Combinations of Probability Qualifiers in Russian

Boris Iomdin (1), Alexander Berdichevsky (2)

(1) V.V.Vinogradov Russian Language Institute, Russian Academy of Sciences
Volkhonka 18/2, 119019, Moscow, Russia
iomdin@ruslang.ru

(2) M.V.Lomonosov Moscow State University
Leninskie Gory, GSP-2, 119992, Moscow, Russia
alexberd@gmail.com

Abstract

The object of the paper is the class of Russian sentences that have more than one probability qualifier (PQ) with intersecting scopes. As it appears, modern Russian texts abound with such phenomena. Our goal is to identify meanings and uses of such utterances. We analyze the most typical cases and proceed to more controversial issues. The analysis shows that even though the language has plenty of tools for fine differentiation of probability estimations, speakers often avoid straightforward statements, resorting to a variety of means to emphasize the approximate and subjective character of their estimates and thus declining the responsibility for the statements they make.

Keywords

Semantics, pragmatics, modality, scope, likelihood, probability qualifiers, contradiction.

1 Introduction

Recently the authors of this paper have taken notice of sentences having more than one probability qualifier (PQ) with intersecting scopes. PQ are part of the modal frame of the utterance. Here is an inexhaustive list of such words and word combinations in Russian (with rough English equivalents): бабушка на дое сказала ‘we shall see what we shall see’; без всякого сомнения ‘without any doubt’; безусловно ‘undoubtedly’; бесспорно ‘indisputably’; верно ‘most likely’; вероятно ‘probably’; вне всякого сомнения ‘beyond all doubt’; возможно ‘possibly’; вроде (бы) ‘like enough’; вряд ли ‘hardly’; высоковероятно ‘highly probable’; должно быть ‘must be’; едва ли ‘scarcely’; естественно ‘naturally’; кажется ‘seemingly’; как будто ‘allegedly’; конечно ‘of course’; маловероятно ‘unlikely’; может быть ‘maybe’; наверно ‘likely’; навряд ли ‘scarcely likely’; настолько ‘naturally’; невероятно ‘incredible’; несомненно ‘undoubtedly’; определенно ‘definitely’; очевидно ‘evidently’; по всей вероятности ‘in all probability’; по всей видимости ‘to all appearances’; по-видимому ‘apparently’; разумеется ‘obviously’; скорее всего ‘(most) likely’; сомнительно ‘questionably’; точно ‘positively’; явно ‘manifestly’. A large literature
is dedicated to this vocabulary, e.g. (Bulygina & Shmelev, 1992; Yakovleva, 1994; Apresjan, 2004; Grigoryeva, 2004).

However, to the best of our knowledge, no one has studied the possibility of combining these qualifiers within a single sentence\(^1\), or, to put it more precise, with intersecting scopes (see Boguslavsky 1996). Typically, there are just disclaimers, as e.g. «…the construction *не только может быть, но и точно* ‘not only maybe, but also positively’ or, even worse, *может быть и точно* ‘maybe positively’. If someone wants to say that one should not have limited oneself to a hypothesis and could make a categorical assertion, he may express this idea using another construction with a different conjunction: *не может быть, а точно* ‘not maybe, but positively’» (Bulygina & Shmelev, 1992, 132).

As it appears, however, there are much more examples of this phenomenon. Look at some examples of the “impossible” construction just quoted above:

1. *А впрочем, может быть и точно* / Социалист он беспорочный ‘Though *maybe positively*, he is an irreproachable socialist’ (Nekrasov);
2. *Ничипоренко задумался: а может быть, и точно в революциях нужна субординация?* ‘Nichiporenko started pondering: *maybe positively* subordination is necessary for revolutions’ (Leskov);
3. *То что они вряд ли появятся, это может быть и точно* ‘That they will hardly appear, this *may be positive*’ (Football.By website).

