The grammar of surprise: the Russian construction of the type Кошка взяла да умерла ‘Suddenly, the cat died’

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Abstract

Contemporary Russian has a construction composed of the verb ‘to take’ and a second verb V2. Both verbs manifest identical grammatical categories, they are linked either by syndetic (with a conjunction meaning ‘and’) or asyndetic coordination or else they are serialized, and the meaning of the whole construction is roughly speaking ‘to suddenly V2’. In the paper I will first examine the formal and semantic properties of the construction, next discuss some criteria which support an analysis in terms of grammaticalization theory including additional pragmatic effects, and finally tackle the question how to model these facts in a dependency framework of the MTT type.

Key words

Grammaticalization, non-canonical actants, non-canonical coordination

1 Introduction

A whole range of European languages has a coordinative verbal construction with the meaning ‘to do something all of a sudden / unexpectedly’, the first verbal component of which is constituted by the verb ‘to take’. This type is reported by [Coseriu 1966] to occur in not less than 26 North, East and South European languages, including even Irish English (he took and said). It remains, however, unclear, which of them express the idea of unexpectedness and which convey a mere ingressive meaning, as seems to be the case in Swedish (cf. [Ekberg 1993]). On the other hand, it seems beyond any doubt that the take-construction covers whole compact areas of adjacent languages, e.g. around the Baltic Sea (Finnish, Russian, Lithuanian, Polish) and on the Balkan Peninsula. Since the meaning of unexpectedness is very remote from the basic meaning of the verb ‘to take’ in all languages mentioned, it usually is treated as a separate meaning. This seems to be all the more justified as it can no longer govern an NP as a direct object.

As for contemporary Russian, this meaning of vzjat’ in combinations of the type Ja vzjal da skazal ‘I suddenly said’ is already attested in Ušakovs 1935 dictionary. When summarizing the existing Russian literature on this topic, [Fortuin 2000: 155] characterizes it as denoting
an arbitrary, unmotivated action, “entirely caused by the personal whim of the subject”.\textsuperscript{1} This analysis is refined by [Kor-Chahin 2007], who distinguishes between intentionally controlled actions and uncontrollable events; the latter type plays a crucial role indeed, given the multitude of examples with the verb ‘to die’,\textsuperscript{2} cf. Кошка взяла и умерла. However, as will be shown below, one must take into account additional pragmatic effects that might blur this clear-cut semantic distinction.

In what follows, I first will examine the structural properties of the construction, next discuss some criteria which support an analysis in terms of grammaticalization theory, and finally tackle the question how to model these facts in a dependency framework of the MTT type.

\section{Formal properties}

The \textit{vzjat’}-construction allows for several subtypes of phrasal linking, cf.

\begin{itemize}
  \item a) \textit{vzjal i} X-oval
  \item b) \textit{vzjal da} X-oval
  \item c) \textit{vzjal da i} X-oval
  \item d) \textit{vzjal,} X-oval
  \item e) \textit{vzjal} X-oval
\end{itemize}

\textbullet a)-c) \textbullet ‘and’ conjunctions
\textbullet d) asyndesis
\textbullet e) double verb construction

Variant d) is by far less frequent than its syndetic counterparts. It may be illustrated by the following example:

\begin{itemize}
  \item (1) …Что вот взял, умер в весне назло ‘that I’ll go and die in spite of spring’
\end{itemize}

\textbullet This asyndetic subtype should not be confused with the last subtype e), which represents a type of construction typical of Russian and may be described as the starting point of verbal serialization; its prosodic and morphosyntactic characteristics and semantic subtypes are described in [Vajs 1993, 2000, 2003]. At first sight, we may thus state that the use of \textit{vzjat’} denoting unexpected events constitutes a particular case of both syndetic and asyndetic coordinative construction and of verbal serialization. The different techniques may combine within the same string of text, cf. the following example, where the two verbs are first linked by a conjunction, then serialized:

\begin{itemize}
  \item (2) Возьму да и женюсь на первой дуре […] А вдруг взял и женюсь на самой умной. ‘I’ll go and marry the next little dummy… But may be, I’ll marry the brightest one’
\end{itemize}

\textbullet As will be shown below, this does not, however, imply that semantic properties of all techniques mentioned are identical.

