Why Morphology Matters: Sexism and the Russian a-Declension

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0. Introduction

- Personal nouns in the Russian a-declension constitute a structured category which relates the subcategories in terms of instantiation relations.
- The relations can only be established in terms of sexist myths about women: “Woman as the second sex”, “Woman as Madonna and Whore” and “Woman’s place in man’s world is at home”.
- On this basis I shall conclude that the Russian a-declension reflects sexist ideologies.

1. Cognitive Linguistics: Category networks

![Diagram of category networks]

Figure 1: Category network

2. The Object of Study: Personal nouns in the a-declension

(1)

- a) Female persons, e.g.
  
  *dama* ‘lady’, *ženščina* ‘woman’, *deva* ‘maiden’, *vdova* ‘widow’

- b) Persons engaged in an intimate relationship to the speaker, e.g.
  
  i) Hypocoristic forms of first names: *Vanja* (<Ivan), *Dima* (<Dimitrij), *Jura* (<Jurij)
  
  ii) Relatives: *papa* ‘daddy’, *djadja* ‘uncle’, *deduška* ‘grandfather’

- c) Exponents of (mostly) negative characteristics, e.g.
  
  *p’janica* ‘drunkard’, *skrjaga* ‘miser’, *plaksa* ‘crybaby’, *brjuzga* ‘grumbler’, *ubijca* ‘murderer’

3. The [FAMILIARITY] Schema

(2)

- a) Soft stems (*Vanja*):
  
  “I want to speak to you the way people speak to people whom they know well and toward whom they feel something good, and to children”

- b) Hard stems (*Dima*):
  
  “I want to speak to you the way people speak to people whom they know well. I don’t
want to speak to you the way people speak to children”

c) Stems in -š (Griša):
“I want to speak to you the way people speak to people whom they know well and to children”

(3) Schema for hypocoristic names ([FAMILIARITY]):
“Persons who stand out from the multitude by virtue of their intimate relationship to the speaker”

4. The [MARGINALITY] Schema

(4)

a) nouns in -aka/-uka: pisaka ‘scribbler’ (pisat’ ‘write’), podljuka ‘mean person’ (podlyj ‘mean’)

b) nouns in -agal-uga: brodjaga ‘tramp, down-and-out’ (brodit’ ‘wander’), bednjaga ‘poor fellow’ (bednyj ‘poor’)

c) nouns in -alal-ila: podpevala ‘yes-man’ (podpevat’ ‘join (in singing)’), zubrila ‘crammer’ (zubrit’ ‘cram’)

d) nouns in -jca/-ica: ubijca ‘murderer’ (ubit’ ‘kill’), umnica ‘clever person’ (umnnyj ‘clever’)

e) Õ-derivations: zadira ‘bully, trouble-maker’ (zadirat’ ‘tear to pieces’), nadoeda ‘pain in the neck’ (nadoedat’ ‘to get on the nerves’)

(5) Schema for exponents of (mostly) negative characteristics ([MARGINALITY]):
“Persons standing out from the multitude by being placed at an endpoint of a scale”

5. The [NON-PROTOTYPICALITY] Schema

(6)

a) [FAMILIARITY]:
Persons who stand out from the multitude by virtue of their intimate relationship to the speaker.

b) [MARGINALITY]:
Persons who stand out from the multitude by being placed at an endpoint of a scale.
6. **Sexism: Woman as the second sex**

(7)

W: “Woman” (and “man”) are defined independently of each other (e.g. in terms of sex organs). (equipollent opposition)

W1: “Woman” is defined independently (e.g. in terms of sex organs), “man” as “the second sex”. (privative opposition, woman unmarked)

W2: “Man” is defined independently (e.g. in terms of sex organs), “woman” as “the second sex”. (privative opposition, woman marked)

Figure 3: Three construals of “woman”
7. **Sexism: Woman as Madonna and Whore**

(8) “Woman is at once Eve and Virgin Mary. She is an idol, a servant, the source of life, a power of darkness; she is the elemental silence of truth, she is artifice, gossip and falsehood; she is healing presence and sorceress, she is man’s prey, his downfall, she is everything that he is not and that he longs for, his negation as his *raison d’être*. [...] Under whatever aspect we may consider her, it is this ambivalence that strikes us first.” (Beauvoir 1993:151f.)

(9) **SIN AND VICE IS WOMAN**
**VIRTUE IS WOMAN.**
8. **Sexism: Woman’s Place in Man’s World is at home**

![Diagram illustrating concepts of non-prototypicality, marginality, and familiarity with metaphors]

Figure 5: “Woman as the second sex”, “woman as Madonna and whore” and “woman’s place is in the home” in the a-declension

(10) “If there is a basic domain of experience associated with A, then it is natural for entities in that domain to be in the same category as A.” (Lakoff 1987:93)

9. **Conclusion**

- The a-declension is not an arbitrary juxtaposition of three unrelated subcategories, but rather a structured category which relates the subcategories in terms of instantiation relations.
- The relations can only be established in terms of a sexist myth about women: “Woman as the second sex”.
- Therefore the Russian a-declension reflects sexist ideologies.

**References**


