

Discourse words in Russian. The case of *voobščee* and *v obščem*

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Abstract

In this paper I give a description of two Russian discourse words (DW) *voobščee* and *v obščem*, standing for two types of discursive semantics : the semantics of “adequacy” and the semantics of “point of view”. This approach can be defined as a non pragmatic description of DW. A theoretical framework is proposed, in which the contribution of the DW to the utterance meaning is divided into two interrelated aspects : a core (basic) meaning and four levels of variation . The different uses of *voobščee* and *v obščem* result from the unfolding of the core meaning according to various factors of variation.

The wide range of terms such as *particles, connectors, connectives, pragmatic markers, discourse markers, discourse words* (DW), etc can be partly related to theoretical and methodological choices, resulting in different data taken into account. I will therefore discuss for a start the specificities of my own approach, compared to others.

The pattern of communication underlying most of the research works on the DW (in particular those coming under the theory of relevance) take it for granted that communication should be analysed through its final natural purpose, namely the way it is interpreted by the hearer. Communication is required to attain the goal of fully achieved interpretation. Success and efficiency are therefore taken as the core of the analysis. Paradoxically, the hearer, as the aim and the reference point is given no autonomy at all towards the speaker. He is but the target chosen by the speaker.

It must be admitted, though, that recent works on *vagueness in conversation* (cf. notably H. Jücker, S. Smith, T. Ludge, 2003) call into question some aspects of such a conception, as regards in particular the non autonomy of the receiver (cf. « *the addressee may be able to make sense of the speaker's word even if this is not the sense intended by the speaker*, Jücker et alii, p. 1743).

Our conception of the language activity as a production and recognition of texts (generic term for any type of written or oral verbal production) is based on the notion of regulation and mutual fitting process (adjustment) between autonomous subjects, which can be summed up by the set phrase : “if you see what I mean” (in French : “*si tu vois ce que je veux dire par là*”). This comes down to consider “understanding as a special case of misunderstanding” (A. Culioli). Interlocution is also the right and capacity to refuse the interlocution, or to break it, or to distort the frame of the dialogue, or to seek an agreement on another ground than that set up for a start. Duplicité, rhetorical strategy, failure, lies, are an integral part of the communication and should not be reduced to mere deviation.

According to B.Fraser (1999), three questions should be answered as regards the DW : *what are they? What do they mean? what function(s) do they manifest*. We will try to put forward a coherent answer to those three questions (most of the approaches within a dominant pragmatic frame prove to be more interested in *what function(s) do they manifest* than *what are they?* and *What do they mean?*).

1. *What are they?* We take the DW as building up a class of full words just as any other class of words (N, V, A, etc.), with their core meaning and their own distribution. The term *distribution* holds for three types of data :

- the **scope** of the DW ; depending on the nature of the sequence, the interpretation of the DW is liable to change ;

- the **position** of the DW in the host clause : it can be initial, medial or final ;

- the **intonation** : the DW may be either integrated to its scope or set apart.

Unlike authors such as B. Fraser, we do not take the DW as connectors : words such as *since, because*, etc. should not be considered as DW. As for the relation between the sequence introduced by the DW and the context, it must be considered on different levels (cf. below the four levels of variation).

2. *What do they mean ?* Grounding on the description of about fifty DW in Russian and in French, the following definition has been worked out : a DW is a word which defines the discursive status of the sequence **p** corresponding to its scope : **p** stands for a **particular way** to say a state of affairs **Z** (*state of affairs* means what I am speaking about when I say what I say : a state of affairs therefore has no accessibility but through the sequence **p** saying it). What depends on the propositional content of the sequence **p** in itself (*what p says of Z*) should be clearly distinguished from what stems from the semantic discursive value of the DW (*how p says Z*).

The DW are distributed into two semantic fields :

- the semantic field of *point of view* : what the utterance says stands as a *point of view* on **Z**. But the relevance taken through this point of view is, by definition, relative, and therefore multifold. An accumulation of points of view may come up, different and sometimes contradictory, with no possibility for anyone of them in particular to say **Z** exhaustively. We will then speak of *point of view DW*. The sequence **p** as a point of view on the state of affairs **Z** is related to a first point of view **q**, as opposed to it more or less strongly, the DW specifying this opposition.

