

Measurement-Contents Constructions in Russian

Olga Jurievna Podlesskaja

ITTP RAS
olga@iitp.ru

Abstract

This paper is dealing with a special subclass of Russian prepositional idiomatic constructions for naïve measurement with preposition *v* and a noun in accusative case – *dom v tri etaža* ‘a house three storeys high’, *sinjak v pol-lica* ‘a black eye as big as half of the face’, *kover vo vsju stenu* ‘a carpet as big as a whole wall’. They are semantically different depending on the participants of the construction (numerals, *ves* ‘whole’ and *pol-* ‘half’) – such as what is being measured, the object or the part of the object and what is being used as a measure. The construction with numeral may also be called contents construction. It is shown that this type is easily paraphrased in construction with an attribute. Also it turns out that constructions with modifiers *ves* ‘whole’ and *pol-* ‘half’ despite their inner semantic differences have the same meaning of big size or high degree. Some semantic and syntactic peculiarities of these constructions are described.

Keywords

Syntactic phrasemes, measurement constructions, naïve measurement, semantics

1 Introduction

There are interesting idiomatic prepositional constructions in Russian with prepositions *v* ‘in’ and *s* ‘with’ that require accusative case after them: *rybka razmerom v ladon’* ‘a fish as big as a palm’ / *mal’čik rostom s pal’čik* ‘a boy as big as a finger’. They represent a naïve measurement of objects, independent from common stereotypical means of exact measurement. In this system the objects correspond directly to the speaker’s experience – by comparing the sizes with the sizes of human body parts and other objects, relevant to the speaker and used as standards for size and form [Shemanaeva 2008]. All components of this construction, such as object, measure, and parameter of measurement (length, height, width, etc.) are bound with each other and depend on the choice of the other parts.

The fact that constituents of the construction semantically depend on each other leads to the conclusion that we are dealing with special units on the boundary between lexicon and grammar. They are called constructions by Charles Fillmore, see (Fillmore et al., 1988),

(Goldberg 1995), (Jackendoff 1997), (Kopotev 2008), (Plungian & Rakhilina 1996), (Podlesskaya & Rakhilina 2000), (Podlesskaya 2007), units of microsyntax, or syntactic phrasemes, in Moscow Semantic School (Iomdin 2003, 2006, 2008), and a type of phrasemes in (Melčuk & Iordanskaja, 2007).

The subject of this paper is a special sub-class of prepositional constructions with preposition *v* ‘in’ and accusative: *dom v tri okna* lit. ‘house in three windows’ = ‘a house three windows wide / a house that has three windows’, *komnata v pol-etaža* lit. ‘a room in half-storey’ = ‘a room as big as half a storey / a room occupying half of the floor’, *pjatno vo vsju stenu* lit. ‘a stain in whole wall’ = ‘a stain as big as a whole wall / a stain the size of a wall’, and synonymic attributive constructions: *trexetažny dom* ‘three-storey house’, *pjatiaktny balet* ‘ballet in five acts’ and so on. The goal of the description is to define the most probable and relevant participants of this situation of measurement, the parameters connected to the defined participants, some restrictions and the general meaning of the whole construction.

2 Comparing with the Outer Measure vs. Measuring Using Inner Parts

All prepositional measuring idiomatic constructions with preposition *v* ‘in’ and accusative, which were mentioned above, have the same structural appearance. However, despite this structural similarity, they denote three semantic situations, three types of relations between the measure and the measured object:

1. the measure comes from relevant measuring domain, but is **not** a part of the measured object – *mal’čik rostom v pal’čik* ‘a boy as big as a finger’ (not ‘as big as his own finger’), *rybka v ladon’* ‘a fish as big as a hand’, *sloj pyli tolščinoj v tri pal’ca* ‘a dust layer as thick as three fingers’;
2. the measure is an important (focused) part of the object – as in *dom v tri etaža* ‘a house three storeys tall’;
3. the object is a part of the measure – as in *pjatno vo vsju stenu* ‘a stain as big as a whole wall’, *komnata v pol-etaža* ‘a room as big as half a storey’.

