

“Backwards” Sentences



**INFORMATION STRUCTURE
FOR TRANSLATORS**

**KAREN DAVIS
SLAVIC DEPT
NCS**

KMDAVIS@RADIUM.NCSC.MIL

Materials and Students



- All texts are authentic Russian texts – sources in handouts – which have been used in classes.
- The student population is
 - At the level 2+ / 3 threshold (or higher) on DLPT5
 - ✦ ACTFL Intermediate High / Advanced Low
 - Working with Russian on a daily basis
 - Drawn from classes over eleven years, comprising hundreds of individuals

Thematic & Information Structure



- IS: The arrangement of information within each clause
- The way this relates to the arrangement of information in preceding and following clauses and sentences
- Contributes to topic development and maintenance

Topic/Comment



- Also called Theme/Rheme or Old/New
- Topic = ‘what we’re talking about’
- Comment = ‘what I have to say about it’
- Topic is presented first, Comment second.

Topic/Comment in Translation



- Because IS is cohesive, a translator should attempt to provide the same thematic information flow as the original, marking as ‘topic’ and ‘comment’ the same things the author did.
- A major problem for translators:
Word Order

Topic/Comment in English (1)



- Topic and Subject are the same thing
- Comment and Predicate are the same thing
 - How much of the predicate is Comment is variable, depending upon context

James bought the new Dan Brown book.

Topic/Comment in English (2)



- James bought the new Dan Brown book.
- ‘James’ – ‘bought the new Dan Brown book’
 - What did James do?
- ‘James bought’ – ‘the new Dan Brown book’
 - What did James buy?
- ‘James bought’ – ‘the new Dan Brown’ (book)
 - Which book did James buy?

Topic/Comment in English (3)



In conversation, Topic is often omitted or reduced:

- “Which book did James buy?” – “The new Dan Brown.”
- “What did James buy?” – “The new Dan Brown book.”
- “What did James do?” – “He bought the new Dan Brown book.”
- “Who bought the new Dan Brown book?” – “James (did).”

Indicating the Topic – word choice



- Pronouns are the quintessential Topic marker.
 - They always refer to something already known or easily inferred – ‘old’ information.
- ‘Pro-verbs’ such as ‘do’ indicate that they are part of the Topic.
 - Like pronouns, they refer back to a verb already named or easily inferred.
 - Thus they can turn predicates into Topics.
 - “Who bought the new Dan Brown book?” – “James did.”

Indicating the Topic – placement of adjuncts



- James bought the new Dan Brown yesterday
- Yesterday, James bought the new Dan Brown

In the second sentence the Topic includes
‘yesterday’;
in the first, that’s part of the new information,
i.e., the Comment.

Indicating T/C in Translation (1)



- English has a relatively fixed word order, especially as compared to Russian.
- Russian has no trouble fronting predicates; therefore in Russian, a predicate can be Topic, in English the predicate is usually the Comment.
- Restoring English word order can thus reverse Topic and Comment, leading to loss of the information structure.

Indicating T/C in Translation (2)



Жертвами этой “розыгрышки” стали и
абоненты МТС

*Victims (pred.) of this raffle were also
subscribers (subj.) to MTS*

The Topic of this sentence is ‘the victims of this
“raffle”’

- Position in the sentence
- Presence of ‘this’ (indicating something we’ve talked about already)

Indicating T/C in Translation (3)



- Жертвами этой “розыгрышки” стали и абоненты МТС
- Translating this as “MTS subscribers have also become victims of this ‘little prank’” reverses the Topic/Comment assignment.

The Tool Box



Жертвами этой “розыгрышки” стали и абоненты МТС

How can we put ‘MTS subscribers’ in the Topic position in the English sentence?

- Changing the voice
- Changing the verb
- Changing the part of speech
- Adding a ‘dummy subject’
- Extrapositioning

Change of Voice



- The simplest way to reverse subject and predicate order.
- Harder to make a passive into an active as actors are often omitted in passives.
- -ся intransitives are good candidates for becoming English passives
- ИМЕН НЕ НАЗЫВАЛИ = no names were named

Changing the Voice



- Имен не **называли**
 - *Names (obj.) (they – elided) did not name*
- No names were **named**.

- Некоторые аналитические центры США **спонсируются Москвой**
- Several American think tanks **are supported by Moscow**

Changing the Voice



- Ну а уж в воскресенье утром в эфире “Первого” **возобладал Владимир Владимирович**
 - *Well already on Sunday morning on the airwaves of One ruled Vladimir Vladimirovich.*
- And no later than Sunday morning, Channel One’s airwaves were **dominated by Vladimir Vladimirovich.**

Changing the Voice



- Во время одного из конкурсов, когда нужно было с ходу ответить на любой вопрос из зала, порадовал публику **известный кавээнщик Михаил Галустян**.
 - *During one of the competitions, when it-necessary was on the fly to answer to any question from the floor, gladdened the audience (obj.) famous KVN-er Mikhail Galustyan (subj.)*
- During one competition, when they had to answer on the fly to any question from the floor, the audience was tickled by **Mikhail Galustyan, the famous KVN player**.

