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SINTAKTIK NEYTRALLASHUV: SEMANTIK-FUNKSIONAL YONDASHUV

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Annotatsiya.

Tilshunoslikda neytrallashuv muayyan qo'llanish sharoitlarida til birliklarining farqlovchi belgilarining funksional ahamiyatining yo'qolishi yoki susayishi sifatida talqin etiladi. Mazkur maqolada sintaktik sathdagi neytrallashuv hodisasi kompleks tahlil qilinadi. Tadqiqot asosan ingliz va rus tillarining illyustrativ materiallariga tayangan bo'lib, boshqa tillardan olingan tipologik ma'lumotlar bilan ham boyitilgan.

Kalit so'zlar: neytrallashuv; sintaksis; farqlovchi oppozitsiyalar; funksional tilshunoslik; sintaktik neytrallashuv; kommunikativ funksiya.

СИНТАКСИЧЕСКАЯ НЕЙТРАЛИЗАЦИЯ: СЕМАНТИКО-ФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ПОДХОД

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Аннотация.

В лингвистике нейтрализация определяется как устранение или ослабление функциональной значимости различительных признаков языковых единиц в определённых условиях их употребления. В статье представлен комплексный анализ явления нейтрализации на синтаксическом уровне. Исследование основано на иллюстративном материале английского и русского языков и дополнено типологическими данными из других языков.

Ключевые слова: нейтрализация; синтаксис; различительные оппозиции; функциональная лингвистика; языковые противопоставления.

SYNTACTIC NEUTRALIZATION: A SEMANTIC-FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract.

In linguistics, neutralization is defined as the elimination or reduction of the functional relevance of distinctive features of linguistic units in particular contexts. This paper presents a comprehensive analysis of neutralization on syntactic level. The study is based on illustrative data from English and Russian and is supplemented by typological evidence from other languages.

Keywords: linguistic neutralization; syntax; distinctive oppositions; functional linguistics; linguistic contrasts.

Introduction. Neutralization is widely recognized as one of the universal mechanisms underlying the functioning of language. It refers to the weakening or elimination of functionally relevant distinctions between linguistic units under the influence of structural, semantic, pragmatic, or communicative factors. Traditionally, neutralization has been investigated primarily at the phonological and morphological levels, where it is understood as the suspension of linguistic oppositions in specific contexts. However, recent developments in linguistic theory suggest that neutralization extends beyond these levels and also operates in syntax, influencing the realization of grammatical meanings and syntactic functions. At the syntactic level, neutralization is manifested in the reduction or disappearance of distinctions between syntactic constructions, syntactic relations, and communicative sentence types. In many cases, contextual, discourse-related, and pragmatic factors, together with the speaker's communicative intention, override formally expressed grammatical oppositions, allowing structurally different constructions to perform equivalent communicative functions. From this perspective, syntactic neutralization serves as an important mechanism that contributes to the flexibility, economy, and communicative efficiency of language.

Despite the growing interest in functional and cognitive approaches to syntax, syntactic neutralization remains considerably less explored than its phonological and morphological counterparts. Most previous studies have focused on individual manifestations of this phenomenon, whereas a comprehensive semantic-functional account of syntactic neutralization has yet to be developed. This research gap is particularly evident in comparative studies of English and Russian, whose syntactic systems rely on different grammatical resources to express similar communicative meanings.

The concept of neutralization originated in structural linguistics and is traditionally associated with the work of Trubetzkoy (1939), who introduced it to describe the suspension of phonological oppositions in specific contexts [1]. This interpretation was further developed by Jakobson (1932, 1971) and other representatives of the Prague Linguistic Circle, who regarded neutralization as a regular mechanism governing the realization of distinctive oppositions within the language system [2].

The functional dimension of neutralization was subsequently emphasized by Martinet (1960), who viewed it as one of the mechanisms contributing to linguistic economy [3]. Later, Lyons (1968) argued that the notion of neutralization is applicable beyond phonology, suggesting that comparable processes may occur at other linguistic levels whenever context renders formal distinctions functionally irrelevant. This broader interpretation has been reflected in contemporary linguistic reference works, where neutralization is generally defined as the reduction or elimination of linguistically significant contrasts under particular structural or communicative conditions (Crystal, 2008).