Case 1) may be illustrated with the following scheme of measurement constructions, see Table 1:

X (measure object)	V (copula)	Y (parameter in instrumental case)	(Preposition <i>v</i>)	Z (measure in accusative case)
<i>Mal’čik</i>	<i>Byl</i>	<i>Rostom</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>pal’čik</i>
<i>Rybka</i>			<i>V</i>	<i>ladon’</i>
<i>Sloj pyli</i>		<i>Tolščinoj</i>	<i>V</i>	<i>3 pal’ca</i>

Table 1: Scheme of measurement constructions

Some participants are obligatory, some may be explicitly omitted; the construction may convey both big and small size, depending on the arguments [Shemanaeva 2008]

In this paper we focus on cases 2) and 3), which represent two possible measurement strategies within one situation frame where object and measure are connected by the part-whole relationship.

3 Measuring Using Parts of the Object: Contents or Sizes ?

When we measure the object by its parts, it is difficult to say that we actually measure it because first we state the contents and the number of constituents and then we indirectly convey also the information of the size of the object. To state the number of constituents we need a numeral in the construction: *lestnica v odin prolet* ‘a staircase with one flight’, *dom v tri etaža* ‘a house three storeys high’, *stado v tysjaču golov* ‘a flock/ a herd of one thousand heads’ and so on. It can be viewed as a measurement because implicitly *dom v tri etaža* ‘a house three storeys high’ is bigger than *dom v odin etaž* ‘a house one storey high’, so we judge whether an object is relatively big or small by the number of its relevant parts.

Interestingly, if an object has more than one parameter of measuring (more than one relevant dimension of measuring), there is usually a dependence between the part and the parameter: the house in *dom v tri okna* ‘a house three windows wide / a house that has three windows’ is measured only in horizontal dimension (despite the fact that the windows can also be theoretically counted vertically like floors), while the house in *dom v tri etaža* ‘a house three storeys tall’ is inevitably measured in vertical dimension.

4 “Close Contact” Measurement: Part vs. Whole

The other possible measurement strategy within the situation frame where object and measure are connected by part-whole relationship is when we denote the size of the object not by its smaller constituents and their number, but by the comparison to the whole, which turns out to be a measure.

This is the case of prepositional idiomatic constructions with *v* and modifiers: *ves* ‘whole’ and *pol-* ‘half’: *v pol-lica* ‘as big as half the face’, *vo vsju stenu* ‘as big as the whole wall’. The whole is a measure and its part is being measured: *šram v pol-lica* ‘a scar as big as half the face’, *zrkalo vo vsju stenu* ‘a mirror as big as the whole wall’. The part is situated on the whole, the location is one of close contact, either physically like in *šram v pol-lica* ‘scar the size of half the face’, or visually, like in *očki v pol-lica* ‘glasses the size of half the face’.

In spite of the fact that only a half of the whole measure is mentioned, the construction *v pol-* itself has a meaning of high degree or big size, as if the measure for the size was whole and thus big, much bigger than the part itself: *rumjanec v pol-lica* ≈ ‘bright flush’, *šram v pol-lica* ≈ ‘big scar’, cf. also *glaza / očki / rot / fingal (sinjak) / pjatno v pol-lica* ‘eyes / glasses / mouth / black eye / stain as big as half the face’, *fortočka / cvetok v pol-okna* ‘a ventlight / flower as big as half the window’.

The size of the part of the measure, normally relatively small, through the metaphorical comparison with the size of the whole (*vo vsju stenu* ‘as a whole wall’) and even to half of the size of the whole (*v pol-okna* ‘as half the window’) is thus regarded as very big.

We observe that constructions with both modifiers – *ves*’ and *pol*- denote the same meaning of big size or high degree. This situation has a semantic parallel – the case of Russian *polu*-, which can mean either half¹ of the thing or state (*polupustoj* ‘almost empty’ – *pustoj* ‘empty’) or the whole thing (*polumesjac* ‘moon’ – *mesjac* ‘moon’), see (Iomdin 2003).

Below, we will look more closely at the structure of the two constructions *X vo ves*’ *Z* and *X v pol-Z*.

