

Gradient Complementhood in Russian Prepositional Verbs: Evidence from Diagnostics

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This paper investigates how Russian intransitive prepositional verbs, such as *vozdeystvovat' na* ‘act on’ and *skazat'sya na* ‘to affect’, pattern as selecting complements or adjuncts, and why standard syntactic diagnostics often yield conflicting results. Extending non-binary approaches to the complement-adjunct distinction (Acedo-Matellán & Oltra-Massuet 2024; Gallego 2010), I propose a gradient model of argument structure in which complementhood depends on the degree of integration between the verb and its PP, correlated with prepositional desemantization.

To construct the corpus, we selected verb-preposition combinations from the Russian National Corpus (RNC; Savchuk et al., 2024) that occur at least 1,000 times in the corpus and involve verbs that select a single preposition, such as *vozdeystvovat' na* ‘act on’. Motion verbs, such as *priplýt' k* ‘sail up to’ and *prizemlit'sja na* ‘land on’, as well as verbs that select multiple prepositions, such as *soglasit'sja s/na* ‘agree with/to’, were excluded from the dataset.

Russian data show that PP complements require preposition-sensitive *wh*-questions, such as *Na chto eto vliyayet?* ‘What does this affect?’, whereas forms such as **Gde eto vliyayet?* ‘Where does it influence?’ are infelicitous in isolation, as they fail to target the PP complement. Preliminary evidence also indicates that verbs such as *vpast'* ‘fall into’ and *pogruzit'sja* ‘be lost in’ license these questions only in appropriate discourse contexts.

The omission test reveals a continuum in the availability of PP omission. Verbs in sentences like **On prinadlezhit* ‘He belongs’ strictly require overt realization, indicating that the PP occupies an obligatory argument position. Other verbs allow omission more freely when the complement is recoverable from the surrounding context, as in *Pravda, skazalas' i pandemiya* ‘Admittedly, the pandemic also had an effect’. By contrast, expressions such as *Vsyo skazyvaetsya* ‘Everything has an effect’ permit a generalized interpretation in which the target of the effect remains unspecified. Some verbs show intermediate behavior: sentences like **Situatsiya vozdejstvuyet* ‘The situation affects’ are ungrammatical without the PP. However, acceptability improves when the argument is contextually or adverbially supported, as in *Vsyo eto vozdejstvuyet terapevticheski* ‘All this has a therapeutic effect’.

Syntactically, this contrast can be modeled in terms of null complement licensing: strongly selecting verbs require overt expression, while weaker verbs permit the complement to remain unexpressed when it is recoverable from context. This variation reflects lexical sensitivity in the licensing of omission, with position along the continuum determined by the interaction between selectional strength and discourse recoverability.

Sluicing further indicates that the PP position remains structurally available under ellipsis as in *Eto vliyayet, no neponyatno na chto* ‘It affects something, but it’s not clear what’. However, in cases of strict lexical selection, sluicing does not provide evidence beyond that already revealed by omission, as in **Proyekt sostoit, no ya ne znaju iz chego* ‘The project consists, but I don’t know of what’. Moreover, intermediate cases suggest that discourse recoverability alone is insufficient to license acceptable sluicing. Predicates such as *vozdeystvovat' na* ‘act on’ may

permit omission when supported by contextual or adverbial material, while remaining degraded under sluicing: *?Eto vozdejstvuyet, no neponyatno na chto* ‘?It acts, but it is unclear on what’.

Table 1 summarizes the diagnostic profiles of the verbs investigated. The proposed continuum is based on the cumulative behavior of each verb across independently motivated diagnostics, including omission under different discourse conditions and sluicing.

No single diagnostic determines the status of a verb-PP combination. Instead, each verb is classified according to its cumulative profile across the diagnostic battery. The diagnostics do not pattern arbitrarily but probe different aspects of verb-PP structure: *wh*-questions reflect selectional properties, iterability captures the uniqueness of argument positions, omission tracks the recoverability of argument realization, and sluicing probes the availability of a syntactically projected complement position under ellipsis. The convergence and divergence of these diagnostics therefore provide evidence for a gradient model of verb-PP integration rather than a categorical complement-adjunct distinction.

Table 1. Diagnostic profiles of selected Russian prepositional verbs across omission and sluicing contexts

Russian verb	English gloss	Omission			
		Bare omission	Adverbial support	Discourse context	Sluicing
<i>skazat'sya na</i>	'have an effect on'	✓	✓	✓	✓
<i>otrazit'sya na</i>	'be reflected in'	*	✓	✓	✓
<i>vliyat' na</i>	'influence'	*	✓	✓	✓
<i>vozdeystvovat' na</i>	'act on'	*	✓	✓	?
<i>vozderzhat'sya ot</i>	'refrain from'	*	*	✓	*
<i>pogruzit'sya v</i>	'be lost in'	*	*	✓	✓
<i>otkazat'sya ot</i>	'refuse'	*	*	✓	✓
<i>nuzhdat'sya v</i>	'need'	*	*	✓	✓
<i>prevratit'sya v</i>	'turn into'	*	*	✓	✓
<i>vpast' v</i>	'fall into'	*	*	*	*

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Selected References

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