We have to make a disclaimer that many of the examples under discussion do not always belong to the immaculate literary Russian language, and we agree that some native speakers will not accept them. However, a surprising abundance of such examples makes us assume that they are not accidental and as such constitute an object for research. We have tried to determine meanings and uses of utterances exemplified above.

## 2 Typical Cases

The main function of \(PQ\) is known to indicate the degree to which the speaker believes the statement in the assertive part of the sentence to be true. Then in what cases can a sentence have two (or even more) such indications? We believe that the most typical cases may be subdivided into four main groups: (1) **Specification.** One of the qualifiers specifies the meaning expressed by another qualifier. (2) **Change of the degree of certainty.** The degree to which the speaker is certain may change right within the sentence being uttered. (3) **Different subjects of estimate.** Different \(PQ\) indicate the degree of certainty of different persons (e.g. the speaker and the sentence subject). (4) **Uncharacteristic use.** One of the \(PQ\) has in fact a different function (stylistic, rhetorical, metatext, etc.). Let us consider these four groups first, and discuss some closely related and more complicated cases after that.

---

\(^1\) Multiple adverbs in one sentence have been studied in various languages, but – as far as we know – primarily from the syntactic and not the semantic point of view. Cf. Rijkhoek 1998, Cinque 1999, von Fintel & Iatridou 2001, Shields 2005, Nauze 2006.
2.1 Specification

Formally speaking, if one PQ comes into the scope of another it means that the speaker makes a statement of the following type: «The probability of the fact that the probability of P equals $p_1$ equals $p_2$». How do we interpret such statements?

One of the possible interpretations is as follows. The speaker may express an objective and a subjective estimation in different terms. Consider a pair of the examples:

(4a) I know that the probability of event $P$ is small.
(4b) I believe that the probability of event $P$ is small.

In (4a), the probability is estimated objectively, and in (4b), subjectively. The difference in the following pair of examples is, we believe, the same:

(5a) И интересно, <...> посетет ли в ближайший обозримый период Владимир Путин Прикамье? Не знаю. А вот что касается столицы автономии Кудымкара – то точно вряд ли: сюда до сих пор ни разу не ступала нога высшего должностного лица государства ‘We wonder <...> whether Vladimir Putin will visit in the near future the Prikamye region? We do not know. But what concerns Kudymkar, the regional capital, he positively hardly would: a foot of a top-level official has never ever stepped there before’ (Perm News);

(5b) Погруженные в поток повседневности нынешние, наверное, и сами вряд ли осознавали, что гребут наудачу, не ведая, куда вынесет волна безвластиya: на гребень или в пучину бед ‘Plunged into the humdrum flow, nowadays people probably hardly realized themselves that they were rowing randomly, not knowing where the wave of anarchy would bring them: on the crest or into the gulf’ (Pristavkin).

In (5a), the probability estimation (minimal) is presented as an objective one, reasoned by the fact that the named event had never occurred before. In (5b), the probability estimation is subjective, since the speaker has no objective information about the thoughts of other people. Cf. another characteristic example, in which non-objective information is marked by the word combination точно вряд ли ‘positively hardly’:

(6) Правда, американский чиновник не пояснил, на чем основывается его информация, а потому его заявление не вызвало должного эффекта. За последний год американская разведка уже несколько раз заявляла, что 80-летний Кастро протянет недолго и точно вряд ли когда-то вернется к управлению страной ‘However, the American official did not explain what his information was based on, and this is why his declaration missed fire. During the last year, American intelligence have declared several times already that the 80-year old Castro would not live out long and that he positively hardly would return to govern his country’ (Vzglyad, Business Newspaper).

However, this interpretation cannot be applied to many examples of точно вряд ли constructions in which the probability estimate cannot possibly be objective; cf.
And positively hardly will the folk mind cope with the back-breaking task: which of the two evils is the lesser, the regional arbitrariness or the return of the Communists’ (Vslux.Ru website).

The townspeople are undoubtedly hardly worried about the name of the company that carries them each morning to school, college, or work’ (Diapazon).