X, as we stated above, should be a relevant part of Z, being in either physical or visual contact with Z. As for Z, these objects tend to be 1) flat spacious surfaces (*stena* ‘wall’, *okno* ‘window’, *ekran* ‘screen’), also the surfaces on human body, that is to say, body parts that are conceptualized as surfaces (*lico* ‘face’, *šćeka* ‘cheek’, *spina* ‘back’, *grud* ‘chest’²); or 2) spaces (*komnata* ‘room’, *zal* ‘hall’, *ulica* ‘street’, *ploščad* ‘square’, *gorod* ‘city’, *nebo* ‘sky’, *zemlja* ‘earth’). The measures apart from their topological characteristics should be relatively big, cf. *carapina vo ves*’ *palec* ‘a scar as big as a whole finger’. The measures may also be “unmeasurable”, but they are used in the naïve measurement nevertheless: *raduga v pol-neba* ‘a rainbow as big as half the sky’, *grjada voln vo vse more* ‘ridge of waves as wide as the sea’, and

Vnizu ležala širokaja, v polzemli, zelenaja polosa... [I. Grekova]
‘Below lay a wide, as wide as half the earth, green patch’

The parameter Y (general size, length, width) may be explicitly expressed with an adjective denoting size (*ogromnyi* ‘huge’, *dlinnyi* ‘long’, *bol’šoj* ‘big’) like in schemes *Adj X v pol-Z* or *Adj X vo ves Z*: *gromadnaja kletka v polkomnaty* ‘a huge cage as big as half the room’, *bol’šaja, v polsteny, fotografija* ‘a big photo as big as half the wall’. The construction itself has a meaning of big size (*kletka v polkomnaty*, a cage as big as half of the room is evidently big) so this repetition of expressive means is emphatic. If the parameter denotes small size, it does not go well along with the construction of generally big size and high degree. An expression *nebol’šie štorki v pol-okna* ‘not very big curtains as big as half the window’ shows some conflict between the semantics of the whole construction and the semantics of its constituents.

The parameter Y may also be in instrumental case, as shown in the table above for other *v*-constructions. In this case it is important to distinguish between the approximative measurement, as in our constructions, and the exact measurement, which is of no big interest to us because the scope of compatibility and acceptability of objects and measures is wider, such as in *širinoj v dva metra* ‘as wide as two meters’, *dlinoj v pol-šaga* ‘as long as half the

¹ Or even the absence of the state mentioned, cf. *poluodetyi* – ‘almost nude, not fully clothed’.

² *Spina* ‘back’ and *grud* ‘chest’ are often used metonymically as corresponding parts of the clothes, so there are many examples like *pjatno vo vsju grud* ‘stain as big as a whole chest’, *vyšivka vo vsju spinu* ‘embroidery as big as a whole back’.

step', and so on. The idiomatic construction with omitted parameter and exact measure is not so liberal: *???kartina v dva metra* 'a picture as big as two metres', *???šram v tri santimetra* 'a scar as big as three centimeters'.

The parameter may also have a place of Z in the *ves*'-construction: *X vo ves Y Z-a*, like in *vo vsju širinu ulicy* 'as wide as the width of the street' or *vo vsju dlinu komnaty* 'as long as the length of the room'.

The construction *X vo ves' Z* (with certain Z such as parameters *dlina* 'length', *šir'* / *širina* 'width' and some others) can be either an adverbial modifier³ or an attributive group for a noun, cf.

stojali vo vsju dlinu tanceval'noj zaly 'were standing along the length of dance hall' vs.
stol vo vsju dlinu tanceval'noj zaly 'a table as long as the length of dance hall'

We will show some illustrations of verb and noun modifiers in context (though the examples are taken from fiction and they are not so widely spread in colloquial language):

Verb modifiers:

A molodoj odnonogij elektrik Perepelicyn medlenno pokrasnel vo vsju ščeku 'flushed to the width of a whole cheek' *i ne skazal ni slova...* [V. Grossman]⁴

Fedjunja opjat' uvernulsja, Kirsha i pljuxnulsja vo vsju spinu 'fell down to the length of the whole back', *a Fedjunja tut kak tut...* [P.P. Bažov]

On protjanul ruku za sigaretami, ščelknul zažigalkoy, gluboko, vo vsju grud' zatjanulsja 'inhaled as deep as a whole chest'. [G. Baklanov]