\textsuperscript{1} When translating such examples into colloquial English, one may sometimes use a similar coordinative paraphrase, viz. \textit{He went and said}. Another equivalent is suggested by Isačenko, who translates our construction by the simple verb \textit{vzdumat’}, meaning roughly ‘to take into one’s head’ [Fortuin 2000: 155].

\textsuperscript{2} This point is already made by Fortuin, who quotes a similar example on p. 156.
To the variants a)-e) we may add two variants not noted so far in the literature, viz. the omission of the second verb and its substitution by an interjection. In both cases, the meaning of the missing verb remains vague (for omitted verbs, see [Mel’čuk 1995, ch. 7]) and can only be interpreted unambiguously in an appropriate context:

f) vzjal da φ

g) vzjal da + interjection

These variants can be illustrated by the following examples:

(3) [Она какую же шутку придумала:] взяла да мужу вареньем в лицо, и бороду вымазала. (А. Островский) ‘She played a dirty joke to her husband: all of sudden, she threw the jam into his face, and smeared his beard with it’

(4) Он взял да бух! в воду. ‘All of a sudden, he fell / dived into the water’

It goes without saying that not all these variants share all syntactic properties. For example, the double verb allows inversion of the verbal components, whereas syndetic and asyndetic linking require a fixed word order, cf.

(5a) «… какой вы отец? .. Удавлюсь вот возьму!
(5b) *.. Удавлюсь вот и да возьму! *.. Удавлюсь, вот возьму!

The “liberal” behavior of the double verb type fits well into the overall picture of this construction, which tolerates even anti-iconic order. The same holds true for the prosodic unity (one single stress, no break between the verbs) characteristic of the above variant d) vzjal x-oval: this corresponds exactly to the prosodic behavior of prototypical double verbs.

As is stated in [Kor-Chahin 2007], the vzjal’-construction as a whole behaves in many respects like the double verb construction. In particular, the grammemes of the two verbal components should be identical: hence, person, number, gender, mode, aspect, voice and representation (the opposition finite : nonfinite) of both verbs are required to take the same values. As for tense and aspect, see ex. 6-7 below. Besides this, the two verbs share the same subject. Furthermore, auxiliary morphemes such as the conditional marker by and the auxiliary of ipf. future forms (budu, budes’, etc.) cannot be repeated. Unlike with double verbs in general, this ban on repetition also holds true for negation.

The following observations will somewhat modify the image just obtained. As for tense and aspect, they do not coincide in situations such as the following:

(6) Подумал я: что мне не злиться? Взял и пишу: «Сын!..» (Успенский, Идилия)
 ’I thought: why shouldn’t I get angry? Suddenly, I wrote down: “My son!...”’

Пишу is an evident case of a historical present. Interestingly enough, the two verbs need not necessarily agree in aspect and tense. Another case is constituted by our next example:

(7) Взрослеть не хочется!!!! И не буду. Вот возьму и не буду взрослеть. Характер уж какой есть (не сахар, что странно), и не буду я его менять. ‘I don’t want to grow up. And I will not. You’ll see, I will not grow up. I am a nasty piece of work and I am not going to change it.’  
www.spbgu.ru/index.php?ind=blog&op=home&idd=10&curmese=October%202004
This time, the lack of agreement affects only aspect, but the whole italicized string except the negation is a phraseme with a slot for an infinitive in the ipf. aspect; roughly speaking, its pragmatic function is that of a refusal of a previous (auto-) suggestion.

As for negation, its location in 7 is the only possible one, since it never occurs with the verb vzjat’, cf. Взял и не ответил, but: *Не взял и ответил ‘Surprisingly, he did not answer’. In this respect, the vzjat’-construction differs from double verbs, since the latter allow for negation placement both in the first and second verbal components, cf. Сидел не шевелился ‘He sat there without moving’ but: Не поленись прочитай! ‘Don’t be lazy, read it through!’

