

Semantics of Attenuated Comparatives in Russian

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Abstract¹

The paper discusses the semantics of Russian comparatives with the attenuative prefix *po-* like *pobol'she* 'somewhat more' or *poumnee* 'a bit cleverer'. It is shown that they have two major types of usage, the comparative one and the selective one. The former is close to the semantics of the standard comparative degree of adjectives and adverbs, while the latter is closer to the semantics of the superlative. Within the comparative type a special case is described: the correlative construction which contains two attenuatives. Its outstanding feature is cross-filling of valency slots of the comparatives.

1 Attenuated Comparatives in the Lexical System of the Language

Comparative forms of adjectives and adverbs with the prefix *po-*, like *pobol'she*, *poumnee* (roughly, 'somewhat more', 'a bit cleverer'), are so common in Russian and so fully documented in grammars and linguistic literature that it may raise the question of whether another study in this area could really add anything new to the existing knowledge. Indeed, such linguistic units are semantically straightforward; they all share a meaning component of attenuation close to 'somewhat' and are, at first glance, not enigmatic at all.

We will however attempt to demonstrate that these units have very nontrivial properties, some of which have not been discussed in literature and deserve close consideration.

What do we know about attenuated comparatives in Russian? The basic facts can be found in the famous Victor Vinogradov's book (1947, reissued in 1972) and all Russian academic grammars. Vinogradov discusses these units comparing them with regular comparatives:

"In forms ending with *-ee*, *-e*, *-še* the meaning of the comparative degree is not complicated by any additional shades. These forms may combine with the prefix *po-*. The prefix *po-* usually attenuates the degree of prevalence of a quality in one of the compared objects. For example: *ljudi pobednee nas* 'people somewhat poorer than we', *učeniki pomolože* 'students (who are) a bit younger'" (Vinogradov 1972: 210-211)².

The most recent Russian academic grammar describes the meaning of such forms in more or less the same terms: "Uninflected words (adjectives and adverbs) which are formed from the comparative degree with the help of the prefix *po-* possess the categorical properties and the meaning of the comparative but have the general meaning of an attenuated, moderate degree of manifestation of a property." (Grammatika 1980, v.1, p. 565).

In this paper, we will focus on the semantic peculiarities and, on a lesser scale, syntactic properties of constructions that contain such units, largely disregarding the issue of their grammatical or lexicographic status. This means that we will not consider arguments for and against any concrete theoretical decisions, e.g. (a) whether or not these units belong to two different parts of speech – adjectives and adverbs, or else

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² Here and below, all translations have been made by the authors.

constitute a separate part of speech, together with the comparative or without it; (b) whether or not the paradigms of the respective adjectives and adverbs include the forms with *po-* or else the latter are their word formation derivatives and constitute independent lexemes; (c) whether or not these units are comparatives in need of a grammeme of an additional grammatical category (attenuativity or the like), or else regular comparatives and *po*-comparatives should be ascribed different values of a certain more general grammatical category

Still, to avoid confusion, we will proceed from the following three assumptions:

1) There are adjectives and adverbs with *po-*. In *Prinesi kamen' potjaželee* ≈ 'bring a rather heavy stone' or 'bring a somewhat heavier stone',³ we have a *po*-adjective, whilst in *Nado rabotat' poaktivnee* ≈ 'one has to work a bit more actively' there is a *po*-adverb. In an ambiguous sentence

(1) *On byl powyše,*

the latter word may be interpreted as an adjective if (1) means 'he was somewhat taller' (and relates to *On byl vysokim* 'he was tall') and as an adverb if (1) means 'he was situated in a somewhat higher place' (and relates to *On byl vysoko* 'he was in a high place').

2) The words with *po-* – we will henceforth refer to them as attenuatives, following Igor Mel'čuk (1998)⁴ – like regular comparatives, are included into the paradigms of the respective adjectives and adverbs. If an adjective or an adverb has more than one sense, attenuatives may appear in the paradigms of all of the respective lexemes, or only in some of them. For instance, the adjectives *legkij* 1 'lightweight' and *legkij* 2 'not difficult' both have attenuatives (*voz'mi molotok polegče* 'take a slightly lighter hammer' vs. *dajte emu zadaču polegče* 'give him a slightly less difficult task', whereas the polysemous adjectival vocable *ostryj* readily generates the attenuative form in some of the senses (*nož poostree* 'a somewhat sharper knife', *sous poostree* 'a somewhat hotter sauce', and categorically rejects them in a terminological sense (**appendicit poostree* 'a somewhat more acute appendicitis').