Noun attribute:

Udivitel'no xoroš, krasavec, možno skazat'. Strojnyj, vysokij, rumjanec vo vsju ščeku 'flush as big as a whole cheek'... [A. S. Pushkin]

V konce koncov mne bylo veleno pereodet'sja v temnyi paradnyi kostjum xozjaina nomera s nagradami vo vsju grud' 'awards as big as a whole chest'. [B. Griščenko]

When the parameter Y is omitted and the object may be measured in various directions, we may have difficulties in understanding. *Vo vsju ulicu* 'as big as a whole street' is ambiguous because *ulica* 'street' has both width and length, whereas *transparant vo vsju ulicu* 'banner as big as the whole street' or *očered vo vsju ulicu* 'a queue as long as the length of the street' are not ambiguous. The expression *kover vo vsju komnatu* 'a carpet / a rug as big as a whole room' is not quite understandable because the carpet may be either on the floor or on the

³ A lot of Russian idiomatic prepositional constructions with *v* and noun in accusative case do not denote size at all but they denote high degree and appear only as adverbial modifiers, cf. *vo vse gorlo* 'by full throat' / *vo vsju moč* 'with all one's might' / *vo ves' dux* 'with all one's might' / *vo vsju pryť* 'at full speed' and so on.

⁴ Most examples were taken from the National Corpus of Russian Language (www.ruscorpora.ru).

wall, so it may be measured in horizontal or vertical dimension. Only from the context we may guess that the carpet is actually lying on the floor:

Verоятно, tut byl kover vo vsju komnatu, potomu čto, edva sdela dva ili tri šaga, on kuda-to propal, a potom takie že šagi razdalis' v protivopoložnom konce etix potemok. [B.L. Pasternak]

‘There was probably a carpet as big as a whole room here because he disappeared after two or three steps and then the sound of his footsteps was heard in the opposite corner of this dark room’

The modifier (*ves'* or *pol-*) is an obligatory participant of the construction (*šram v lico ‘a scar as big as a face’, *kover v stenu ‘a carpet as big as a wall’) and the only possible attribute in it, cf. *??? vo vsju nekrašenuju stenu* ‘as big as an unpainted wall’, *??? vo vse nemytoje okno* ‘as big as an unwashed window’, *??? vo vsju puxluju ščeku* ‘as big as a plump cheek’, *??? vo vse detskoje lico* ‘as big as a child’s face’. Exceptions are possessive pronouns: *vo vsju našu stenu* ‘as big as our wall’, *vo vse moe okno* ‘as big as my window’⁵.

As for the choice of the participants in the measurement construction, we may state that some Zs tend to appear mostly in *ves'* construction (*vo vsju grud'*), some others mostly in *pol-* construction (*v pol-lica*), while still others combine with both (*v pol-steny – vo vsju stenu*).

5 Attributive Measurement Construction

We can create a certain hierarchy of objects that are used as measures: (1) objects that belong to the whole, its parts (a house has floors, a staircase has flights); (2) abstract measurement units (meters, centimeters); (3) standard objects that do not belong to measured possessor (*rybka v ladon'* ‘a fish as big as a hand’, *sloj pyli tolščinoj v tri pal'ca* ‘a dust layer as thick as three fingers’).

Abstract measurement units are most easily paraphrased into attributive constructions (*volna v tri metra* ‘a wave as big as three meters’ – *trexmetrova volna* ‘three meter wave’), while it is slightly more difficult for parts of the whole (*trexproletnaja lestnica* ‘three-flighted staircase’) and it is almost unacceptable for body parts as measurement units. The corresponding adjectives (*trexpalyi* ‘three-fingered’, *dvuxgolovyi* ‘two-headed’) denote that the object has a certain number of these body parts and not the size of this object.

Paraphrasing is not acceptable either for the constructions with *ves'* and *pol-*, where a part of the object is measured by being compared to the whole. *Stennoj škaf* lit. ‘wall wardrobe’ does not mean that it is as big as a wall neither does *komnatnoje rastenije* ‘room plant’ tell us anything about its size. Components *ves'* and *pol-* do not compose compound adjectives in paraphrasing constructions at all.

