

## Special operations: Russian rivalry in cognitive linguistics

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When the Kremlin insists on calling the war in Ukraine a *specoperacija* ‘special operation’, they resort to a morphological construction with deep roots in the Soviet period. This morphological *spec-N* construction, which involves the formation of a so-called stub compound (Spencer 1991) by adding *spec* to a full or abbreviated noun, competes with the syntactic Adj + N construction, whereby a relative adjective (e.g., *special’nyj* ‘special’) modifies a noun. While competitions between constructions have received attention in cognitive linguistics in recent years (e.g., Goldberg 2019), competition between morphological and syntactic constructions represents an understudied area (Masini 2019). We analyze the *spec-N* construction as a blend involving emergent structure and compression, and argue that cognitive linguistics as a usage-based, non-modular, and encyclopedic theory of language (Langacker 2008) offers the necessary tools for an adequate analysis of competing morphological and syntactic constructions.

We constructed a database of all attestations of the *spec-N* construction in the Russian National Corpus ([www.ruscorpora.ru](http://www.ruscorpora.ru), non-fiction), as well as all attestations of the competing Adj + N construction. The database contains 424 lemmas, which were annotated manually for several parameters.

We argue that the addition of *spec* to a noun prompts the opening of a blended mental space with an activity that represents an exception from a general pattern. Several subtypes are identified, and it is suggested that their meanings and relationships can be insightfully analyzed as a radial category network.

Our analysis indicates that the competition involves a complex interplay of factors, which can be adequately described in a usage-based model. The *spec-N* construction is more than a shorter version of its syntactic competitor, since the *spec-N* construction involves emergent structure and compression (Fauconnier & Turner 2004) in the same way as prototypical compounds (Nessel & Sokolova 2019). For instance, *specodežda* ‘special clothing (for work in a factory)’ has a narrower meaning than its syntactic competitor. A non-modular approach where both morphological and syntactic patterns inhabit the same “constructicon” enables us to capture the complex relationships that characterize the competition between the *spec-N* and Adj + N constructions.

We show that the history of the *spec-N* construction goes back to the early Soviet period, when stub compounds appeared in Russian “[i]n an attempt to ‘sovietize’ the language” (Molinsky 1973: 15). The construction survived the fall of the Soviet Union and has remained productive. While some recent examples have no relation to Soviet realia, ironic uses of the construction suggest that the Soviet connotations are still part of the mental grammars of many language users. We argue that an encyclopedic approach to semantics is necessary in order to capture the rich meaning of the *spec-N* construction which is closely intertwined with changes in Russian society.

Our study illustrates the important role of constructions in political discourse. Insightful analyses can be couched in cognitive linguistics, which posits all the necessary analytical tools.

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