

The category of animacy-inanimacy in the Russian language and the linguistic worldview

Andrei Narushevich^{1*}, and *Hadi Bak*²

¹Rostov State University of Economics, Inicativnaya str. 46, Taganrog, 347936, Russia

²Atatürk University, Atatürk str., Erzurum, 25140, Turkey

Abstract. The main goal main goal of our study is to give a description of a segment of the linguistic worldview, which reflects the division of objects of objective reality into animate and inanimate, which underpins the grammatical category of animacy-inanimacy of nouns in Russian. Methodology. The methodological basis of is study is comprised of the combination of structural-semantic, cultural-anthropological and comparative methods. The interpretation of linguistic phenomena is based upon the link between the grammatical form and its semantic content. The employment of cultural-anthropological approach allows us to reveal the reflection of fragments of the linguistic worldview in language forms, a reflection of collective ideas about the surrounding reality fixed in the language and obligatory for all speakers of this language. An analysis of everyday ideas about various objects of reality that are interpreted as living or inanimate, allows us to discover, at the epistemological level, several intermediate conceptual forms (interpreted as resembling the animate, as formerly animate, as a set of living organisms, etc.). This makes it possible to explain the existence of nouns with fluctuating animacy-inanimacy. Results. The performed analysis leads us to the conclusion that in the linguistic consciousness of speakers, the classification of objects as animate/inanimate is carried out not only on the basis of the biological properties of these objects, but also based on their interpretation by speakers as active or inactive. At the same time, our interpretation of some objects may cause difficulties because they combine the characteristics of both “animate” and “inanimate”.

1 Introduction

The category of animacy-inanimacy in the Russian language and, more broadly, in interpreting objects of reality as animate or inanimate is an object of research of various academic disciplines – linguistics, psychology, culture studies, etc. In [1], the perception of living objects by people is studied; the semantics of animacy-inanimacy is considered as a means of creating metaphors in [2-6], or as an aspect in the study of the linguistic worldview in [7-10]. Traditionally, the category of animacy-inanimacy is defined as a grammatical category of nouns, which reflects the division of objects of reality into

*Corresponding author: anarushevich@yandex.ru

animate and inanimate. Animate nouns, the declension forms of which coincide in accusative and genitive cases /Accusative=Genitive/, usually denote living beings. Inanimate nouns, which are characterized by the coincidence of the accusative and nominative forms /Accusative=Nominative/, nominate inanimate objects. However, this pattern is regularly violated: for example, most nouns naming deceased persons, the names of game pieces, dolls, etc. are animate nouns, while the nouns denoting plants, groups of living beings, etc. are declined like inanimate nouns. These examples indicate that for this grammar category the leading characteristic is the subjective interpretation of the object by native speakers, as well as the outcomes of the earlier stages of interpretation (animism) recorded in grammar. As Louis Hjelmslev points out, “subjective classification ... rarely rests on the physical properties of an object, more often it is based on the role, utility function (imaginary or real) of the object” [12].

An analysis of noun usage allows us make the following conclusion: the category of animacy/inanimacy is inextricably linked with the anthropocentrism of human thinking: some objects are likened to a person and refer to animate ones, while others that do not show “activity”, do not resemble a person as a “standard” of living things, perceived as inanimate. Thus, the epistemological aspect is the leading one in determining the grammatical status of a noun [13].

2 Methodology

The methodological foundation of this research comprises the system unity of the structural-semantic, cultural-anthropological and comparative methods. The interpretation of linguistic phenomena is based upon the link between the grammatical form and its semantic content. The employment of cultural-anthropological approach allows us to reveal the reflection of fragments of the linguistic worldview in language forms, a reflection of collective ideas about the surrounding reality fixed in the language and obligatory for all speakers of this language.

An analysis of interpretation of objects as “animate” or “inanimate” by native speakers shows that the standard of “animate” is the human himself or herself. Life forms that differ from this standard are frequently ambiguously classified in language, which explains the contradiction between the oppositions “alive/not alive” and “animate/inanimate”.

3 Results

It is necessary to distinguish between scientific concepts, which are formed as a result of an objective scientific analysis of reality, and “everyday concepts” inherent in most native speakers, and reflecting fragments of the “naïve” linguistic worldview–“subjective ideas of a person about the world recorded by the facts of the language, different from the scientific worldview” [14].

As the linguistic analysis shows, the elements of context –nouns and adjectives with which nouns can be combined–are also associated with the comprehension of the corresponding objects as “animate” or “inanimate”.

