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Russian Pronouns with Focus Antecedents: Coreference and Binding in Corpora

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Abstract

Despite a lot of interest for the factors influencing the choice of pronoun (reflexive or personal) with an antecedent in Russian, the role of the anaphoric relation—coreference or semantic binding—has been understudied, including disagreements as to the acceptability of particular data points. To clarify things, I employ large corpora (Araneum and GICR) to study the role of several factors in determining the likelihood of the pronoun being used as coreferential or bound: pronoun type (reflexive/personal), pronominal morphology (nominal/adjectival), syntactic distance to the antecedent as well as word order (cf. (Wurmbrand 2017) for German pronominals). I conclude that Russian reflexives are capable of, and frequently used with, coreferential interpretation (and more so when preposed to the antecedent) and that Russian 1st- and 2nd-person pronouns can be used as bound (i.e. as fake indexicals) when postposed.

Keywords: binding, coreference, fake indexicals, focus, reflexives, Russian
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Местоимения с фокусным антецедентом в русском языке: кореферентные и связанные употребления в корпусах

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Аннотация

Несмотря на значительный интерес к факторам, определяющим выбор между личными и возвратными местоимениями с антецедентом в русском языке, роль отношения к антецеденту (кореферентность или связывание) остаётся слабо изученной, а приемлемость отдельных примеров вызывает споры. В настоящей работе на материале веб-корпусов (Araneum и ГИКРЯ) исследуется влияние, оказываемое на интерпретацию местоимения как кореферентного фокусному антецеденту или связанного им такими факторами, как тип местоимения (личное или возвратное), его морфологический класс (местоимение-существительное или местоимение-прилагательное, т. е. притяжательное), расстояние до антецедента и порядок слов (пре- или постпозиция к антецеденту, ср. для немецких прономинанов в (Wurmbrand 2017)). Мы показываем, что русские рефлексивы способны выступать и часто выступают в кореферентной интерпретации, в особенности в препозиции к антецеденту, и что личные местоимения 1 и 2 лица в постпозиции могут интерпретироваться как связанные (*fake indexicals*) в реальных текстах.

Ключевые слова: кореферентность, рефлексивы, русский язык, связанные дейктики, связывание, фокус

1 Introduction

The research on pronouns with antecedents in Russian has followed several directions: the conditions of Binding Theory governing the use of reflexives and reciprocals were made precise (Testelefs 2001; Zubkov 2018; Perevozchikova 2024a); empirical work revealed various aspects of the competition between personal and reflexive pronouns where the two types can serve the same function and additional factors such as the focus of empathy come into play (Paducheva 1985; Pekelis 2021); and some studies probed into the semantic nuances of bound pronouns (Tiskin 2018; Rodionov 2025).

Finally, recent years have seen an increase of interest (Podobrjaev 2016; Paramonova 2023; Tiskin 2025) for **fake indexicals** (FIs)—personal pronouns bound by a varying, often focus antecedent whose ϕ -features (person, number, gender) do not have the expected restricting effect on the range of variation. (Paducheva 1983, 21) was apparently the first to discuss a potentially FI example from Russian (1), due to Alexander Pushkin, where a possible (although unintended) reading is ‘(I was my reader, and) no other relevant individual was his/her own reader,’ in which the 1st person feature on *moj* ‘my’ is not active in restricting the relevant alternatives to the group of the speaker’s associates whom he could refer to as *we*.

- (1) A čto vsego tošnej, liš’ ja byl **moj** čitatel’.
and what of.all nauseating only I was my reader
‘And what is most dull/nauseating, only I was my reader [i.e. I was my only reader]’

However, one issue has been left out, with potentially detrimental consequences for the understanding of the competition between pronouns. That is, there has been no systematic comparison between **coreferential** and semantically **bound** pronouns, maybe because FIs are relatively rare and their investigation cannot proceed with a quantificational antecedent, which is standard to ensure semantic binding of a reflexive or reciprocal, as such antecedents are normally not compatible with 1st- and 2nd-person bindees in English or Russian. Focus binding as in (2)–(5) or ellipsis as in (6)–(7) below is needed instead.