- the semantic field of *adequacy* : the utterance **p** is presented as adequate to say / express the state of affairs **Z**, and, on this account, is meant to fully say **Z**. The DW specifies the support of the *adequacy* (the *warrantor*) of the sequence **p** (the warrantor is not the speaker himself). We will then speak of *adequacy DW* (*adequacy* is not a synonym of “truth” : there are different types and different degrees of adequacy).

Some DW are liable to belong to both fields. For instance, *pravda* («truth») in Russian can work either as a point of view DW (example (1)) or as a adequacy DW (example (2)) ; compare :

(1) *On ne priexal na vstreču. Pravda, on zabolet*

He neg come to meeting **pravda** he fell ill

He didn't come to the meeting, it must be said that (to tell the truth) he fell ill.

The sequence « he fell ill » comes to correct the first point of view « he didn't come to the meeting » which fails to say truly **Z**.

(2) *Ja očen' rada, čto vy tak думаete. Pravda, očen' rada.*

I am very happy that you should think that way. **Pravda** very happy.

The sequence “very happy” is (really) adequate to express the feeling of the speaker.

3. *What functions do they manifest ?* The description of a DW within such a framework associates a characterisation of the semantic identity of the DW (its core meaning) with a systematic study of the variation in relation to its distribution. As will be shown with *voobščē* and *v obščem*, the core meaning of the DW must be distinguished from its various uses. The various uses of the DW result from the unfolding of the semantic core of the DW according to various factors of variation.

In the present communication, we will illustrate this approach through the description of two DW in Russian : *voobščē* and *v obščem*. Those two DW are derived from the adjective *obščij*, which means “common, general, overall, global”. The first one exemplifies the *adequacy* type, the second one the *point of view* type. According to the semantic value of *obščij*, those two DW hold a negative component : “general / global” is opposed to “particular / local”.

I. Semantic characterisation.

A. *Voobščē* and the semantics of generalization.

Voobščē adverb vs *voobščē* DW

The description of *voobščē* raises an additional problem (which is often to be met in the description of the discursive words). In addition to its discursive uses, *voobščē* can be used as an adverb. In this case, the generalization specifies the status of an item of the predicative relation. For the time being, we will merely illustrate the three main uses of *voobščē* as an adverb :

- The scope of *voobščē* in an argument of the predicate :

(3) *Ja xoču zanimat'sja voobščē lingvistikoj*

I want to do **voobščē** linguistics.

Linguistics is taken as a generic term, as opposed to such or such particular field in linguistics (morphology, syntax, semantics)

- *Voobščē* as strengthening a quantifier or a negation :

(4) *Ne tol'ko Vanja protiv, voobščē vse (vsja grupa) protiv*

Vanja is not the only one to be against it, *voobščē* the whole group is against it

Voobščē doubles /reinforces the assertion that all (*vse*) the items of the set answer the property « be against it ».

- The scope of the generalization is a property associated to a qualitative scale :

(5) *Rjedom s Zinoj gotovilis' k pryžku v vodu letičiki. Oni byli muskulisty i neploxo složeny, no ix sil'no portili dlinnie sinie trusy. Ja ni za čto ne ostalsja by v takix trusax. Plavki na mne bylo čto nado, a na Skačkove - voobščē blesk*

Next to Zina, there were aviators getting prepared to jump into the water. They were muscular, with good looks. But they wore lousy blue swimming trunks, which I would in no way have worn myself, not even for a second. I had a quite suitable trunk myself, but as for Skackov's, it was *voobščē* dazzling

Different degrees of the property in relation to various supports can be distinguished, and the degree introduced by *voobščē* outranges all the degrees (it stands for the property in its very essence).

Discursive generalization.