3) All attenuatives are comparatives at the same time. The words under discussion must be assigned the comparative grammeme since they appear in many types of syntactic environment typical of comparatives, including the comparative constructions, in which the second element of comparison is expressed by the genitive or introduced with the conjunctions *čem* or *neželi* 'than', as in *On zarabatyvaet bol'she direktora* 'he earns more than the director' vs. *On zarabatyvaet pobol'she direktora* 'he earns somewhat more than the director'; *On starše, čem ego brat* 'he is older than his brother' vs. *On postarše, čem ego brat* 'he is somewhat older than his brother'.

The availability of attenuatives in the paradigms of adjectives and adverbs is quite regular: most qualitative adjectives and adverbs have these forms even though some have not. Interestingly, the presence of standard comparatives is no guarantee that the word will have an attenuated form: *nužnee* 'more needful', *neobxodimee* 'more necessary', *želatel'nee* 'more desirable' exist but *??ponužnee*, *??poneobxodimee*, *??poželatel'nee* do not. Attenuated forms of adjectives or adverbs of a complex morphological structure (with prefixes, two radicals etc.) are formed with difficulty, even if standard comparatives are part of the corresponding paradigm: *??pobezavarijnee* 'a bit more accident-free', **poneiskrennee* 'somewhat more insincere', *??ponesvoevremennee* 'somewhat more untimely', etc. On the other hand, the authors are unaware of any cases when an adjective or adverb would have an attenuative but no standard comparative in its paradigm.

It should also be noted that attenuatives are formed precisely in the same way as standard comparatives are, with the same morphological structure (excluding the prefix, of course), not depending on the productivity or non-productivity of the morphemes used or on morphological (semantically void) variation: *rezče – porezče* 'sharper – a bit sharper', *ran'she – poran'she* 'earlier – a bit earlier', *bystree/bystrej – pobystree/pobystrej* 'faster – a bit sharper', etc.

³ For reasons of space, we will not always provide multiple English equivalents of examples with words under discussion, even though in many cases, including (1), the respective utterances can be interpreted in more than one way depending on the particular use of such words.

⁴ Igor Mel'čuk sees in these word forms an attenuative quasi-grammeme, i.e. a grammeme defined on a part of the paradigm rather than the whole paradigm.

To our best knowledge, there are no lexicographical resources, traditional or computerized, that systematically indicate presence or absence of attenuatives for Russian adjectives or adverbs. A significant step in this direction is made in the computer dictionary of the multi-purpose linguistic processor ETAP-3 (Apresjan *et al.* 1992, 2003), developed with the immediate participation of both authors. Here, the information on attenuatives is given for each lexeme of every adjective and adverb.

According to our observations,⁵ attenuatives are used on an incredibly wide scale in modern Russian, especially in the colloquial speech. The meanings conveyed by these lexical units, which are explained below, appear to be very useful for Russian speakers. We observe that these forms can be acquired very early in life; a two-year-old boy, who is only starting to use basic prepositions, says *lezu ešče povyšē* ‘I am climbing a bit higher still’. Attenuatives are occasionally formed from practically any qualitative adjectives and adverbs, and sometimes even from relative adjectives and adverbs whose meaning normally excludes quantification. Note some illustrative examples taken from real texts of various genres:

Ego absoljutnyj slux poabsoljutnee moego budet! ‘His absolute ear (for music) will be somewhat more absolute than mine’;

Tibet i tak imeet širokiju avtonomiju, už poavtonomnee Burjatii v sostave RF ‘Tibet already has a broad autonomy, in any case it is rather more autonomous than Buryatia within Russia’;

A šumerskij-to, ja smotru, poaggljutivativnee tjurkskix budet ‘The Sumerian language, I presume, is rather more agglutinative than Turkic languages’ etc.

Attenuatives are very frequently used in Russian translations from languages where there is nothing even remotely similar to such units, e.g. English:

Kak raz v etot moment rukovoditel'nica xora, mogućego telosloženija ženščina v tvidovom kostjume, nastavljala ix, čtoby oni pošire raskryvali rty, kogda pojut (D. Salinger. “For Esmé – with Love and Squalor”).

In the original, the standard comparative was used: *At the moment, their choir coach, an enormous woman in tweeds, was advising them to open their mouths wider when they sang.*

Podobnye razgovory, po-vidimomu, neizbežno vlekut za soboj žaždu razvlečenij, i vot, v minutu slabosti, ja predložil Džordžu vytaščit' bandžo i popytat'sja ispolnit' kakuju-nibud' pesenku povešeele (Jerome K. Jerome. “Three Men in a Boat (To Say Nothing of the Dog)”).

