



Irina Levontina

Vinogradov Russian Language Institute RAS

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7368-2135>

Noun as a Verb

Abstract

The paper explores the phenomenon of using nouns in place of verbs in performative speech acts, particularly in the context of requests. A key example is the Russian construction *Našedšego ključii pros'ba vernut'* 'Whoever finds the keys, please return them', *lit.* 'a request to the finder to return', which, while non-standard, is widely used in speech. The use of nouns instead of verbs in performative utterances is not unique. For instance, saying *Moi pozdravlenija!* 'My congratulations!' instead of *Pozdravljaju vas* 'I congratulate you' reflects a similar phenomenon. This tendency often arises because speakers aim to avoid the implied intimacy implied by 1st/2nd-person pronouns and verb forms, especially in formal or less intimate communication. The peculiarity of the Russian word *pros'ba* 'request' in contrast to similar words (e.g., *mol'ba* 'plea') is that in performative usage it develops unique government patterns. Specifically, it governs the accusative case to indicate the addressee as a semantic argument of the word *pros'ba*, borrowing this pattern from the transitive verb *prosit'* 'to ask'. This reveals an unexpected connection between performativity and the syntactic behavior of the word, highlighting how performative contexts can influence grammatical structures.

Keywords

performative verbs, government pattern, Russian, directive speech acts, semantic actants, addressee, valency

To my teacher Jurij Derenikovič Apresjan with gratitude and love

0.

Jurij Derenikovič Apresjan greatly enjoyed analyzing the structural peculiarities of individual words. For instance, he enthusiastically discussed the word *sistema* 'system': it is incapable of governing an infinitive —one cannot say *sistema delat' zarjadku* 'system to do exercises'. However, within the phrase *vojti v sistemu*

‘to become a system’, such a possibility does emerge *U nego vošlo v sistemu delat' zarjadku* ‘It became a system for him to do exercises’. Compare, for example, the word *privyčka* ‘habit’ which can take an infinitive complement itself: *vošlo v privyčku delat' zarjadku* ‘It became a habit to do exercises’ and *U nego pojavilas' privyčka delat' zarjadku* ‘He developed a habit of doing exercises’. One might also recall Apresjan’s famous co-authored paper with Leonid Iomdin on the construction *negde spat'* ‘no place to sleep’ (Apresjan & Iomdin, 1989, pp. 3–89). I believe Apresjan would also have been interested in analyzing the unusual grammatical properties of the word *pros'ba* ‘request’.

This work is based on the principles of systematic semantic description developed by Ju. Apresjan (2000), one of the most important of which is the idea of an integral description of language. Integral description presupposes that the dictionary and the grammar are mutually adjusted. The objective of this paper is to analyze the Russian word *pros'ba* ‘request’, demonstrating special syntactic and semantic behavior, particularly in performative contexts. Linguistic material is partially sourced from the corpora (mainly <https://ruscorpora.ru/>) and the Internet, partly from the author’s collection. So statistical conclusions cannot be drawn.

1. Examples

We often come across utterances like:

- *Poezd dal'se ne pojdët, pros'ba osvobodit' vagony.*
‘The train will not go further, please vacate the cars, lit. a request to vacate the cars.’
- *Pros'ba ne bespokoit'.*
‘Please do not disturb, lit. a request not to disturb.’
- *Poterjany ključi. Našedšego pros'ba vernut' na vaxtu.*
‘Keys lost. Whoever finds them, please return to the guard post, lit. a request to the finder to return’, etc.

They are widely used in speech, although some of them, as the last one, are non-standard.

Here are some examples:

- (1) *Pokornejšaja pros'ba ob"jasnit' mne, esli možno, kakim obrazom, za čto i počemu ja podvergnut byl segodnjašnemu obyску?*
 'Most humble request to explain to me, if possible, how, why, and for what reason I was subjected to today's search?' [F. Dostoevskij (1871–1872)]
- (2) *Dnja tri nazad ja poslal v redakciju rukopis' Peškova [...], zaglavie "Staruxa Izergil". [...] Pros'ba: posmotret' i rešit' eë sud'bu, [...], ne v dolgom vremeni.*
 'Three days ago, I sent to the editor the manuscript of Peshkov [...], entitled *The Old Woman Izergil*. [...] Please (lit. a request: to) review and decide its fate, [...], without delay.' [V. Korolenko (1894)]
- (3) *Kakaja nelepост! Bronzovyj Lermontov udivlënno smotrit nam vsled, uperev podborodok v vysokij vorotnik oficerskogo sjurtuka. «Sledujuščaja ostanovka "Kurskij vokzal", konečnaja. Pros'ba ne zabyvat' vešči v salone tramvaja». Priexali.*
 'What absurdity! The bronze Lermontov looks after us in surprise, his chin resting on the high collar of his officer's coat. "Next stop: Kursky Station, final stop. Please (lit. a request) do not forget your belongings in the tram." We arrived.' [S. Burlačenko (2019)]
- (4) *Syn vyskočil počti srazu že, budto teleportirovalsja na pervyj ètaž, i proskol'zнул v priotkrytuju dver' pod"ezda (kogo-to opjat' ždali, podperev dver' kirpičom, no Petrov ne posmotrel kogo — uvidel tol'ko listok v kletočku, karakuli, nadpis' "Ubeditel'naja pros'ba ne zakryvat' dver'"), uvidel poloski skotča na vsex čtyrëx uglax listočka).*
 'The son dashed out almost immediately, as if teleported to the first floor, and slipped through the slightly open door of the entrance (someone was being waited for again, propping the door with a brick, but Petrov didn't look to see who—he only saw a checkered piece of paper, scribbles, the inscription "Urgent request: do not close the door," and saw strips of tape on all four corners of the paper)'. [A. Sal'nikov (2016)]
- (5) *Kak-to pri vstreče v Moskve on mne poxvastalsja, čto kogda vypadal redkij slučaj vystupit' so stixami, kto-to iz prijatelej šël po rjadam i predupreždal: "Pros'ba ne zapisyvat'".*
 'Once, when we met in Moscow, he boasted to me that when the rare opportunity would arise to perform poetry, one of his friends would walk through

the rows and warn: “Please (lit. a request) do not record.” [R. Sokoloskij (2015)]

- (6) *Ubeditel'naja pros'ba ne kormit' životnyx. Direkcija zooparka.*
‘Strong request: do not feed the animals. Zoo administration.’ [Signs on Doors and Windows (2003)]
- (7) *Esli že predložennoe vremja ili mesto doktora Smita ne ustraivaet, to pros'ba dogovorit'sja o vstreče s sekretarëm Zamestitelja Rukovoditelja Centra.*
‘If the proposed time or place does not suit Dr. Smith, please (lit. a request) arrange a meeting with the secretary of the Deputy Head of the Center’ [I. Pis'menny (2005)]
- (8) — *Priexali, — soobščil Degtjarëv, — poezd dal'se ne pojdët, pros'ba osvobodit' vagony.*
“‘We’ve arrived,” Degtyarev announced, “the train will not go further, please (lit. a request) vacate the cars.” [D. Doncova (2004)]
- (9) *Bol'saja pros'ba dopolnit' moi argumenty, i gde vozmožno, usilit'.*
‘A big request to supplement my arguments and, where possible, to strengthen them.’ [12 Hours a Day?, forum (2010–2011)]

2. Description of the material

At first glance, *Našedšego pros'ba vernut' lit.* ‘a request to the finder to return’, from the point of view of syntax resembles sentences like:

- *U menja problema <vopros>* ‘I have a problem/question’
- *Nam kryška <xana, kapec>* ‘We’re done for’

However, in the latter cases, the noun functions as a predicative with a zero copula and easily allows a non-zero copula:

- *U menja budet problema <byl vopros>* ‘I will have a problem/had a question’
- *Nam byla by kryška <xana>* ‘We would be done for’

However, in some sentences with the lexeme *pros'ba* in question, the noun acts as the predicate itself, and no copula is present. Incorrect: **Našedšego ključiči byla pros'ba vernut' lit.* 'A request to the finder was to return'.

In syntactic terms, our lexeme *pros'ba* is closer to units like interjections: *stop, xlop, basta, xoroš, lady, marš* 'stop, clap, enough, good, alright, march', etc. With these, no copula is possible; they themselves form the predicate. Compare also the term clausative – “Part of speech of a lexemic expression which is syntactically equivalent to a clause; e.g. , Down [with terrorists!] | Wow! | Not at all.” (Melčuk, 2023, p. 247).