Another way of putting it is the following. Using a PQ within the scope of another one, the speaker increases the precision of his probability estimate.

The PQ can be graded according to the probability degree they express (e.g. from вне всякого сомнения ‘beyond all doubt’ ‘the probability is close to 1’ down to невероятно ‘incredible’ ‘the probability is close to 0’): beyond all doubt, undoubtedly, indisputably, of course, obviously > positively, most likely, definitely > highly probable > in all probability, to all appearances > must be > apparently > like enough > probably > seemingly > allegedly > rather > maybe, possibly > questionably > unlikely > hardly, scarcely > we shall see what we shall see > incredible. Of course, this scale is incomplete and very approximate. Compare other “scales of likelihood” in (Diver, 1964) or, for Russian, in (Yakovleva, 1994, 197). Besides, many of these words are synonyms that differ in other features than the probability degree (see Apresjan 2004, Grigoryeva 2004; these authors propose similar scales, too).

The likelihood scale (as probably any other scale) is presented in the language as discrete, while in reality it is continuous (the probability value, in theory, may be anywhere between 0 and 1). For example, the Russian expression вряд ли ‘hardly’ indicates a probability of, say, 10%. If вряд ли comes into the scope of another PQ, the speaker indicates how close his feeling of probability is to that point of the scale: the more categorical the qualifier, the closer to the point. In that case, we could provide following (or similar) explications for the word combinations we have studied: безусловно, вряд ли ‘undoubtedly hardly’ = ‘the probability is perfectly explained by the expression вряд ли’; скорее всего, вряд ли ‘most likely hardly’ = ‘the probability is close to the value described by вряд ли, with a certain error allowed’; наверное, вряд ли ‘probably hardly’ = ‘the probability is close to the value described by вряд ли, but it may be significantly different’; может быть, вряд ли ‘maybe hardly’ – ‘the probability may be close to the value described by вряд ли’.

It seems, however, that the latter combination is hardly acceptable even within a highly liberal approach to the quality of the texts analyzed. Qualifiers expressing a lesser probability cannot be combined with вряд ли at all. This is not surprising, though, since otherwise the speaker would disavow his own estimate; cf. the unacceptability of *Не может быть, что это вряд ли ‘is it impossible that it can hardly happen…’; *Вряд ли едва ли ‘hardly scarcely’.

In the texts we have analyzed there are many examples like the following:

‘But what is absolutely positive, hardly ever anything happens by chance’ (Ukrainskaya Pravda).
Combinations of Probability Qualifiers in Russian

It comes that the speaker declares absolute correctness of the nomination he chose, i.e. he evaluates his probability estimate as maximally precise. But this estimate is rather unprecise by definition. One could not offer any value of probability corresponding to the expression *вряд ли* that most Russian speakers would agree on. It seems to vary from 0% to 30%. Consider some characteristic examples below:

(10) Даже если Путин сейчас захочет (что уже *вряд ли*, вероятность 5%, не больше) легитимизировать свое правление, он просто не сможет этого сделать 'Even if Putin decides (which can *hardly* happen, the probability is 5%, no more) to legitimize his power, he simple won’t be able to do this' (*LiveJournal.Com*);

(11) …выйти на поле стадиона Сан-Сиро он *вряд ли* сможет. Вероятность этого в штабе «волков» оценивают в 10% '…he will *hardly* be able to take the field of San-Siro stadium. At the “wolves” headquarters, the probability of this is estimated at 10%' (*Imho.Ws*);

(12) 17–18 *вряд ли* покатит, вероятность в 70%, что я уже уеду ‘17th or 18th will *hardly* do, there is a probability of 70% that I will have already left’ (*SlamDunk.Ru*)

Declaration of an «absolute preciseness» of such an unprecise expression is quite odd. Cf. also the following English example and its criticism on the same website forum:

(13) "For all of those, I’m absolutely, one hundred percent positive that there’s probably ten more that we haven’t seen publicly," says Hoglund (Security Focus, 2003-03-05) – Yes, and I’m absolutely 100% positive that it might rain today. Guess I should be a meteorologist, huh?

