OVS Order in Russian: A View from Variable Argument Linking

Maria Berkovich[1] Daniar Kasenov[2] Ivan Kalyakin[3, 4]

[1]HSE University [2]New York University [3]Institute of Linguistics, RAS [4]Pushkin State Russian Language Institute

A-movement in OVS order

Pereltsvaig (2021) argues that object-initial word orders in Russian have radically different derivations. While OSV requires Ā-movement of O over S, which resides in [Spec, TP], OVS is derived via A-movement of O to the subject position (see also Bailyn 2004). She provides evidence from reciprocal binding and weak crossover effects (1), suggesting that there is no Ā-movement involved in the derivation of OVS word order.

(1) a. Ā-movement of O in OSV
*Každuyu kvartiru$_i$ eë$_i$ xozjajka otremontirovala
every.ACC apartment.ACC its.GEN owner.NOM renovated
Exp.: 'Every apartment was renovated by its owner.'

b. A-movement of O in OVS
Každuyu kvartiru$_i$ otremontirovala eë$_i$ xozjajka
every.ACC apartment.ACC renovated its.GEN owner.NOM
'Every apartment was renovated by its owner.'

There is also supporting evidence from quantifier float and *that*-trace effects (Antonyuk 2021) that the object DP ends up in [Spec, TP].

However, if OVS is derived via A-movement of the object, two questions emerge: (i) how the main verb ends up before the subject; (ii) how to dislocate the object over the subject without violating A-minimality (Anagnostopolou 2003 *et seq.*), cf. (2)

(2) [$_{TP}$ DP$_O$ T [$_{VoiceP}$ DP$_S$ Voice [$_{vP}$ *v* [$_{VP}$ V DP$_O$]]]]

A Smuggling account

In his recent work, Storment (2025) suggests that the mechanism of smuggling derives inversion constructions in general. Smuggling (Collins 2005) allows the lower DP to be moved above the higher DP as a subconstituent of some VP via movement of that VP. As a result, the initially lower DP can be targeted for A-movement without violating A-minimality, cf. (3).

(3) a. Knigu čitajet Petja
book.ACC reads Petya.NOM
'Petya reads the book.'

b. [$_{VoiceP}$ [$_{VP}$ čitajet knigu] Voice [$_{vP}$ Petja *v* [$_{VP}$ ~~čitajet knigu~~]]]

The crucial prediction of the smuggling account is that S in the OVS word order is the external argument, i.e. it has all the same properties as S in SVO or OSV word orders. We, however, argue that this prediction is **not** supported by empirical evidence.

Funding information

This research has been supported by the Russian Science Foundation, project 25-18-00222 "Control and Raising in the languages of Eurasia" realized at Pushkin State Russian Language Institute.

References

❖ S. Antonyuk. Russian OVS: Towards a Better Understanding of the Construction's Properties and Significance. *Journal of Slavic linguistics*, 29(3):1–16, 2021. ❖ J. F. Bailyn. Generalized inversion. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 22(1):1–50, 2004. ❖ N. Boneh and L. Nash. The syntax and semantics of dative dps in russian ditransitives. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 35(4):899–953, 2017. ❖ K. Branan. Locality and Antilocality: The Logic of Conflicting Requirements. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 54(1):1–38, 2023. ❖ C. Collins. A Smuggling Approach to the Passive in English. *Syntax*, 8(2):81–120, 2005. ❖ M. C. Cuervo. *Datives at Large*. PhD thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2003. ❖ A. R. Deal. Raising to Ergative: Remarks on Applicatives of Unaccusatives. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 50(2):388–415, 2019. ❖ V. Gribanova. Head movement and ellipsis in the expression of Russian polarity focus. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 35(4):1079–1121, 2017. ❖ E. Neu. Direct causatives of unergatives: A view from variable unaccusativity. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory*, 44(1), 2025. ❖ A. Pereltsvaig. The OVS order in Russian: Where are the O and the V? *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*, 29, 2021. ❖ P. Shushurin. A low applicative analysis of External Possession in Russian. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*, 29, 2021. ❖ J. D. Storment. *Projecting (Your) Voice: A Theory of Inversion and Defective Circumvention*. PhD thesis, State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2025. ❖ R. Tollan. Unergatives are different: Two types of transitivity in Samoan. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*, 3(1), 2018. ❖ J. Wood and A. Marantz. The Interpretation of External Arguments. In R. D'Alessandro, I. Franco, and Ángel J. Gallego, editors, *The Verbal Domain*, pages 255–278. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.

A new generalization

We claim that S in OVS constructions **fails** to pass external argument diagnostics – this is not predicted by any account on the market.

In (4) and (5), we employ external argument diagnostics (agent adverbials and purpose clauses) while cross-cutting them with configurations that require A-movement of O (Pereltsvaig 2021). Ungrammaticality is due to conflicting requirements: S must and must not occupy [Spec, VoiceP] at the same time.

(4) a. *každogo studenta naročno rugaet ego naučruk
every.ACC student.ACC intentionally scold.PRES.3.SG his advisor.NOM
Exp.: 'Every student is intentionally scolded by his advisor.'

b. *každogo studenta rugaet ego naučruk, čtoby poizdevatjsja
every.ACC student.ACC scold.PRES.3.SG his advisor.NOM to mock.INF
Exp.: 'Every student is intentionally scolded by his advisor in order to mock him.'

