The Russian idiom #kto-kto, a...#

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The Russian idiom 'KTO-KTO, A…'

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Abstract  A lexicographic description of the Russian idiom ‘кто-кто, а…’, that is, its lexical entry, is proposed—according to the methodology of Explanatory Combinatorial Lexicography: its definition (in two formats: verbal, i.e. textual, and formal—as a formal semantic rule of the Meaning-Text type), its GOVERNMENT PATTERN, its syntactic structures and its lexical functions. As an illustration, the paper offers the linguistic representations of two Russian sentences that contain the idiom on the semantic, deep-syntactic and surface-syntactic levels. It is shown that ‘кто-кто, а…’ is a normal, lexemic idiom, rather than a syntactic one, as it is often called.

Аннотация  Для русской идиомы ‘КТО-КТО, А…’ предлагается лексикографическое описание (словарная статья), выполненное в соответствии с принципами толково-комбинаторной лексикологии: толкование (в двух форматах: словесное, или текстовое, и формальное в виде формального семантического правила типа Смысл-Текст), модель управления, синтаксические структуры идиомы и её лексические функции. В качестве иллюстрации для двух русских фраз, содержащих идиому ‘кто-кто, а…’, предлагаются лингвистические представления на семантическом, глубинно-синтаксическом и поверхностно-синтаксическом уровнях. Показано, что ‘кто-кто, а…’—это обычная лексемная идиома, а не синтаксическая, как нередко утверждается.

1 Statement of the problem

Consider the Russian sentence in (1):

(1) Kto-kto, a Vanja, y pokusat’ sopernika mog.

‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that Vanya could bite his rival.’

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NB: The semanteme ‘certain’ stands for ‘definitely true’ (as in *It is absolutely certain that Prohibition has failed*).

The expression ‘кто-кто, а [Y X-it]’ is an idiom—that is, a non-compositional phraseme.\(^1\) Syntactically, it is a noun phrase consisting of the lexeme *кто-*c\(_2\)‡ ≈ ‘someone’, see Iordanskaja and Mel’čuk (in print), repeated twice plus the coordinating conjunction *а* \(≈\) ‘but, and’.

NB: The top corners \(\_\_\_\_\_\) indicate an idiom; the square brackets enclose the semantic actants of the idiom.

Compared to other Russian (and not only Russian) idioms, the idiom ‘кто-кто, а [Y X-it]’ features several particularities:

- **Semantic particularities of ‘кто-кто, а [Y X-it]’**
  - It has a rather complex meaning; in particular, its definition contains a strict (= exclusive) disjunction and interacts in an involved way with the meaning of its semantic actant ‘X’: see the definition in Sect. 2.
  - Its semantic actants ‘X’ and ‘Y’ are themselves in a predicate ∼ argument relation:
    
    '[it is certain that] X–i\(\Rightarrow\)Y',

    where \(i\) stands for a particular semantic dependency.
  - It affects the semantic-communicative structure of the clause in which it appears: ‘Y’ must be a *Focalized* Sem-Theme, and ‘X’ a *Focalized* Sem-Rheme of this clause. (One can also say that this idiom is compatible only with a particular Sem-communicative structure of the clause.)

- **Syntactic particularities of ‘кто-кто, а [Y X-it]’**
  - It has unusual deep- and surface-syntactic structures, which are not obvious; see below.
  - As is the case for any noun phrase, the idiom ‘кто-кто, а [Y X-it]’ can be introduced by a preposition, but not by any preposition. The preposition PREP that syntactically governs the idiom is the same that governs L(N)(‘Y’), i.e. the noun L that expresses the meaning ‘Y’; it can be only a simple (= primary) preposition—with the exception of a few lexically specified prepositions; moreover, the preposition that introduces the idiom has to be repeated with the second кто-кто\(_2\):

  \[\text{(2)}\]

  a. *O kom o kom, a o Vane ty, konečno, slyšal.*

  About whom about whom, but about Vanya you, of course, have heard.

  ‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that you have heard of Vanya.’

  a’. *Krome kogo krome kogo, a krome Vani nikto ˙etogo ne možet.*

  Except whom except whom, but except Vanya nobody this not can.