For dedicated reflexive pronouns, coreferential interpretations have been long known crosslinguistically (albeit somewhat neglected in textbook expositions of Binding Theory, presumably because semantic binding is more indicative of a syntactic relation to the antecedent). Therefore, the scope of Binding Theory cannot be limited to cases of semantic binding (Bruening 2021). Already (Dahl 1973) surveys the previous literature, calling (2) ambiguous:

- (2) Only Lyndon pities **himself**.
a. ‘Others do not pity themselves’ (bound, sloppy)
b. ‘Others do not pity Lyndon’ (coreferential, strict)

For Russian, (Paducheva 1983) claims that (3) is ambiguous and the two paraphrases in (3a)–(3b) each display one of its two readings.

- (3) Tol’ko Džon možet perexitrit’ **svoju** ženu.
only John can fool REFL:POSS wife
a. Svoju ženu možet perexitrit’ tol’ko Džon. (sloppy)
b. Ženu Džona možet perexitrit’ tol’ko on sam. ‘John’s wife, only he himself can fool’ (strict)

Paducheva seems to be claiming that thematically preposing the reflexive (3a) makes it unambiguously bound. The logic of this claim is in disagreement with a more recent argument advanced by (Wurmbrand 2017). That in turn is a development of the Minimal Pronoun approach to FIs (Heim 2008; Kratzer 2009). Kratzer and Wurmbrand discuss the influence of word order on the availability of FIs in German: in (4), (4a) can have the bound reading w.r.t. *unser* (i.e. ‘others are not taken care of by *their* sons’). Here *unser* is a FI because the feature ‘1st person’ is inert as regards the focus alternatives (i.e. other parents), not requiring that they include the speaker. The variant (4b) only has the coreferential reading under which our son does not take care of anyone else. Unlike Kratzer’s account with a built-in role for subject-verb interaction in the formation of FIs, this and other data force Wurmbrand to adopt a simpler requirement: to have a bound reading, the pronoun has to be preceded and commanded by its antecedent.

- (4) a. Nur uns versorgt **unser** Sohn.
only us takes.care.of our son
‘Only us does our son take care of’
b. **Unser** Sohn versorgt nur uns.
our son takes.care.of only us
‘Our son only takes care of us’

So do Russian and German differ as to the binding of preposed pronouns (cf. (3a) and (4b)), or do FIs

generally differ from reflexives as to how they get bound?

Furthermore, (Boguslavskij 2002) prohibits the coreferential reading for (5) with the possessive reflexive.¹ Likewise, (Déchaine, Wiltschko 2015) claim that (6) only has the bound reading (although it is possible that ellipsis behaves differently as compared to focus binding).

- (5) Tol'ko Ivan ljubit **svoju** rabotu.
only Ivan likes REFL:POSS job
'Only Ivan likes his job'
- (6) Ja postrig **svoju** lužajku, i Ivan tože.
I cut REFL:POSS lawn and Ivan too
'I cut my lawn, and Ivan [did] too'—his lawn or mine?

On the other hand, (Kusliy 2016) declares (7), with the possessive reflexive, ambiguous, which means that the LF without binding of *svoj* is available.

- (7) Andrej skazal, čto on poblagodaryl **svoju** ženu, i ja tože.
Andrey said that he thanked REFL:POSS wife and I too
'Andrey said that he gave thanks to his wife, and I [did] too'

The following questions therefore arise as regards the coreference and semantic binding possibilities of both reflexives and pronominals in Russian:

- (A) How available are coreferential readings for Russian reflexives, and bound readings for Russian personal pronouns (FIs)?
- (B) What is the role of word order in disambiguating those readings?

The following Section 2 presents corpus evidence for the presence and extent of coreferential and bound readings for Russian pronominals and reflexives under focused subject antecedents and evaluates the empirical statements by Boguslavskij, Kusliy and Paducheva as well as the role of word order, also allowing for comparison between personal and reflexive pronouns in the same contexts. Section 3 concludes.

