

On the Russian passive

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The point of departure of my analysis of the Russian passive is Langacker's (1991:127; 143) contention that passive clauses do not derive from active clauses. An active clause and a passive clause that both designate the same objective process and code it with much the same lexical content are arrived at by different compositional paths. Although such clauses are approximate synonyms, they are still semantically distinct because of analyzability.

My paper focuses on passive clauses with agentive phrases. In Russian, like in English or Swedish, the main function of such clauses is said to be the thematization of the passive subject, which corresponds to the object of the active clause, and the rhematization of the passive agent, which corresponds to the subject of the active clause (see e.g. Khrakovskii 1991:170-171; Zolotova et al. 1998:132). However, Russian word order also allows active clauses with the same information structure. Sentences such as *Договор был подписан министрами обороны двух стран* and *Договор подписали министры обороны двух стран* have the same information structure and they can be interchanged in certain contexts, namely in what Zolotova (1982) calls informative discourse. Informative discourse is construed so that the situation we are informed about is abstracted from the concrete duration of the action – the author/narrator is totally detached from the text world. She speaks what she knows. Due to the demotion of actuality and actionality in the verb forms that are used in order to form the Russian passive, active and passive clauses can rarely be interchanged in reproductive discourse (Zolotova et al. 1998:203). In reproductive discourse the events and states are tied to an observer who has seen and heard what is narrated, and the discourse builds up or reproduces a text world that we are invited to view from the vantage point of the observer. Consider the following fragment: *Поднявшись по темной лестнице на третий этаж, он пошарил на привычном месте звонок, не нашел и постучал кулаком. Дверь открыла женщина, ...* (Internet). In this reproductive discourse it would be unnatural to replace *Дверь открыла женщина* with its passive counterpart.

I will present a cognitive linguistic analysis of the Russian passive, accounting for its characteristic demotion of actionality, actuality, and agentivity. In addition, I will discuss the types of contexts and texts in which the passive tends to occur.

References

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