The original text by Jerome K. Jerome does not even include a comparative: *There seemed to be a desire for something frolicsome to follow up this conversation, and in a weak moment I suggested that George should get out his banjo, and see if he could not give us a comic song.*

Importantly, both Russian translations have not even a trace of artificiality and are adequate to the originals.

2 Syntactic and Combinatorial Properties of Attenuatives

We mentioned above that attenuatives share important syntactic and combinatorial properties with standard comparatives. Still, there are essential differences between these two classes of units, to be briefly outlined below.

2.1 Attenuatives and the Adverbs of Degree

Attenuatives are reluctant to allow adverbs denoting high degree, including those appearing exclusively, or primarily, with the comparative: *gorazdo, namnogo, kuda* ‘much’, *ves'ma* ‘quite’; cf. *gorazdo sil'nee* ‘much stronger’, but not **gorazdo posil'nee* ‘much a bit stronger’, *rabotajut kuda bystree* ‘work noticeably faster’, but not **rabotajut kuda pobystree* ‘work noticeably somewhat faster’. In contrast, adverbs and particles denoting small degree, like *nemnogo, neskol'ko* ‘somewhat’, *čut* ‘a tiny bit’, *slegka* ‘slightly’ are commonly used with the standard and the attenuated comparatives alike, as in *nemnogo ran'she <poran'she>* ‘somewhat earlier’, *čut' glubže <poglubže>* ‘a tiny bit deeper’.

⁵ In collecting the material, we have been using three Russian text corpora: 1) the untagged corpus of the Institute of the Russian Language in Moscow; 2) the morphologically tagged National corpus of Russian and 3) the annotated corpus of Russian SYNTAGRUS, which offers complete syntactic tagging for each sentence. The latter corpus was created by the team to which both authors belong (see Boguslavsky *et al.* 2002). The National corpus of Russian and SYNTAGRUS can be freely accessed at www.ruscorpora.ru.

Doubtless, these combinatorial peculiarities of attenuatives are of semantic nature: if *pobol'she* means 'somewhat more' than expressions like *namnogo pobol'she* 'much somewhat more' harbour a semantic contradiction.

2.2 Attenuatives and the Negation

It is harder to explain rather whimsical rules of combining attenuatives with the particle *ne* 'not'. Such combinations are perfectly normal in contrastive situations or in cases where the appropriate use of an attenuative is questioned: *On byl ne postarše, a, naoborot, pomolože svoej nevesty* 'He was not somewhat older but, conversely, somewhat younger than his fiancée', *On k tomu vremeni budet ne postarše, a drevnim starcem s sedinami do pola* 'By that time, he will not be a bit older but an ancient old man with grey hair reaching to the floor'. On the contrary, regular negation whose scope could be confined to the attenuative, does not occur: *On ne vyše šestiletneho rebenka* 'He is no taller than a six-year-old child' but not **On ne powyše šestiletneho rebenka* 'He is not a bit taller than a six-year-old child'. A probable cause may be the communicative structure of the attenuatives, which seem to contain a conjunction of two predicates; *pobol'she X-a* means 'more than X and a bit more than X': such a conjunction does not allow a natural negation. The picture appears to be similar to the one that exists in construction like *On rezko zatormozil* ≈ 'he slammed on the brakes' which, roughly, means 'He used the brakes, and used them abruptly' and does not allow grammatical negation: **On ne rezko zatormozil* is unacceptable (Paducheva 1974, Boguslavsky 1985).

Quite expectantly, attenuatives reject, even more strongly, the negation accompanied by intensifiers: **On niskol'ko <ničut, ni kapel'ki> ne powyše šestiletneho rebenka* ≈ 'He is not a tiniest bit taller than a six-year-old child'.

2.3 Absence of Analytical Superlative and Comparative

The analytical superlative easily formed from the standard comparative, as in *Lučše vsego on umeet igrat' v futbol* 'He can play football best of all' or *On sil'nee vsech* 'He is stronger than everyone else' is strictly banned for the attenuative: **Polučše vsego on umeet igrat' v futbol* 'He can play football somewhat best of all', **On posil'nee vsech* 'He is somewhat stronger than everyone else'. Even this ban, however, is sometimes violated in colloquial speech if additional factors enter the play. A notable case is colloquial style making use of the verb *budet* (future tense of *be*) in a special sense of assumptive evaluation, very typical in attenuated contexts. To give an example, a sentence like *Braziliya posil'nee vsech budet* 'Brazil will surely be stronger than all' is likely to appear in the discussion of a football championship and perfectly grammatical. We believe that in such contexts the attenuative loses the semantic element 'somewhat' and behaves as a synonym of the regular comparative.