On the whole, how accurate can a “primitive” probability estimate be? Is it calculated, intuited, deduced from experience? How does the “naïve math” correspond to the scientific probability theory? This is a topic on its own right.

2.2 Change of the Degree of Certainty

The presence of several PQ in a single sentence may be accounted for by the fact that the degree to which the speaker is certain in what he is saying changes in the process of speaking. These cases are less interesting since they do not constitute any semantic anomaly. Besides, strictly speaking, in the majority of these cases, the scopes of the PQ do not intersect.

In most cases the confidence of the speaker increases while he is speaking, cf.

(14) …этот, который кричал, лежал внизу возле клетки лифта, *наверное*, там же, где упал вчера, *наверняка* там же — сам он встать не мог, ползти тоже, а выйти к нему так никто и не вышел… 'the man who had been screaming was lying downstairs near the elevator, *probably* in the same place when he fell yesterday, *certainly* in the same place, as he could not get up by himself, nor crawl, and no one ever came to him’ (Strugatsky Brothers).

In (Yakovleva, 1994, 238) the idea of «certainty accumulation» was proposed (elaborated on
the word определенно ‘definitely’). The reverse order, however, is possible, too: «Compare the order of the synonyms according to the decrease of certainty degree in the following example: — Ну что ты, — неуверенно сказал Эдик. — Не может быть... Вряд ли... Сомнительно что-то... (Стругацкие) “What are you saying!” said Edik with diffidence. “This is impossible... Hardly so... somehow questionable...”’ (Strugatsky Brothers)» (Grigoryeva, 2004, 160).

2.3 Different Subjects of Estimate

A combination of two PQ, one within the scope of the other, is also possible if the subjects of the probability estimates introduced by these modifiers are not the same. Cf.

(15) Пушкин <...> эти слова стихотворения Вяземского в своих письмах не выделял как цитату, считая их, видимо, бесспорно всеобщим достоянием ‘Pushkin <...> in his letters did not mark these lyrics by Vyazemsky as a quote, apparently believing them to be indisputably common property’ (Landa) [the estimate видимо is made by the speaker, and бесспорно, by Pushkin];

(16) По поводу композиции, как видно, ученые спорят, но зато оттенки, кажется, бесспорно хороши ‘Scientists, as it seems, are disputing about the composition, but the tints, it seems, are indisputably good’ (Hiero.Ru website) [the estimate кажется is made by the speaker, and бесспорно, by the scientists’].

2.4 Uncharacteristic Use of Probability Qualifiers

A combination of incompatible, as it would seem, probability qualifiers may be explained by the fact that one of them has in fact another function. Let us examine several frequent cases.

2.4.1 Indication of the source of the estimate

One of the qualifiers may in fact point to the source of the estimate and not to the probability degree. It expresses the cause of the opinion about the probability the speaker has made.

Some PQ (e.g. кажется, вроде, как будто) indicate hearsay knowledge (see Bulygina & Shmelev, 1992, 133–134 on these PQ, called “quotatives”, obligatory in certain cases). Cf.

(17) Сам не слышал – товариш из пятнадцатой палаты сказал, – но, кажется, это точно. Что всех, кто родился за границшей Китая а потом приехал, высылают обратно ‘Haven’t heard myself, a guy from Ward 15 told me, but seemingly it is positive. Everyone who was born outside China and then came is sent back’ (Toropov);

(18) Насколько я знаю, в этом случае у вас статус иностранного супруга иностранки. Положена только социальная помощь, языковые курсы – вроде вряд ли ‘As far as I know, in this case you have the status of a foreign spouse of a foreigner. You are only entitled to welfare, apparently hardly a language course’ (Russian Germany website).

