Adverbs of small quantity and degree as a lexicographic type

Valentina Apresjan

Vinogradov Institute of Russian Language, Russian Academy of Sciences
valentina.apresjan@gmail.com

Abstract

The article examines Russian adverbs of small quantity and small degree. The main semantic divide in this group is between adverbs that can denote a small yet significant quantity or degree of something (e.g., немного ‘a little, a few’) and those that can only denote quantity or degree so small as to be almost negligible (e.g., едва ‘hardly, barely’). The adverbs in these two semantic groups display distinctly different syntactic, combinatorial, communicative and prosodic properties.

Keywords

Integral description of language, adverbs of small quantity and degree, semantics, syntax, communicative properties, prosody, syntactic phraseme

1 Introduction

The article examines Russian adverbs of small quantity and small degree as a lexicographic type within the framework of integral description of language (Apresjan 2000). This lexicographic type is not very large but is fairly important in the system of Russian language. Small quantity and degree adverbs display a number of interesting linguistic properties and differ in this respect both from other adverbs of quantity and degree and amongst themselves.

On the whole, it must be noted that the scale of quantity and degree is very heterogeneous. In particular, the pole of small quantity and the pole of large quantity are absolutely asymmetrical. Without going into great detail, let us state that even such apparently close correlates as немного ‘a little, a few’ and много ‘much, many’, мало ‘little, few’ and много ‘much, many’, маловато and многовато (diminutive forms of мало and много) are very

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different in properties.

Both немного and мало can denote quantity as well as degree, whereas много can only denote quantity – the meaning of high degree is expressed by another adverb, очень ‘very’:

(1a) немного <мало> друзей ‘a few/few friends’

(1b) немного устать <мало уважать> ‘to be tired a little/to respect little’

(1c) много друзей ‘a lot of friends’

(1d) *много устать <уважать> ‘to be very tired/to respect a lot’ - impossible

(1e) очень устать <уважать> ‘to be very tired/to respect a lot’

Мало has three meanings: ‘few’, ‘little’ (quantity), ‘scarcely’ (degree) and ‘not enough for a certain purpose’. Много is asymmetric in this respect – it has only two corresponding meanings: the meaning of quantity ‘many, a lot’ and ‘too many for a certain purpose’. However, their respective diminutive forms маловато and многовато display even more discrepancy: маловато “inherits” two meanings from мало (the meanings ‘few’, ‘little’ (quantity) and ‘not enough for a certain purpose’), whereas многовато has only one meaning – namely, ‘too many or too much for a certain purpose’. Consider the following examples:

(2a) Для двух пирогов этой муки маловато ‘For two cakes, this flour is not quite enough’

(2b) Для двух пирогов этой муки многовато ‘For two cakes, this flour is rather too much’

(3a) Денег мне маловато платят, но удаётся сводить концы с концами ‘I earn rather little money but it’s enough to make the ends meet’

(3b) *Денег мне многовато платят - даже на путешествия хватает ‘I earn rather a lot of money, it’s even enough for travel’ – impossible

The paper focuses on the following adverbs of small quantity and degree: немного ‘a little, a few’, мало ‘little, few’, чуть ‘a little bit, a trifle, slightly, barely’, чуть-чуть ‘a little bit, a trifle’, еле ‘barely, hardly’, едва ‘barely, hardly, scarcely, lightly’, слегка ‘slightly’, самую малость ‘just a little bit’, капельку ‘a tad, a pennyworth’, чуточку ‘a whit, a smidgen’. Some of these adverbs can denote both quantity and degree – немного, мало, чуть-чуть, самую малость, капельку, чуточку; some – only degree (чуть, еле, едва, слегка)\(^2\).

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\(^2\) Each of those words has several meanings, and therefore several different lexemes; however, for the sake of readability, we will not introduce different indices for different lexemes (чуть 1, чуть 2), but will simply talk about different meanings.
2 Linguistic properties of the adverbs of small quantity and degree

2.1 Semantic distinctions among the adverbs of small quantity and degree

2.1.1 Focus of attention: existence or small quantity/degree

The main system-forming semantic divide in this group of adverbs is between adverbs that focus attention on the existence of a small yet significant quantity or degree of something and those that focus attention on a quantity or degree so small as to be almost negligible. In (Bulygina and Shmelev 1988) this distinction was formulated for the adverbs немного and мало: while немного can be interpreted both as ‘a little’, ‘a few’ and ‘little’, ‘few’, мало can only be interpreted as ‘little’ or ‘few’. For немного, these two different interpretations are triggered by different communicative functions: in the prosodically unstressed position of theme or as part of a complex rheme, немного is interpreted as ‘a little’, ‘a few’, with the focus on the existence of something:

