Argument and adjunct extraction asymmetries in wh-movement in Russian.

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My presentation explores the syntactic asymmetry between the extraction of arguments and adjuncts from embedded clauses in Russian. Interrogatives involving wh-constituent extraction represent one of the most sensitive domains for investigating the interplay between syntactic constraints and cross-linguistic variation. While the phenomenon of argument–adjunct asymmetry has been widely studied in other languages, Russian remains comparatively underexplored—particularly from an experimental perspective.

This study aims to clarify the empirical landscape and test hypotheses concerning (1) the presence of island constraints in various types of embedded constructions, (2) the influence of constituent type (argument vs. adjunct), and (3) the interaction between these factors. To this end, three acceptability judgment experiments were conducted, focusing on chto- ('that'), chtoby- ('in order to'), and kak- ('how') clauses, as well as indirect questions formed with interrogative pronouns and the particle li ('whether').

At the heart of this investigation lies a central question: does Russian exhibit a consistent asymmetry between arguments and adjuncts in extraction contexts—and if so, what does this asymmetry look like? Drawing on experimental findings, the presentation will address: (1) the syntactic and theoretical foundations of argument–adjunct asymmetry; (2) empirical parameters that shape the acceptability of movement; (3) a methodology for identifying covert grammatical constraints that may not surface through introspective analysis alone.

The results contribute to a more fine-grained typology of island effects in Russian and open up new directions for investigating structurally heterogeneous clauses such as kak ('how')-clauses. This talk will be of interest to researchers in syntax, experimental linguistics, and the typology of syntactic islands, as well as to anyone intrigued by the interface between grammar and processing. I invite you to reflect on the extent to which Russian syntax aligns with—or challenges—universal patterns of grammatical structure.

(The research was conducted in 2019-2020 by the Moscow Group of Experimental Syntax at Moscow State University)