Some other PQ (as конечно) refer to the common knowledge of the speaker and the addressee
Combinations of Probability Qualifiers in Russian

as the source of the estimate. Cf. Wierzbicka’s explication of конечно: ‘I suppose you understand it could not be another way’ (Wierzbicka 1968, 26); «In all its uses, конечно represents the fact that a certain situation exists as a rather evident one. The speaker believes that knowing the circumstances or the general order of things, the addressee has all the information necessary to conclude that a certain situation exists» (Apresjan 2004, 476); see also (Yakovleva, 1994, 253–257). Combinations of конечно with other PQ may be roughly interpreted as ‘it is obvious for you and me that the probability of P is what I say it is’.

\[(19) \text{Конечно, маловероятно, что атеисты или мусульмане примут участие в}
\text{Всенощной или Крестном ходе ‘Of course it is unlikely that atheists or Muslims will}
\text{take part in the Vigils or the Sacred Procession’ (Levada Center website);}
\]

\[(20) \text{В Уз.Гос.Издате сегодня обещали уплатить весь гонорар за роман. Это,}
\text{конечно, вряд ли. Либо не уплачивают, либо вычитут такой налог… ‘The Uzbekistan}
\text{State Publishers promised today to pay the whole author’s fee for the novel. This will}
\text{hardly happen, of course. They’ll either pay nothing, or impose such a tax…’ (Ivanov).}
\]

2.4.2 Rhetorical device

If one of the PQ showing that the speaker is absolutely certain (бесспорно, безусловно, etc.) comes within the scope of another, which expresses uncertainty, this is often an indication of the fact that the “indisputability” of the statement is sham and will be impeached below. Cf.

\[(21) \text{Из этого исходят поправки: ни в коем случае не представлять экстремистам}
\text{трибуна для изложения их взглядов и требований. Кажется, это бесспорно. А с}
\text{другой-то стороны: если это враг, то можно ли не знать врага? ‘This is where}
\text{the amendments come from: never give the floor to extremists so that they could}
\text{expound their views and claims. This seems indisputable. But, on the other side, if they}
\text{are enemies, how could you afford not to know the enemy?’ (Vremya MN);}
\]

2.4.3 Meiosis

Meiosis (or litotes) is a sort of language hyperbole, a reference to something with a name disproportionately lesser than its nature (see also Krysin 2004, 267). Many examples may be explained by the fact that one of the PQ in fact masks the certainty of the speaker, who for some reasons would not want to make a straightforward statement. Cf.

\[(22) \text{Конечно, вряд ли можно считать полезным для здоровья маневрирование на}
\text{велосипеде среди потока автомобилей и вдыхание выхлопных газов ‘Of course,}
\text{one can hardly consider salubrious jockeying on a bicycle in the traffic and inhaling the}
\text{exhaust’ (Zerkalo Nedeli).}
\]

2.4.4 Metatext function

One of the probability qualifiers may also have a metatextual function, estimating not the probability of an event, but the correctness of the estimate made by another speaker; cf.
It happens sometimes that it only seems to the child and his parents that he is victimized, while in fact no one even thinks about that. – Yes, sometimes it only seems so. But when three people [beat] the lying girl with their feet in the WC – this is hardly seems' (LiveJournal.Com) [the latter кажется has the autonymic function and should be italicized or placed in quotes].

3 More Complex and Disputable Issues

3.1 «Precise Approximateness»

Let us first consider the combinations of probability qualifiers and the Russian approximate quantitative construction (marked by a reversed word order), as in

(24) Человек десять точно придет ‘Ten people or so will positively come’.