Dolls and game pieces. A doll is, as a rule, a miniature copy of a person. At the same time, ludic activity creates an opportunity to use of names of toys in a context typical for human actions. These features explain the compatibility of names of toys with animacy-labeled verbs and adjectives: *to nurse (feed, comb, lull) a doll; sad (funny, talking) doll*. On the other hand, these are inanimate objects that can break or crack: *a broken doll, a cracked nesting doll*, etc. The combination of animate and inanimate characteristics determines the fluctuation of the grammatical marker of animacy/inanimacy in the declensions of these

nouns /Accusative=Nominative/ and /Accusative=Genitive/: “*Then, when she had her own children, she began to sew dolls for them*” (M. Baru); “*I bought a lot of things. Sometimes I bought dolls*” (A. Gerasimov). Special mention should be made of the traditional construction “to play with dolls”, which retains the nominative case: “*But in some ways she looks like the mother, who was quietly lying in a compartment next to her two little daughters playing with dolls*” (V. Kobets); “*All Veras in the yard played with dolls, and only she, the smallest one, played with soldiers*” (T. Kudryavtseva).

Names of pieces in cards, chess, etc. show similar properties. In the game system, the relationship between the pieces creates a certain hierarchy that is reminiscent of social communication. In addition, some of the names of game pieces (*queen, king, knight, bishop*) appeared as a result of the formation of figurative meanings of originally animated nouns. Other names (jack, ace, queen, etc.), by analogy with those mentioned above, are endowed with the properties of living beings, which is supported by the peculiarities of their compatibility. The semantics of the names of the game pieces shows that they are interpreted as active objects resembling living beings, which is reflected in the declension of nouns of the animate type.

The deceased. Life and death are inextricably linked concepts. Mythological and religious ideas about “life after death” are undoubtedly some of the brightest and most acutely experienced ideas for most people. It is no coincidence that the word “deceased” literally means “asleep” in Russian. The nouns denoting the deceased contain contradictory components in their semantics: “person” and “dead”, “deceased”, which determines the specificity of their use. This is reflected in the peculiarities of their compatibility with verbs. Thus, the words *the deceased, the late, the passed away* in certain contexts regularly combine with verbs denoting the actions of living beings. Usually we are talking about the events of the past, when the people in question were still alive: “*The deceased worked all her life as a ticket attendant in a cinema*” (S. Shikera). In addition, the deceased and the dead are regularly the main characters of mystical stories in which they act like living beings: “*The dead man rose and began to look out for his murderer*” (M. Shishkin). All this determines the grammatical animacy of the words of this group /Accusative=Genitive/.

A special status among the nouns denoting the dead belongs to the word *corpse*, which is regularly declined as an inanimate noun: “*In the park, they would find corpses of suicides and corpses of those who were shot*” (D. Granin). This is due to the specific meaning of this word – “the body of a deceased organism”. A corpse is only a part, the material shell devoid of a soul and of everything that is connected with life. It is characteristic that this word is used not only in relation to people, but also to animals: *the corpse of a horse, corpses of animals*. The compatibility of this noun also indicates the characteristics of the inanimacy: “*In such conditions, the corpse decomposes quickly*” (E. Gordeeva); “*The tightness of the burial contributed to the fact that the corpse was destroyed very slowly*” (S. Ryazantsev).

Thus, the semantics of words of this group and the associations, fixed in the minds of speakers, stipulates the grammatical characteristics of animacy-inanimacy of these nouns.

Plants. As is known, the names of plants are grammatically inanimate nouns /Accusative=Nominative/. This is because speakers perceive plants as significantly different from other living organisms, primarily in that they are incapable of independent motion. As Aristotle mentioned, “the beginning of movement arises in us from ourselves, even if nothing has set us in motion from outside. We do not see anything like this in inanimate [bodies], but they are always set in motion by something external, whereas a living being, as we say, moves itself”. [15, 226]. V.A. Itskovich also points out: “a living thing is understood as an object capable of independent motion, so plants belong to inanimate objects”. [16, 87] In addition, people in their work still use plants as a building material, to manufacture fabrics, medicines, etc. The names of plants are regularly used in

inanimacy-labeled contexts: *to spray plants, chop down a tree, mow grass*, etc. “*You can often see: a tree is broken or cut down, and new branches are already growing around the break or stump*” (I. Lalayants).

Thus, in the “naïve” worldview, plants are perceived as part of the inorganic nature that surrounds people. This determines the grammatical inanimacy of words in this group.

Microorganisms. For a long time, people knew nothing about the existence of microorganisms because the study of this form of life is only possible when specialized technology and equipment are utilized. In addition, even in the framework of the scientific worldview, viruses with the ability to crystallize are considered a special, transitional form between organic and inorganic nature. Native speakers perceive microorganisms as distant from the “human standard”, hence microorganisms are perceived ambiguously. This explains the fluctuations in the declension of nouns in this group /Accusative=Nominative or Accusative=Genitive/: “*The servants rubbed themselves, by the order of the lady, with ointments that kill microbes*” (A. Titov).

Fish and sea creatures as food. The nouns *herring, squid, oyster, shrimp*, etc. are often used in the meaning of “the dish made from a creature of a certain species”. As a rule, under the influence of the direct meaning (“a living being”), these nouns are inflected as animate ones: “*He ate pike perch in butter ...*” (A. Chekhov); “*Yesterday we ate goose and all the pies*” (A. Chekhov).

