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A long story about short-form adjectives in Russian and their rivals

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CLEAR

Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian
<https://site.uit.no/clear/>



Short-form adjectives and their rivals

- copula:

Short-form vs. long-form

1. Критерии очень **простые**_{LF}.
'The criteria are very simple.'
2. Критерии очень **просты**_{SF}, и их всего два.
'The criteria are very simple, and there are only two of them.'

Two contexts
(-/+ copula) are
analyzed in two articles

+ copula:

Short-form vs. long-form vs. INS

1. Город был **пуст**_{SF}: талибы оставили его накануне ночью.
'The town was empty: the Taliban warriors had left it just before that at night.'
2. Прилавки были **пустые**_{LF}, но голодато не было никакого [...].
'The stalls were empty, but there was no hunger at all [...].'
3. Фойе гостиницы тоже было **пустым**_{INS} [...].
'The hotel foyer was also empty [...].'

Some context

- Other grammatical distinctions are usually named in terms of the **concepts** that they invoke: person, number, tense, aspect, voice, etc. By contrast, what is named is the **form** used to mark a distinction, leaving its meaning unclear.
- We tend to think of **long form** as the **default** form for adjectives, and the **short form** as something that is **marginal**, perhaps even losing ground historically.



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Tore Nessel & Laura A. Janda (2023):
The long and the short of it: Russian predicate
adjectives with zero copula.

Russian Linguistics

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185>

(open access!)

**NB! Only -copula in this
article (we look at
+copula and competition
with INS in 2025)**

A classic problem in Russian morphosyntax

- Choice between long forms (LF) and short forms (SF) of predicate adjectives
 - Predicate adjectives = adjectives in predicate position, the Y in sentences meaning 'X = Y', as in Иван **добрый/добр**
- Predicate adjectives occur in sentences with full verbs (e.g., verbs of motion) or copula verbs (e.g., *быть* 'be' and *стать* 'become')
- A copula verb may be overt (e.g., был 'was (masculine singular)' or covert (so-called zero copula)
- **We limit ourselves to sentences with zero copula, where the choice is between nominative long forms (LF) and short forms (SF)**
- (In sentences with overt verbs, the predicative adjective may also occur in the instrumental)

Corpus examples with the adjective *prostoj* 'simple'

- (1) a. Критерии очень **простые**_{LF}.
'The criteria are very simple.'
- b. Критерии очень **просты**_{SF}, и их всего два.
'The criteria are very simple, and there are only two of them.'
- (2) a. Ответ **простой**_{LF}: в обеспечении интеллектуальных сверхвозможностей важнейшую роль играет активация определенных, а вероятно, и многих мозговых структур.
'The answer is simple: for intellectual superopportunities the activation of certain and, presumably, numerous brain structures play a major role.'
- b. Ответ **прост**_{SF}: здания-памятники расположены на самых коммерчески привлекательных территориях города.
'The answer is simple: the historic buildings are situated in the commercially most attractive parts of town.'

Method and data

1. Establish a database of examples culled from the Russian National Corpus (syntactic subcorpus): 5,813 example sentences
2. Identify (nearly) categorical rules whereby the choice of form is determined by the context
 1. Lexical: adjectives that accept only one form (рад etc.)
 2. Morphosyntactic: constructions that accept only one form
3. Pinpoint a “space of competition”, i.e., a set of contexts where all forms are possible
4. Analyze statistically the interplay of contextual factors within the space of competition.



Possible outcomes

1. Predictable from context
2. NOT predictable from context – may have different meanings, but we may also not have identified the correct contextual factors

Relevant factors (from scholarly literature)

Word order:

- SA: Subj before Adj
- AS: Adj before Subj

Subject + \emptyset + Adjective (+ complement)

Море

+ \emptyset +

богато

+

рыбой.

- Noun
- Personal pronoun
- Other pronoun
- Infinitive
- Clause
- No subject

- Gender/number
- Frequency

- YES vs. NO

Relevant factors relate to the subject, the predicate, and the relation between them.

Noise in the data

- We had to eliminate many adjectives that don't have both LF and SF:
 - numerals (один, первый...)
 - pronouns with adjectival declension (чей, другой, этот, иной, какой, мой, наш, сам, весь...)
 - Past Active Participles (бывший, сумасшедший...)
 - adjectives that have only SF (должен, рад)
 - adjectives that have only LF (американский, немецкий, отсталый, загорелый, лучший, меньший, дармовой, кадровый, мировой, пирров...)
 - superlatives with самый + LF

Types of Complement (part one)

(3) Я, конечно, **виновата**_{SF}, что не пошла в партизаны.

FINITE CLAUSE

‘I am, of course, guilty for not becoming a partisan.’

(4) Она **способна**_{SF} выражать эмоции.

INFINITIVE CONSTRUCTION

‘She is able to express emotions.’

(5) Они не **согласны**_{SF} со сроком.

PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

‘They don’t agree on the deadline.’

(6) Описание Марко Поло **полны**_{SF} неточностей.

GENITIVE NOUN PHRASE

‘Marco Polo’s descriptions are full of inexactitudes.’

Types of Complement (part two)

- (7) Я очень **благодарна**_{SF} Владимиру Шварцману и Саше Чачко за искреннее желание помочь.

DATIVE NOUN PHRASE

‘I am very grateful to Vladimir Švarcman and Saša Čačko for their sincere wish to help.’

- (8) Чем он так **горд**_{SF}?

INSTRUMENTAL NOUN PHRASE

‘What is he so proud of?’

