

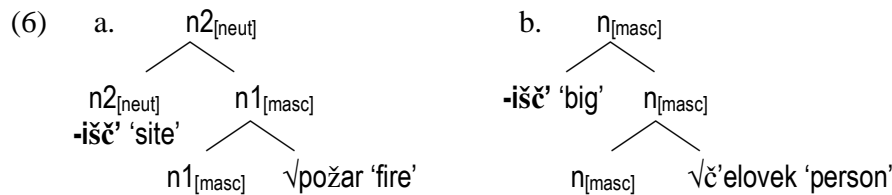
## The nature of homophones

**1. Goal:** In this paper, I investigate the nature of homophones. It has been traditionally assumed that homophones are linguistic objects that sound the same, but differ in meaning (Mogg, Bradley, Miller, Potts, Glenwright, & Kentish 1994, Timberlake 2004, Townsend 1975, Wade 2000, etc.). I claim that the traditional accounts are missing an ingredient. I show that homophones differ not only in meaning but also in syntactic structure, leaving just the sound the same. This work is a case study of Russian non-root homophones (suffixes and prefixes).

**2. Problem:** In Russian, there are sets of suffixes (*-ec, -ic, -išč', -k, -ik, -ok*) and prefixes (*po-, pro-*) which systematically differ in distributional properties. For example, the suffix *-išč'* “place/site” can change the gender of the base form, while its homophonous counterpart *-išč'* “big” can never change the gender of the base (1)–(2). With this respect, the following question arises: If homophones differ only in meaning, as the traditional accounts claim, how can we account for the fact that their distributional properties are also different?

- |     |  |  |   |
|-----|--|--|---|
| (1) | a. požár<br>fire.N.SG (MASC)<br>‘fire’         |  | b. požár’-išč’-e<br>fire-PLACE/SITE-N.SG (NEUT)<br>‘site of fire’ |
| (2) | a. č’elov’ék<br>person.N.SG (MASC)<br>‘person’ |  | b. č’elov’éc’-išč’-e<br>person-BIG-N.SG (MASC)<br>‘big person’    |

**3. Proposal:** I propose that non-root homophones systematically differ in both meaning and syntactic structure. For example, out of two non-root homophones, one is structurally a head, while the other one is structurally a modifier. According to Bierwisch (2003), Schütze (1995), and Bachrach & Wagner (2007), heads project, thus they determine categorial properties of the output. Modifiers do not project, thus they do not determine categorial properties of the output. In (1), the suffix *-išč'* “place/site” determines the gender of the output, which is consistent with its status as a syntactic head (6a). In (2), the homophonous suffix *-išč'* “big” cannot determine the gender of the output, which is consistent with its status as a syntactic modifier (6b).



**4. Conclusions and further questions:** Russian non-root homophones differ not only in meaning, but also in syntactic structure, as illustrated in the table below. The following questions arise: First, is this property language-specific, as in Russian, or is it universally true? Second, is this a special property of non-root homophones or is it also true for root homophones?

|                  | Non-root homophones |
|------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Meaning</b>   | different           |
| <b>Structure</b> | different           |
| <b>Sound</b>     | same                |

## References

- Bachrach, A., & Wagner, M. (2007). Syntactically driven cyclicity vs. output-output correspondence: The case of adjunction in diminutive morphology. *Proceedings of the 30th Penn Linguistics Colloquium*.
- Bierwisch, M. (2003). In E. Lang, C. Maienborn, & C. Fabricius-Hansen (Eds.), *Modifying adjuncts* (pp. 113-159). Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Mogg, K., Bradley, B., Miller, T., Potts, H., Glenwright, J., & Kentish, J. (1994). Interpretation of homophones related to threat: Anxiety or response bias effects? *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 18 (5), 461-477.
- Townsend, W. C. (1975). *A handbook of homophones of General American English*. Waxhaw, N.C.: International Friendship.
- Schütze, C. (1995). PP attachment and argumenthood. *Papers on Language Processing and Acquisition. MITWPL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 26, 95-151.
- Timberlake, A. (2004). *A reference grammar of Russian*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wade, T. (2000). *A comprehensive Russian grammar*. Blackwell Publishing.