On the Semantics of Case and Mood

In this paper, I investigate the semantics of Intensional Genitive Case in Russian (IG), a phenomenon whereby objects of certain intensional verbs appear in genitive Case, as is exemplified in (1). Two puzzles arise in connection with IG: first, it is licensed only by strong intensional verbs in Farkas’ (1985) terminology and not by weak intensional verbs. For example, verbs ždat’ (wait for), zasluzhivat’ (deserve), trebovat’ (demand), prosit’ (ask for), license IG, while predstavljat’ (sebe) (imagine), predvidet’ (foresee), izobražat’ (draw, depict) do not. The second puzzle concerns the distribution of IG vs. accusative Case: the same verbs that license IG can also take accusative objects, as in (2). As has been noted in the literature (Neidle 1988, Bailyn 2004, Kagan 2005), the choice of Case is dependent on a number of semantic properties. For instance, the genitive tends to be assigned to non-specific, indefinite, narrow scope NPs and to NPs that lack existential commitment (EC). At the same time, none of these properties is sufficient to account for the alternation. Thus, the object NP in (2) is most likely to receive a narrow scope interpretation and to lack EC; still, it is accusative. The solution to these puzzles proposed in this paper will relate it to another phenomenon: the licensing of subjunctive mood, which, too, is possible only with one class of intensional verbs.

My first observation is that all those verbs that license Intensional Genitive also license subjunctive mood in their complement clauses, or in relative clauses embedded under them. Those verbs that do not take genitive objects, do not license subjunctive mood either (with very few exceptions). Hence, I propose that this correlation is not accidental and that the semantico-pragmatic contribution of genitive Case-marking to an NP is analogous to the contribution of subjunctive mood to a clause.

I adopt the approach to subjunctive mood proposed in Farkas (2003). Roughly, Farkas argues that a complement clause can be subjunctive only as long as the proposition it contributes is neither entailed nor presupposed to be true in the embedded context, i.e. in the set of worlds introduced by the intensional verb. Thus, we deal with lack of commitment to truth which is relativized to the modal base. The complements of epistemic predicates (e.g. think) and fiction predicates (e.g. imagine) are entailed to be true in the set of worlds introduced by the verb. For instance, think introduces an accessibility relation to the epistemic state of the subject. The complement clause is entailed to be true in the worlds that conform to the subject’s vision of reality. Thus, (3) entails that the proposition A unicorn entered Mary’s house is true in every possible world within Mary’s epistemic state (4). The case is different with desiderative predicates (e.g. want), as shown by Heim (1992). Heim argues convincingly that these verbs do not introduce a set of worlds in which the complement clause is true (want-worlds), but rather trigger world ranking, as formalized in (5). These verbs do not introduce a set of worlds in which the complement is entailed to hold. Rather, they trigger an entailment that those worlds in which the embedded proposition is true are ranked higher than the ones in which it is false. Since commitment to truth relative to the embedded context is absent, subjunctive mood is licensed.

I propose that just as subjunctive mood signals lack of commitment to truth (in the sense relativized to the embedded context), so IG signals lack of EC. I introduce a distinction between Absolute Existential Commitment (AEC) and Relative Existential Commitment (REC), formalized in (6). AEC is EC in the traditional sense of the term, i.e. a commitment that an NP quantifies over a non-empty set in the actual world. REC is a commitment to existence in the actual world or in any alternative possible world that stands to it in an accessibility relation introduced in the sentence. For our purposes, these are the worlds which represent the embedded context. In (6), all such worlds are subsumed under the set $W^A$. I further propose that IG is only licensed in the absence of REC. This way, we account for the fact that this Case, similarly to subjunctive mood, is only licensed by strong intensional verbs. Weak intensional verbs introduce a certain set of possible worlds. Their complement clause is entailed to be true in these worlds, and similarly, their NP complement carries EC relative to these worlds. Thus, (7) entails that the proposition Lena left is true in the world that conforms to Dima’s imagination, and similarly, (8) entails the existence of a storm in this world. In contrast, verbs like want do not trigger a commitment to truth or to existence (but only world ranking); therefore, they license subjunctive mood and IG. Finally, I will consider the genitive/accusative alternation in sentences with strong intensional verbs. I will show that there are at least three cases, and then Intensional Genitive is ruled out. For example, REC is carried by wide scope NPs, since they carry EC relative to the actual world (AEC). As a result, these NPs are obligatorily accusative.
1. Dima ždžot čuda / *čudo.
   Dima wait miracle_{GEN SG/ACC SG}
   Dima is waiting for a miracle.
2. Dima ždžot rusalku / *rusalki.
   Dima waits mermaid_{ACC SG/GEN SG}
   Dima is waiting for a mermaid.
3. Mary thinks that a unicorn entered her house.
4. \( \forall w [w \in E^{m,w_0} \rightarrow \exists x [\text{unicorn} (x,w) \land \text{enter} (x,\text{Mary's-house},w)]] \)
   \((E^{m,w_0}=\text{Mary's epistemic state in } w_0)\)
5. a. ‘a wants φ’ is true in w iff
   for every \( w' \in E^{a,w} \):
   every \( φ\)-world maximally similar to \( w' \) is more desirable to a in w than any non- \( φ\)-world
   maximally similar to \( w' \).
   (based on Heim 1992:193)
   \((E^{a,w} \text{ stands for the epistemic state of a in } w)\).
   b. For every world \( w' \) that belongs to the epistemic state of the subject, the worlds maximally
   similar to \( w' \) in which the embedded proposition is true are ordered higher than those worlds
   maximally similar to \( w' \) in which it is false.
6. Let S be a sentence with propositional content p. Let NP be a noun phrase that contributes the
   property P. Let \( w_0 \) be the actual world. Let \( \sim \) encode entailment and/or presupposition relation. Then:
   a. An occurrence of an NP in S carries Absolute Existential Commitment iff
   \( p \sim \exists x P(x,w_0) \)
   b. An occurrence of an NP in S carries Relative Existential Commitment iff
   \( \exists w [w \in W^S \land p \sim \exists x P(x,w)] \)
   where \( W^S \) is the set of all worlds such that an accessibility relation to these worlds is introduced in
   the sentence (e.g. by intensional operators)
7. Dima predstavil sebe, četo Lena ujexala.
   Dima imagined himself that Lena left.
   Dima imagined that Lena had left.
8. Dima predstavil sebe burju.
   Dima imagined himself storm_{ACC SG}
   Dima imagined a storm.

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