(4a) Немного денег осталось ‘There IS a little money left’

In the prosodically stressed position of independent rheme, немного is interpreted as ‘little, few’, with the focus on the “smallness” of the quantity of something:

(4b) Денег осталось немного ‘There is LITTLE money left’

On the other hand, мало always forms an independent rheme and is prosodically stressed, no matter what its position in the sentence is; this adverb can only receive the ‘little, few’ interpretation:

(5a) *Мало денег осталось ‘There IS a little money left’ – stress pattern and interpretation impossible

(5b) Мало денег осталось ‘There is LITTLE money left’

(5c) Денег осталось мало ‘There is LITTLE money left’

As it turns out, this semantic distinction is universal for the entire group of adverbs of small quantity and degree. The communicative difference that goes along with the semantic one is also universal: namely, those adverbs that can only focus attention on the “smallness” of quantity or degree and are, thus, inherently negative, are also the ones that are always rhematic – a fact which is not surprising, since negation tends to form the rheme of the utterance.

Semantically, the adverbs are divided into three groups:

• adverbs that can have both interpretations – (a) a significant small quantity or degree or (b) a negligible small quantity or degree (немного, чуть-чуть, слегка, самую малость, капельку, чуточку);
• adverbs that can only have one interpretation – a negligible small quantity or degree (мало, еле, едва);

• adverb чуть which in the meaning of degree allows both interpretations and in the meaning of quantity – only one, namely, that of negligibly small quantity.

Interestingly, in this respect чуть is contrasted to its reduplicated version чуть-чуть, which allows both interpretations in the meaning of quantity as well as in the meaning of degree; cf.:

(6a) Чуть-чуть муки все-таки 1осталось ‘Still, there IS a tiny bit of flour left’ [a small but significant quantity]

(6b) Муки осталось 1чуть-чуть ‘There is only a TINY bit of flour left’ [a negligibly small quantity]

(6c) После аварии он чуть-чуть 1прихрамывает ‘He’s been slightly LIMPING since the accident’ [a small but significant degree]

(6d) Он прихрамывает совсем 1чуть-чуть ‘He’s limping only SLIGHTLY’ [a negligibly small degree]

Чуть, because of its phonetic peculiarities (it is, like еле and едва, a clitic) cannot form an independent rheme and cannot bear phrasal stress; however, in the meaning of degree it still allows for both interpretations:

(7a) Копия все-таки чуть отличается от оригинала по цветовой гамме ‘Colorwise, the copy is still slightly DIFFERENT from the original’ [a small but significant degree]

(7b) Суп подали чуть теплый ‘They served the soup only SLIGHTLY warm’ [a negligibly small degree]

Чуть does not have a full-blooded quantity meaning; the range of contexts where it can appear as a quantifier is very limited. It appears mostly with such nouns as деньги ‘money’ and толк ‘sense’; syntactically, it can only serve as predicate; in terms of its communicative properties, it always forms an independent rheme; prosodically, it is not a clitic and is always stressed; and stylistically, it belongs to the conversational register:

(7c) Работы много, а денег – 1чуть ‘A lot of work and almost no money’ [a negligibly small quantity]

(7d) *Работы много, но и чуть денег все-таки платят ‘A lot of work but still they pay a little bit of money’ [a small but significant quantity] – interpretation impossible

Of the remaining adverbs in the first group, самую малость, капельку, чуточку ‘a tiny bit’ have two meanings – namely, quantity and degree, with both interpretations possible in both meanings; слегка ‘slightly’ has only the meaning of degree with both interpretations possible.

The items самую малость, капельку, чуточку present certain syntactic interest. In principle, all adverbs which can denote both quantity and degree have an ambivalent syntactic status.
Adverbs of small quantity and degree

In the meaning of quantity, they function syntactically as numerals, governing a noun in the genitive case, as is typical of Russian numerals: немного <чуть-чуть, мало> работы <денег, муки> ‘a little bit <a tiny bit, little> of work <money, flour>’. Or else, used without nouns, they can function as nouns themselves, independently filling in the valence of direct object in verbs: Он мало знает об этом периоде ‘He knows little about this period’; Он рассказал нам совсем немного ‘He told us very little’.