We put forward the following characterisation of *voobščē* : *voobščē* means that the representation of **Z** through **p** leaves aside any specifying feature of **Z** as a particular state of affairs **z_i**. Being rid of any specifying feature the state of affairs can be taken as the representative of a class of specific situations **z₁ ... z_n**, each of them being a specific realisation of **Z**. Hence the following notation : **Z** (**z_i**) where (**z_i**) refers to what is not taken into account by *voobščē p*.

Three types of discursive generalization can be distinguished, depending on how the negative component (the particular) is at work :

- generalization as a positive discursive strategy (the speaker makes the choice to overlook particular cases) :

(6) *Banina Kirpičenko vstretil tret'ego dnja na aèrodrôme v Južnom. On daže ne znal, čto u nix otpuska sovpadajut. Voobščē emu malo bylo dela do Banina.*
Kirpicenko met Banin on the third day at Loujnyj airport. He didn't even know that their vacations were at the time. *Voobščē* he didn't care much for Banin.

- Generalization as a way to refuse taking into account a particular situation :

(7) - *Nu kak kartina ? - Zdorovo voobščē*

Well, how do you find this picture, then ? - Fine *voobščē*.

Voobščē marks the speaker's refusal to express his straightforward opinion.

- Generalization means that the speaker has no control of the «particular» or no access to it (discursive strategy by default)

(8) *Ty voobščē pomniš, čto u tebjā vrač segodnja*

You *voobščē* remember you must go to the doctor today

voobščē strengthens the indetermination inherent in the question : unlike the same question without *voobščē*, (8) doesn't call forth a yes or no answer. The point at stake is the fact of getting to see the doctor in a context where the hearer's planning of the day doesn't not allow such a business.

In those two last cases, the “particular” can be more or less closely related to the position of the speaker such as expressed in the left context.

B. *V obščem* : a global point of view.

V obščem specifies its scope **p** as a global point of view about a state of affairs **Z**, which is introduced by a first sequence **q**. The sequence **q** comes as a local point of view on **Z**. *V obščem* refers to a specific situation which is grasped « locally » (**q**) and then all in all (**p**). Introducing a global point of view on **Z** comes under various discursive strategies according to how the “local” is taken into account by the speaker :

- **Summary, assessment.** Introducing a global point of view comes under a positive discursive strategy ; the speaker gets beyond the split up heterogeneous aspects of the situation by introducing a global point of view encompassing all the local aspects :

(9) *Semdesjat dva sud'i, a za nimi straža, svideteli, sekretari, služki, v obščem, čelovek sto.*
Sixty two judges, the escort, the witnesses, the servants, **v obščem** about one hundred people

- **In short.** The global point of view means that the speaker puts an end to the splitting into the smallest details :

(10) *Vot kogda on togda sdaval èkzamen, u nix byl Gogol', Majakovskij i čto-to ešče. V obščem on pisal čto-to po Gogolju.*

When he took his examination, Gogol, Maïakovski, and a few others were on the syllabus. **V obščem** he took Gogol.

- **Roughly speaking.** The global point of view means that the speaker stands beyond the splitting up of the situation into local points of view.

(11) - *Ja dolžen byl zastavit' izvinitsja. - Zastavil ? - bystro sprosil Zilin ? Jura pokolebalsja nemnogo, zatem skazal uklončivo. - V obščem on izvinilsja. Potom.*

- I had to make him apologize - And so, did you do it ? Zilin asked Ioura hesitated, and then, evasively - **V obščem** he did apologize. Later.

II Semantic variation of *voobščee* and *v obščem*

The variation of these DW is ruled by a series of heterogeneous factors. As regards the regular part, it can be described on four levels, each of them centred on one aspect of this variation. Those four levels are autonomous, but linked to one another. Showing up those four levels involves explicit criteria. In order to define the value of the DW, it is necessary to grasp it on four levels of variation.

Discursive configurations

As regards the **intonation**, the **DW** is either integrated in the sequence standing for its scope, either set apart (in writing, the DW is either between two commas or not). This distinction rests on a variable weighting between the content of **p** and its semantic outcome as determined by the DW. When the DW is integrated, the content of **p** is put forward (configuration A). When the DW is in a detached position, the enunciative (discursive) position of the speaker (as defined by the DW) is put forward (configuration B). A third configuration will be set up, gathering the **rhetorical** uses of the DW : the DW works as a discursive scansion in a discourse set otherwise (configuration C).