2 Pronouns with Focus Antecedents in Corpora

To examine the antecedence options for pronominals and reflexives in contemporary Russian, I ran a series of queries to the web-scraped Araneum Russicum Maximum corpus (19.8bn tokens; <http://aranea.juls.savba.sk>) and GICR corpus (approx. 19bn tokens, <http://webcorpora.ru>).²

For both corpora, two types of contexts were searched for. In all cases, the pronoun of interest must constitute what can reasonably be construed as a complement, or part of a complement,³ of an indicative verb whose subject is the combination of one of the pronouns *ja* 'I,' *my* 'we,' *ty* 'thou' or *vy* 'you:PL' (also polite for 'thou') with a focus particle *tol'ko/liš'odin* 'only.' The difference lay in the word order: one type of query retrieved cases where the complement precedes its verbal head and its subject; in another, the complement follows the subject and the head. To put a cap on the number of examples, queries were limited to sentences ending with the antecedent (for preposed pronouns) and those beginning with the antecedent (for postposed pronouns).⁴

¹I am grateful to Maria Starodubtseva for the observation concerning the dubiousness of Boguslavsky's judgement and for drawing my attention to Kusliy's paper.

²Annotated corpus samples, together with the R code used for the diagrams, are available at <https://osf.io/245ez>.

³This requirement means that the pronoun could be part of an adjunct within the complement, e.g. embedded in a gerundive (or even an adjunct clause) which was itself adjoined to the dependent infinitive, e.g. in *Tol'ko my pridaëm im cennost', vnosja v nix častičku svoej duši* 'Only we endow them with value, contributing a particle of REFL:POSS soul to them' (GICR).

⁴CQL queries, for Araneum (pre-/postposition of the pronoun, not queried explicitly, relative to its focus antecedent):

preposition [tag='V.i.*'] [word='только|лишь|один|одна|одни'] [word='я|мы|ты|вы']
[word='\!|\?|\.\.']

postposition [word='\.\!|\?|\.\.'] [word='только|лишь|один|одна|одни|Только|Лишь|Один|Одна|Одни']
[word='я|мы|ты|вы'] [tag='V.i.*']

For GICR:

preposition [pos='V.i.*'] [word='только'|word='лишь'|word='один'|word='одна'|word='одни']
[word='я'|word='мы'|word='ты'|word='вы'] [word='!'|word='\?'|word='\.']

postposition [word='!'|word='\?'|word='\.'] [word='только'|word='Только'|word='лишь'|word='Лишь']

The resulting samples were manually filtered to extract examples where a pronoun of interest was present. Those were further annotated for pronoun type (personal vs. reflexive), pronoun morphology (nominal vs. adjectival/possessive) as well as for the distance between the antecedent and the pronoun: **local** in the same clause (although possibly included in a participial clause within the clause containing the antecedent—as a reviewer notes, conflating coarguments of antecedents with pronouns in a PP); **nonfinite** within an infinitival clause in a complement of the verb or a sequence of such clauses (and/or gerundives), irrespective of construction type and the controller of the nonfinite subject; **distant** within a finite clause in a complement of the verb or within an infinitival clause which has a filled Spec,CP position (a *wh*-word), as in

- (8) Tol'ko ja znaju [_{CP} kak mne žit'].
 only I know how I:DAT live:INF
 'Only I know how I should live' (Araneum)

The last parameter of annotation was of course interpretation, that is, whether the pronoun (reflexive (9) or personal (10)) is coreferential to its antecedent or (again reflexive (11) or personal (12)) bound by it, i.e. co-varying with the choice of the focus alternative to the subject. I ventured to assess it intuitively as a native speaker, but a proportion of cases were difficult to annotate, probably for instructive reasons. One, but by no means the only, problem was to remove the instances of *tol'ko* in the adversative meaning (akin to *yet* or *it's only that*), which often has no formal properties distinguishing it from the focus particle *tol'ko* in written discourse.⁵ The cases where no final decision could be made are not included in the calculations, and neither are the cases where two pronouns with different characteristics were present.