Let us also note for completeness that, unlike the regular comparative which has both a synthetic and an analytical variant (*časče – bolee často* 'oftener – more often'), the attenuative can only be synthetic (*pointeresnee* 'more interesting' but not **pobolee interesnyj*).

2.4 Syntactic Features

It is known that many Russian adjectives and adverbs have certain nontrivial syntactic features of the following nature: occupying the position of the predicate (maybe, in combination with a copula verb) they may accept subjects expressed by an infinitive or a certain type of subordinate clause (formed by conjunctions *čto* 'that', *čtoby* 'so that', an indirect question, and the like,⁶ cf.

(2) *Trudno* [=predinf] *bylo poverit', čto on prav* 'It was difficult to believe that he was right';

(3) *Interesno*, [=predchto] *čto oni ne pomnjat, kto predostavil im nezavisimost'* 'It is interesting that they do not remember who gave them their independence';

(4) *Važno* [=predchtoby], *čtoby emu rasskazali pravdu* 'It is important that he should be told the truth'.

⁶ For details on syntactic features like "predinf", "predchto" etc. see Iomdin-Mel'čuk-Pertsov 1975 and Apresjan *et al* 1992.

These features are shared by standard comparatives, even though they are not manifested on a similarly regular basis and may require that additional conditions be satisfied; compare (3)-(4) and

(3a) *Ešče interesnee, čto oni ne pomnjat, kto predostavil im nezavisimost'* 'It is even more interesting that they do not understand who gave them their independence';

(4a) *Gorazdo važnee, čtoby emu rasskazali pravdu* 'It is much more important that he should be told the truth'.

In principle, attenuatives retain these features, too. However, they seldom come into play and the conditions imposed on acceptable utterances are even more rigid and less formalizable:

(3b) *Poverit', čto on prav, bylo nemnogo potrudnee* 'It was somewhat more difficult to believe that he was right';

(4b) *Pointeresnee, požaluj, drugoe – čto oni etogo ne pomnjat.* 'Maybe another thing is a bit more interesting: that they do not remember this'.

A quite expectable conclusion could be drawn from the above. Any linguistic phenomenon manifests itself the most strongly in canonical cases and becomes washed-out, less and less expressed as one proceeds from the center to the periphery. With regard to these syntactic features, attenuatives are remote periphery.

2.5 Attenuatives as Attributes

In contrast to the above, attributive constructions to be discussed in this subsection are not peripheral with regard to the attenuatives but, conversely, are especially characteristic of them. In these constructions, the attenuated adjective is a (predominantly postpositive) modifier of a noun: *pozovite parnej pokrepče* 'call rather more strong guys', *ja znal načal'nikov i poumnee* 'I used to know bosses who were a bit more clever' etc. Regular synthetic comparatives are unwelcome in such constructions and should be replaced by analytical ones: *Pozovite bolee krepkix parnej*, but not **Pozovite parnej krepče* или **Pozovite krepče parnej*. (Comparative attributes become more acceptable if they have their own syntactic dependents: *Ja znal načal'nikov i umnee našego* 'I knew bosses who were more clever than ours').

Of special interest is a subclass of attributive constructions formed by attenuatives where the modified word is one of the interrogative pronouns *kto* 'who' and *čto* 'what': *Pozovi kogo pokrepče* 'Call someone rather more strong' *Pojdeš' v magazin, kupi čego povkusnee* 'If you go shopping, buy something rather more delicious'.

This subclass is further represented by constructions with the interrogative adjective *kakoj* 'which, what kind' as in *Ja predlagal komandiru zakopat' granatomet v zemlju, no on prikazal tol'ko zavalit' ego kamnjami, vybiraja kakie potjaželee* 'I proposed to the commander to dig the hand-mortar but he only ordered to heap stones on it, choosing very heavy ones' (Viktor Suvorov, *The Aquarium*).

