesti se* (*divorce*) are monovalent if the subject is in plural and all participants have the same status. In this case, the complement is nominative (agent).

Oni su se vjenčali. *Они поженились.*

The verbs are divalent if the subject is singular and if they have a nominative and prepositional complement. The verbs *rastati se* (*separate*) and *razvesti se* (*divorce*) in Croatian have a prepositional complement realized as *od+genitive* (*from+genitive*), and as *s+instrumental* (*with+instrumental*) in Russian. The corpora attest *rastati se s* (*separate with*), while attestations of *razvesti se s* (*divorce with*) are negligible.

The verb *oženiti se* (*marry*) in divalent form has a nominative and instrumental complement with the attested prepositional: *s+instrumental* (*with+instrumental*), *za+accusative* (*for+accusative*) in Croatian. In Russian, the complement is only the prepositional *na+locative* (*on+locative*).

Verbs with matching complements on the syntactic level, but different on the morphological level

(cro)razvoditi se/razvesti se : (ru)разводиться/развестись; (eng)divorce

Razvela se od njega.

NomC:nominative PrepC:od+genitive

Он развелся с женой.

NomC:nominative PrepC: s+instrumental

(cro)rastajati se/rastati se : (ru)расставаться/расстаться; (eng)separate

Rastala se od muža/s mužem.

NomC:nominative PrepC:od+genitive

PrepC:s+instrumental

Она рассталась с мужем.

NomC:nominative PrepC:s+instrumental

Verbs with different complements on the syntactic level and morphological levels

(cro)ženiti se/oženiti se : (ru)жениться/пожениться; (eng)marry

Oženio se svojom djevojkom (iz ljubavi).

NomC:nominative InstC:instrumental (AdvC: iz+genitive)

Принц женился на бедной девушке (по любви).

NomC:nominative PrepC:na+locative (AdvC:po+dative)

Psych-verbs

Some authors (Levin & Hovav, 2005, White, 2003) have distinguished minimal pairs such as *fear* and *frighten*, *like* and *please*, which have a complement with the semantic role of experiencer, however, in the verb *fear*, the experiencer is the subject, while in the verb *frighten*, the experiencer is the object.

In this paper, verbs were classified into two main groups:

A. Verbs that become transitive and change the roles of experiencer and stimulus when they appear without a pronoun (in Russian particle -ся) *se* (*yourself*).

1. Verbs with two complements where the experiencer is the subject (reflexive verbs) and the stimulus is a dative (A.1.1.), instrumental (A.1.2.), or prepositional (A.1.3.) complement;
2. Verbs with two complements where the stimulus is the subject and the experiencer is an accusative case object.

B. Verbs where the experiencer is the subject, but transformation is not possible: *bojati se* (*fear*), *smijati se* (*laugh*), *nadati se* (*hope*), *diviti se* (*admire*). The element *se* with these verbs stands as a particle, not as a pronoun (Silić & Pranjković, 2005, p. 40).

A.1.1.**(cro)iznenadivati se/iznenaditi se***(Ja)Iznenadila sam se daru.*

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Experiencer Stimulus

(cro)čuditi se/začuditi se*(Ja)Čudim se vremenu.*

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Experiencer Stimulus

(ru)удивляться/удивиться*Я удивилась этой встрече.*

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Experiencer Stimulus

(cro)radovati se/obradovati se*(Ja)Radujem se daru.*

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Experiencer Stimulus

(cro)veseliti se/razveseliti se¹*(Ja)Veselim se suncu.*

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Experiencer Stimulus

(ru)радоваться/обрадоваться*Бабушка обрадовалась приезду внучки.*

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Experiencer Stimulus

A.1.2.**(cro)oduševljavati se/oduševiti se***(Ja)Oduševljujem se prirodom.*

NomC:nominative InstD:instrumental

Experiencer Stimulus

(ru)восхищаться/восхититься*Я восхищаюсь ее красотой.*

NomC:nominative InstD:instrumental

Experiencer Stimulus

восторгаться*Она восторгалась красотой природы.*

NomC:nominative InstC:instrumental

Experiencer Stimulus

A. 2.**iznenadivati/iznenaditi; (eng)surprise***Dar me iznenadio.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

čuditi/začuditi²; (eng)amaze*Vrijeme me čudi.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

удивлять/удивить*Его поступки очень удивили меня*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

radovati/obradovati; (eng)please*Dar me raduje.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

veseliti/razveseliti*Sunce me veseli.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

радовать/обрадовать*Солнце обрадовало нас.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

A.2.**oduševljavati/oduševiti; (eng)delight***Priroda me oduševljuje.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

восхищать /восхитить*Меня восхищает её красота.*

NomC:nominative AccCD:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

восторгать*Красота природы восторгает всех.*

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative

Stimulus Experiencer

A close-meaning verb to *восхищаться* and *восторгаться* is the verb *наслаждаться*, a reflexive verb, the meaning of which is 'be enthusiastic', and which has both nominative and instrumental complements. When the verb is

nonreflexive, the meaning is 'delight, enrapture'. A close meaning word is also the verb *любоваться*, which means 'admire'.