However, it should be noted that the range of non-verbal predicate expressions turns to be broader than one might think. For example, the expressions *pas* 'pass' and *vist* 'whist' used in Russian Preference, a game of cards, are commissive speech acts: after the contract is ordered, the other players must declare whether they commit to taking the required number of tricks in the game or not. If a player commits to taking a certain number of tricks, they declare “whist”; if not, “pass.”

(10) *Damy, koroli, tuzy bezprestanno metalis' pered glazami; v glazax to i delo razdavalis' slova: kuplju, pas, vist, remiz, vam remiz!...*

'Ladies, kings, aces constantly flashed before my eyes; in my ears, the words "I'll buy, pass, whist, remise, you remise!" kept ringing out...' [A. Družinin (1850)]

(11) «*Pas*», — *skazal on i snova vypil. Igrali, verovatno, v preferans. Ty kogda sobiraeš'sja exat'? — sprosil Viktor i ob"javil «vosem' pervyx». V otvet poslyšalos': «Vist», «Pas», — i partnëry «legli».*

“Pass,” he said and drank again. They were probably playing preference. “When are you planning to leave?” Victor asked and declared “eight first.” In response came: “Whist,” “Pass,” and the partners “lay down.” [V. Vysotskij (1969–1970)]

3. Problem statement

All the above uses of the word *pros'ba* are performative. *Našedšego pros'ba vernut'* 'Whoever finds it, please return' is not a description of a request but the request itself (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1974). The ability to be used performatively is an

individual feature of the word *pros'ba*. Neither the word *prikaz* 'order', nor *trebovanie* 'demand', nor *mol'ba* 'plea' are used in this way.

Of course, the word *pros'ba* also has an ordinary descriptive (i.e. non-performative) lexeme. For example, in the following case, the request itself is expressed by an imperative, and the word *pros'ba* merely introduces the corresponding speech act:

- (12) — *Il'ja, — govorju ja drožaščim golosom, — u menja k tebe pros'ba; možet byt', ona pokažetsja tebe glupoj i smešnoj pri takix obstojatel'stvax... no... no... ne brosjaj Fomku.*

“Ilya,” I said in a trembling voice, “I have a request for you; it might seem silly and ridiculous under these circumstances... but... don’t abandon Fomka.” [E. Nagrodskaja (1910)]

In such descriptive uses, the word *pros'ba* is accompanied by a copula, not necessarily zero:

- (13) *I vsě-taki eë neizmennaja pros'ba byla — dat' ej bombu i pozvolit' byt' odnim iz metal'ščikov.*

‘And yet her constant request was to give her a bomb and allow her to be one of the throwers.’ [B. Savinkov (1909)]

- (14) *So svojej storony, u menja tože budet pros'ba ob ostorožnosti. A v čěm delo? Pust' o moej missii znaet kak možno men'se ljudej. Vy, vaš Erik, kol' skoro vy emu tak bezrazdel'no doverjaete, i vsě.*

‘On my part, I will also have a request for caution. What’s the matter? Let as few people as possible know about my mission. You, your Eric, since you trust him so completely, but no one else.’ [V. Rybakov (1993)]

- (15) *Tol'ko u menja budet pros'ba... — Andrej opjat' pomolčal, prodolžal, naxmurivšis': — V silu opredelënnyx obstojatel'stv ja ostalsja bez dokumentov...*

“Only I will have a request...” Andrej paused again, and then continued, frowning: “Due to certain circumstances, I am left without documents...” [N. Dežnev (2002)]

4. The word *pros'ba*: syntactic coding of the addressee

The situation of a request presupposes three semantic actants: the subject, the addressee, and the content (who is asking, whom they are asking, and what they are asking for). Thus, the word *pros'ba* has three semantic arguments.

In its performative use, *pros'ba* displays several interesting features, first of all related to the realization of the addressee valency.