SF in over 99% of examples with complements

(Nearly) categorical rules

1. Adjective with complement → **SF**
(5 exceptions out of 809 examples, coverage ≈ 99%)
2. Impersonal constructions → **SF**
(Infinitive, clausal or no subject, neuter adj)
(19 exceptions out of 1,710 examples, coverage ≈ 99%)
3. Non-personal pronoun as subject → **SF**
(*əmo* 'this', *to* 'that', *vcë* 'all' etc.)
(13 exceptions out of 325, coverage ≈ 96%)
4. Word-order (rhematic subject): AS → **SF**
(10 exceptions out of 429 examples, coverage ≈ 98%)

**Let's take a
closer look:
Is there a
common
denominator?**

1. All (nearly) categorical rules involve **SF**.
2. No morphosyntactic contexts where **LF** is the only option!

Descriptions of situations vs. participants

1. **Найти заинтересованного капиталиста** практически **НЕВОЗМОЖНО_{SF}**.
'Finding an interested capitalist is practically impossible.'
2. **Что это не зеркало** – **ТОЧНО_{SF}**, потому что [...].
'That this is not a mirror is clear, because [...].'
3. Каждый актер привнес в фильм свою неподражаемую ауру: Светлана Немоляева, Лия Ахеджакова, Людмила Иванова ... Как ими можно не восхищаться и не любить? **Это НЕВОЗМОЖНО_{SF}**!
'Each actor contributed their inimitable aura to the movie: S. N., L. A., L. I. ... How is it possible not to be excited about them and not to love them? It's impossible!'
4. Это место не узнать: **ОНО ЗОЛОТОЕ_{LF}**, а за ним совершенно чёрная река.
'This place is unrecognizable: it is golden, and behind it there is a completely black river.'

SF describes situation

LF describes participant

Sentences 1–2 are traditionally analyzed as **ADVERBS**.

However, same ending –o.

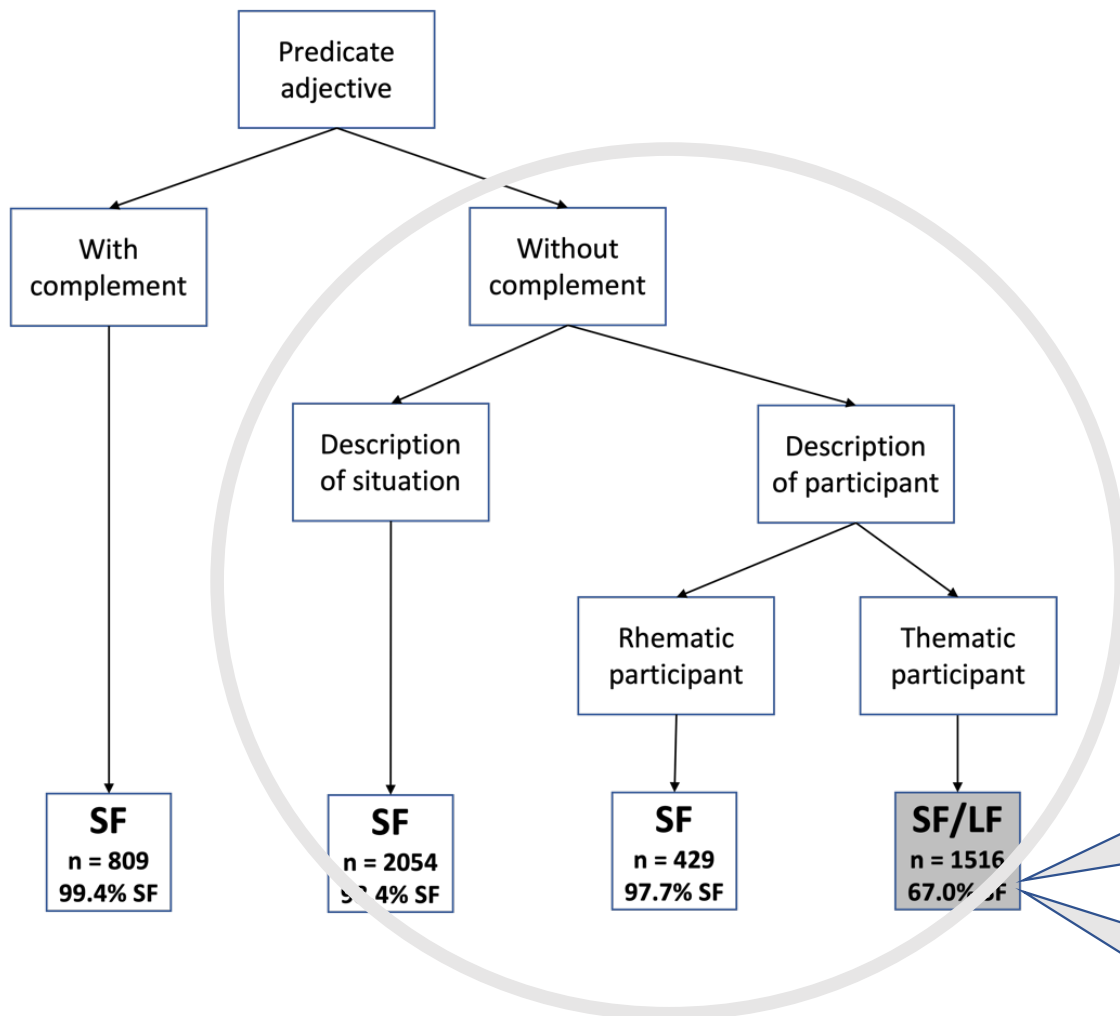
Revised (nearly) categorical rule:
Predicate adjective describes situation → **SF**

Word order

- Thematic word order = SA = subject before predicate adjective
 - See all previous examples
- Rhematic word order = AS = predicate adjective before subject
 - **Известно_{SF}** имя его отца – Рейнер Фос.
'The name of his father is well known – Reiner Foss.'

SF in over 97% of examples AS word order

Overview – decision tree



The situation/Participant Hypothesis
 “In sentences without a complement
 a. Long forms are descriptions of thematic participants.
 b. Short forms are descriptions of situations or participants.”

“Space of competition”:
 Even here **SF** is dominant!