As a matter of fact, the constructions with pronominal adverbs like *Ego nado otpravit' kuda podal'se* 'He has to be sent to some rather remote place', *Neužheli v Pitere ili gde poblížhe ne nashlos' podxodjaščego aktera?* 'Can it be that a suitable actor was not to be found in Petersburg or at some closer place' also belong to this class, even though the attenuatives occurring in the last two sentences (*podal'se, poblížhe*) are formed from adverbs and not from adjectives,

In all examples of the last two paragraphs, the interrogative pronouns in fact behave as indefinite ones: *kupi čego povkusnee* = *kupi čego-nibud' povkusnee*, *otpravit' kuda podal'se* = *otpravit' kuda-nibud' podal'se*. Accordingly, these examples enrich the class of cases where interrogative pronouns are used instead of indefinite ones and, quite unexpectedly, come to resemble minor type constructions like *kto popalo* 'anybody who comes first', *gde xočeš'* 'wherever you wish' etc.⁷

⁷ A detailed description of such cases can be found in Iomdin 2007.

Curiously enough, such constructions are opposed syntactically and – in all appearance – semantically to another class of cases where the interrogative pronoun is a subject or object of the predicate of a clausal complement, where this predicate is expressed by an attenuative. Compare, for instance, sentences (5a) and (6a), on the one hand, and (5b) and (6b), on the other hand.

(5a) *On vybiral kogo pokrepče* ‘He was choosing the one (or the ones) rather more strong’.

(5b) *On vybiral, kto pokrepče* ‘He was choosing who was rather more strong’.

In (5a), *kogo pokrepče* is a noun phrase where the attenuative is an attribute of the pronoun, whereas in (5b) *kto pokrepče* is a clause with a predicate *pokrepče* and a nominal subject *kto*.

(6a) *Naden' čto poxuže* ‘Put on something rather less smart’.

(6b) *Ul'jaša, verno, rassprašivaet sejčas tam etu baryšnju, nadevaja čto poxuže, čtoby potom zanjat'sja raskladkoj veščej* ‘Ulyasha is probably questioning the young lady there, putting on some clothes that happen to be less smart in order to start arranging things later’ (Boris Pasternak, *The Childhood of Liubers*).

In (6a), *čto poxuže* is a noun phrase in the accusative, whilst in (6b), just like in (5b), it is a clause with a predicate *poxuže* and a nominal subject *čto*.

3 Semantics of Attenuatives

3.1 Comparative Type

Attenuative *po*-constructions have two quite different semantic varieties – the comparative one and the selective one. We will examine them in sections 3.1 and 3.2, respectively.

Po-forms belong to the comparative type if they convey the idea of comparison of two entities which possess property P in different degrees, cf.:

(7) *Tol'ko odno uxo, požaluj, podlinnee drugogo* ‘one ear is perhaps a bit longer than the other’.

In (7), both elements of comparison are represented: the one that is being compared with something (‘one ear’) and the one with which the comparison is made (‘the other ear’). We will term these elements as “first compare” and “second compare”, respectively. In the canonical case the first compare syntactically subordinates the comparative word, which in its turn subordinates the second compare.

Of all constructions with attenuatives, sentences like (7) are closest of all to standard comparative constructions with non-attenuative forms of adjectives and adverbs (COMPAR). The latter can always replace the attenuative forms without any significant shift of the meaning.

Syntactic Optionality of the Second Compare

In attenuative constructions, the second compare is not syntactically obligatory. According to our estimates, sentences without an explicit second compare even prevail over the ones that contain it. While regular comparatives do not necessarily require an explicit second compare, either, attenuatives are much more eager to skip it. In (8), the *po*-form modifies the noun: (8a) has a simple modifier and (8b) a dangling one:

(8a) *Posle etogo iz ščeli vybežal tarakan pomen'se* ‘After that, a smaller cockroach scurried out of the crack’.

(8b) *Iz ščeli vybežal vtoroj tarakan, pomen'se* ‘A second cockroach, a smaller one, scurried out of the crack’.

The second comparee is not mentioned in either sentence but is given in the preceding context. In both cases, the COMPAR forms appear to be impossible without an explicit second comparee: **Iz ščeli vybežal tarakan men'se* and **Iz ščeli vybežal vtoroj tarakan, men'se* are both wrong. The introduction of the second comparee makes the sentence acceptable: *Iz ščeli vybežal vtoroj tarakan, men'se pervogo* 'A second cockroach, smaller than the first one, scurried out of the crack'. This requirement is dropped if COMPAR makes part of a dangled phrase, as in (9), or acts as the predicate, together with a copula verb, or without it, as in (10):

(9) *Na nem byl takoj že remen', no nemnogo uže* 'his belt was similar, but somewhat narrower'.

(10) *I jazyk počti takoj že, kak u nas, xotja i xuže* 'Their language is nearly the same as ours, although (it is) worse' (M.Shcherbakov, The Duo).