4.1. DAT

First, it can be expressed by the dative case:

(16) *I vot razdalsja razlučajuščij golos, deskat', ostorožno, poezd otpravljaetsja, pros'ba passažiram^{DAT} zanjat' svoi mesta.* 'And then the parting voice rang out, saying, "Careful, the train is departing, passengers are requested to take their seats."' [V. Kungurceva (2009)]

(17) *Pros'ba provožajuščim^{DAT} vyteret' slězy — oni gorju ne pomogut.* 'Request to those seeing off to wipe their tears—they won't help with the grief.' [M. Baru (2013)]

(18) *Iskrenne pozdravljaem pobeditel'nic, (blizkim^{DAT} pros'ba rascelovat' ot našego imeni)!* 'We sincerely congratulate the winners, (their dear ones are requested to kiss them on our behalf)! [Contest Completed! Our Congratulations! (2003)]

(19) *Studentam^{DAT}, želajuščim oformit' kartočki gosudarstvennogo pensionnogo straxovanija, pros'ba obraščat'sja v otdel po rabote so studentami (komnata 226).* 'Students wishing to apply for state pension insurance cards are requested to contact the student affairs office (room 226).' [Signs on Doors and Windows (2004)]

(20) *Zainteresovannym licam^{DAT} pros'ba ostavljat' svoi koordinaty po e-mail xxxxx@land.ru ili icq 000000000.* 'Interested parties are requested to leave their contact details at e-mail xxxxx@land.ru or ICQ 000000000.' [Electronic Announcement (2004)]

(21) *Ved' ne slučajno mnogie firmy dajut ob"javlenija: priglašajutsja vypuskniki takix-to vuzov, ostal'nym^{DAT} — pros'ba ne bespokoit'sja.*

'It's no coincidence that many firms post ads: graduates of certain universities are invited, others are requested not to worry.' [V. Bolotov (2007)]

As we can see, the use of the dative in this context is quite typical. The dative is the standard case for the addressee valency. Additionally, this might be influenced by constructions like *Vsem^{DAT} molčat'^{INF}, vsem^{DAT} vyjti^{INF}* 'Everyone, be quiet; everyone, leave.' Cf.:

(22) *Razdalos' šipenije gromkoj svjazi: "Pros'ba vsem^{DAT} ostavat'sja na svoix mestax."*

'The loudspeaker hissed: "Everyone is requested to remain in their seats."' [A. Iličevskij (2007)]

4.2. Subordinate clause

Another, also quite common, option is the use of a subordinate clause indicating the circle of possible addressees of the request: it goes without saying that the subordinate clause is not a syntactic actant of *pros'ba*:

(23) *U kogo imeetsja foto mestnosti, do stroitel'stva magazina «VAVILON», okolo tipografii, pros'ba vystavit' zdes'.*

'Those who have photos of the area before the construction of the "Babylon" store near the printing house, please (lit. a request) post them here.' [Demolition of Trees on Krasnye Zori (03.03.2015)]

(24) *Kogo eščë net v našej zamečatel'noj tabličke, bol'saja pros'ba prislat' na mejl [ssylka] sledujuščie dannye — fotografija životnogo, klička, pol, data roždenija, svoë imja.*

'Those not yet in our wonderful table, please kindly (a big request to) send the following data by email [link]: photo of the animal, name, gender, date of birth, your name.' [Cats Forever! (2008)]

(25) *Komu ne interesno — bol'saja pros'ba ne xodit'.*

'Those not interested — please kindly do not come (lit. a big request not to come).' [Today in the Top Blogs: The Story of a Teacher, blog (2008)]

- (26) *U kogo imeetsja KIM dosročnogo, ogromnaja pros'ba otpisat' v ls.*
 ‘Those who have early KIM (tests), a huge request to write in private messages.’

[Exchange of Manuals, Materials, and Books, forum (2012)]

- (27) — *Nu vot, letit on i vdrug slyšit ob"javlenie: esli v samolëte est' anesteziolog, pros'ba projti v salon biznes-klassa.*
 ‘‘So, he’s flying and suddenly hears an announcement: if there is an anesthesiologist on the plane, please (lit. a request) proceed to the business class cabin.’’ [V. Valeeva (2002)]

4.3. Address

Another way to indicate the addressee of the request is through an address. In this case the indication of the addressee is also syntactically separated from the predicate, and the syntactic connection between them is broken. The address does not fill the syntactic valency of the word *pros'ba*:

- (28) *Iz telecentra pri ètom razdavalsja golos v megafon: «Tovarišči, pros'ba razojtis'».*
 ‘From the television center, a voice rang through the megaphone: ‘‘Comrades, please (lit. a request) disperse...’’ [L. Danilkin (2007)]
- (29) *Gy, filologi, pros'ba ne davit' intellektom!* ‘Heh, philologists, please (lit. a request) don’t crush with intellect!’ [Languages. Polyglots, Hey!, forum (2006)]
- (30) *Golos v gromkogovorit ele, metalličeskij, sklëpannyj iz obrezkov krovël'nogo železa, proiznes s drebežžaniem: «Passažiry, vyletajuščie v Mozdok, pros'ba projti na posadku».*
 ‘The voice in the loudspeaker, metallic, riveted from scraps of roofing iron, uttered with a rattle: ‘‘Passengers flying to Mozdok, please (lit. a request) proceed to boarding.’’ [A. Proxanov (2001)]
- (31) *Ženščina normal'noj vnešnosti, 56/163/60, kv., tel., rabota, nezavisimaja, dlja sozdanija sem'i poznakomitsja s mužčinoj 56–63 let, s avto, bez m/p. Mužčiny bez sredstv — pros'ba ne bespokoit'. 680051, Xabarovsk, a/ja 31/8.*

‘A woman of normal appearance, 56/163/60, apartment, phone, job, independent, will meet a man 56–63 years old, with a car, without financial problems, for creating a family. Men without financial means—please (lit. a request) do not disturb. 680051, Khabarovsk, P.O. Box 31/8’) [Amur Meridian (22.12.2004)]

- (32) *Rukovoditeli — pros'ba razobratsja s ètoj naglost'ju, i eščë POMYT' POLY V KONCE KONCOV!!*

‘Administrators—please (lit. a request) deal with this outrage, and also WASH THE FLOORS FINALLY!!’ [Reviews of the Sparta Fitness Club (12.06.2013)]

- (33) *I vot nado že... — Provožajuščie, pros'ba pokinut' vagon! Otpravljaemsja.*

‘And here we go... “Those seeing off, please (lit. a request) leave the car! We’re departing.”’ [M. Blexman (2012)]

Notice that there is always some kind of punctuation mark separating the two parts.

4.4. ACC

The most interesting is the following option: the addressee valency can be marked by the accusative case, which is quite unusual for the Russian language. So to speak, *pros'ba* is here a transitive noun:

- (34) *Vystupaet A. L. Kogan: “Po ustanovivšejsja praktike massovogo napadenija na kompozitora pros'ba vse^{ACC} vkladyvat' svoi soobraženija”.*

‘A. L. Kogan speaks: “According to the established practice of mass attacks on the composer, everyone is requested to share their thoughts.”’ [V. Švec (1945)]

- (35) *Ja vot bez osmotra (kolleg^{ACC} pros'ba ne šutit'!) ne stala by davat' odnoznačnogo zaključenija!!!*

‘I, without an examination (colleagues, please (lit. a request) do not joke!), would not give a definitive conclusion!!!’ [Beauty, Health, Rest: Medicine and Health, forum (2005)]

- (36) *Vsex^{ACC}, komu znakoma èta osoba, pros'ba pozvonit' po telefonu.*

‘Everyone who knows this person, please (lit. a request) call the phone number.’ [V. Vojnovič (2000)]

- (37) *Minutočku vnimanija. Odesskaja kinostudija priglašajet artistov dlja učastija v massovyx scenax. Želajuščix^{ACC} **pros'ba** sobrat'sja u glavnogo vxoda v četyre časa.*
 'Attention, please. The Odessa Film Studio invites actors to participate in crowd scenes. Those interested are requested to gather at the main entrance at four o'clock.' [Iz žizni otdywajuščix, film (1980)]
- (38) *Ispolnjajuščij objazannosti načal'nika kriminal'noj milicii po Kol'skomu rajonu Denis Lobov podčerk nul: "Ljudej^{ACC}, kotorye vsë videli, slučajnyx očevidec^{ACC} **pros'ba** soobščit'."*
 'Acting Chief of Criminal Police for the Kola District Denis Lobov emphasized: "People who saw everything, accidental eyewitnesses, are requested to report."' [Vandals destroyed over 40 gravestones at a Murmansk cemetery (26.06.2009)]
- (39) *A vy gotovy zakrutit' takoj roman? (**pros'ba** otvečat' tol'ko ženščin^{ACC}).*
 'Are you ready to start such a romance? (only women are requested to answer).' [Resort romance with a local (06.07.2005)]
- (40) *Interesy raznostoronnije. Sudimyx^{ACC} — **pros'ba** ne bespokoit'. 680021, Xabarovsk, a/ja 18/2, dlja Ž-34, dlja Ol'gi.*
 'Interests are diverse. Convicted—please (lit. a request) do not disturb. 680021, Khabarovsk, P.O. Box 18/2, for Zh-34, for Olga.' [Amur Meridian (22.12.2004)]

As can be seen from the examples, the syntactic construction under consideration is not entirely new, but it has become widespread in recent times.