- (9) Tol'ko ja mogu byt' **soboju**, i tol'ko vy možete byt' **soboju**.
 only I can be REFL:INS and only you:PL can be REFL:INS
 'Only I can be myself, and only you can be yourself' (Araneum)
- (10) Bol'sinstvo naroda vyxodit v Limu. Na nužnoj **mne** stancii vyxožu tol'ko ja.
 majority folk:GEN get.off in Limu at needed I:DAT station exit only I
 'Most of the people get off in Limu. At the station I need, only I get off' (GICR)
- (11) Tol'ko ja mogu propustit' **svoju** že linejku.
 only I can miss REFL:POSS PRT school.parade
 'Only I can miss my own school parade' (GICR)⁶
- (12) Tol'ko my predлагаем **našim** pokupateljam besplatnuju dostavku kur'erom po Kazani.
 only we offer our:DAT buyers:DAT free:ACC delivery:ACC courier:INS across Kazan
 'Only we offer our customers free delivery by courier across Kazan' (Araneum)

Some of the difficulties were of independent interest. In particular, certain uses of possessives are not necessitated by considerations of meaning as no other salient object of the same type is present in the situation described (13). The assertion here is neither 'Others are not in my *devyatka*' nor 'Others are not in their *devyatkas*,' yet for the present needs I classified (13) as containing a bound reflexive.

- (13) Odin ja sižu v **svoej** devjatke.
 only I sit in REFL:POSS *devyatka*
 'Only I am sitting in my *devyatka* [a model of *Zhiguli* car]' (Araneum)

word='один'|word='Один'|word='одна'|word='Одна'|word='одни'|word='Одни'|
 [word='я'|word='мы'|word='ты'|word='вы'] [pos='V.i.*']

⁵I did *not* remove the instances of idioms or set expressions involving the reflexive, where the pronominal could not be used, e.g. ...*svoju leptu ne vnēs tol'ko ja* '...it's only me who did not contribute,' where *vnesti svoju leptu* means 'contribute.' If preposition is derived by movement, the received wisdom of Generative Grammar does not prevent idiom chunks from appearing preposed provided that they originated postposed to the verb which is part of the idiom (Sportiche, Koopman, Stabler 2013, 207). To clarify at a reviewer's request, idioms differ as regards the possibility of either interpretation: for *svoju leptu* it is hard to imagine a coreferential reading and the possessive is redundant but with *nesti svoj krest* 'bear one's cross' both readings seem in principle available as someone can help me bear my (real of figurative) cross.

⁶An anonymous reviewer points out that the presence of the particle *že* can influence the interpretation of the pronoun. While probably true, the combination *svoj + že* only occurs eight times in the relevant parts of examples from all samples. Combinations of personal pronouns with *že* amount to no more than two.

position		preposition						postposition					
distance to antecedent		distant		nonfinite		local		distant		nonfinite		local	
type	morphology	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor
personal	adjectival	0	81	0	34	0	99	6	173	6	50	18	44
	nominal	0	150	0	9	0	10	13	366	1	7	3	2
reflexive	adjectival <i>svoj</i>	0	7	0	29	2	54	1	8	20	161	28	115
	nominal <i>sebjja</i>	0	0	1	21	3	3	0	8	20	84	9	21