3 Semantical invariant

As is shown by all examples examined so far (as well as by the tentative semantic definition given at the beginning of this paper), the vzjat’-construction denotes one single event, the string V₁ + conj.coord functioning as a kind of adverbial modifier (“suddenly”) of V₂. This helps to explain the abovementioned morphological and syntactic restrictions, i.e. the identical grammatical outfit of both verbs, their common subject and the single occurrence of auxiliary morphemes. But the peculiar adverbial meaning of vzjat’ may also explain some semantic peculiarities. For example, we hardly can find WH-questions of the type Кто взял и простудился? ‘Who surprisingly caught a cold?’ or Кто взял и умер? ‘Who died all of a sudden?’ (note the oddness of the English translations) unless used in verifying questions of the type ‘Who did you say died suddenly?’. The reason is evident: a question of the type just mentioned already presupposes the existence of somebody who has caught cold, whereas the first verb взял carries the opposite information (the cold came as a surprise). The same holds true for Кто неожиданно умер? Moreover, exclamations such as Как ты взял и простудился! ‘How did you manage to catch a cold?’ are deviant in the same way.

The fact that we are dealing with one single event explains also the seemingly deviant aspectual behavior of the vzjat’ construction. As is well known, the default interpretation of a chain of two Russian verbs P and Q in the perfective aspect is the sequential one: ‘first P, then Q’. This is of course not possible in a case such as Он взял и умер, where just one event is denoted: here, both verbs point to the same event time. It should be noted that this situation is by no means exceptional: [Poljanski 1987: 250 ff.] lists a host of other cases where two perfective verb forms linked by ‘and’ refer to one single time point, since they describe two different aspects of one indivisible whole. As for double verbs in the perfective aspect, this situation may even be considered prototypical, since in Russian, verb serialization in general tends to designate one single situation. Therefore it comes as no surprise that the majority of perfective examples in my corpus of double verbs allow only for the simultaneous reading.

The ban on double negation finds also a natural solution: whereas regular coordination admits negation in both clauses or phrases by means of the connector ‘neither – nor’, the same procedure leads to ungrammatical results in our case, cf. он взял да женился > *он ни взял, ни женился. Obviously, this is due to the unitary interpretation of the whole as one single event, the parts of which cannot be negated separately.

The peculiar semantics of our construction is also responsible for a rather unexpected paraphrase. As has been noted by several authors, see [Fortuin 2000: 134 ff.], the meaning of our construction coincides with the meaning of the so-called narrative imperative of perfective verbs of the type В эту-то Дуняшу и влюбись Аким ‘And Akim suddenly fell in
love with this Dunyasha’ (Turgenev). The two types of expressions may also be combined, so that we find the vzjat’-construction in the imperative, cf.

(8) [Вы представляете,] опоздал на автобус, бежал-бежал, а он, то есть водитель, возьми, да и остановись. [Людмила Пировогова, Игорь Немучинский, Елена Маслова, Виктор Лихачев. Может, попробуем по-тамбовски? // "Встреча (Дубна)", 2003.04. 16] ‘I was late for the bus and kept running, and he, the driver, suddenly stopped.’

Therefore, we must account for another variant of the vzjat’ construction, which is subject to less restrictions than the subtypes examined so far. Indeed, as will be shown below, this imperative use of the vzjat’ construction manifests the most advanced (and therefore the least restricted) stage of grammaticalization. Interestingly enough, it does, however, not occur in the double verb subtype, cf. * возьми умри / остановись.

On the other hand, we may also find imperatives in the ‘canonical’ directive meaning, but they constitute a serious semantic challenge: what results now is a contradiction between the general meaning of the whole construction (unexpectedness of the event denoted) and the meaning of the given verbal form which cancels exactly this semantic component. This contradiction was already recognized by [Ušakov 1935: 286]. In a similar vein, [Fortuin 2000: 152] formulates that “...the vzjat’-construction is used to eliminate the addressee’s possible hesitation to do the action.” However, appropriate examples are hard to find. The following one stems from Gogol’s Nose; it illustrates a highly hypothetical scene. Moreover, the literal interpretation cannot be excluded:

(9) [Будь я без руки или без ноги — все бы это лучше; будь я без ушей — скверно, однако ж все сноснее;] но без носа человек — черт знает что: птица не птица, гражданин не гражданин, — просто возьми да и вышиби за окошко! [Н.В. Гоголь. Нос (1836)] ‘But without his nose a man is God knows what: a bird or not, a citizen or not — just go and throw him out of the window!’