Examples like this one, it seems, do not tally with the rule of noncontradictory modal frames suggested by Juri Apresjan (Apresjan, 1978/1995). Apresjan shows that if the SemR includes the meanings ‘P’ and ‘not P’, which form a logical contradiction, then if «in the DSR or the SSR that realizes this SemR at least one of the meanings ‘P’ and ‘not P’ is expressed grammatically, <...> then the sentence synthesized according to this DSR or SSR in the vast majority of cases will be unacceptable» (Apresjan, 1995, 609). It is precisely the approximative quantitative construction that is given as an example of a grammatical expression of a meaning. However, in (24), contradictory meanings ‘approximately’ and ‘precisely’ are combined, and the former is expressed grammatically. Examples like (24) are very frequent:

(25) Борис СТРУГАТСКИЙ, писатель: — Я не мастер говорить юбилейные речи, но к газете "Известия" отношусь с большим уважением. Выписываю газету всю жизнь, лет двадцать-тридцать точно ‘Boris STRUGATSKY, writer: – I am not good at anniversary speeches, but I am very respectful for Izvestiya newspaper. I have been its subscriber all my life, positively some twenty-thirty years’ (Izvestiya) [note that Boris Strugatsky was 68 when he was saying this!].

(26) — Сколько же надо? — подумал Саранин. — В ней пудов пятнаверняка будет. ‘How much is necessary”? Saranin pondered. ‘She certainly weighs some 180 pounds’” (Sologub).

Here the meaning of probability qualifiers as точно, наверняка drifts toward lexical units as минимум, по крайней мере ‘at least’, for which, such uses also appear typical; cf.

(27) На сколько же это опоздал поезд? Часа на два, по крайней мере ‘How much later has the train arrived? Some two hours, at least’ (Tchekhov).

Still, it remains unclear how the indication of an exact lower bound accords with the idea of approximateness. The notion of an “imprecise lower bound” seems pragmatically strange.
3.2 «Objective Subjectivity»

Another interesting topic is the combination of the PQ with the propositional attitude words. Restrictions for such combinations were noted in literature; cf. «…in the context of these words, no probability qualifiers (that are subjective by definition) can be used – *Я рад, что Иван бесспорно пришел на семинар ’I am glad that Ivan, indisputably, came to the seminar’; *Жаль, что он, бесспорно, опоздает ‘It is a pity that he will indisputably come late’ (Yakovleva, 1994, 218) [the latter example seems absolutely normal to us, though]; «…in the context of the putative verbs считать and думать ‘to believe’ бесусловно, несомненно, бесспорно and, to a lesser extent, конечно are possible, but the factive words разумеется and естественно are absolutely impossible. <…> However, even for the putative words бесусловно, несомненно and бесспорно such use is uncharacteristic because of the contrast between the idea of absolute persuasion, expressed by these synonyms, and the idea of opinion, included in the meaning of считать and думать» (Apresjan 2004, 475).

However, we have many examples where the scope of lexical units like по-моему, по моему мнению ‘in my opinion’ includes various probability qualifiers, and even those that express the idea of absolute confidence. Cf.

(28) По-моему, ты безусловно должна получать русский паспорт ’To my opinion, you undoubtedly have to get a Russian passport’ (Shergova);

(29) Аналитики бесспорно, по моему личному убеждению, необходимый народ ’The analysts are indisputably, in my personal opinion, necessary people’ (Krasnoyarsk Social Advertisement Council website).

We do not consider such examples as linguistic anomaly; they surely require a thorough analysis, a topic of a separate research.

4 Conclusion

The analysis of the combinations of probability qualifiers shows that the language develops tools for very fine differentiation of probability estimations. It is interesting that people, however, often avoid straightforward statements, marking by various means the approximateness and subjectiveness of their estimates and declining the responsibility for the statements they make.

Acknowledgements

This work was done with a partial support from the Public Charity Foundation for the Support of National Science, Russian President grants for the Support of Leading Scientific Schools No. НШ-5611.2006.6, Russian President grant for young Ph.D. scholars No. MK-759.2006.6, and Russian Humanitarian Scientific Foundation grant No. 06-04-00289a. Boris Iomdin would like to thank these organizations for their assistance. We are grateful to Leonid Iomdin and Julia Khaleeva who read this paper and made valuable comments.
Bibliography