Table 1: Pronouns in Araneum: bou = bound, cor = coreferential

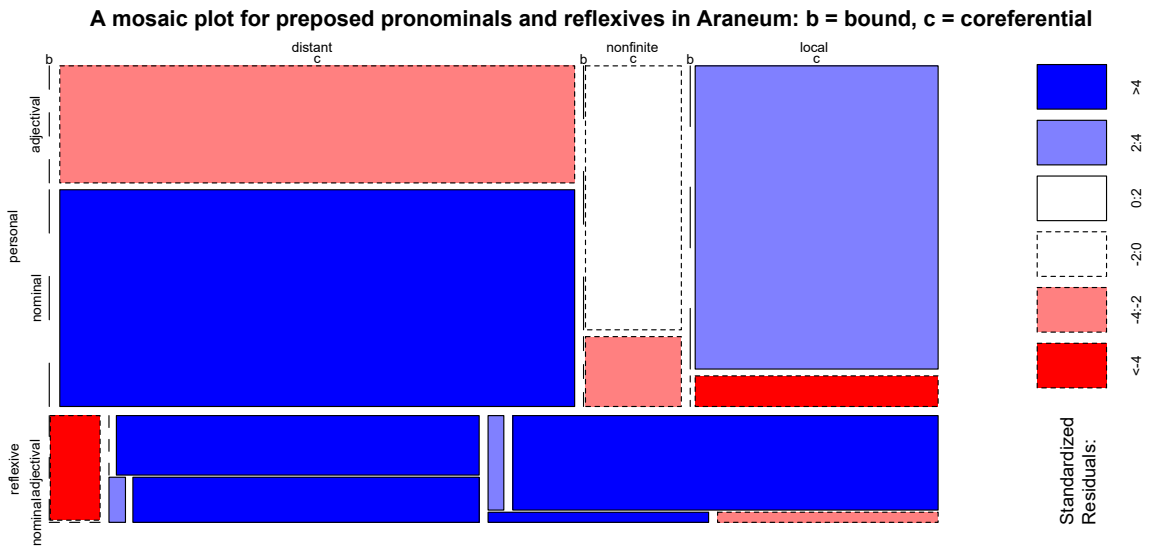


Figure 1: Pronouns in preposition to antecedent in Araneum

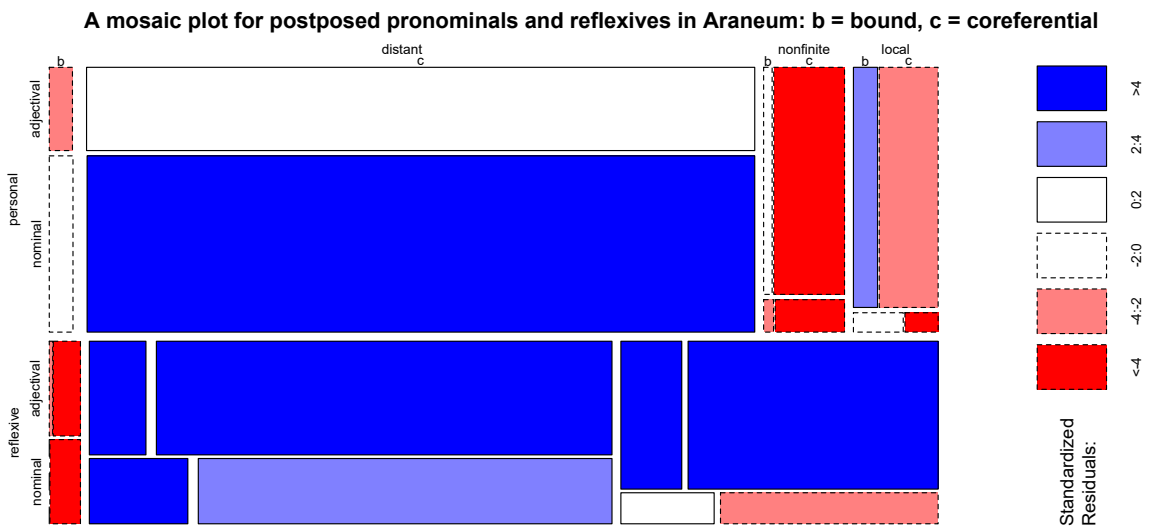


Figure 2: Pronouns in postposition to antecedent in Araneum

position		preposition						postposition					
distance to antecedent		distant		nonfinite		local		distant		nonfinite		local	
type	morphology	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor	bou	cor
personal	adjectival	0	30	0	33	0	135	3	91	7	33	6	36
	nominal	0	193	1	13	0	159	39	481	8	5	2	7
reflexive	adjectival <i>svoj</i>	0	2	11	26	7	95	1	7	72	109	41	153
	nominal <i>sebjja</i>	0	4	10	57	4	28	2	17	79	146	56	76