On the whole, the overwhelming majority of imperative uses in our corpus may be said to represent the narrative reading (cf. ex. 8) and thus fit ideally into the overall meaning of unexpectedness.

4 Grammaticalization phenomena

Several observations suggest that in the case of the vzjat’-construction a process of grammaticalization is still ongoing with different subtypes representing different stages of it. First, unlike the other meanings of the verb vzjat’ described in [Seliverstova 2004, 265-304], this use is almost exclusively limited to the perfective aspect. If imperfective forms occur, they are in the present, used either as a historical present or with iterative meaning, cf.

(10) Каждая третья московская брачной пара берет и разводится. [Рустам Ариф-джанов, Василий Гулин. 14 способов укрепления семьи // "Столица", 1997.07.15] ‘Every third married couple in Moscow goes and gets divorced’

As for the imperative, my search of the Russian National Corpus provided just one example:
On the other hand, this corpus does not even contain one single instance of the preterital forms брал, брала, брал да и..., nor would native speakers accept the transformation of ex. 10 into the past tense. This clearly indicates that our construction has not yet reached the final stage of aspectual pairedness.

The remaining evidence for an ongoing grammaticalization seems even more impressive. As is stated in Kor Chahin 2007, two criteria are crucial in this respect: the presence or absence of a possible direct object governed by vzjat' – in the first case, we are still dealing with the literal meaning ‘to take’; and the feature of ± controllability of the action denoted by the second verb. Let us first examine the impact of direct objects. The following example is said to be ambiguous between literal and derived reading by Kor Chahin:

(12) …потом взял и поставил клетку на середину комнаты. (Домбровский) ‘Then he took and put the cage in the middle of the room’

According to her, this twofold interpretation arises only if the direct object is located after the second verb, whereas the variant взял клетку и поставил allows but the literal reading. As she adds, however, such examples are rare. Moreover, semantically inappropriate direct objects may block the literal reading as in

(13) Однажды мы так его проняли этой бородой, что он взял и сбррли ее... (Астафьев) ‘Once we impressed him so much that he went and shaved his beard’

As for the double verb subtype, it is easy to find similar ambiguous examples. One may quote from the Tampere Corpus: однажды пацан взял и поставил клетку, взял бросил тряпочку. Again, the literal meaning disappears with inappropriate objects, cf. взяли грабанули банк, взяли устроили скандал.

The final stage of detransitivization is reached when the second verb is intransitive, as is the case in ex. 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, and 11. To these we may add an example with double verb:

(14) [Закурил он папиросу, выкурил,] а чтобы окурок бросить, взял нажулся и посмотрел назад. (Русские народные сатирические сказки Сибири) ‘and in order to throw away the cigarette butt, he suddenly bent down and looked back.’

Our second criterion has to do with “impersonal” sentences, i.e. sentences without overt subjects. In my corpus, such examples are limited to the subtype with narrative imperative. The following example is quoted from [Fortuin 2000: 153]:

(15) …вдруг возьмём да приморозь (Карцевский) ‘suddenly, there came a light frost’

Since outside the narrative imperative this impersonal use is not attested, although not considered ungrammatical by native speakers (cf.: как вдруг взяло да приморозило), we may conclude that in 15 it is due to the general syntactic properties of the narrative imperative.
The two syntactic features mentioned (absence of a direct object, impersonal use) are closely related to what is called semantic bleaching in grammaticalization theory. Further evidence for this tendency is provided by the restrictions imposed on the second verb. If we take the literal meaning of \textit{vzjat’} as a reference point, we expect the subject to act as an agent. Consequently, the action denoted by the second verb should be controllable. However, we have already come across examples that do not meet this requirement, e.g. with ‘catch a cold’ or ‘die’ as second verbs. It is easy to find similar examples:

(16) [Казалось, ещё несколько ходов] — и Пономарев сдадится, а он возьми да и с чудом
спасись. (Известия) ‘and Ponomarev would capitulate, but suddenly he got rescued’

With the narrative imperative even inanimate subjects become possible:

(17) Тут в тишине возьми и раздайся чей-то разумный голос. (Литературная Газета № 23, 2001) ‘Out of the silence one suddenly heard somebody’s reasonable voice’

Such examples sound bizarre when used with indicative forms, cf. ”взял и раздался чей-то голос. Obviously, the acceptability of 17 is again due to the general characteristics of the narrative imperative, cf. [Fortuin 2000: 139, 140, 148]. The double verb subtype requires the second verb to denote a controllable action, cf. *взял умер, *взял поскользнул-ся, *взял услышал etc. On the whole, we may thus conclude that the narrative imperative use marks the peak of the grammaticalization of our \textit{vzjat’}-construction and the double verb subtype stays behind the syntatic subtypes, since it imposes an additional restriction on the second verb.

As has been signaled in the beginning, we should, however, take into account a pragmatic factor that may change the whole picture. Ex. 1 already contained the expression назло ‘against (somebody’s) will / interests’, and the semi-phrase (collocation) возьму и не буду in ex. 7 expresses a similar idea of almost childish resistance to the inevitable. Not surprisingly, the National Corpus provides a lot of sentences referring to somebody’s death against the will of other persons, for example:

(18) — Ведь Тарас Ермилыч был огорчен: угощал угощал дорого гостя, а тот в награду взял да и умер. [Д.Н. Мамин-Сибиряк. Верный раб (1891)] ‘...: he entertained his dear guest as well as he could, but the guest rewarded him by dying suddenly’

What is at stake then is not the experiencer’s lack of control over the disaster, but the idea that the latter happens against the will of somebody else. In addition, these examples carry a non-serious flavor, a joking or mocking tone. Note that even double verbs become acceptable when conveying such a humorous spirit: instead of *взял умер, one may say взял сыграл в ящик ‘all of a sudden, he kicked the bucket’. The following example perfectly illustrates the childish attitude that may engender such utterances:

(19) Ну кто из нас в детстве не обижался так на взрослых: «вот взьму, забалую и умру, и будет тогда плачать». Но мы не болеем и не умираем. ... ‘Who among us has never felt offended by his parents like this: “OK, now I’ll fall ill and die, and then you will cry”. But we are not ill and do not die.’ www.zhuk-book.ru/good.php?link=catalog:part1:2820
On the other hand, we will never find chains such as *он взял и погиб because unlike умереть, погибнуть is associated with death by accident or catastrophe, which excludes the possibility of self-destruction. Minor misfortunes may be treated in the same way as death:

(20) [Отец оказался прав: экзаменовали меня кое-как, наспех] — словно боялись, что я возьму да и срезусь. [Анатолий Мариенгоф. Мой век, мои друзья и подруги (1956–1960)] ‘...as if they were afraid that I would go and not pass the exam’

All this boils down to the statement that in 1 and 18-20 the boundary between controllable and non-controllable events has not yet been crossed: if undesirable events occur in our construction, they are reinterpreted in a humorous way, as if they were willingly caused by the victim. Thus, real uncontrollable events remain limited to the narrative imperative use.

5 The syntactic representation

Our final task consists of sketching an appropriate syntactic treatment of the vzjat’-construction within the framework of an MTT-shaped dependency grammar. To begin with, it has become evident that we are not dealing with a ‘normal’ coordinative relation, since the second conjunct including both the conjunction ‘and’ (or the pause as its asyndetic counterpart) and a second verb is obligatory, if the verb vzjat’ really is to express the idea of unexpectedness. Moreover, regular verb phrase coordination differs from our construction in several semantic respects since it links two separate situtations, hence the divergent time reference and the possibility of double negation (see section 1). Nor would we claim that a chain such as он взял да женился represents what [Bolshakov 2005] calls stable coordinate pairs: our construction has nothing in common with pairs like carrot and stick or ups and downs. To put it in other words: apart from the collocation взял и не (буду) (cf. ex. 7 and 8), there is no sign of any of the subtypes of phraseological boundness described in [Mel’čuk 1995]. What remains then is a treatment in terms of polysemy. Much like existing dictionaries, I propose to single out a separate meaning of vzjat’ with the following approximate definition: X взял и Y-oval = X неожиданно Y-oval. To this, we must add a rather unexpected government pattern:

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This is of course only part of the story. For instance, the prosodic, morphological and syntactic requirements to be met by the second actant still must be stated separately. This could be done in a general way by indicating that variant 1 and 2 must fulfill the conditions of the Surface-syntactic relation однор ‘coord’, while 3 must satisfy the conditions for the SSR сериал ‘serial’.

Such a formulation would guarantee the coreferentiality of the subjects of

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3 The label сериал has been coined to designate the double verb SSR однор is taken from the inventory of SSR offered by Mel’čuk 1974/1999 and covers all types of coordination. The logic symbol v denotes the weak interpretation of ‘or’, i.e. ‘and/or’, and summarizes the syntetic subtypes a), b) and c) listed in the beginning.
both verb phrases and (in the case of variant 3) their identical morphological outfit as well as the ban on the repetition of auxiliary morphemes. For 1 and 2, analogous conditions would have to be formulated. Additional conditions will have to handle the semantic restrictions imposed on the subject (animate noun) and the second verb (controllability) and possible pragmatic side-effects such as joke or mockery. The ban on WH-questions is not an idio-syntactic property of our construction, but originates from a general semantic conflict between the meaning ‘unexpectedly’ and the presuppositions of such a question. As for the ban on sequential time reference, it is implied by the meaning of the whole construction consequently, therefore it should not be formulated separately. On the other hand, the ban on double negation does not follow automatically from the semantic definition – after all, the element ‘unexpectedly’ could be denied separately –, so that it must be stated in an explicit way. The aspectual deficiency (lack of finite imperfective non-present forms) should be accounted for in the morphological section of the dictionary entry, and the syntactic apparatus of MTT will have to cope with the particular properties of the narrative imperative, i.e. inanimate subjects, subjectless uses and verbs denoting uncontrollable events. As for unequivocal readings of examples such as 12, I see no other way than to treat them as ambiguous, which means that two alternative syntactic representations are needed.

It should be emphasized that the solution discussed meets the first and logically super-ordinated criterion, formulated in [Mel’čuk 2003: 200] for the determination of the Synt-governor in a given Synt-relation: criterion B1 clearly indicates the direction \( vzjat' \rightarrow Conj \rightarrow V2 \) of the dependency, since the first verb \( vzjat' \) selects the string ‘and V2’ and not vice versa. Moreover, this solution offers several advantages. First, it answers the question where the second semantic actant of the verb \( vzjat' \) has gone: it turns out to be still there, but to have completely changed its shape (instead of a noun phrase we have a second verb phrase). Second, this solution is perfectly in line with the treatment of similar structures proposed by [Boguslavskij 1996: 28-32]: a sentence such as Попугай изловился и укусил меня в палец ‘The parrot managed to bite me in my finger’ is analyzed as a non-canonical coordination, the whole second conjunct of which functions as the second actant of the first verb. It seems a fair guess that the same treatment is required for the pragmatic phraseme Будто(те) так добрый ... и ... ‘would you be kind enough to...’; besides this, the same analysis would be needed for the German counterparts Der Papagei brachte es fertig und biss mich in den Finger and Seien Sie so gut und ... And third, the distribution of governor and dependent proposed here for the double verb subtype is the same as the one proposed by [Vajs 2000] for double verbs in general: the second verb always depends on the first one.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that on account of the adverb-like semantics of \( vzjat' \) (‘suddenly, unexpectedly’) my proposal seems rather counter-intuitive since a real adverb would be governed by the second verb. However, within the hierarchy of criteria discussed in [Mel’čuk 2003: 200] this criterion is the weakest one: the semantic content of the phrase is decisive if and only if neither syntactic nor morphological properties provide reliable cues for the determination of the governing node.

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