

### THREE PUZZLES ABOUT *nel'zja* IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN

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The main aim of this paper is to group together three (apparently) disjoint issues concerning the syntactic properties and the deep semantics of the phi-invariant negative modal operator *nel'zja* (either ‘impossible’ or ‘impermissible’) in Contemporary Russian (henceforth CR) and suggest a possible unified solution for all of them. The puzzles take the following form:

**Puzzle n° 1.** Modalized utterances conveying (participant-external) negative circumstantial possibility of the type  $\neg\Diamond p$  can be formally represented in CR by two quasi-synonymous constructions, i.e., *nel'zja* + INF<sup>PF</sup> and  $\neg$ (INF<sup>PF</sup>), cf. (1)–(2):

- (1) 79 procent-ov polaga-jut, čto segodnja **nel'zja** postupi-t' v  
 79 percent.GEN.PL think-PRS-IPFV-3PL that today impossible enroll-INF-PFV in  
 vuz-Ø “bez značitel'n-yx denežn-yx zatrat-Ø”.  
 college-ACC.SG without significant-GEN.PL monetary-GEN.PL cost-GEN.PL

[Tret' rossijan sčitajet Rossiju sliškom obrazovannoj stranoj // Lenta.ru, 2005.06]

‘79% of them think that nowadays it is impossible to get into college “without significant monetary costs”’

- (2) — No točno zna-l, čto na besplatn-oe otdeleni-e mne **ne**  
 But exactly know-PST-IPFV-M.SG that on free-ACC.SG department-ACC.SG I-DAT NEG  
*postupi-t'*, sliškom vysok-ie trebovani-ja i konkurs-Ø  
 enroll-INF-PFV way too high-NOM.PL demand-NOM.PL and competition-NOM.SG  
 bol's-oj.  
 big-NOM.SG

[Vtoroe vysšee po-xitromu // Kommersant, 2011.03]

‘But I knew for sure that I could not be funded—too high demands and too big of a competition’

However, when the aspectual marking of the infinitive form is flipped, a strong negative (universal) deontic reading of the type  $\Box\neg p$  (with modal raising) is available only for the first construction, i.e., *nel'zja* + INF<sup>IPF</sup>, whereas for  $\neg$ (INF<sup>IPF</sup>) the negation is interpreted linearly w.r.t. the deontic operator and the structure can be thus assigned only an anankastic reading of the type  $\neg\Box p$ , cf. (3)–(4) [but see (8) below for a case of reconciliation between structures]:

- (3) **Nel'zja** v-sta-va-t' i xodi-t' po salon-u pri  
 Forbidden get=up-INF-IPFV and walk-INF-IPFV around cabin-DAT.SG upon  
 vzlet-e, posadk-e i ruležk-e samolet-a.  
 take-off-PREP.SG landing-PREP.SG and taxiing-PREP.SG plane-GEN.SG

[Foto iz semejnovo arxiva. Stjuard Andrej D'jkonov pogib, spasaja passažirov // Komsomol'skaja pravda, 2006.07]

‘It is forbidden to get up and walk through the cabin during take-off, landing and taxiing phases’

- (4) Slav-a Bog-u, mne zavtra rano **ne** v-sta-va-t'!  
 Glory-NOM-SG God-DAT.SG I-DAT tomorrow early NEG get=up-INF-IPFV

‘Thank goodness I don’t have to wake up early tomorrow!’ (unavailable: ‘I am forbidden to wake up early tomorrow’)

**Puzzle n° 2.** ANDRJUŠČENKO (2017: 39) points out that, when a referential (often pronominal) Subject is present in the syntactic structure and spelled out as a dative DP, the combination [DP<sub>DAT</sub>] + *nel'zja* + INF<sup>PF</sup>, unlike [DP<sub>DAT</sub>] +  $\neg$ (INF<sup>PF</sup>), is pragmatically ill-formed, cf. (5)–(6) (more in general, on the relative rarity of overt dative DPs alongside *nel'zja* cf. GRILLBORZER 2019: 67–72):

- (5) #Mne **nel'zja** v-sta-t' s krovat-i.  
I-DAT impossible get=up-INF-PFV from bed-GEN.SG
- (6) Mne **ne** v-sta-t' s krovat-i.  
I-DAT NEG get=up-INF-PFV from bed-GEN.SG  
Intended: 'I cannot get out of bed'

However, with covert (e.g., non-referential or generalized) Subjects, both variants are equally acceptable, cf. (7):

- (7) Ètot-Ø tekst-Ø **nel'zja** / **ne** pereves-ti<sup>PF</sup> za desjat'-Ø minut-Ø.  
This-ACC.SG text-ACC.SG impossible / NEG translate-INF-PFV in ten-ACC.SG minute-GEN.PL  
Intended: 'You cannot / It is impossible to translate this text in ten minutes'

Moreover, even *nel'zja* + INF<sup>IPF</sup> and ¬(INF<sup>IPF</sup>), which are believed to embed a dative Holder licensed by a matrix Applicative head (BURUKINA 2020), are assigned the same strong negative deontic reading in the same context, cf. (8):

- (8) Na rabot-u **nel'zja** / **ne** opazd-yva-t'<sup>IPF</sup>.  
On work-ACC.SG forbidden / NEG be=late-INF-IPFV  
Intended: 'You mustn't / It is forbidden to come late for work'

**Puzzle n° 3.** It is well known from the literature (cf., a.o., HUDIN 1994) that, while  $[[nel'zja] + INF^{PF}]$  is usually interpreted as  $\neg\Diamond p$  and  $[[nel'zja] + INF^{IPF}]$  as  $\Box\neg p$ , mismatches can frequently occur. In particular, the modal operator may license an infinitive form which is assigned a reading apparently inconsistent with its contextually-bound aspectual marking. Consider (9)–(10) (**G** and **P** are Priorian temporal operators):