4.5. Non-canonical and canonical syntactic coding of the addressee

At the same time, all the listed ways of marking the addressee of a request for the word *pros'ba* are non-canonical. The "legal" way is κ + *dative*:

- (41) *Gramota. Otvety sprav očnoj služby vopros № 246452. Zdravstvujte. Kak pravil'no, "našedšego^{ACC} **pros'ba** vernut'" ili "našedšemu^{DAT} **pros'ba** vernut'"? Ili i tak, i tak verno? OTVET. Pravil'no: k našedšemu^{k+DAT} **pros'ba** vernut'. 29 sentjabrja 2008.*

‘Hello. Which is correct, *našedšego*^{ACC} **pros'ba** vernut' (the finder please return) or *našedšemu*^{DAT} **pros'ba** vernut' (lit. to the finder a request to return)? Or are both correct? ANSWER Correct: *k našedšemu*^{k+DAT} **pros'ba** vernut' (to the finder please return. September 29, 2008.' [Reference Service Grammar answers from the reference service question No. 246452 (2.14.2025)]

Indeed, outside performative uses, the correct form is: *Vaša pros'ba k nemu*^{k+DAT} vernut' *ključy byla vpolne razumnoj* ('Your request to him to return the keys was quite reasonable'). Here, *emu*^{DAT} or *ego*^{ACC} are impossible. However, the “correct” government pattern is only freely used in descriptive utterances:

- (42) *Zatem Šimanskij sprosil, est' li u neë pros'by k komandovaniju*^{k+DAT} *gospitalja*. 'Then Shymansky asked if she had any requests for the hospital administration.' [V. Grossman (1960)]
- (43) *Delo prinimalo ser'eznyj oborot, i ja kak rukovoditel' ekspedicii obratilsja s pros'boj k Stepanovu*^{k+DAT} *sxodit' vniz na poisk gruppy Evgenija Očkina*. 'The matter was taking a serious turn, and I, as the expedition leader, made a request to Stepanov to go down and search for Yevgeny Ochkin's group.' [I. Vol'skij (1994)]
- (44) *V pis'me o Pavlu Florenskomu (24 maja 1924 goda) Aleksej Fëdorovič priglašaet ego učastvovat' v ètom sbornike [...]. V konce pis'ma pros'ba k o Pavlu*^{k+DAT} *posetit' suprugov Losevyx i razdelit' s nimi «blagostnye vospominanija» v godovščinu ix svad'by 23 maja po staromu stilju (5 ijunja po n. st.)*. 'In a letter to Fr. Pavel Florensky (May 24, 1924), Alexey Fyodorovich invites him to participate in this collection [...]. At the end of the letter, there is a request to Fr. Pavel to visit the Losev couple and share with them the “blessed memories” on the anniversary of their wedding, May 23 (old style) / June 5 (new style).' [A. Taxo-Godi (2009)]

This also occurs in utterances that are intermediate between descriptive and performative:

- (45) *U menja k tebe*^{k+DAT} *pokornejšaja pros'ba poxodatajstvovat' za menja pred Ivanom*. 'I have a most humble request for you: to intercede on my behalf with Ivan.' [Al. P. Čexovv (1887)]

- (46) *Ja na samoe maloe vremja, i kak tol'ko ustroju, ne posmotru ni na kakie prepjatstvija, ni na vremja, i črez poltora ili dva mesjaca ja na doroge v Rim. K vam^{k+DAT} moja ubeditel'nejšaja pros'ba uznat', mogu li ja vzjat' sestër moix do èkzamena i takim obrazom vyigrat' vremja ili neobxodimo oni dolžny ožidat' vypuska. Dajte mne otvet vaš i, esli možno, skoree.*