⁵ In the measurement construction with preposition *s* ‘with’ and accusative case this situation is common: *kulak razmerom s detskuju golovu* ‘a fist as big as a child’s head’, *jabloko s horošij arbuz* ‘an apple as big as a good watermelon’.

6 Conclusion

We have shown in this paper that there exist different types of naïve measurement expressed in prepositional constructions with the similar structure. The measurement depends on what object is being measured – a bigger object consisting of small parts or parts of the bigger objects. The two types – contents and size construction have different abilities of being paraphrased into attributive constructions.

The measurement idiomatic construction with preposition *v* and accusative denoting big size or high degree has its own semantics. It correlates with the fact that the component *pol-*, or *polovina*, ‘half’ does not necessarily mean that the size of the measured object is small. Thus, constructions with half the measure and the whole measure appear to be nearly quasi-synonymic, while a part and the whole are not quasi-synonyms: *kletka vo vsju komnatu* ‘a cage as big as a whole room’ / *kletka v pol-komnaty* ‘a cage as big as half the room’.

Bibliography

Fillmore, Ch., P. Kay, & M. O’Connor. 1988. Regularity and idiomaticity in grammatical constructions: the case of *let alone*. *Language*, 63(3): 501-38.

Goldberg, A. 1995. *Constructions: A constructionist grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Jackendoff, R. 1997. Twisting the night away. *Language*, 73(3): 535-559.

Kopotev, M. 2008. *Principy sintaksičeskoj idiomatizacii*. Helsinki.

Iomdin, B.L. 2003. Semantika russkoy pristavki POLU-. In *Rusistika na poroge XXI veka: problemy i perspektivy. Materialy meždunarodnoj naučnoj konferencii*. Moscow, IRL RAS, pp. 109–113.

Iomdin, L.L. 2003. Bolšie problemy malogo sintaksisa. In *Trudy meždunarodnoj konferencii po kompjuťernoj lingvistike i intellektual’nym texnologijam. Dialog’2003*. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 216-222.

Iomdin L.L. 2006. Mnogoznačnye sintaksičeskie frazemy: meždú leksikoy i sintaksisom. In Kobozeva I.M., Narinyani A.S., Selegey V.P. (eds.) *Kompjuťernaja lingvistika i intellektual’nye texnologii: Trudy meždunarodnoj konferencii Dialog’2006*. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 202-206.

Iomdin, L.L. 2008. V glubinax mikrosintaksisa: odin leksičeskij klass sintaksičeskix frazem. In *Kompjuťernaja lingvistika i intellektual’nye texnologii: Trudy meždunarodnoj konferencii Dialog’2008*. Issue 7(14). Moscow: RGGU, pp. 178-184.

Melčuk, I. & L. Iordanskaja. 2007. *Smysl i sočetaemost’ v slovare*. Moscow: Languages of Slavic cultures.

Plungian V.A., Rakhilina E.V. 1996. “Tušat-tušat – ne potušat”: grammatika odnoj glagol’noj konstrukcii In Zmarzer V., Petrukhina E.P. (eds.) *Issledovanija po glagolu v slavjanskix*

yazykax: glagol'naja leksika s točki zrenija semantiki, slovoobrazovanija, grammatiki.
Moscow : Filologiya.

Podlesskaya V.I. & Rakhilina E.V. 2000. Licom k licu. In Arutyunova, N.D., Levontina, I.B. (eds). *Jazyki prostranstv. Logičeskij analiz jazyka*. Moscow: Languages of Russian culture.

Podlesskaya V.I. 2007. Mnogoznačnost konstrukcii «čto + za + NP» v svete dannyx NKRYa: čto že eto za konstrukcija?! In Iomdin L.L., Laufer N.I., Narinyani A.S., & Selegey V.P. (eds.) *Kompjuternaja lingvistika i intellektual'nye texnologii: Trudy meždunarodnoj konferencii Dialog'2007*. Moscow: RGGU, pp. 460-469.

Shemanaeva O.Yu. 2008. Konstrukcii razmera v tipologičeskoj perspektive. PhD thesis. Moscow.