In the meaning of degree, they function syntactically as adverbs, define verbs and are governed by them: Я немного <чуть-чуть> устал ‘I’m a little bit <a tiny bit> tired’; Это меня мало интересует ‘I’m hardly interested in this’.

The expressions самую малость, капельку, чуточку are also characterized by this substantive/adverbial syntactic ambivalence and, in fact, carry it a little further: all three have developed from nouns and still keep some rudimental traces of substantivity. In their quantity meaning, they can be used either in the nominative, in the accusative, or in the genitive of negation (possible for kapel’ka), but not in any other cases (which shows they are not really nouns anymore):

(8a) Дай мне, пожалуйста, самую малость <капельку, чуточку> ↓ водички ‘Give me please a tiny bit of WATER’ [a small but significant quantity]

(8b) Воды осталась самая ↓ малость <капелька, чуточка> ‘Just a TINY bit of water remains’ [a negligibly small quantity]

(8c) Нет ни капельки воды ‘We don’t have a drop of water’

(8d) *Он пришёл с самой малостью <капелькой, чуточкой> воды ‘He came with a tiny bit of water’ - impossible

In their degree meaning, they have the fixed form of accusative:

(9a) Я самую малость <капельку, чуточку> ↓ устал ‘I’m a tiny bit tired’ [a small but significant degree]

(9b) – Ты устал? – Самую ↓ малость <капельку, чуточку> ‘– Are you tired? – Just a tiny bit’ [a negligibly small degree]

The adverb слегка ‘slightly’ is in many ways like немного, чуть-чуть, самую малость <капельку, чуточку> in their degree meaning, except that слегка differs in the range of predicates it is used with: e.g., collocations слегка устать <вibrировать> ‘to be slightly tired <to vibrate slightly>’ are fine, but *слегка любить <уважать> ‘to love <respect> slightly’ are not. Thus, слегка allows for two interpretations, depending on its communicative function in the sentence; although слегка does not favor post-verbal position, it can still form an independent rheme:

(10a) Она слегка ↓ пополнела ‘She has got slightly stouter’ [a small but significant degree]

(10b) Он лишь ↓ слегка напоминает своего отца ‘He is only slightly reminiscent of his father’ [a negligibly small degree]
The remaining adverbs *еле* and *едва* denote degree and are negatively polarized, which means that they only have one interpretation – that of negligibly small degree:

(11a) *От раны остался лишь еле <едва> заметный шрам* ‘Just a barely visible scar remained of the wound’ [a negligibly small degree]

(11b) *Еле <*едва> заметный шрам все-таки остался* ‘Still, there remains a barely visible scar of the wound’ [a small but significant degree] – interpretation impossible

For prosodic reasons, *еле* and *едва* cannot form independent rhemes and bear phrasal stress (they are clitics, like *чуть*) but because of their negative polarity they still always imply that the degree is so small as to be negligible and insufficient for whatever purpose. Their phonetically independent reduplicated versions *еле-еле* and *едва-едва* which can occupy sentence-final position and bear stress will not be considered here because they do not inherit the meaning of degree. The only meaning *еле-еле* and *едва-едва* have is that of ‘with great difficulty’ – *Он еле-еле <едва-едва> передвигал ноги* ‘He could barely move his feet’.

### 2.1.2 Location of adverbs on the scale of quantity and degree

The semantic distinction discussed in the previous section mostly concerns perception of reality and its representation by the speaker. In other words, it is for the most part a pragmatic, subjective distinction – which is confirmed by the fact that it is only elicited under certain communicative conditions.

In some ways, this pragmatic distinction parallels a more objective semantic characteristic of these adverbs – namely, their location on the scale of quantity and degree. Those adverbs that denote the smallest degree – *еле*, *едва* – are also the ones that are negatively polarized and always focus attention on the smallness of X’s degree, never on X’s existence.

And yet, in some ways the objective location of an adverb on the scale, the actual quantity or degree it denotes can diverge from how it is represented by the speaker. Some adverbs, such as *чуть-чуть*, *самую малость*, *чуточку*, *капельку* are located very close to the zero pole on the scale of quantity. They point to very small quantities. Objectively, quantities implied by these adverbs are smaller than those implied by the adverb *мало*, which, objectively, points just to a small quantity. However, in terms of subjective evaluation, the distribution is just the opposite – *мало* stresses the smallness of X’s quantity, whereas *чуть-чуть*, *самую малость*, *чуточку*, *капельку* can also bring into attention the fact of X’s existence and can denote quantities sufficient for some purpose.