A.1.3.

(cro)ljutiti se/naljutiti se

(Ja)Ljutim se na mamu.

NomC:nominative PrepC:na+Acc
Experiencer Stimulus

(ru)злиться/разозлиться

Мальчик злился на маму.

NomC:nominative PrepC:na+Acc
Experiencer Stimulus

(cro)brinuti se/ zabrinuti se

(Ja)Brinem se o tami/za mamu/zbog mame.

NomC:nominative PrepC:o+ locative
za+accusative
zbog+genitive

(ru)волноваться/заволноваться

Мы волновались о их судьбе

/за сына/из-за экзамена.

NomC:nominative PrepC:o+Loc
za+Acc
iz-za+Gen
Experiencer Stimulus

A.2.

ljutiti/naljutiti; *(eng)be angry*

Mama me ljuti.

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative
Stimulus Experiencer

злить/разозлить

Меня злит общий скептицизм.

NomC:nominative AccD:accusative
Stimulus Experiencer

brinuti/zabrinuti; *(eng)worry*

Mama me brine.

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative
Stimulus Experiencer
Experiencer Stimulus

волновать/заволновать

Судьба нас волнует.

NomC:nominative AccC:accusative
Stimulus Experiencer

B. Without transformation

Verbs with matching complements on the syntactic and morphological levels

(cro)bojati se/pobojati se : (ru)бояться/побояться; (eng)fear

(Ja)Bojim se mraka.

za sina

NomC:nominative GenC:genitive
PrepC: za+accusative

Я не боюсь собак.

за тебя

NomC:nominative GenC:genitive
PrepC:za+accusative

(cro)stidjeti se/zastidjeti se : (ru)стыдиться/при(за)стыдиться; (eng)be ashamed

(Ja)Stidim se prošlosti.

NomC:nominative GenC:genitive

Он никогда не стыдился нашей любви.

NomC:nominative GenC:genitive

Difference:

(Ja)Stidim se zbog svoje prošlosti.

NomC:nominative GenC:genitive

Он стыдился за сына.

NomC:nominative PrepC:za+accusative

Verbs with different complements on the syntactic and morphological levels

(cro)smijati se/nasmijati se : (ru)смеяться/посмеяться; (eng)laugh

(Ja)Smijem se bratu.

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Она смеялась над братом.

NomC:nominative PrepC:nad+Inst

(cro)nadati se/ponadati se : (ru)надеяться/понадеяться; (eng)hope

(Mi)Nadamo se Vašoj pomoći.

NomC:nominative DatC:dative

Я очень надеюсь на успех в этом деле.

NomC:nominative PrepC:na+Acc

(cro)sjećati se/sjetiti se : (ru)вспоминать/вспомнить; (eng)remember

(Ja)Sjećam se djeda.

NomC:nominative

GenC:genitive

Вадим вспоминает первую встречу с Анной.

NomC:nominative

AccC:accusative

The verb *вспоминать/вспомнить* (remember) is not a reflexive verb, but rather a transitive verb that opens up space to an accusative complement, i.e. to an object. That verb is used as a reflexive verb in impersonal constructions (*Мне вспомнилась старинная песня.*).

Conclusion

The generalization of syntactic patterns often leads to systematic errors. Difficulties in second-language learning (L2) may arise when a first-language (L1) speaker attempts to directly transfer a syntactic pattern from L1 into L2. There are certain syntactic patterns that can be foreseen, but there are many more unforeseeable ones. This makes mastering verb valency the key problem in learning a foreign language.

Croatian and Russian are related Slavic languages, and thus there is a very high overlap in verb valency between these two languages. When it comes to some of the most frequent errors arising as a result of similarities between the two languages, we must emphasize the incorrect use of prepositions (i.e. incorrect choice of case after a preposition: *жениться с ней*). Errors can also occur quite often if a verb in L1 has one matching and one or more non-matching meanings with a verb in L2 (*надеяться на*).

This paper aims to facilitate both the acquisition and teaching of Croatian and Russian as foreign languages. A comparative analysis can be very important for language teachers as it helps them predict learners' errors.

Endnotes:

¹ In Russian, the verb *веселиться* means 'to have a great time, have fun'. The Croatian equivalent is *radovati se*.

² The verb *čuditi* (to amaze) is considered normatively unacceptable. However, it is included in our study because of its frequent use and attestation in the corpora.

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