Next step: Statistical analysis of “space of competition”

Other factors in the space of competition

- **Type of subject**
- Gender and number
- Frequency of adjective overall and frequency of adjective as predicate

Type of subject

- Non-personal pronouns Это, Всё
- Noun phrases unmodified
- Noun phrases modified
- Personal pronouns
- No subject
- Other subject

Statistical analysis focuses only on the “space of competition” between SF and LF

- Predicate adjectives
 - Without a complement
 - That describe a participant (not a situation)
 - The participant is thematic (appears before the adjective)
- The dataset contains 1516 such examples
 - 67% of them use SF

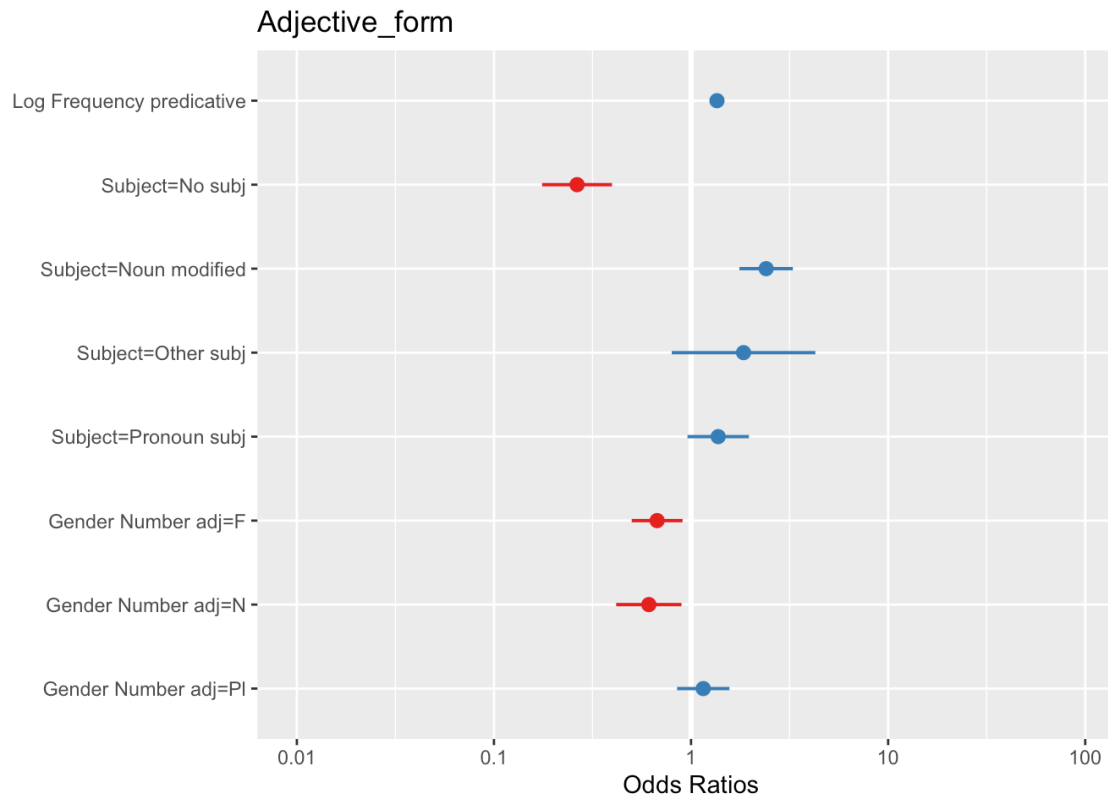
Statistical analysis

Adjective_form \sim 1 + Log_Frequency_predicative + Subject + Gender_Number_adj

Our model yields correct predictions in 70.05% of all cases. While this is not a lot better than the baseline of 67.02%, a statistical comparison of our model with the baseline shows that the difference is highly significant and the probability that this difference (or a greater one) could occur by chance is 0.006. The C-score measure of goodness of fit is 0.704, which indicates a good model. The R-squared value indicates that the model accounts for 16.5% of the variance in the data.