Cf. the following examples, where *мало* objectively indicates a greater quantity than *чуть-чуть*, *самую малость*, *чуточку*, *капельку* possibly can, yet points to its subjective smallness and insufficiency, whereas the latter indicate an objectively very small quantity which is nevertheless subjectively viewed as sufficient:

(12a) *Песка привезли мало – всего два грузовика* ‘They brought little sand – only two truckloads’

(12b) *Песка привезли чуть-чуть <самую малость, чуточку, капельку> – всего два грузовика* ‘They brought a tiny bit of sand – only two truckloads’ – impossible
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(13a) Добавь в начинку чуть-чуть <самую малость, чуточку, капельку> корицы ‘Add a tiny bit of cinnamon to the filling’

(13b) *Добавь в начинку мало корицы ‘Add little cinnamon to the filling’ – impossible

In fact, мало and немного are more abstract and can denote any quantity, so long as it is viewed as small by the speaker.

The adverbs чуть-чуть and in particular, самую малость, чуточку, капельку are much more concrete – especially капельку (literally – ‘a droplet’) – and are normally used to denote very small, objectively small quantities of different substances (such as a drop, a quarter of a teaspoonful etc.).

This semantic peculiarity triggers a combinatorial limitation: the adverbs чуть-чуть, самую малость, чуточку, капельку cannot co-occur with any count nouns or with any semantically animate nouns (such as народ ‘people, crowd’ – a non-count noun that is grammatically inanimate but semantically animate); cf. the ungrammaticality:

(14a) *чуть-чуть <самую малость, чуточку, капельку> стульев <книг, деревьев> ‘a tiny bit of chair/books/trees’

(14b) *чуть-чуть <самую малость, чуточку, капельку> народа ‘a tiny bit of people’

2.2 Linguistic properties of the adverbs of small quantity and degree

2.2.1 Syntactic properties of the adverbs of small quantity and degree

Syntactic properties of adverbs in this group are triggered by two semantic factors:

- whether they can denote both quantity and degree;
- whether they can focus attention on the existence of some X or only on its small quantity or degree

As was illustrated in the previous section, adverbs that can denote only degree, syntactically can only function as adverbial modifiers; adverbs that can denote quantity, in their quantificational meaning function as objects and behave more like numerals or nouns than like adverbs (see above).

The second distinction affects the syntactic properties of adverbs in the following way: those adverbs that can only focus attention on the small quantity or degree of X, in other words, those that are, to an extent, negatively polarized, are the ones that can form syntactic phrasemes. This important notion was introduced and elaborated in (Boguslavsky & Iomdin 1982, Melčuk 1987, Melčuk 1995, Iomdin 2003, Iordanskaja & Melčuk 2007). In this paper, we use it somewhat loosely to describe a type of collocations that, compared to free word combinations, are both syntactically peculiar and limited in the choice of lexical items that can fill in their valences.
The adverbs мало, едва and чуть (which is a borderline case between two types of adverbs) form a variety of syntactic phrasemes: мало ли + wh-word (мало ли что, мало ли кто, мало ли куда etc.) with two meanings, to be examined below; чуть не X, чуть было не X ‘almost X’; ‘to come near doing X’; чуть не X ‘as near as dammit’, ‘next door to X’; едва не X ‘almost X’; ‘to come near doing X’; ‘to be within an ace of doing X’; едва не X ‘as near as dammit’, ‘next door to X’.

It is impossible to consider all these phrasemes in the present paper because of space limitations, so I will confine myself to some comments on the semantics and structure of the most interesting of them, мало ли + wh-word, without an attempt at a comprehensive description. The phraseme мало ли + wh-word (literally ‘little if’) has no correlates with large quantity adverbs. Potential combinations with много 'many, much', ли 'if' and wh-words simply do not exist; cf. the grammaticality of мало- based collocations VS. the ungrammaticality of много-based collocations: Мало ли что он придумает ‘There’s no saying what he might think of’ VS. *Много ли что он придумает.