'I am here for a very short time, and as soon as I settle things, I will not let any obstacles or time constraints stop me. In a month and a half or two, I will be on my way to Rome. My most urgent request to you is to find out if I can take my sisters before the exam and thus save time, or if they must necessarily wait until graduation. Please give me your answer, and if possible, as soon as you can.' [N. Gogol (1836–1841)]

In performative utterances, however, such constructions, while they do occur, are atypical:

- (47) *Poka že k èvoljucionistam^{k+DAT} vsej napravlenij pros'ba byt' poskromnee i nazyvaj' svoë učenie gipoteznoj, a ne dokazanoj teorijej.*

'For now, evolutionists of all stripes are requested to be more modest and refer to their ideas as hypotheses, not as proven theories.' [Darwinism: PRO and CONTRA, forum (04.03.2007)]

- (48) *K avtoram^{k+DAT} portala: Pros'ba soedinit' èti vospominanija kak-nibud' gde-nibud' otdel'no, bez lišnix replik so storony drugix pol'zovatelej, požalujsta.*

'To the authors of the portal: Please (lit. a request) combine these memories somewhere separately, without unnecessary comments from other users, if possible.' [Memories of Wartime Voronezh, forum (2007)]

In the last example, the author uses a colon and a capital letter to separate the addressee from the predicate, breaking the syntactic connection between them.

5. Syntactic coding of the content of a request

To summarize, the peculiarity of the Russian word *pros'ba* 'request' lies in its performative usage, where it develops special government patterns. In particular, it

governs the accusative case to indicate the addressee, apparently borrowing this government pattern from the transitive verb *prosit'* 'to ask'.

It should be noted that performative usage also limits the ways in which the content valency of *pros'ba* can be filled. In such cases, the content is typically expressed with an infinitive, whereas in descriptive usage, the noun *pros'ba* (like the verb *prosit'*) can also use the construction *o* + *prepositional case*. This is impossible in performative usage:

(49)

- a. **Prosim** mužčin pomoč' s pogruzkoj.
'We ask the men to help with the loading'
- b. Mužčin **poprosili** pomoč' s pogruzkoj.
'The men were asked to help with the loading.'
- c. **Pros'ba** k mužčinam pomoč' s pogruzkoj byla proignorirovana.
'The request to the men to help with the loading was ignored'
- d. Mužčiny! **Pros'ba** pomoč' s pogruzkoj.
'Men! Please help with the loading.'
- e. **Prosim** mužčin o pomošči s pogruzkoj.
'We ask the men for help with the loading.'
- f. Mužčin **poprosili** o pomošči s pogruzkoj.
'The men were asked for help with the loading.'
- g. **Pros'ba** k mužčinam o pomošči s pogruzkoj byla proignorirovana.
'The request to the men for help with the loading was ignored.'

However, the following variant sounds strange.

- h. *Mužčiny! **Pros'ba**^{PERF} o pomošči^{χyi} o+PREP s pogruzkoj.
'Men! Request for help with the loading.'

6. Performative nouns and politeness

The phenomenon of using a noun denoting a speech act instead of a standard verb in performative utterances is not unique to *pros'ba*. Compare:

- (50) *Moi pozdravlenija!* 'My congratulations!' instead of *Pozdravljaju* 'I congratulate' [speech act 'Congratulation'];
- (51) *Moi soboleznovanija!* 'My condolences!' instead of *Soboleznuju* 'I condole,' [speech act 'Condolence'].

This is likely due to the avoidance of first and second person forms, especially in formal or distant communication (see Goffman 1967, Brown & Levinson 1987, Larina 2009). First and second person pronouns and verb forms can create a sense of overly close interaction, which may feel uncomfortable in certain contexts. Therefore, speakers often prefer to replace them with more impersonal constructions.

For example, the verb *prosit'* (to ask) in performative usage often appears in the third person plural (see Slavkova 2014):

- (52) *Passažirov prosjat projti na posadku.*
'Passengers are asked to proceed to boarding.'

Similarly, instead of *Esli xotite* 'If you want', one often hears *esli est' želanie* 'If there is a desire.' This form is practically standard when addressing clients.

7. Speech act of request

The speech act of a request has a feature that distinguishes it from other directive speech acts, such as demands or orders: in a request, the speaker understands that the addressee is not obligated to fulfill their wish. The fulfillment of the speaker's desire is a matter of the addressee's goodwill; cf. *pokornejšaja pros'ba* 'most humble request'.