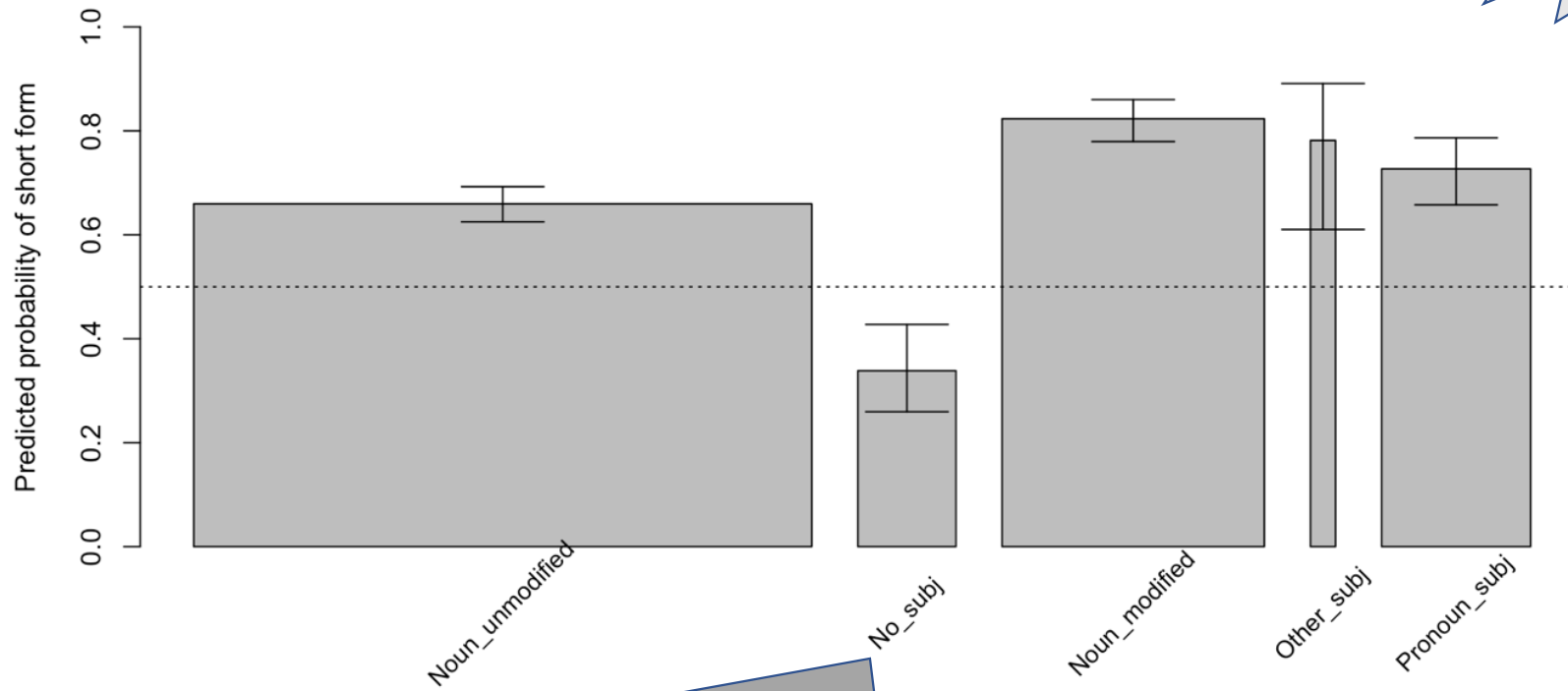
Statistical analysis

Adjective_form \sim 1 + Log_Frequency_predicative + Subject + Gender_Number_adj



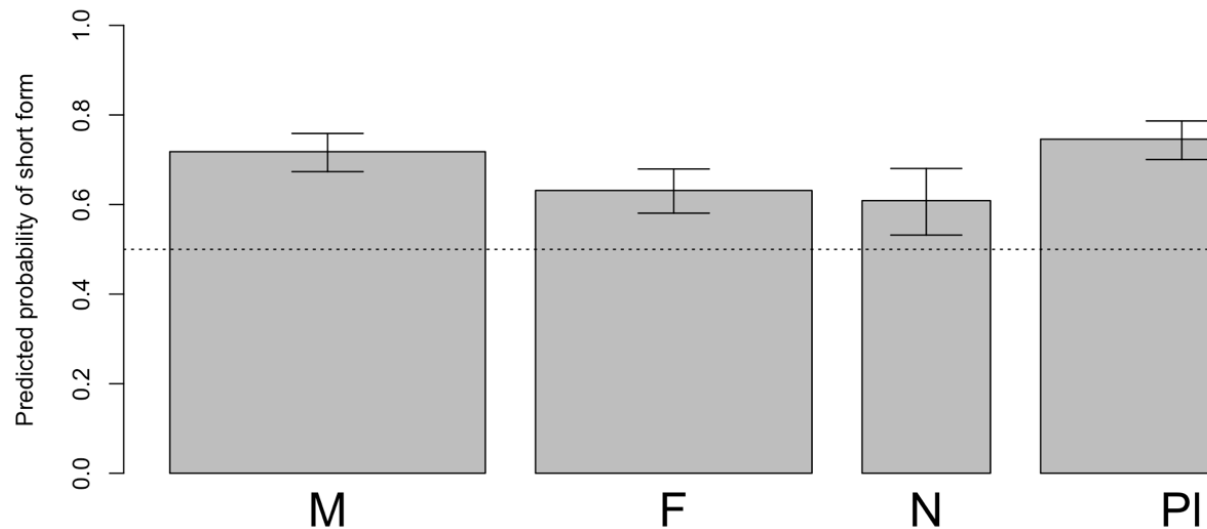
Subject types

Thicker columns = more data



Elliptic sentences without subject favor **LF!**

Gender and number

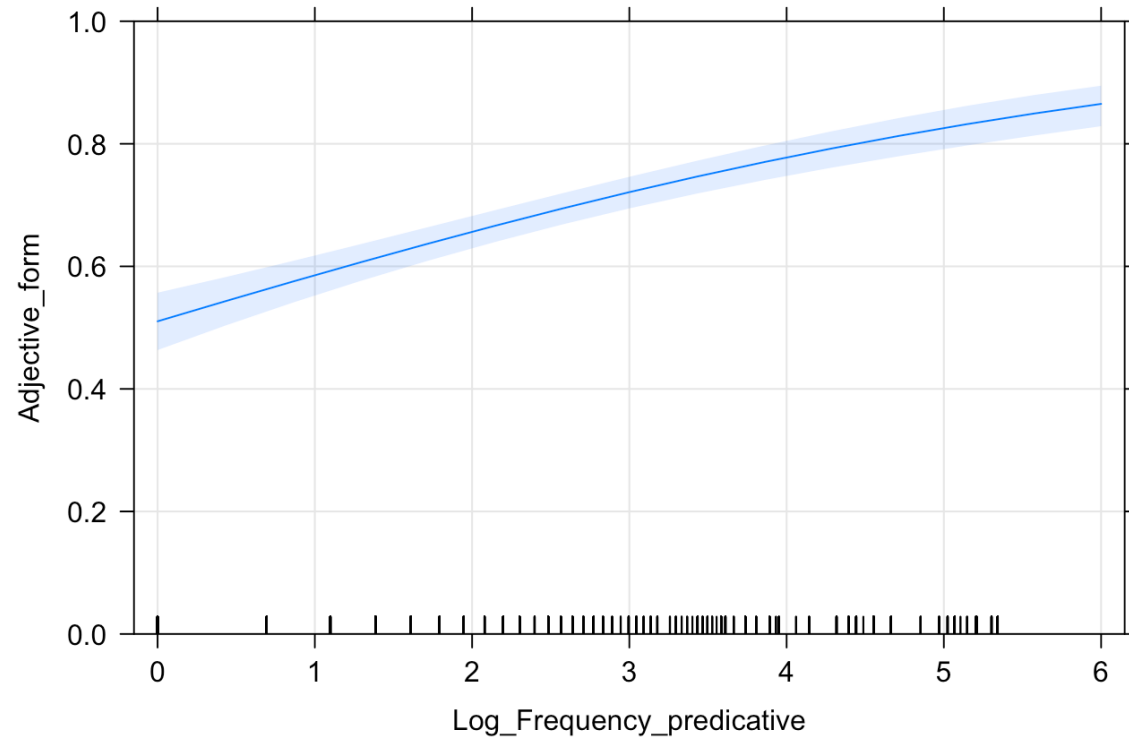


But differences are rather small!

The gender/number hierarchy:

Masculine singular, plural > feminine singular, neuter singular
(where > means “is more likely to combine with an SF than”)

Frequency



Higher frequency yields higher likelihood of **SF**.