Table 2: Pronouns in GICR: bou = bound, cor = coreferential

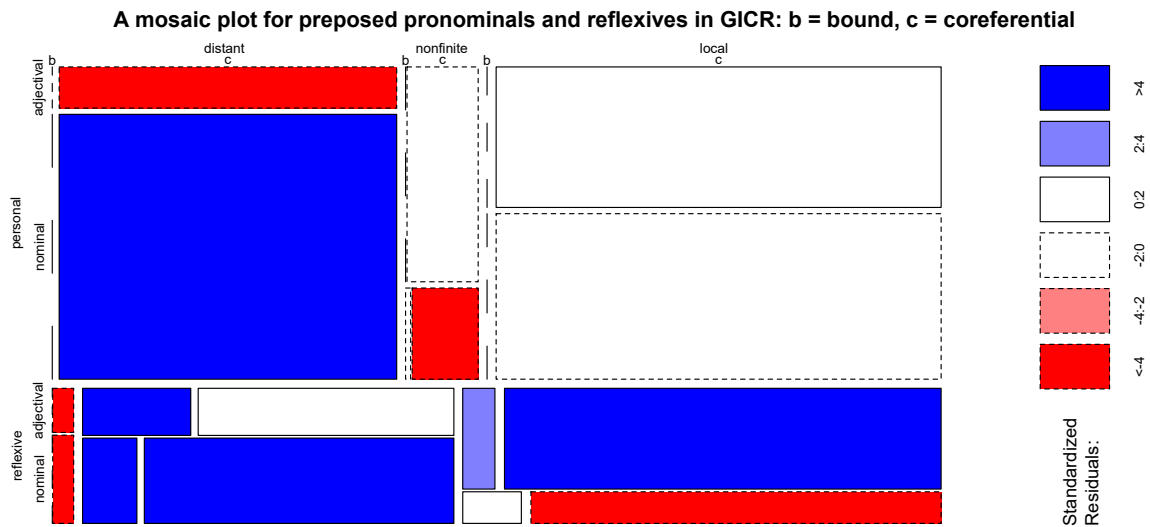


Figure 3: Pronouns in preposition to antecedent in GICR

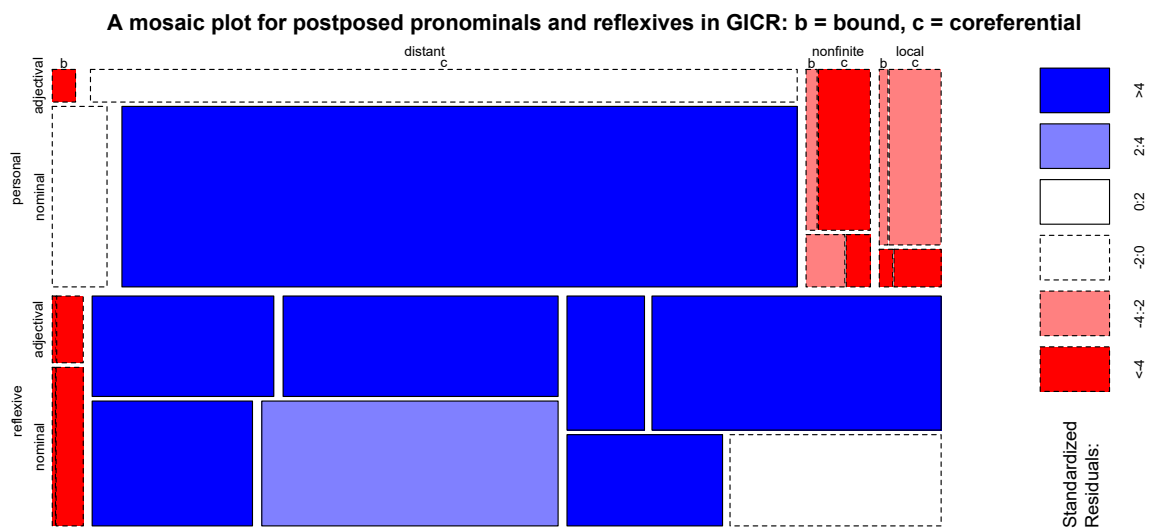


Figure 4: Pronouns in postposition to antecedent in GICR

Likewise, although a gerundive attached to a dependent infinitive as in (14) contains a pertinent occurrence of the pronoun, its interpretation is peculiar in the sense that the assertion of (14) is, again, not that others cannot make it such by taking it in their own hands, let alone that others cannot make it such by taking it in *our* hands. Rather, it is just that others cannot make it such—with the additional information that the way we *are* able to do it is by taking it in our hands. Given the limited focus of the present paper, I classified (14) as “bound.”

- (14) Tol’ko my možem eë sdelat’ takoj, vzjav v **svoi** ruki.
 only we can her make such taking in REFL:POSS hands
 ‘Only we can make it/her such, [by] taking [it/her] in our hands’ (Araneum)

The aggregate results for the Araneum corpus are presented in Table 1 and graphically depicted in Figures 1 (for preposition) and 2 (for postposition). Similarly, the results for GICR are presented in Table 2 and depicted in Figures 3 and 4. For both corpora, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- (I) Reflexives are not just possibly but *more frequently* coreferential than bound. So Boguslavskij’s ban on the coreferential reading of (5) is at least not generally true, and Kusliy’s intuition about the possibility of strict ellipsis in (7) is better supported by corpus data (not involving ellipsis though). Paducheva’s observation about the ambiguity of (3) is thus vindicated.
- (II) Personal pronouns, whether nominal or adjectival, are essentially (with one exception from GICR) never bound in preposition. In this respect, Russian behaves in accordance with Wurmbrand’s pattern in (4), where a personal possessive pronoun is also shown to disallow the bound reading (German lacks a reflexive possessive so no comparison can be made for *svoj*).