Voobščee.

Configuration A : **p** is a generalization

(8) (...) *On daže ne znal, čto u nix otpuska sovpadajut. Voobščee emu malo bylo dela do Banina.*

Kirpichenko met Banin on the third day at Ioujnyj airport. He did'nt even know that their vacations were at the same time. **Voobščee** he did'nt care much for Banin

Configuration B : the speaker makes the choice of speaking in terms which don't take into account the specificity of the situation (whether or not in relation to the position of the hearer):

(12) – *Ty ne mog by nam pomoč razobrat' knigi ? – Kak tebe skazat' ... Voobščee, mne na rabotu pora...*

- Couldn't you try to help us sort out those books ? How shall I put it... **Voobščee** I need to go working

(the speaker does not answer the specific request made to him).

Configuration C : rhetoric uses of **voobščee** (reduced phonetic form) : the speaker quashes the practical position taken by the hearer

(13) – *Mam, vam s otsom bylo by legče, esli by my s Vad'koj usli v armiju.*

Anna Mikhajlovna položila ložku i strogo vzgljanula na syna : - Ty voobščee soobražaeš', čto ty govoriš' ?

_ Mummy, would it make it easier for you and daddy if we went to the army ?

A.M put back its spoon and looked harshly to her son ; are you **voobščee** aware of what you're saying ?

(14) (...) - *Rebjata, vy voobščee !*

(...) - You, boys, you **voobščee** (there are no words I can find to describe your behaviour).

V obščem.

Configuration A : the thorough point of view p completes the local point of view q.

(10) (...) *V obščem on pisal čto-to po Gogolju.*

When he took his examination, Gogol, Mařakovski, and a few others were on the syllabus. *V obščem* he took Gogol.

Configuration B : the thorough point of view is a reformulation of Z :

(14) *Sud interesuetsja, kogda baby ušli, sami oni ušli ili pod ruku ix vyvodili, skol'ko pustyx butylok našli. V obščem, scena iz « Voskresen'ja ».*

The Court wants to know when the girls left, whether they were walking or had to be carried away, how many bottles were found (...). *V obščem*, a scene or « Résurrection ».

Configuration C : *v obščem* as a punctuator

(15) *V obščem posideli, vypili, i, v obščem, po domam.*

V obščem we stayed there for a while, we drank et *v obščem* everybody went back home.

In this case, the first point of view q is not explicit : *v obščem* points out that the speaker is roughly speaking, reducing his story to the main lines.

Continuity or contrast with the left context.

We will show that according to the **position** of the DW in the sequence, **p** is in a relation of continuity (initial position) or in contrast with the left context (rhematic medial position). In final position, the DW works backwards on its scope and therefore does not specify the relationship between **p** and the left context (only for configurations A and B).

Voobščě

Initial position :

(6) (...) *On daže ne znal, čto u nix otpuska sovpadajut. Voobščě emu malo bylo dela do Banina.*

Kirpicenko met Banin on the third day at Ioujnyj airport. He didn't even know that their vacations were at the same time. *Voobščě* he didn't care much for Banin

Medial (rhematic) position

(16) *Odin umnyj čelovek skazal, čto buduščee nel'zja prevedet', no možno izobresti. – Esli ono voobščě est', èto buduščee.*

A clever man said that the future cannot be foreseen, but can be invented. Supposing that this future does *voobščě* exist.

Final position

(7) - *Nu kak kartina ? - Zdorovo voobščě*

Well, how do you find this picture, then ? - Fine *voobščě*.

V obščem

Initial position :

(11) (...) *Jura pokolebalsja nemnogo, zatem skazal uklončivo.- V obščem on izvinilsja. Potom.*

I had to make him apologize - And so, did you do it ? Zilin asked Ioura hesitated, and then, evasively - *V obščem* he did apologize. Later.