Table 9 The ten most frequent adjectives and ten hapaxes in our dataset. The numbers represent the total number of occurrences as predicate adjectives in the syntactic subcorpus of the Russian National Corpus and the numbers in parentheses represent the logarithmic transformations of these frequencies corresponding to the x-axis of Fig. 5. Note that the highest frequency item is an outlier not visualized in Fig. 5

a. Lemmas of high frequency:

<i>nužnyj</i> ‘necessary’	613 (6.42)	<i>gotovyj</i> ‘ready’	172 (5.15)
<i>izvestnyj</i> ‘well-known’	209 (5.34)	<i>trudnyj</i> ‘difficult’	165 (5.11)
<i>važnyj</i> ‘important’	201 (5.30)	<i>xorošij</i> ‘good’	159 (5.07)
<i>neobxodimyj</i> ‘indispensable’	183 (5.21)	<i>ponjatnyj</i> ‘understandable’	152 (5.02)
<i>nevozmožnyj</i> ‘impossible’	182 (5.20)	<i>interesnyj</i> ‘interesting’	144 (4.97)

b. Hapaxes:

<i>adekvatnyj</i> ‘adequate’	1 (0)	<i>mudryj</i> ‘wise’	1 (0)
<i>antinaučnyj</i> ‘anti-scientific’	1 (0)	<i>osobyj</i> ‘special’	1 (0)
<i>bezzaščitnyj</i> ‘helpless’	1 (0)	<i>slabovol’nyj</i> ‘infirm’	1 (0)
<i>iskusstvennyj</i> ‘artificial’	1 (0)	<i>zdravyj</i> ‘healthy’	1 (0)
<i>jadovityj</i> ‘poisonous’	1 (0)	<i>xmuryj</i> ‘gloomy’	1 (0)

Interim summary – \emptyset copula

1. Most frequent option: **SF**
2. (Nearly) categorical rules:
 - a. Adjective with complement → **SF**
 - b. Impersonal constructions → **SF**
 - c. Non-personal pronoun as subject → **SF**
 - d. Word-order: AS → **SF**
3. The Situation/Participant Hypothesis:
 - “In sentences without a complement
 - a. Long forms are descriptions of thematic participants.
 - b. Short forms are descriptions of situations or participants.”
4. Factors favoring **SF**:
 - a. Overt subject
 - b. Masc sg or pl
 - c. High frequency
5. Relatively free variation inside “space of competition”

These findings are compatible with a situation where **LF** and **SF** convey different meanings (since the choice is not completely determined by the context).

What we did not look at

- Variation in meaning expressed by LF vs. SF
 - SF = state “contingent and potentially variable” (Timberlake 2004: 292)?
- Stylistic and sociolinguistic factors
 - SF more bookish?
- Change over time
 - SF decreasing?





Tore Nessel & Laura A. Janda (2025):
Contextually determined or semantically
distinct? The competition between instrumental,
long form nominative and short form nominative
in Russian predicate adjectives

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185>

(open access!)

Here we look at
examples with copula
and competition with INS

Instrumental (INS), long form (LF), short form (SF) with copular verb (быть)

Фойе гостиницы тоже было **пустым**_{INS} [...].

‘The hotel foyer was also empty [...].’

Прилавки были **пустые**_{LF}, но голодато не было никакого [...].

‘The stalls were empty, but there was no hunger at all [...].’

Город был **пуст**_{SF}: талибы оставили его накануне ночью.

‘The town was empty: the Taliban warriors had left it just before that at night.’

Possible factors: form of the copula verb, subject, word order,
complements to the predicate adjective, meaning

Steps in the method

- Collected database of examples with overt copula from Russian National Corpus (syntactic subcorpus)
- Identified (nearly) categorical rules and narrowed focus to space of competition
- Statistical analysis of examples in the space of competition (1690 examples)

Findings

- Choice of adjective form is partly determined by 3 factors of context:
 - presence/absence of a complement
 - nature of subject
 - mood of copula verb
- 4 (nearly) categorical rules: one requires INS (very restricted), 3 require SF
- SF is default option for predicate adjectives in almost all contexts
- LF is weakest, least frequent
- In contexts where INS, SF, LF are possible, they have different meanings
- SF marks temporary states rather than permanent characteristics

Data

- Sentences with forms of **быть** (except **есть**) and predicate adjective
- Removed all adjectives that do not have both short and long forms, e.g., those in **–ский** and **рад** (see list from 2023 article).

	# attestations	% attestations
Instrumental	734	23%
Long form nominative	261	8%
Short form nominative	2211	69%
Total	3206	100%

Factors

- **Complement** of adjective: finite clause, infinitive clause, noun phrase, prepositional phrase, no complement (see next slide)
- **Subject**: finite clause, infinitive clause, modified noun, unmodified noun, pronoun, other overt subject, no subject
- **Word order**: adjective initial, medial, final
- **Gender and number** of adjective: masculine singular, feminine singular, neuter singular, plural
- **Frequency of lemma** overall and **frequency as predicate adjective**
- **Lemma** of each adjective
- **Form of copula verb**: finite past, finite future, imperative, subjunctive, infinitive, gerund

Complement of adjective

Втайне я был даже слегка **горд**_{SF}, **что он готов опять слушать**
'Secretly I was even a little proud that he was ready to listen again'

Finite
clause

Но машины были **готовы**_{SF} **уехать**.
'But the cars were ready to leave'

Infinitive clause

Also: No
complement

Мы были **довольны**_{SF} **своей новой квартирой**.
'We were satisfied with our new apartment'

Noun phrase

Он всю жизнь был особо **чувствителен**_{SF} **к запахам**.
'All his life he was particularly sensitive to smell'

Prepositional
phrase

Subject

Infinitive
clause

По улицам ходить было **небезопасно**_{SF}, ни днем, ни ночью.

'To walk in the streets was not without danger, both day and night.'

Особенно было **обидно**_{SF}, что он был мокрый.

Finite
clause

'In particular it was a shame that he had been wet.'

Other types of subjects: modified noun, unmodified noun,
pronoun, other overt subject, no subject

Form of copula

- finite past
 - был, была, было, были
- finite future
 - буду, будешь, будет, будем, будете, будут
- imperative
 - будь, будьте
- subjunctive
 - был бы, была бы, было бы, были бы
- infinitive
 - быть
- gerund
 - будучи

(Nearly) categorical rules

- **Gerund** as copula: instrumental
- Adjective with **complement**: short form
- **Clausal or infinitival subject**: short form
- **Impersonal** constructions with no subject: short form
- **Non-personal neuter pronouns** as subjects: short form