  ‘As for Vanya, but not for anybody else, it is certain that except Vanya nobody can [do] this.’

  b. *Перед kem перед kem, a перед Vanej mne stydno.*

  In front of whom in front of whom, but in front of Vanya I dat ashamed.

  ‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that I feel ashamed in front of Vanya.’

\(^1\) On universal typology of phrasemes, see Mel’čuk (2015, Chap. 16). A detailed analysis of the ‘кто-кто, а…’ idiom is found in Sannikov (2008, pp. 380–381, 2010, pp. 206–208). Note that in conformity with Russian orthography, this idiom, if not introduced by a preposition, is spelled with a hyphen.
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b' *Čerez kogo čerez kogo, a čerez Vanya ėto
Through whom through whom, but through Vanya this
polučit’ možno.
obtain is.possible
‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that it is possible to get this
through Vanya.’

c. Dlja kogo dlja kogo, a dlja Vani ja ėto sdelaju.
For whom for whom but for Vanya I this will do
‘As for Vanya, but not for anybody else, it is certain that I will do this for Vanya.’
c'. *Radi kogo radi kogo, a radi Vani ja ėto sdelaju.
For the sake of whom for the sake of whom, but for the sake of Vanya
I this will do
‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that I will do this for the
sake of Vanya.’

NB: The preposition PREP can be semantically empty, that is, governed by the verb X (in this
case it marks a particular actant of X), as in (2) a.–b.), or be semantically full, as in (2) c.).

The object of the present paper is to propose a description of the ‘кто-кто, а...’ idiom in
the form of a lexicographic entry of the Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary [ECD]. The
exposition presupposes sufficient knowledge of the ECD methodology and formalisms, as
well as acquaintance with the Meaning-Text approach (see Mel’čuk 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016).

2 Lexicographic description of the idiom ‘кто-кто, а...’
‘кто-кто, а...’, idiom, noun

Definition
‘кто-кто, а [Y X-it]’:
‘{As for human Y, but not for anybody else,} Sem-
Theme,
{it is certain
2
that either {X–i→Y}A or {X←1–PREP–2→Y}B } Sem-
Rheme, Focalized’

NB: The curly brackets { } indicate some areas of the semantic structure—in order to allow for
easy reference.

Government Pattern [GP]

| |  
|---|---|
| Y <-> II |  

1. a–conj-coord → N₁
   | {disjunctₐ, with the SemRel i implemented
   | in the SSyntS by –r→L(‘Y’)}

2. a–conj-coord → PREP–prepos → N₁
   | {disjunctₜ} or {disjunctₐ, with the SemRel i
   | implemented in the SSyntS by –r→PREP→L(‘Y’)}

NB: The vertical bar | here and below indicates conditions on what precedes it.

Surface-syntactic structures

1. If ‘кто-кто, а...’ is not introduced by a preposition:
   L(‘X’)→r→кто–redupl-3→кто–coordinative→а | GP(L(‘X’)) ⊃ [–r→N_case]
(i) Kogo-kogo, a Vanju, ja vségda primu,

‘As for Vanya, but not for anybody else, it is certain that I will always receive Vanya.’

The condition stipulates that the GP of the verb L(‘X’) includes the indication \([–r \rightarrow N\text{case}]\), i.e. this verb governs a bare noun (without preposition, but in a particular case).

NB: For surface-syntactic relations mentioned here and below, see Mel’čuk (2016, pp. 184ff.).

2. If kto-kto, a... is introduced by a preposition:

\[
L(‘X’)–r/circumstantial\rightarrow \text{PREP–prepos}\rightarrow \text{kto–redupl-3}\rightarrow \text{PREP–prepos}\rightarrow \text{kto–coordinative} \rightarrow \text{A}
\]

either \(\text{GP}(L(‘X’)) \supset \text{[}–r \rightarrow \text{PREP–prepos} \rightarrow N]\) (sentence (i))

or \(L(‘X’)–\text{attr} \rightarrow \text{PREP}\) (sentence (ii))

(i) Otprep kogo otprep kogo, a otprep Vanji tak legko ne otdelat’sja

‘As for Vanya, but not for anybody else, it is certain that of prep Vanya one cannot get rid so easily.’