- (9) **Nel'zja** dopusti-t' (expected: dopusk-a-t'<sup>IPF</sup>) vozniknoveni-ja pravov-ogo  
Forbidden allow-INF-PFV formation-GEN.SG legal-GEN.SG  
vakuum-a v sfer-e evropejsk-oj bezopasnost-i [...]  
gap-GEN.SG in area-PREP.SG European-GEN.SG security-GEN.SG
- [S. V. Lavrov. Stat'ja v gazetax «Kommersant» i «Uoll-strit džornal» // «Diplomatičeskij vestnik», 2004]
- 'We must prevent the formation of a legal gap in the area of European security'  
 $\lambda x.\lambda y.\lambda t.\lambda e. \Box\neg[DOPUSTIT'(e) \& GP\phi(t) \& HOLDER(e,y) \& THEME(e,vozniknovenija)]$
- (10) No **nel'zja** by-lo s-kr-yva-t' (expected: s-kry-t'<sup>PF</sup>) ego dolgo:  
But impossible be-PST-N.SG hide-INF-IPFV he-ACC long  
vs-e usili-ja s-deržat' ego dela-li ego  
all-NOM.PL effort-NOM.PL hold=back-INF-PFV he-ACC make-PST-IPFV.PL he-ACC  
tol'ko sil'n-ej.  
only strong-CMPR

[Ol'ga Onojko. Nekromantissa (2014)]

'But it was impossible to hide him for long; every effort to hold him back did nothing but make him stronger'

$\lambda x.\lambda y.\lambda t.\lambda e. \neg\Diamond[SKRYVAT'(e) \& P\phi(t) \& EXPERIENCER(e,y) \& THEME(e,ego)]$

**The proposal.** The unified analysis this paper intends to pursue falls back on the following two main arguments: a) the compositional nature of the modal readings assigned to *nel'zja* and *ne* sentences; and b) the grammatically relevant distinction between primary and secondary ordering sources for both overt and covert modal operators. Loosely following YANOVICH'S (2013: 203–216) analysis of CR symboletic modal *stoit* 'should', I argue that the (otherwise underdetermined) modal force of *nel'zja*—an atomized item formed via univerbation of the negative operator *ne* and the element *l'zja* (> Old East Slavic *lbzě* 'possible, easy-doable')—is not sensible to different merging heights in the clausal spine (*contra* IATRIDOU, ZEIJLSTRA 2013)

but, rather, to the abstract epistemic schemata (in the sense of DE WIT, DICKEY FORTH.) projected in the event structure by each aspectual (intensional) operator. In other words, it is the quantificational force of the operator licensed by *nel'zja* (i.e.,  $\exists$  for  $\neg$ [[PF<sub>OP</sub>]],  $\forall$  for  $\neg$ [[IPF<sub>OP</sub>]]) that triggers in turn the most appropriate modal reading ( $\neg\Diamond p$  vs.  $\Box\neg p$ ). This manages to capture the specularity of (7)–(8) and, in particular, to make sense of the underdetermined flavor assigned to the covert modal element in  $\neg$ (INF) sentences—crucially left unexplained in, a.o., MELNIKOVA's 2020 otherwise sound account—which, following TSEDRYK's (2018) convincing arguments, I assume to be monoclausal (*pace*, a.o., FLEISHER 2006).

In a similar fashion, contextual modal-aspectual mismatches of the type instantiated by (9)–(10) can still be linked back to aspectual semantics. In particular, either a)  $\neg$ PF<sub>OP</sub> circumstantial modal base is relativized to an optimal world ordered by an event-maximizing source CONT and picked up from its set by a BEST function (if  $[[nel'zja]] + INF^{PF} = \Box\neg p$ ; cf. TATEVOSOV 2014) or b) the ordering source of  $\neg$ IPF<sub>OP</sub> deontic modal base is *de facto* empty ( $\emptyset$ ), i.e., the modal base is not relativized to any best-ranked world (if  $[[nel'zja]] + INF^{IPF} = \neg\Diamond p$ ).

Finally, the pragmatic oddity of (5) against (6) and the puzzling difference between (3) and (4), which is then recomposed in (8) (endowed with a generalized, covert Holder), can both be explained away resorting to RUBINSTEIN's (2012) commitment-based approach to primary and secondary ordering sources for weak and strong modal operators. In particular, on the one hand, (5) and (6) diverge in the subject's degree of involvement in the given dynamic eventuality. By virtue of the DP<sub>DAT</sub>–(MOD)-INF interaction, (6) could only express participant-internal circumstantial possibility, i.e., that “[...] the possibility that the event occurs is restricted by the speaker's ability to get up [...] in a given set of circumstances” (TSEDRYK 2018: 310), whereas the overt spell-out of DP<sub>DAT</sub> in (5)—a tokenization of participant-external circumstantial possibility—is redundant outside marked information structures, e.g., as an informational focus. On the other hand, the anankastic reading of (4), which is not available for the strong deontic variant with *nel'zja* in (3), is informed by a presupposition of lack of collective commitment towards a set of primary priorities, i.e., by the speaker's belief “[...] that the secondary priorities it depends on are still up for discussion” (RUBINSTEIN 2012: 52), which takes the form  $A\{p\} \wedge B\} \vee \{\neg p\}$ . I argue that, all other parameters being equal, this lack of collective commitment is grammatically signalled by the overt spell-out of a dative (referential) Holder. When reference is generalized, however, commitment to *p* is to be interpreted again as generalized and the strong deontic reading is restored for both structures, as in (8).

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