We will go through each in more detail

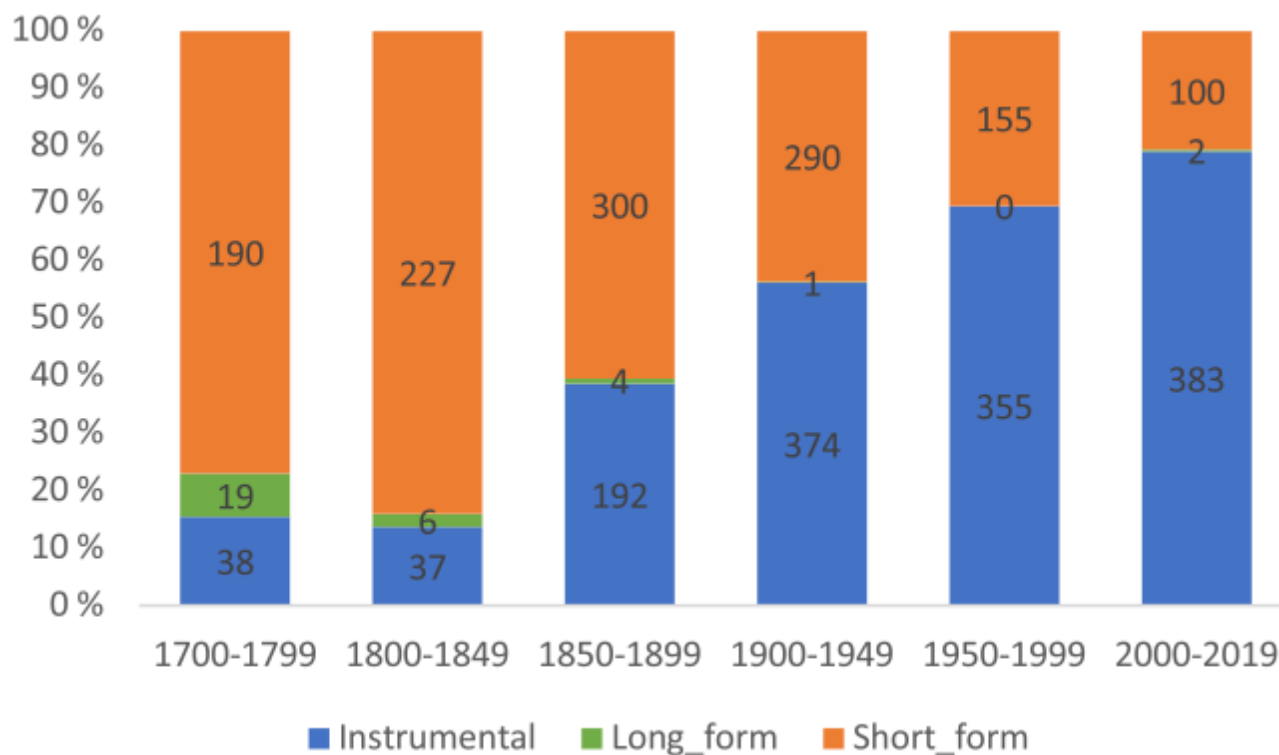
Gerund as copula: instrumental

Но будучи **независимым**_{INS}, он не нуждался в этом и работал самостоятельно.

‘But since he was independent, he didn’t need this and worked on his own.’

In our data: 16 exx. with gerunds in our data, **all INS**

Historical trend for predicate adjectives immediately following будучи: Data from Russian National Corpus



Adjective with complement: short form

	Instrumental	Long form	Short form	Total
Clausal complement	1	0	60	61
Infinitive complement	0	0	152	152
NP complement	10	0	277	287
PP complement	29	1	230	260
Total	40	1	719	760

Mostly involves для, as in this example:

Важно, что кредит будет **доступным**_{INS} для предприятий.
'It is important that credit will be available for companies.'

Clausal or infinitival subject: short form

Table 5 The distribution of predicate adjectives in sentences with clausal and infinitival subjects. Only adjectives without a complement are included

	Instrumental	Long form	Short form	Total
Clausal subject	1	3	32	36
Infinitive subject	10	0	376	386
Total	11	3	408	422

Impersonal constructions with no subject: short form

Здесь, в зоопарке, было **чудесно**_{SF} и совсем не **страшно**_{SF}.

‘Here, in the zoo, it was wonderful and there was nothing to be afraid of.’

All 121 examples of impersonal constructions with no overt subject in our dataset have short form.

Non-personal neuter pronouns as subjects: short form

Table 6 The distribution of predicate adjectives in sentences with neuter forms of non-personal pronouns

	Instrumental	Long form	Short form	Total
<i>čto</i> ‘what’	0	0	8	8
<i>èto</i> ‘this’	6	2	85	93
<i>ničto</i> ‘nothing’	0	0	1	1
<i>to</i> ‘that’	3	0	4	7
<i>vsë</i> ‘all’	5	0	36	41
Total	14	2	134	150

Всё было **безуспешно**_{SF}.
‘Everything was unsuccessful.’

Summary of (nearly) categorial rules

- Gerund будучи -> INS
- Complement -> SF
- “Non-standard subjects” (clauses, infinitives, non-personal pronouns, and zero subjects in impersonal sentences) -> SF

Note: non-standard subjects refer to **events**,
standard subjects refer to **participants**

Non-standard subject это:

Умру-то – это **ясно**_{SF}, но не сейчас.
'I am going to die – that is clear, but not now.'

Standard subject оно:

В избе всего одно окно и оно **грязно**_{SF}.
'In the hut there is only one window, and it is dirty.'