If COMPAR acts as an adverbial modifier of a verb, this restriction does not apply: *Iz ščeli vybežal vtoroj tarakan, men'se napominajuščij golodnogo volka* 'A second cockroach, less resembling a hungry wolf, scurried out of the crack'.

Semantic Obligatoriness

As we showed above, the valency slot of an attenuative corresponding to the second comparee is syntactically optional. It is important, however, that it is semantically obligatory. We term a slot semantically obligatory if it must be filled in the semantic structure even if it is not instantiated in the syntactic structure.

Consider the sentence

(11a) *Imenie svoe on prodal i kupil drugoe* 'He sold his estate and bought another one'.

The price slot for both verbs 'buy' and 'sell' is syntactically optional. (11a) does not convey any information on the price; neither does it assume that such information is present in the preceding context. The situation is different with the valency slot of the attenuated comparative which corresponds to the second comparee. Even when it is not explicitly filled with a dependent phrase in the syntactic structure, the semantic structure always contains the meaning which instantiates this slot. Sometimes, this information is given in the same sentence:

(11b) *Imenie svoe on prodal i kupil drugoe, pomen'se* 'He sold his estate and bought another one, somewhat smaller'.

In (11b) we obviously know with what the new estate is compared: it is smaller than the estate he had before. In other cases, the meaning which fills this slot is found in the preceding context:

(12) *Rjodom s lestnicej byl xoll pomen'se* 'near the stairs there was a somewhat smaller hall'.

Although (12) mentions only one hall, if the text is coherent, another one had to be introduced before.

Finally, there are cases in which the second comparee is not even mentioned in the context, but even then it makes part of the semantic structure of the sentence:

(13a) *Esli by ja znala, čto u tebjja podnjalas' temperatura, ja prišla by poran'se* 'If I had known that your temperature got high, I would have come earlier' (= '...earlier than I really came').

(13b) *Esli u tebjja podnimetsja temperatura, ja pridu poran'se* 'If your temperature gets high, I will come earlier' (= '...earlier than I would come otherwise').

For all three cases (12), (13a) and (13b), it is obvious that the second comparee is not absent from the sentence in the same way as the information on the price is absent from sentences (11). The speaker always reads a definite content into this slot, while the addressee uses the context to reconstruct it.⁸

Special Case: The Correlative Construction

As we saw above, if the second comparee is not directly subordinated by the comparative word and is to be found in the context, it should be the preceding context. However, there exists a class of syntactic constructions which violates this rule: the *po*-form does not subordinate the second comparee, which is located to the right of the comparative word. These are correlative constructions.

A correlative construction is a two-part coordinative construction, such that:

(a) its both parts describe the same situation P, in which two participants are singled out – A and B. For example, in

(14) *Mal'čiki peli gromko, a devočki tixo* ‘the boys were singing loudly and the girls softly’,

P = ‘to sing’, A = ‘the one who is singing’, B = ‘level of sound in singing’;

(b) two parts of the construction denote two copies of P – P1 and P2, which differ in these participants. In (14), ‘the boys’ = A1, ‘loudly’ = B1, ‘the girls’ = A2, ‘softly’ = B2.

(c) two parts of the construction have parallel communicative structures: A1 and A2 are Themes, and B1 and B2 are Rhemes (cf. (14a)), or the other way round (14b).

(14a) *Mal'čiki [A1=Th] peli gromko, [B1=Rh], a devočki [A2=Th] tixo [B2=Rh]* ‘the boys [A1=Th] were singing loudly [B1=Rh] and the girls [A2=Th] (were singing) softly [B2=Rh].

(14b) *Gromko [B1=Th] peli mal'čiki [A1=Rh], a tixo [B2=Th] – devočki [A2=Rh]* ‘the ones who were singing loudly [B1=Th] were the boys [A1=Rh], and (the ones who were singing) softly [B2=Th] (were) the girls [A2=Rh]’.

Let us now introduce attenuatives in the rhematic components of the correlative construction:

(15) *Xrustal'nye bokaly byli pobol'she, a stekljannye pomen'she* ‘the crystal wineglasses were a bit bigger, and the glass ones a bit smaller’.

Sentence (15) is remarkable in several respects. First of all, it is semantically superfluous (tautological). It contains two comparative words but they are, in a way, closed onto one another, so that we have only one act of comparison: the crystal wineglasses were a little bigger than the glass ones, and the glass wineglasses were a little smaller than the crystal ones. (15) can be paraphrased so that to leave only one comparative word, and the meaning will not change:

(15a) *Xrustal'nye bokaly byli pobol'she stekljannyx* ‘the crystal wineglasses were a bit bigger than the glass ones’.