- (III) However, contrary to Paducheva’s assessment of (3a), Russian *reflexives* can be bound in preposition, e.g. in (15), although the proportion of bound reflexives in preposition is consistently⁷ smaller than in postposition, as is the proportion of all reflexives among all pronouns of interest⁸.

- (15) a. Poka čto **svoju** točku zrenija aktivno navjazyvali tol’ko vy.
 so.far REFL:POSS point of.view actively imposed only you
 ‘So far, only you have been actively imposing REFL:POSS point of view’ (Araneum)
- b. Stol’ko raz izvodit’ **sebja** vsevozmožnymi dietami mogu tol’ko ja!
 so.many times torture REFL various:INS diets:INS can only I
 ‘Torturing myself with various diets so many times, only I am capable of’ (GICR)

- (IV) Personal pronouns, both nominal (16) and possessive (12), can be bound by focus antecedents when postposed to it in local, nonfinite-embedded and finite-embedded contexts. This testifies to the naturalness of fake indexicals to Russian discourse and presents a first approximation at their frequency both w.r.t. corpus size and as compared to other uses of pronouns.

- (16) Tol’ko vy umeete vsxlipnut’ tak, čto k **vam** nesěš’sja čerez purgu i uragan
 only you:PL know.how sob so that to you rush:2SG through snowstorm and hurricane
 ‘Only you can sob so that one rushes to you through snowstorm and hurricane’ (GICR)

Additionally, for all cases except for distant reflexives and preposed personal pronouns, GICR shows a consistently greater proportion of bound uses both of personal and reflexive pronouns compared to Araneum. The clearer prevalence of coreferentiality in Araneum may be due to the difference in (the proportions of) genres in the corpora. If so, the suggestion in (Pekelis 2021, 87) that the 2nd-person pronouns convey more empathy than the reflexive needs to be supplemented with an account of how the reflexive evolved to convey the “commercial” type of appeal more typical of Araneum documents.