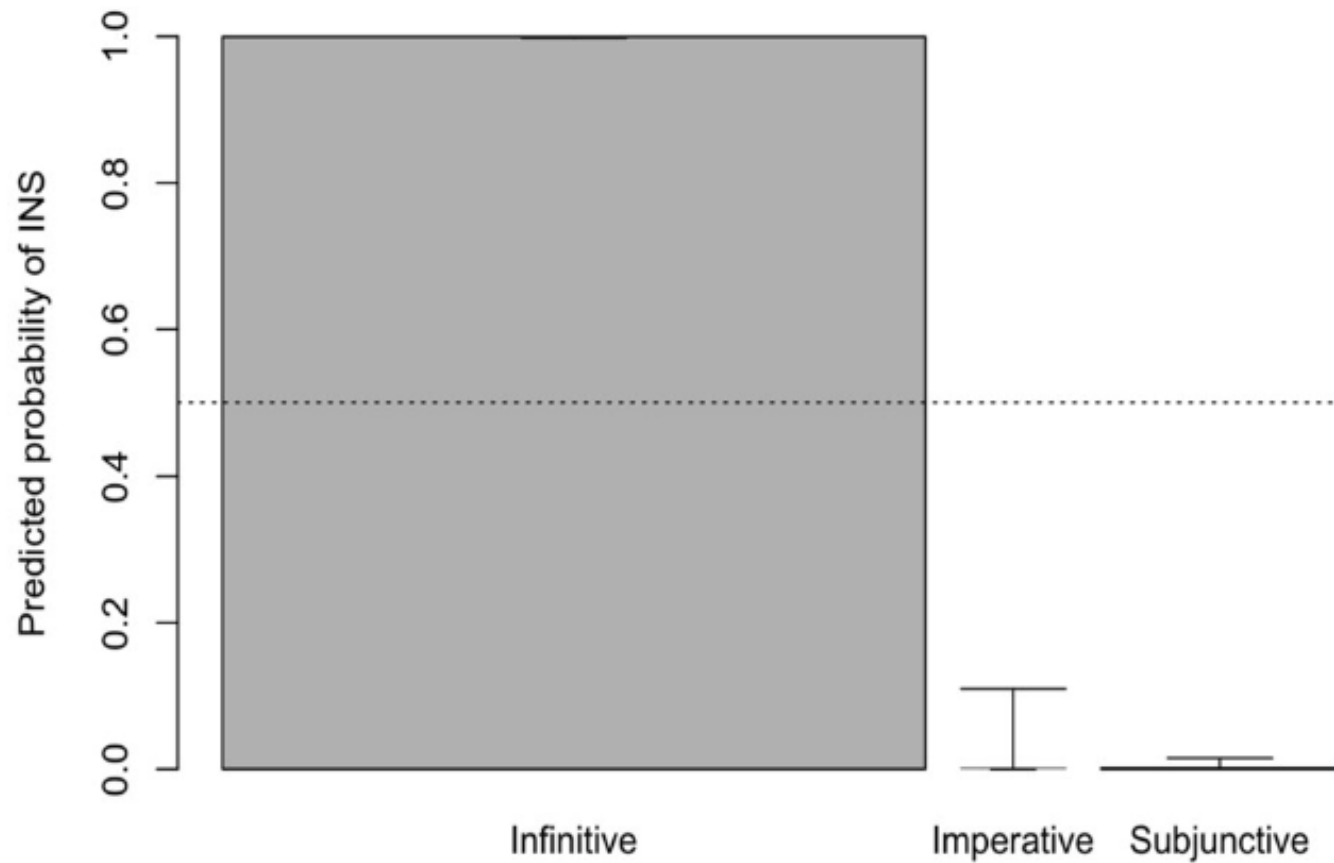
INS vs. SF in sentences with an infinitive, imperative, or subjunctive form of **быть**

	Instrumental	Short form	Total
Infinitive	178	44	222
Imperative	3	11	14
Subjunctive	22	53	75
Total	203	108	311

INS in 65.2% of relevant examples

Adjective_form ~ Copula + (1 | Lemma_adjective)

Effect of copula forms on prediction of instrumental forms of predicate adjectives



Typical patterns for infinitives, imperatives, subjunctives

Infinitive:

А для чего быть **богатым**_{INS}?

‘But what’s the point of being rich?’

Imperative

Не будь **ревнив**_{SF}, ответил Пилат и потер руки.

‘Don’t be jealous [...], Pilate answered and rubbed his hands.’

Subjunctive:

Однако успех «третьей колонны» был бы **возможен**_{SF} лишь при условии, если бы она была последовательно оппозиционной.

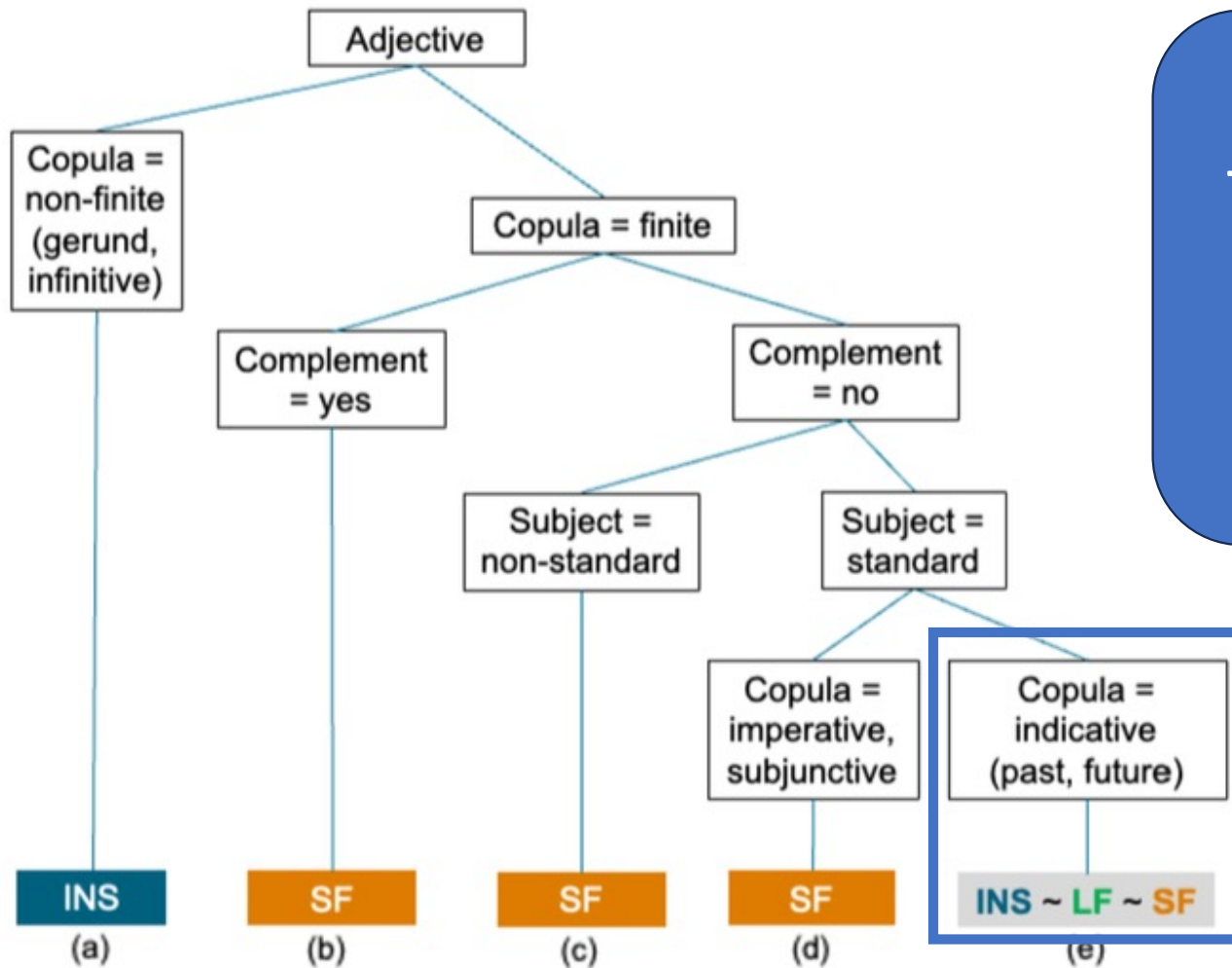
‘However, the success of the “third column” would only be possible under the condition that the “third column” would be consistently oppositional [...].’