Although neutralization has been investigated most extensively in phonology and morphology, subsequent studies have demonstrated its relevance to the syntax-morphology interface. In particular, Baerman, Brown, and Corbett (2005) discuss neutralization in relation to syncretism, showing that the loss of formal distinctions may result from the interaction between syntactic and morphological structures [4]. Silverman (2012) further broadens the theoretical perspective by defining neutralization as a conditioned limitation on the distribution of contrastive values, thereby emphasizing its functional nature rather than restricting it to phonological processes [5].

Building on these theoretical foundations, the present study approaches syntactic neutralization as a context-dependent reduction of functionally relevant syntactic oppositions. From a semantic-functional perspective, formally distinct syntactic constructions may lose their contrastive value under the influence of discourse, communicative intention, and pragmatic context while preserving communicative effectiveness.

When discussing neutralization in syntax, we refer to the reduction or merging of distinctions that would otherwise be encoded by syntactic structures or operations. Following Silverman (2012), neutralization may be understood not merely as the elimination of oppositions but as a conditioned redistribution of contrastive information [5]. Although Silverman's analysis is primarily concerned with phonological neutralization, this broader understanding of the phenomenon can be extended to the syntactic domain. From this perspective, formally distinct syntactic constructions may lose their functional contrast under the influence of context, discourse conditions, and communicative intention. Thus, syntactic neutralization can be viewed as the context-dependent suspension of functionally relevant syntactic oppositions while preserving the communicative effectiveness of an utterance.

One way to consider syntactic neutralization is through word-order flexibility. In English, word order (Subject-Verb-Object) is the primary way to distinguish who is the agent versus the patient in a sentence. "The dog bites the man" and "The man bites the dog" have opposite meanings because of word order. English has no case marking on these nouns, so syntax (i.e., word order) carries the burden of distinction. In Russian, however, case inflections on nouns indicate who is the subject or object (*sobaka kusaet cheloveka* vs. *cheloveka kusaet sobaka* – "the dog bites the man"). The noun endings indicate the subject/object roles. This means that Russian can grammatically allow multiple word orders (*Sobaka kusaet cheloveka*, *Cheloveka kusaet sobaka*, or *Kusaet sobaka cheloveka*, etc.) without changing the core proposition. Word order may be used for emphasis or information structure, but not for basic grammatical role assignment. In a sense, Russian neutralizes the syntactic contrast between different word orders for the purpose of indicating subject/object roles. Word order is therefore "neutral" with respect to grammatical relations (within limits). A fixed SVO order versus an OSV order in Russian does not signal a difference in who is doing what; instead, it signals topic-focus differences pragmatically, which constitute a separate level of analysis. Thus, a contrast that exists in English syntax (where word order is grammatically meaningful) is neutralized in Russian syntax because morphological case assumes that function. Conversely, one could say that English has neutralized morphological case and transferred that functional load to syntax, illustrating how languages distribute grammatical distinctions across different linguistic levels.

Another syntactic contrast is **active vs. passive voice** (and other diatheses, like causative, antipassive, etc., in languages that have them). Some languages lack a formal passive construction, effectively neutralizing the active/passive distinction—they might always use active syntax and rely on context or generic pronouns to express what other languages do with a passive. Chinese, for instance, has passive-like constructions but often simply drops the agent and uses an active verb in context to imply a passive meaning. One might say that, in Chinese, active and passive roles are not grammatically distinguished as obligatorily as in English—an active sentence can serve a passive function pragmatically, neutralizing that difference unless a speaker chooses to add *bèi*. In English, the difference between "The vase broke" (intransitive; it could imply that it broke itself or was broken by someone unknown) and "The vase was broken (by John)" (passive) is explicit through the passive construction. Many contexts in English require one or the other for clarity or stylistic reasons, whereas languages without a strict passive form can neutralize that distinction through context.

Some languages neutralize distinctions in mood (e.g., subjunctive vs. indicative) in certain environments. English, for instance, has a very marginal subjunctive (distinct only in cases like "I suggest that he go" vs. "he goes"). In most cases, the indicative and subjunctive forms in English coincide (the subjunctive is only clear in the third person singular or with the verb *to be*, e.g., "if I were"). We could say English has largely neutralized the indicative/subjunctive distinction in its verb morphology, making it a syntactic or morpho-syntactic neutralization. Russian has a subjunctive/conditional mood (often formed with the particle *by* and the past tense), but one could argue that, in certain subordinate clauses, the distinction between using the indicative and the "subjunctive" is neutral or optional. The line between morphological and syntactic neutralization is blurry here, since mood is often marked by morphology or particles.