At the same time, the following pattern is present: the names of crustaceans, seashell and some other marine animals are often inclined as inanimate: *eat oysters, boil squid, chop crabs*, etc. “*Oysters, lobsters, shrimps, crab meat - cut and mix with the sauce.*” (A. Nyman). It is clear that this combination of features of the living and the nonliving in the semantics of the nouns of this group is reflected in their grammatical form.

We carried out a frequency analysis of the grammatical animacy-inanimacy indicator of the nouns in the considered groups. The examples were taken from the National Corpus of the Russian Language (www.ruscorpora.ru) using continuous sampling (at least 100 examples for each analyzed unit). The analysis results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency analysis of the usage of nouns in the considered groups.

Lexeme	Accusative=Genitive (% of usage)	Accusative=Nominative (% of usage)
the deceased	100	-
the dead	100	-
the late	100	-
corpse	-	100
doll	64	36
nest doll	56	44
bobblehead	54	46
microbe	45	55
bacteria	47	53
virus	34	66
oyster	43	57
shrimp	41	59
lobster	38	62
squid	36	64
crab	38	62

As can be seen from the table, the usage frequency of the considered nouns confirms the data obtained in the analysis of the semantics of lexemes. The nouns denoting the deceased are regularly declined as animate nouns (with the exception of the lexeme *corpse*). The names of microorganisms show fluctuations in declension, which is due to the specifics of their semantics. The names of sea creatures as food are more frequently declined as inanimate

nouns, which is explained by the change in their lexical meaning –“the dish made from a creature of a certain type”.

4 Conclusions

Our analysis of the semantic groups of nouns enables us to make a conclusion about the grammatical category of animacy-inanimacy of nouns being associated with the specifics of people’s interpretation of the surrounding world. Labeling objects as “animate” or “inanimate” is often determined by everyday, “naïve”, ideas held by native speakers. This is indicated by the existence of objects that combine the characteristic of “alive” and “dead”, which is determined by the peculiarities of thinking of native speakers, by fixed associations, the tradition of use, and other reasons. The characteristics of the living (non-living), that is reflected in the semantics of the noun, determine the grammatical indicator of animacy-inanimacy /Accusative=Genitive or Accusative=Nominative/.

Thus, the existence of animate and inanimate nouns in the Russian language can be considered as a fragment of the linguistic worldview reflecting the specific ideas of people about the surrounding reality.

References

1. M. Lowder, P. Gordon, *Cognition*, **136**, 85-90 (2014), doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2014.11.021
2. J. Ji, M. Liang, *Lingua*, **205**, 71-89 (2018), doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2017.12.017
3. Z. I. Rezanova, E. D. Nekrasova, I. G. Temnikova, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, **200**, 135-141 (2015), doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.08.033
4. L. Jin, *Brain and Cognition*, **126**, 23-32 (2018), doi.org/10.1016/j.bandc.2018.06.001
5. V. A. Surovtsev, V. N. Syrov, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, **200**, 130-134 (2015), doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.08.032
6. D.ai Yingli, Z. I. Rezanova, K. S. Shilyaev, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 22 August 2015, the Xxvi Annual International Academic Conference, Language and Culture (2015)
7. N. A. Mishankina, A. N. Zheleznyakova, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, **215**, 316-321(2015), doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.640
8. U. S. Zakharova, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, **154**, 499-503 (2015), doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.201
9. N. V. Ufimtseva, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, **154**, 28, 36-43. (2014) doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.10.108
10. I. Lenart, I. Markovina, *Heliyon*, **2**, February (2021), doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e05940
11. H. Bak, *Proceedings of Southern Federal University. Philology*, **25**, 87-99 (2021), [doi10.18522/1995-0640-2021-1-87-99](https://doi.org/10.18522/1995-0640-2021-1-87-99)
12. L. Hjelmslev, *Principles of typological analysis of languages of various systems* (1972)
13. A. Narushevich, *Slavica*, **49**, 56-72 (2020), [doi10.31034/049.2020.022](https://doi.org/10.31034/049.2020.022)
14. U. Kozina, *The Humanities (Yalta)*, **37**,60-64 (2017)
15. A. Narushevich, *Hygiene of culture. Culture in the digital space* (Budapest, 2020)
16. Aristotle, *Physics, Aristotle. Writings in Four Volumes*, **3**, 235-341 (1981)

17. V. Itskovich, *Questions of Linguistics*, **4**, 85-96 (1980)
18. R. Shakar. *Semantic category of animation and its expression in Russian word formation* (Kazan, 2018)
19. D. Shalkov, V. Kolmakova, E. Shilova, *Modern Global Economic System: Evolutional Development vs. Revolutionary Leap*, **198**, 136-144 (2021), doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-69415-9_16