(5) a. *molodoženov opozoryat naročno roditeli drug druga
newlyweds.ACC embarrass.FUT.3.PL intentionally parents.NOM each other.GEN
Exp.: 'Newlyweds will be intentionally embarrassed by each other's parents.'

b. *molodoženov opozoryat roditeli drug druga, čtoby
newlyweds.ACC embarrass.FUT.3.PL parents.NOM each other.GEN to
ih possoritj
them.ACC make.quarrel.INF
Exp.: 'Newlyweds will be embarrassed by each other's parents in order to make them quarrel.'

New observation: S in OVS constructions is not a canonical external argument – one that is introduced in the thematic [Spec, VoiceP].

Analysis I: demotion of the external argument

If the external argument does not occupy [Spec, VoiceP], then where is it?

Case assignment strongly suggests that the base-generation position of the two arguments is not flipped: if S were introduced below O, it would be near impossible to derive the fact that OVS order still involves a NOM-ACC case configuration.

Option 1. There is a split between between external arguments: some are in [Spec, VoiceP], others are in [Spec, *v*P] (Tollan 2018).

(6) a. [$_{VoiceP}$ DP Voice [$_{vP}$ *v* [$_{VP}$ V DP]]]

b. [$_{VoiceP}$ Voice [$_{vP}$ DP *v* [$_{VP}$ V (DP)]]]

We reject this option because, cross-linguistically, the split seems to be established between unergatives (and some transitives, e.g., ingestives) and other transitives. In Russian, unergatives successfully pass external argument diagnostics.

(7) Ja begal po utram, čtoby poxudetj
I.NOM ran on mornings to slim.down
'I used to run in the morning to slim down.'

Option 2. External arguments in OVS constructions are introduced with the help of the HighAppl head (Cuervo 2003; Neu 2025).

(8) [$_{VoiceP}$ Voice [$_{HighApplP}$ DP HighAppl [$_{vP}$ *v* [$_{VP}$ V DP]]]]

The main objection comes from case-marking: applied arguments in Russian are generally dative-marked. We follow Shushurin (2021) in that dative-marked arguments in Russian are introduced by the LowAppl head: the contrast between low and high applicatives in Russian (Boneh, Nash 2017) is rather between low and high-low applicatives (Wood, Marantz 2017).

Crucially, we believe that this option sheds light on apparent A-minimality violations in OVS constructions.

Analysis II: anti-locality

Building on Deal (2019) and Branan (2022), we propose that the possibility of moving O over S without violating A-minimality is due to an anti-locality constraint on movement, as defined in (9).

(9) a. Generalized Spec-to-Spec anti-locality: Movement of a phrase from the specifier of XP must cross a maximal projection other than XP.

b. Definition of crossing: Movement from position A to position B crosses C if and only if C dominates A but does not dominate B.

Taking the initial position of S to be [Spec, HighApplP], the ban on Spec-to-Spec movement explains why it is O that ends up in the subject position, see (10). Additionally, under the common assumption that in Russian V moves (at least) to Asp (Gribanova 2017), the required OVS word order is derived.

(10) [$_{VoiceP}$ Spec Voice [$_{HighApplP}$ DP$_S$ HighAppl [$_{vP}$ *v* [$_{VP}$ V DP$_O$]]]]

Ditransitives: only an apparent issue

Branan (2022) motivates his proposal based on cases of non-iterative symmetry: only the second-highest DP can undergo A-movement (A-minimality holds *modulo* anti-locality). However, ditransitives in Russian seem to contradict the prediction: both IO V S DO and DO V S IO word orders are possible.

(11) a. Maše podaril ja konfety
M.DAT gifted I.NOM sweets.ACC
'I gifted sweets to Masha.'

b. Konfety podaril ja Maše
sweets.ACC gifted I.NOM M.DAT
'I gifted sweets to Masha.'

However, relative order of DO and IO is not fixed, suggesting that (11b) is derived by A-movement of DO over IO which feeds movement of DO into the subject position. Our analysis makes the following prediction: IO V S DO word order should **not** involve A-movement of DO over IO.

The diagnostic: backward binding. Given that only A-movement creates new antecedents for binding, IO V S DO word order should not allow backwards binding of DO into IO. This is borne out (judgements of ~5 speakers – example (12a) is the baseline).

(12) [Context: the teacher took away every kid's distraction (smartphones, game consoles, yo-yos and such).]

a. Ego$_i$ pristavku vernula učiteljnica toljko Pete$_i$
His console.ACC gave.back teacher.NOM only P.DAT
'The teacher gave only Petja's console back to him.'

b. *Eë$_i$ vladeljcu vernula učiteljnica toljko pristavku$_i$
its owner.DAT gave.back teacher.NOM only console.ACC
Exp.: 'The teacher gave only the game console back to its owner.'

NB: The intended reading is of covariance – some speakers allow (12b) when understanding it that there was a unique game console whose owner had more distractions.

Conclusions

- A-movement of O in Russian OVS constructions requires some sort of demotion of the external argument, which allows to obviate A-minimality violations.
- We suggest an account based on two main ingredients: (i) lower structural position of the external argument; (ii) Spec-to-Spec anti-locality.
- Other implementations are possible – but, given the data presented here, any account that derives inversion in Russian OVS constructions while keeping the external argument in its usual position seems less plausible.

dk4981@nyu.edu kalyakin.iv@gmail.com