A type of syntactic neutralization occurs when languages allow pro-drop (omission of subject pronouns) versus those that do not. In Spanish or Russian, one can drop the subject pronoun (*Ø viene* "(he) comes", *Ø prišel* "(he) came")

without ambiguity because the verb inflection or context identifies the subject. In English, dropping the subject is ungrammatical ("is coming" is not a valid full sentence in Standard English for "he is coming"). One could view pro-drop languages as neutralizing the distinction between an explicit and an implicit subject in certain persons—the syntax does not force the contrast between "pronoun present" and "pronoun absent" to carry meaning, whereas in English the presence of a subject pronoun versus its absence is a meaningful (indeed mandatory) difference. Essentially, languages like Spanish or Russian treat sentences with or without an overt subject as the same underlying structure (the distinction is neutralized syntactically; an empty category stands in). Typologically, pro-drop is common in languages with rich verb inflection (again, different levels trade off: rich morphology allows the neutralization of an element in syntax) [6].

Syntactic neutralization can also be seen in how languages tolerate ambiguous structures that others avoid. English famously has some ambiguous constructions (e.g., "Visiting relatives can be boring"), where the subject could be interpreted as either relatives who visit or the act of visiting relatives. Such ambiguity arises from a neutralization of underlying structures (gerund vs. participle or a noun vs. verb distinction). Some languages might disambiguate this by using different syntax (perhaps a different form for the verbal noun). When a language uses one structure to cover two meanings that another language would distinguish syntactically, that is a kind of neutralization. For instance, English uses the same structure for a statement and a yes–no question if intonation is the only marker ("You're coming?" with rising tone vs. "You're coming."). Here the syntactic form is identical; only prosody differentiates the speech act. We might call that a pragmatic marker, but syntactically the distinction is neutralized (unlike, say, Spanish, which inverts the subject and verb in a question or uses a question particle). This edges into pragmatics, but it highlights that the division between syntax and pragmatics in marking contrasts can lead to neutralization at the purely syntactic level.

One more thing to note is that English syntax is relatively rigid and relies on structure to convey meaning, so where English neutralizes a syntactic distinction, it often does so through prosody or context [7]. One could argue that English neutralizes the distinction involving the relative clause complementizer *that* in certain cases: "the man I saw" vs. "the man that I saw"—the presence or absence of *that* does not change the meaning (although style or formality may differ). Russian syntax, being more flexible and often using morphology to encode grammatical roles, shows neutralization of word order for grammatical relations, as discussed above. Another interesting Russian example is the neutralization of negation scope in certain constructions: double negation in Russian (using *ni*-words) is syntactically required, whereas in English double negatives typically have a different meaning (they do not neutralize to a single negation). In Russian, *Ja nigde ne byval* ("I nowhere not was") simply means "I haven't been anywhere"—the two negatives neutralize into a single logical negation. In English, two negatives can cancel each other out or, at the very least, are considered non-standard [6]. Thus, Russian syntax neutralizes what, in logic, would be a distinction between one negation and two by treating two negative elements as one semantic negation, whereas English generally avoids this by using only one negative element at a time (except in dialects or rhetorical usage).

So, syntactic neutralization is perhaps less clear-cut than phonological or morphological neutralization, but it underscores the idea that what one language treats as two distinct constructions, another may treat as one. Whether it involves leaving out elements (subjects, complementizers), allowing multiple interpretations for one structure, or lacking a construction altogether, neutralization in syntax often reflects the balance between economy and explicitness that each language strikes. The interplay between syntax, morphology, and pragmatics is crucial: often, if syntax neutralizes a distinction, another level (morphology, lexical choice, or context) compensates to avoid confusion, or speakers simply rely on context. This interplay will be further illustrated in the discussion of semantic and pragmatic neutralization.

The analysis has shown that syntactic neutralization is a systematic phenomenon rather than a collection of isolated cases. Although it is generally less explicit than phonological or morphological neutralization, it demonstrates that distinctions encoded syntactically in one language may be neutralized or expressed differently in another. Such neutralization reflects the balance between structural economy and communicative explicitness that characterizes individual languages. The findings also indicate that syntactic neutralization cannot be examined independently of other linguistic levels. Whenever syntactic distinctions are neutralized, their functional load is frequently redistributed to morphology, lexical means, discourse, or pragmatic context, thereby preserving communicative effectiveness. This confirms that neutralization is best understood as a dynamic semantic-functional mechanism operating across the language system rather than as a phenomenon confined to a single linguistic level.

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