As defined by M. Glovinskaja in the *Integrative Dictionary*:

“Person X wants P to happen; X, believing that person Y can do P and not believing that Y must do P, tells Y that they want Y to do P; X says this in such a way that the addressee understands that X does not believe that Y must do P” (Glovinskaja, 2003, p. 882; see also Glovinskaja, 1991, p. 63; Glovinskaja, 1993)

This places the requester in a vulnerable position. This vulnerability explains the strong preference for avoiding first-person forms when there is no close relationship.

For this reason, the speech act of a request is characterized by various non-standard ways of formulating the utterance. For example:

- *Passažirov prosjat projti na posadku*
‘Passengers are asked to proceed to boarding’
- But not **Pered passažirami izvinjajutsja za zaderžku rejsa*
‘Passengers are apologized to for the flight delay’
- Or: **Passažirov blagodarjat za ponimanie*
‘Passengers are thanked for their understanding’

At the same time, the valencies of the addressee and the content must be expressed as clearly as possible for the request to be fully realized. Therefore, performative usage gives rise to unusual constructions with the noun *pros'ba*, which mimics a verb but lacks personal markers.

8. Conclusion

The Russian word *pros'ba* ‘request’ demonstrates special syntactic and semantic behavior, particularly in performative contexts. Its ability to govern the accusative case indicating the addressee, borrowing this pattern from the transitive verb *prosit'* ‘to ask’, is particularly striking. This reveals an unexpected connection between performativity and the syntactic behavior of the word, highlighting how performative contexts can influence grammatical structures. At the same time, this reflects the broader tendency in Russian as well as in other languages

(cf. *Thanks!*, *Auguri!*, *Mein Mitleid*, etc.) to use nouns to perform speech acts, creating a sense of distance and politeness¹.

References

- Apresjan Ju. (2000), *Systematic lexicography*. Translated by Kevin Windle. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-linguistics/article/abs/juri-apresjan-systematic-lexicography-translated-by-kevin-windle-oxford-oxford-university-press-2000-pp-v304/5F407245011C9C692BFFE47C473392C0>
- Apresjan Ju., Iomdin L. (1989). Konstrukcii tipa *negde spat'* v ruskom jazyke: sintaksis i semantika. *Semiotika i informatika*, 29, 3–89.
- Austin, J.L. (1962). *How to Do Things with Words*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Brown, P. & Levison S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Glovinskaja M. (1991). Slovarnaja stat'ja glagola *prosit'*. In Ju. D. Apresjana (Ed). *Materialy k integral'nomu slovarju sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo jazyka (obrazcy slovarnyx statej)* *Semiotika i informatika*, 32, 63–71.
- Glovinskaja, M. (1993). Semantika glagolov reči s točki zrenija teorii rečevyx aktov. In E. Zemskaja (Ed.) *Russkij jazyk v ego funkcionirovanii. Kommunikativno-pragmatičeskij aspekt* (ss. 158–218). Nauka, Moskva. <https://uchitu.ru/articles/m-ya-glovinskaya-semantika-glagolov-rechi-s-tochki-zreniya-teorii-rechevyh-aktov.html> (accessed February 15, 2025).
- Glovinskaja, M. (2003). *Prosit'*. In Ju. Apresjan, O. Boguslavskaja, I. Levontina, et al., *Novyj ob''janitel'nyj slovar' sinonimov russkogo jazyka*. Jazyki slavjanskoj kul'tury, Moskva, Vena.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction rituals: essays on face-to-face behavior*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Larina, T. (2009). *Kategorija vežlivosti i stil' komunikacii. Sopostavlenie anglijskih i russkix lingvokul'turnyx tradicij*, Rukopisnye pamjatniki Drevnej Rusi, Moskva.
- Melčuk, I. (2023). *General Phraseology. Theory and Practice*. *Linguisticae Investigationes Supplementa*, 36, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, Amsterdam.
- Searle, J. R. (1974). *Speech Acts, an essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

¹ The author cordially thanks Igor Melčuk for valuable comments.

Slavkova, S. (2014). Performative use of the verbs to ask and pray in Russian and Bulgarian: the pragmatic role of type and tense. *Scando-Slavica*, 60(2), 231–252. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00806765.2014.984464>