⁷Whenever significant, i.e. for local domain *svoj* in Araneum and GICR and for nonfinite and local domain *sebja* in GICR; χ^2 test with Yates’ continuity correction (implemented in R 4.3.0, (R Core Team 2023)), $\chi^2 = 8.9985$ for *svoj*, $\chi^2 = 8.9978$ for nonfinite domain *sebja*, $\chi^2 = 8.693$ for local domain *sebja*; $df = 1$, $p < .01$.

⁸Whenever significant, i.e. for nonfinite and local domain in both Araneum and GICR, $\chi^2 = 29.648$ for nonfinite domain in Araneum, $\chi^2 = 50.891$ for local domain in Araneum, $\chi^2 = 30.366$ for nonfinite domain in GICR, $\chi^2 = 230.08$ for local domain in GICR; $df = 1$, $p \ll .001$.

3 Conclusion

Getting back to the research questions (A)–(B), these are the conclusions I hope to have substantiated:

- (!A) Russian reflexives (nominal and possessive) with focus subject antecedents are routinely construed as coreferential to the associate of the focus particle (thus giving rise to a strict reading), and at least in some texts more frequently so than behaving as bound by the focus subject (the sloppy reading). Russian 1st- and 2nd-person pronouns (also nominal or possessive) can act as bound by their focus subject antecedent (= FI).
- (!B) In real texts preposed reflexives are more rarely interpreted as bound by such antecedents than when postposed. Personal pronouns in the above sense occur bound in preposition only exceptionally, but does not mean that binding in preposition would result in ungrammaticality given that (as my so far unpublished experimental work seems to suggest) speakers are able to recover such dependencies in discourse comprehension. .

While the existence of FIs has been shown beyond doubt in a variety of languages (at least in various branches of Indo-European, in Hungarian and Hebrew), I am not aware of any previous quantitative studies of their use in any language. The data collected for this paper can be used to estimate their frequency in Russian. However, some parameters were ignored here, such as the type of matrix predicate (e.g. mental state vs. other predicates; (Perevozchikova 2024a)) or its form and the presence/absence of overt subject (Perevozchikova 2024b). Those are therefore left for future research, although some of the parameters may require experimental rather than corpus study due to the scarcity of examples even in largest fully searchable corpora.

There are a few other research questions that I can only mention here. One is taking more particles into consideration, such as *daže* ‘even’ or *imenno* ‘just, exactly’; so far only exclusive particles were considered. Another would consist in comparing focus binding as understood here with ambiguities under ellipsis, as in (7), and in dream reports and counteridentity contexts, where both reflexives and pronominals can be coreferential in Russian (Tiskin 2026). Finally, as far as the study of fake indexicals in Russian goes, there exist cases where “fake” features surface on non-pronominal elements (Bassi 2021) such as the feminine feature on the predicative adjective in (17), which need not mean that the other drinkers were also female (although they seem to be in the discourse in question).

- (17) *pripasěn byl kon’jačok proxladnenskij [sic] i vinco domašnee. V obščem, trezvoj ostalas’ tol’ko ja.*
 stored was brandy cool and vine homemade in general sober:F remained only I
 ‘We had cool brandy and homemade vine in store. In short, only I remained sober’ (GICR)

More distant research perspectives include studying binding by non-subject focus (as opposed to quantificational) antecedents and the connections between FI readings and communicative structure, of which word order is only one aspect. One hypothesis here is that certain difficulties with preposing a bound pronominal may have to do with online processing, where the pronominal can be identified as bound no sooner that the antecedent is processed. While superficially reflexives, which can be coreferential too, appear to be affected by the same problem, it may help that for them bound interpretation is more expected and perhaps even default (although not necessarily statistically prevalent, as shown above). Moreover, there might be differences between topics and merely given/backgrounded material in that a topic should be fully interpretable where it appears, without delay. For a reflexive, being bound may be the default so that a topic containing a reflexive would be understood as containing a predicate with two participant roles identified (although see (Sportiche 2023)). But for a pronominal coreference is the default, which causes *prima facie* interpretive failure if the antecedent has not been introduced beforehand.

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