(ii) Bezprep kogo bezprep kogo, a bezprep Vanji my ne spravimsja

‘As for Vanya, but not for anybody else, it is certain that without prep Vanya we will not cope.’

The first condition foresees the case of a governed preposition (ot ‘of, from’ in this case), see (i), and the second deals with a semantically full preposition (bez ‘without’ in this case, see (ii)).

Syntactic properties

1. kto-kto, a... can be governed only by a simple (= primary) preposition PREP that is not čerez ‘through’, krome ‘except’, radi ‘for’, ...

2. kto-kto, a... tends to be modified by one of the particles imenno ‘just’, kak raz ‘exactly’, -to ≈ ‘as for’, and už [intensifier], approximately synonymous with the idiom; these particles are added to the noun Y: Kto-kto, a imenno (kak raz, už) Vanja(-to) pridet ‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that just (exactly) Vanya will come’. The intensifier už can also be added to the first kto rather than to Y.

3. kto-kto, a... tends to be introduced by the connector (conjunction? particle?) nu ‘well’ (as in Nu, kto-kto, a Vanja pridet ‘Well, as for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain that Vanya will come’).

Lexical functions

QAdv0: imenno ‘just’, kak raz ‘exactly’, -to ≈ ‘as for’, už [intensifier]

For the formal definition of the idiom (a SemR-to-DSyntR rule), see Fig. 1.

3 Linguistic comments and explanations

Definitions

The definition of our idiom is presented in its verbal (= textual) form for a general orientation of the reader. However, for a rigorous analysis, a formal definition of the idiom, in terms of a semantic representation ⇔ deep-syntactic representation correspondence, is needed.

Note that the idiom’s semantic actant 1 = X is realized, on the DSynt-level, as the syntactic governor of the idiom, just as is the case with all modifiers.

The exclusive disjunction ‘either – or’ in the definition of kto-kto, a... plays quite a special role: it indicates that the definition contains two mutually exclusive fragments A and
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Fig. 1 Formal definition of the ‘kto-kto, a…’ idiom: a SemR-to-DSyntR rule. The semanteme ‘set_either–or’ ≈ ‘either…, or…’ heads an exclusive (= strict) disjunction—a set of mutually exclusive alternatives, in this case—alternatives A and B. (See Mel’čuk 2012, pp. 214–216 for the semanteme ‘set_or’ ≈ ‘or’.)

B, so that it can apply to the semantic structure ‘S’ under consideration in case it features fragment A and in case it features fragment B.

Surface-syntactic structures

The idiom ‘kto-kto, a…’ has two alternative SSyntSs, according to whether it is not introduced by a preposition [1] or it is introduced by a preposition—PREP [2]. As stated above, this preposition can be semantically full (such as bez ‘without’ or pri ‘in the presence of’), or semantically empty—imposed by the government of the verb X (as in O kom o kom, a o Vane ja govorit’ X ne budu ‘About whom about whom, but about Vanya I speak X not will’). The SSyntS of the idiom consists of two chunks:

- A noun phrase kto–redupl-3 → kto, formed by one of the Russian reduplicative SSyntRels, which link a repeated occurrence L’ of the lexical unit L to L.2

2 Russian has at least four reduplicative SSyntRels:

blizko–redupl-1 → blizko lit. ‘close, close’ [insistence]
blizko–redupl-2 → blizko lit. ‘close-close’ [intensification]
gde–redupl-3 → gde, a… lit. ‘where-where, but …’ [idioms of the type considered in this paper]
Počitaj–redupl-4 → počitaj! lit. ‘Read-read!’ = ‘Don’t you dare to read [on me]!’ [a syntactic idiom: a threat; uttered with a special intonation]

The four corresponding types of phrase are distinguished, among other things, by different prosodies.
The coordinating conjunction  

 depend on the noun phrase  

 via the coordinative  

 the SSyntS of the idiom under description is similar to the SSyntSs of the expressions  

 and  

 but not  

 but  

 The idiom  

 is a noun (more precisely, a noun phrase);  

 [intensifier] are its approximate adverbializations—  

 related by the following equivalence (with head-switching):  