This phraseme has two meanings which can be illustrated by two types of contexts:

(15a) Он захватил с собой термос, фонарь, спички – мало ли что может понадобиться в дороге ‘He took with him a thermos jug, a torch, matches – there’s no saying what might happen en route’

(15b) Возьми с собой теплую куртку – мало ли какая будет погода ‘Take a warm jacket with you – there’s no predicting what kind of weather we’ll have’

(16a) – Я хочу в кино. – Мало ли что ты хочешь! ‘– I want to go to the movies. – It doesn’t matter what you want!’

(16b) – Она сказала, что вредно есть после шести вечера. – Мало ли что она кому сказала, что же теперь, всё выполнять! ‘She said that it’s not healthy to eat after six o’clock. – Who cares what she said and to whom – it doesn’t mean one has to be guided by that!’

In the phrases (15a) and (15b) мало ли implies that the situation can develop in different ways and one must account for this versatility.

In the phrases (16a) and (16b) мало ли implies that in whatever ways the situation might develop, it should not be taken into account.

Consequently, two different definitions are proposed for these two different meanings of the syntactic phraseme мало ли + wh-word.

(17) мало ли + wh-word + X = ‘the speaker thinks that X might develop in any of the possible ways and that the subject of the situation should take this into account’

This first, “quantificational” мало ли is mostly prospective because the speaker does not know which X will take place.

(18) мало ли + wh-word + X = ‘the speaker thinks that in whatever of the possible ways X might have developed, the subject of the situation should not take this into account’
This second, “concessive” мало ли can be used retrospectively and it is very different pragmatically: it is definitely “unfriendly” and is used mostly in such speech acts as prohibition and refusal, whereas the first мало ли is pragmatically quite neutral.

To conclude this brief overview, let us stress once again the fact that this abundance of syntactically and semantically unusual structures has flourished on the basis of precisely those adverbs that can only focus attention on the smallness of quantity or degree, on its insignificance; it seems as if there is something in their semantics that is seminal for phraseology.

2.2.2 Combinatorial properties of the adverbs of small quantity and degree

There are many important combinatorial differences in this group of adverbs concerning the type of nouns or predicates they can be used with. However, the difference we are going to consider in the present paper has to do with the aforementioned semantic distinction between adverbs that focus attention on the existence of X and those that focus attention on the small quantity or degree of X. We will consider the compatibility of these two types of adverbs with certain concessives and with temporal particles еще ‘still, yet’ and уже ‘already’.

For obvious semantic reasons, concessives like хоть ‘at least’ or все-таки ‘yet, still’ can co-occur with adverbs which stress the existence of X and cannot co-occur with adverbs which stress the insignificance of X’s quantity or degree. This is a matter of modal frames coming into contradiction because the said concessives stress the existence of a situation, either despite the fact that it is not quite satisfactory (хоть) or despite the fact that circumstances were against it (все-таки):

(19a) Вситаки хоть немного <чуть-чуть> побывали вместе ‘Still, at least a little bit of time we managed to spend together’
(19b) *Вситаки хоть мало побывали вместе ‘Still, at least little time we managed to spend together’ - impossible
(20a) Вситаки хоть слегка теплые батареи – уже греют ‘The radiators are at least slightly warm – they are warming the place’
(20b) *Вситаки хоть чуть <едва, еле> теплые батареи – уже греют ‘The radiators are at least barely warm – they are warming the place’ – impossible

As for the temporal particles еще ‘still, yet’ and уже ‘already’, both types of adverbs can co-occur with them. However, the two types of adverbs render the phrases with еще and уже totally different interpretations:

(21a) Веснушки уже немного <слегка> заметны ‘The freckles are already slightly visible’
(21b) Веснушки уже едва заметны ‘The freckles are already barely visible’
(22a) Веснушки еще немного <слегка> заметны ‘The freckles are still slightly visible’
(22b) Веснушки еще едва заметны ‘The freckles are still barely visible’
These phrases imply different progression of the situation in time: (21a) means that the situation is on the rise – the freckles are going to get bigger with time – probably it’s the beginning of spring and the subject is starting to get freckly as the weather gets sunnier; (21b) implies that the freckles are on the wane – possibly, the subject has started treating them with a special ointment and is expecting them to disappear soon. In the phrase with еще the distribution is the opposite: (22a) means that the freckles are on their way to oblivion, whereas (22b) suggests their peak season is still to come.

To sum up, we can once again see that the “borderline” semantics of the negatively polarized small quantity/degree adverbs shapes all their linguistic properties, which turn out to be very different from those of the more ordinary small quantity/degree adverbs.

**Bibliography**