The closure of comparative words manifests itself in their having common, but criss-crossing actants. The first comparee of *pobol'she* ‘a little bigger’ acts as the second comparee of *pomen'she* ‘a little smaller’, whereas the second comparee of *pobol'she* acts as the first comparee of *pomen'she*. This phenomenon only occurs when comparative words are in the rhematic position. If the communicative structure changes, such distribution of actants is hardly possible:

(15b) ??*Pobol'she byli xrustal'nye bokaly, a pomen'she stekljannye*

⁸ The property of the semantic obligatoriness of the second comparee is only characteristic of the comparative use of the *po*-forms proper. Non-comparative use of these forms is discussed below, in section 3.2.

It should be noted that this phenomenon is not characteristic of standard comparatives. Sentence (16) is quite appropriate in context of (16a), but it does not imply actant criss-crossing.

(16) *Xrustal'nye bokaly byli bol'she, a stekljannye men'she* 'the crystal wineglasses were a bit bigger, and the glass ones a bit smaller'.

(16a) *Nam nužny byli bokaly emkost'ju 0,25 l, no my ix tak i ne smogli najti. Xrustal'nye bokaly byli bol'she, a stekljannye men'she* 'We needed 0.25 l wineglasses but failed to find them. The crystal wineglasses we were offered were bigger, and the glass ones were smaller'.

Sentence (16) means that the crystal wineglasses were bigger than needed and the glass ones were smaller than needed but not that the crystal wineglasses were bigger than the glass ones (even though this fact logically follows from the previous one).

The specific feature of sentences like (16) as compared with sentences which do not contain a correlative construction consists in the fact that the scope of the comparative meaning is determined univocally. Both comparates of both comparative words have fixed positions in the correlative construction without being subordinated by them.

It should be emphasized that cross-interpretation of the *po*-forms only occurs in their comparative use. Let us compare sentences (17a) and (17b), both containing the correlative construction:

(17a) *Mal'čiki peli pogromče, a devočki potiše* 'The boys were singing a little louder and the girls a little softer'.

(17b) *Mal'čiki staralis' pet' pogromče, a devočki potiše* 'The boys tried to sing rather louder, and the girls (tried to sing) rather more softly'.

The cross-interpretation of the comparative words is only natural in (17a): the boys were singing louder than the girls. Sentence (17b), in its most natural interpretation, does not compare the levels of the boys' and the girls' sound. They are characterized irrespective of one another. That means that the *po*-forms have a different type of use which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

3.2 Selective Uses

In addition to the comparative uses discussed above, attenuatives have a different type of usage, which can be illustrated by the following examples:

(18) *Tam on vybral ploščadku, gde bylo pomen'she komkov, sunul ladon' v zemlju i srazu oščutil, kak po pal'cam poteklo pokojnoe blagodatnoe teplo* 'He chose a piece of land where there were fewer lumps of earth, plunged his hand into the earth and felt at once how calm, life-giving warmth streamed along his fingers (N. Gladyshev, Anton's Well).

(19) *Každyj videl pered soboj smert' i staralsja tol'ko podorože prodat' svoju žizn'* 'Everyone saw death in front of him and only strived to sell his life as dearly as possible' (Nikolaj Gogol, Taras Bulba (an early version)).

Since no concrete object of comparison (second comparee) is present in such uses, they are referred to as irrelative (Vinogradov 1972 : 210-211) or absolute (Kustova 2002). We prefer to call these uses selective, since their semantic nucleus is formed by the idea of choice. (We fully agree with Galina Kustova who discussed this idea).

It is interesting to compare the selective uses of attenuatives with the comparative uses considered in the previous section. Sentence

(20) *Prinesi kamen' potjaželee* 'bring a somewhat heavier stone'

has two interpretations– (20a) and (20b):

(20a) ‘There was one stone and it proved to be too light’.

This is a comparative interpretation proper, in which (20) is synonymous with the sentence *Prinesi kamen' potjaželee, čem etot* ‘Bring a stone somewhat heavier than this one’.

(20b) ‘No stone is within the speaker’s eyeshot yet’.

In a first approximation, it can be said that (20b) introduces a relatively heavy stone. However, this characteristic only refers to the stone itself, without any comparison with other stones. Yet, (20b) obviously considers this particular stone against the background of other stones, with which it is implicitly compared. There is a set of potential possibilities, and the stone is chosen among them. But if there is comparison, even an implicit one, then what is the role of the attenuation itself?