 ; for instance:

\[ \text{'N--synt\rightarrow N'} \equiv \text{Adv0(N)} \leftarrow \text{synt--N'} \]

(3) \text{'Komu-komu, a\textsuperscript{N} mne\textsubscript{N'} èto neprijatno}'

As for me but not for anybody else, it is certain2 that to.me it [is] unpleasant.' \(\equiv\)

\[\text{Imenno ('Kak raz', Už)\textsubscript{Adv0(N)} mne\textsubscript{N'} èto neprijatno. | Mne-to èto neprijatno.}\]

4 Illustrations

As an illustration, here are the representations of two Russian sentences that contain the  

 idiom on Sem-, DSynt- and SSynt-levels—one with a direct dependency of the idiom on the head verb, and another one where this dependency is mediated by a preposition (see Figs. 2, 3).

(4) \text{Kogo-kogo, a Vanju ja primu}'

‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain2 that I will receive Vanya.’

(5) \text{K komu k komu, a k Vane ja obraščajus’}'

‘As for Vanya but not for anybody else, it is certain2 that I turn to Vanya.’

5 Linguistic nature of the  

 idiom

The  

 idiom is sometimes called ‘a syntactic phraseme’, but I do not think that this is legitimate. A syntactic idiom, or constructional phraseme (Mel’čuk 2015, pp.
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Fig. 3 Semantic, deep-syntactic and surface-syntactic representations of sentence (5)

338–340), is a non-compositional phraseme that consists not of lexical units, but of minimal syntactic structures (= subtrees) such that any lexemic variable in these structures either is not filled, or is filled by an auxiliary, i.e. structural lexeme, and at least one of these minimal structures cannot be freely chosen by the Speaker to express a given meaning independently of other structures. A typical English syntactic idiom is, for instance, a tautology-like expression:

[Xs] ‘will be Xs’

\[L_{(N,\text{human})PL} \xrightarrow{\text{subject-will-future-analytical}} \text{be-copular-completive} \rightarrow L_{(N,\text{human})PL}, \]

implemented as Boys will be boys, Wives will be wives, Poets will be poets, etc. (see Wierzbicka 1991, pp. 391–452, where a detailed semantic analysis is proposed of tautologically organized syntactic idioms in several languages). Its meaning is, roughly, ‘[Human beings L_{(N,\text{human})PL}] always behave themselves in a not quite appropriate way, yet this is not that bad and can be put up with’. As one sees, this syntactic idiom does not contain semantically full words.

Here is another example—a typical Russian syntactic idiom:

[XDAT] ‘byt’ ne do [YGEN]

\[L([X^\prime]) \xrightarrow{\text{indir-objectival–byt}} \text{be–copular-completive} \rightarrow \text{do ‘up.to’–prepositional} \rightarrow [L([Y^\prime])], \]

Maše ne do knig
To.MashaX not up.to books Y
‘Masha cannot think of books [now], because Masha is completely immersed in something else.’

The ‘kto-kto, a…’ idiom contains a full lexeme kto2c ≈ ‘someone’, so it should not be considered a syntactic idiom.
However, Russian has five similar idioms: ‘čto-čto, a…’, ‘gde-gde, a…’, ‘kuda-kuda, a…’, ‘otkuda-otkuda, a…’ and ‘kogda-kogda, a…’. Wouldn’t it be nice to use a lexical variable instantiated by these indefinite pronouns? That is, couldn’t these expressions be described as realizations of a syntactic idiom: ‘Ξ-Ξ, a…’ [Y X-it], where the variable Ξ can be filled by the interrogative-relative pronouns kto, čto, gde, kuda, otkuda and kogda? Unfortunately, this is impossible: the expressions under analysis show too many differences that cannot be united under one lexicographic entry. Namely, with kto ‘who’ the actant Y denotes a human, with čto ‘what’, an inanimate entity or a fact, with gde ‘where’, a location, with kuda, a direction, with otkuda, a source, and with kogda, a time; accordingly, there are different components in the lexicographic definitions and different elements in the government patterns. Therefore, we have to accept six different lexical idioms built on the same structural model.

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**References**