Individual adjectives have their own preferences

- Adjectives favoring INS: *pročnyj* 'firm', *steril'nyj* 'sterile', *krepkij* 'strong'
- Adjectives favoring SF: *vidnyj* 'visible, prominent', *uznavaemyj* 'recognizable', *sostojatel'nyj* 'solvent', *raznoobraznyj* 'varied', *različnyj* 'heterogeneous', *ravnyj* 'equal', *produmannyj* 'well thought-out', *primenimyj* 'applicable', *pravyj* 'right', *pravdivyj* 'true', *poxožij* 'similar', *ploxoj* 'bad', *otnositel'nyj* 'relative', *oskorbitel'nyj* 'offensive', *odetyj* 'dressed', *nepravil'nyj* 'incorrect', *negativnyj* 'negative', *grubyj* 'coarse', *demokratičnyj* 'democratic', *blagodarnyj* 'grateful', *uverennyj* 'convinced', *gotovyj* 'ready', *xorošij* 'good', *vrednyj* 'harmful', *slyšnyj* 'audible', *nepravyj* 'incorrect'

Note: many adjectives favoring SF are historically participles

Decision tree for predicate adjective



The next step is to focus just on these 1690 examples (“space of competition”):

27% INS
15% LF
58% SF

INS vs. LF vs. SF

- Exclude all data pertaining to (nearly) categorical rules
- 1690 remaining examples have past and future forms of быть
- Multinomial regression:
 - `mlogit(formula= Adjective_form~ 1 | Copula + Word_order + Subject + Gender_Number_adj + LogFrequency_predicative)`
 - Copula: past, future
 - Word order: adjective initial, medial, final
 - Subject: modified noun, unmodified noun, pronoun, other overt subject, no subject
 - Gender and number of adjective: masculine singular, feminine singular, neuter singular, plural
 - Frequency

All factors are significant, but effects are not large and model does not cover a large amount of variance.
Following slides illustrate observed preferences.

Copula= Past, Word_order= A_final,
Subject= Noun_unmodified,
Gender_Number_adj= Masculine,
Frequency_predicative = 1
>> preference for INS

All further observations are
comparisons
with this combination of
factors

Фольклор всегда был **УСТНЫМ**_{INS}.
'Folklore was always oral.'

	Instrumental	Long form	Short form	Total
Past copula	393	235	884	1512
Future copula	71	15	92	178
Total	464	250	976	

Medial placement of adjective >> SF

Трудно сказать, был ли **счастлив**_{SF} этот мрачноватый человек.

‘It was hard to tell, if this darkish person was happy or not.’

	Instrumental	Long form	Short form	Total
Adjective final	413	233	804	1450
Adjective initial	42	15	104	161
Adjective medial	9	2	68	79
Total	464	250	976	1690

Subject is modified noun or pronoun, or no overt subject >> SF

Subject is modified noun:

Венецианская республика была очень **богата**_{SF}.

‘The Venetian republic was very rich [...].’

Subject is pronoun:

Луну изучали не потому, что она была **интересна**_{SF}.

‘They didn’t study the moon because it was interesting.’

No overt subject:

Вообще, в своей жизни Ирина Васильевна никогда не пела – до того была **робка**_{SF} и **тиха**_{SF}.

‘In general, Irina Vasil’evna had never sung in her life – she was so timid and quiet.’

Individual preferences of high frequent adjectives

	# Instrumental	# Long form	# Short form	%Short form
<i>Nužnyj</i> ‘necessary’	0	0	63	100%
<i>Vidnyj</i> ‘visible, prominent’	0	0	23	100%
<i>Ščastlivyj</i> ‘happy’	0	0	12	100%
<i>Gotovyj</i> ‘ready’	0	0	12	100%
<i>Slyšnyj</i> ‘audible’	0	0	10	100%
<i>Jasnyj</i> ‘clear’	0	0	10	100%
<i>Strašnyj</i> ‘terrifying’	0	0	10	100%
<i>Izvestnyj</i> ‘well-known’	0	1	23	96%
<i>Pravyj</i> ‘right’	1	0	14	93%
<i>Ploxoj</i> ‘bad’	0	1	10	91%

High frequency promotes SF

Summary for predicate adjectives with overt copula

Contexts conditioning the choice of adjective form:

- Non-finite copula yields the instrumental.
 - Copula marked for imperative or subjunctive mood yields the short form.
 - The presence of a complement yields the short form.
 - Non-standard subject yields the short form.
- There is competition between the instrumental, the long form nominative, and the short form nominative if the following three conditions are met:
 - a. The copula verb is in the indicative.
 - b. The predicate adjective does not combine with a complement.
 - c. The predicate adjective has a standard subject (a personal pronoun or a noun phrase).

Coherence with Situation/Participant Hypothesis?

Wrapping up

- Empirical
 - Short forms are alive and kicking.
 - Partly determined by contextual factors.
 - In many cases, more than one form is possible – semantic differentiation?
- Methodological
 - Pinpoint (nearly) categorical rules
 - Establish “space of competition”
 - Analyze this space by means of statistics
- Ideas for future research
 - Russian National Corpus now has (improved) syntactic annotation – possible to study more balanced data
 - Diachrony
 - Stylistics and sociolinguistic factors
 - Semantic differences



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