If we continue the quotation from Vinogradov’s book started in the beginning of this paper: “in the irrelative use of the comparative form, when concrete objects of comparison are absent, the prefix *po-* may mean ‘to the highest extent possible, with a higher degree of something than usual’. This meaning appears the most frequently in the adverbial form of the comparative degree. For example: «Ja poskoree vybralsja iz kubitki» ≈ ‘I got out of the caravan as soon as I could’ (Pushkin, A Journey to Arzum)” (Vinogradov 1972: 211), we will gather that the author does not see any semantic generality between the senses introduced by *po-* in the comparative and the selective (irrelative) uses of the units considered.

Indeed, in the comparative uses proper, like (20a), the difference between the compared objects are attenuated. If we say *Etot kamen' potjaželee, čem zelenyj* ‘this stone is somewhat heavier than the green one’ it just means that the weight of this stone is not much heavier than that of the green stone. Obviously, uses like (20b) do not imply anything remotely near to the idea that this particular stone is only a little heavier than the others. Still, we believe that in such cases the prefixed comparatives convey the meaning of attenuation of a value, too. Only, this value is not that of the difference between the compared objects.

In selective uses, *po-*forms should not be confronted with the comparative degree of an adjective or adverb. Instead, they must be confronted with the superlative degree: the attenuation is observed with regard to this latter category.

Indeed, let us compare the following series of utterances:

(21a) *Prinesi samyj tjaželyj kamen'* ‘bring the heaviest stone’.

(21b) *Prinesi kamen', čem tjaželee, tem lučše <kak možno bolee tjaželyj kamen'>* ‘bring a stone, the heavier the better <bring as heavy a stone as possible>’.

(20) *Prinesi kamen' potjaželee* ‘bring a rather more heavy stone’.

In this series of semantically similar phrases, one can easily see how the categorical character of utterances is gradually weakening. In (21a) the speaker demands that no heavier stone should exist. In (21b), strictly speaking, this is not required, but it is implied that should the heaviest stone be brought, it will suit the speaker all right. In (20) the request is weaker still. The addressee is not asked to select the heaviest stone. It will suffice if the stone makes part of the group of the heaviest stones among those available. In other words, it should be heavier than most of the stones. It is not supposed at all that the heaviest stone will better suit the speaker than, say, the second heaviest one. What is needed is that the stone should be definitely closer in weight to the heaviest stone than to the lightest one.

Thus, the semantic contribution of the attenuative is clearly different in sentences of the type (20) than in comparative constructions discussed in section 3.1. The comparative interpretation proper of the attenuative consists in transforming the meaning ‘more’ into ‘somewhat more’. In sentences of the type (20), what is attenuated is the meaning ‘more than all the others’, which turns into ‘more than most of the

others'. One can say that in comparative constructions the operator of attenuation affects the meaning of comparison, while in the selective ones it affects the meaning 'all'. Morphologically, the *po*-forms remain attenuative comparatives, while, semantically, they are attenuative superlatives.

Let us now turn to another aspect of the attenuative semantics. As mentioned above, the ideas of desire and choice are central in the meaning in the selective attenuative. Here, there is always a figure of the subject that has a number of alternatives before him and he attempts (or is impelled by someone) to select the one among them which surpasses most of the other alternatives in the degree of the property in question. Cf. the correct sentence (22a) and an unacceptable one (22b):

(22a) *On vybral jabloko pobol'she* 'he chose a somewhat bigger apple'.

(22b) **Na stole ležalo jabloko pobol'she* 'on the table there was a somewhat bigger apple'.⁹

The ideas of incitement, intention and choice are surprisingly often supported by the lexical context.

Often, it is the imperative that conveys the meaning of desire ('I want you to select among the alternatives available the one which...'), for example:

(23) *Voz'mite semgi, a ešče lučše lososiny, nu, tam, vetchiny, kolbasy, syru, kakih-nibud' konservov podorože* ≈ 'buy some salmon, preferably the best variety, ham, sausage, cheese, some preserves of the **more expensive** kind' (Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, *The Wide Scope*).

Sometimes, the attenuative is the only source of the meaning of selection. For example, sentence (24)

(24) *Ona nadela plat'e pojarče, čtoby vygljadet' molože* 'she put on a rather bright dress in order to look younger'

obviously conveys the idea that a dress was chosen from the brightest ones.

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⁹ It goes without saying that this sentence is absolutely correct with respect to the comparative interpretation of the attenuative.

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