Change of Verb



- Many verbs come in reciprocal pairs that permit you to retain the Russian placement without changing the information ordering:
 - buy – sell; say - hear; teach – learn; fear - scare
- нам уже доложили = We've heard that, we've received the news
- Многих черногорцев эта тенденция пугает = Many Montenegrins fear this tendency

Change the Part of Speech



- Turning a verb into a noun
- Verbs can become a noun + a light verb
- Especially useful for translating impersonals
 - анализировали = ‘an analysis was performed’
 - паниковать никогда не следует = ‘Panic is never called for’
 - Даже желовавшиеся друг с другом Брежнев и Никсон = ‘This includes even the two who kissed, Brezhnev and Nixon’

Adding a 'dummy subject'



Rather than nominalizing the verb, you can use a 'dummy subject' that keeps the verb as topic

- Dummy subjects are pronouns which carry no weight or real meaning
- Dummy *it* or *that* are used often
- Other pronouns are available

'Dummy subject' example (1)



A political analysis begins by describing the agitation caused by Putin's shuffling his cabinet, and then says that 'a week later'

Кажется, успокоились не только широкие народные массы (они, прямо скажем, не очень-то и волновались), но и узкие слои так называемых элит. Нервничали они...

‘Dummy subject’ example (2)



Placing the subject before the verb will cause several problems in smooth comprehension

- Not only the broader public (which, tell the truth, wasn't that upset), but also the narrower layer of the so-called elite have apparently calmed down. They were upset ...

It's 'heavy' at the front; 'calmed down' is now the comment; just who 'they' are is unclear; and 'apparently' is too strongly emphasized.

'Dummy subject' in place



Using a 'dummy' pronoun keeps everything in place:

- *Everyone* has apparently calmed down - not only the broader public (which, tell the truth, wasn't that upset), but also the narrower layer of the so-called elite. They were upset ...

Not Using a Dummy



For many constructions the standard translation uses a dummy 'it', but *not* doing that is sometimes better:

- Такую дату легко **ПОМНИТЬ И ЧТИТЬ**.
 - *Such a date (obj) it-is-easy to-remember and to-honor*
- A date like that is easy **to remember and revere**.
 - *vs It is easy to remember and revere a date like that*

Extraposition



Pulling something out of its normal position, usually by fronting

- Two forms in English:
 - IT-Cleft, which emphasizes the Topic
 - WH-Cleft, which emphasizes the Comment
- Useful when you wish to emphasize the Topic as well as the Comment, or deliver extra emphasis to the Comment.

Extraposition: It-cleft



In an English sentence, the subject is the topic

- To emphasize the subject as a marked Topic, use an ‘it-cleft’ construction
 - It was X that ...
 - It was James who bought the book
- Can be combined with fronting be used to add extra emphasis to the object
 - It was the book that James bought

Extraposition: Wh- Cleft



The WH- cleft supplies extra emphasis to the Comment

- What James bought was the new Dan Brown
- It can also be used to place the subject into Comment position and add emphasis to it
 - Who bought the new Dan Brown was James

Clefts in Action



- Сложнее – с обеспечением объективности и свободы слова на ТВ.
 - What's more difficult and complex is guaranteeing objectivity and free speech on the TV.
 - *More difficult – with the guaranteeing of objectivity and free speech on TV.*
- У среднестатистического зрителя создатся образ Путина, в одиночку победить кризис.
 - What the average viewer will internalize is the image of Putin single-handedly overcoming the crisis.
 - *For the average viewer will form the image of Putin ...*

Indicating T/C in Translation (5)



Жертвами этой “розыгрышки” стали и абоненты МТС

How can we put ‘MTS subscribers’ in the Topic position in the English sentence?

- Change of voice
- Change of verb
- Nominalization
- ‘Dummy subject’
- Extraposition

Which would work best here?

Indicating T/C in Translation (6)



Жертвами этой “розыгрышки” стали и абоненты МТС

- Changing the verb works best:
 - Victims of this ‘little prank’ even *included* MTS subscribers.
- But changing a part of speech also works:
 - *Among* the victims of this ‘little prank’ were even some MTS subscribers.

Another example (1)



В декабре жертвами землетрясения и последовавшего за ним цунами в Юго-Восточной Азии стали **более 300 тысяч человек** .

In December the victims (obj.) of the earthquake and following after it tsunami in SE Asia were more than 300 thousand people.

- December's earthquake and the tsunami that followed it claimed more than **300 thousand victims**.

And one more – стать as ‘be’ (1)



- Еще в 1980-х годах часть ученых предложили, что ключом к переходу на бипедализм стала **МОНОГАМИЯ**
 - *Back in the 1980s part of scientists suggested that as key (obj) to transition to bipedalism served monogamy (subj)*
- As early as the 1980s some scientists had suggested that a key to transitioning to bipedalism was **monogamy**.

Changing the Voice



- Починаючи з 30-х років арештовано та страчено до 80% української інтелігенції
 - *Beginning in the 1930s were-arrested and executed up to 80% of Ukrainian intellectuals.*
 - *This one needs a subject to be added (no 'by' phrase), but it's easy to do given the context.*
- Beginning in the 1930s, *the Soviet government* arrested and executed almost 80% of Ukraine's educated class.

Tricky One



Перед новой Россией стоит множество различных задач.

This one probably tempts you to a straight translation:

Before the new Russia stands a multitude of diverse missions.

One more – without *статья* (2)



Subject post-positioning in English is, however, a highly marked and stylistic device.

The same is true, to a slightly lesser degree, of opening with location phrases.

Thus, the ‘straight translation’ is more deviant, and therefore more emphatic, than the Russian original.

Many Solutions



Again, to maintain information structure without introducing emphasis, change the verb (and voice if you wish):

- The new Russia is faced with a **multitude of diverse missions**.

Or

- The new Russia faces a **multitude of diverse missions**.

You could also use an existential dummy:

- **There are a multitude of diverse missions** facing the new Russia.

Another (1)



В связи с визитом Обамы в Норвегию прилетели инопланетяне.

In connection with Obama's visit to Norway arrived extraterrestrials (nom.)

- Obama's visit had attracted some aliens
- Obama's visit to Norway drew some aliens
- Obama's visit to Norway was being attended by aliens

Changing Parts of Speech



... и через мгновение журналиство и след, как
говориться, **простыл**

*... and in a moment of the journalists even the track, as they
say, had vanished*

... and in a moment the journalists had vanished,
leaving, as they say, **not a trace behind**

A Dummy 'There'



В тех же псковских ссыльных местах год назад открылся **еще один музей** — писателя Сергея Довлатова

In these same Pskovian exile places a year ago opened yet another museum – for the writer Sergei Dovlatov

In these same Pskovian places of exile a year ago there opened **yet another museum** – this one for the writer Sergei Dovlatov

Repetition (cleft-like)



- Пойдет ли на передовую Чаплин?
 - *will go (question) to the front lines Chaplin?*
- And **Chaplin** – will he go to the front lines?

Cleft



- Правда, там в разврате сытости погряз не народ, а его слуги.
 - *Granted, there in the mire of corruption have-wallowed not the people but their servants.*
- Granted, there it's not the people who have been wallowing in the mire of corruption, but their servants.

Changing the Voice



- Шквал обурення у футбольних колах України спричинила одна з останніх заяв наставника “Шахтаря”.
 - *A flurry of indignation (obj.) in football circles of Ukraine caused one of the recent statements (subj.) of the coach of Shakhtar.*
- A flurry of indignation throughout Ukraine’s football world was provoked by one of the Shakhtar coach’s recent statements.

Changing Parts of Speech (or Cleft)



- А переміг на французьких місцевих виборах праворадикальний Національний фронт.
 - *While won in the French local elections the right-radical National Front.*
- While the victors in France's local elections was the right-radical National Front.
- While it was the right-radical National Front who won in France's local elections.

Changing Parts of Speech and a Dummy



- Та й санкції, які Євросоюз запровадив проти Кремля, Саркозі знімав би вже.
 - *And the sanctions (obj), which the European Union has continued against the Kremlin, Sarkozy lifted would-have already.*
- And as for the sanctions which the European Union has continued against the Kremlin, Sarkozy would have already lifted them.

Changing Verbs



- Ту саму думку — про неможливість України перемогти надпотужну російську армію — висловлюють **й інші західні мас-медіа**.
 - *This same thought (obj.) – about Ukraine’s inability to defeat the extremely powerful Russian army – expressed also other Western mass media (subj.)*
- This same thought – Ukraine’s inability to defeat the extremely powerful Russian army – has appeared in **other Western mass media as well**.

A final word



In fact, it's not always *necessary* to preserve the information structure at all. Much depends upon the density of the text, and the familiarity of the subject matter.

But when it is important, you will now have the tools to do it.

Thank you



- Are there any questions?