Medial position (only “roughly speaking”)

(17) – *Nu kak služba idet ? Čem poradueš' ? Pora i očerednoe zvanie polucat'. – Džadja ! Ty že znaeš', čto ja, v obščem, ne oficer.*

Well, then, how is the military service going ? What (good) news ? Its time for you to be promoted – Uncle, you know that *v obščem* I'm not an officer

Final position :

(18) – *Eto xorošo ili ploxo ? - Kak tebe skazat'... Ne očen' xorošo, v obščem*

- Is it good or bad ? – How shall I put it... Not so good, *v obščem*

Propositional content of p.

The third level deals with the propositional content of **p** in its relation to the propositional content of the sequence **q** preceding it. Here again, three cases will be worked out: 1. **p** and **q** are **co-oriented** ; 2.

p and **q** have **opposite orientations** ; 3. there is no relation between the propositional content of **p** and that of **q** (the relation is worked only by the DW). In the first two cases, it is possible to define a relation between **p** and **q** apart from the DW, whereas in the third case, the relation is mainly established by the DW.

Voobščē

1. **p** and **q** are **co-oriented** (the propositional content of **p** is interpreted as a generalisation on **q** assimilated to **z_j**) :

(19) *On pokupaet produkty, guljaet s det'mi i voobščē mnogo delaet dlja doma*

He does the shopping, goes for walks with the children, and **voobščē** does a lot of things for the household.

2. **p** and **q** have **opposite orientations** (The propositional content of **q** and **p** are comparable but for their orientation)

(16) *Odin umnyj čelovek skazal, čto buduščee nel'zja prevedet', no možno izobresti. – Esli ono voobščē est', èto buduščee.*

A clever man said that the future cannot be foreseen, but can be invented. Supposing that this future does **voobščē** exist.

3. the relation between **p** and the left context is set up by **voobščē** :

(12) – *Ty ne mog by nam pomoč razobrat' knigi ? – Kak tebe skazat'... Voobščē, mne na rabotu pora...*

- Couldn't you try to help us sort out those books ? How shall I put it... **Voobščē** I need to go working

(the speaker does not answer the specific request made to him).

(17) – *Skažite, Ivan Petrovič na meste ? – A začem Vam Ivan Petrovič ? I voobščē, čto Vy delaete zdes' v nepriemnyj den' ?*

- Could you tell me if I.P. is here ? – What is the matter with I.P. ? And **voobščē** what are doing here at closing time ?

Whereas the first question stands for an indirect answer to the question of the first speaker, the second one objects to the very rightfulness of the question.

V obščem

1. **p** and **q** are co-oriented : the propositional content of **p** thoroughly takes up the split up presentation given by **q** :

(9) *Semdesjat dva sud'i, a za nimi straža, svideteli, sekretari, služki, v obščem, čelovek sto.*
Sixty two judges, the escort, the witnesses, the servants, **v obščem** about one hundred people.

2. **p** and **q** have **opposite orientations**

(18) - *Ty tak boiš'ja ego ? Počemu ? – On strašnyj čelovek. Net, on, v obščem, xoroši - j kak drug. No esli by ja stala ego ženoi... Brr ! Davaj lučše ne budem o nem.*

- Are you so much afraid of him ? Why ? - He is frightening. He is **v obščem** a good man, as a friend. But were I to marry him... Brr ! Let us not speak of him any further, OK.

3. the relation between **p** and the left context is set up by **v obščem** :

(19) *Gospodin Summan, - skazal Viktor, oblizyvaja ložku. Ja vseгда nedoljubyl ljudi vašej professii. Odnogo ja daže zastrelil (...) V obščem, ubirajtes'.*

Mr. Summan, Viktor said, carefully licking the spoon. I never praised the people in your profession. I even shot down one of them (...) **V obščem** get off.

Discursive coherence

As regards the function of the sequence formed by the DW and its scope **p** in the discourse, three cases can be distinguished :

- **discourse on the facts** : the DW **p** sequence takes part in the discursive progress (orientation toward the continuation of the discourse) ; the DW can very often be withdrawn with no consequence on the discursive coherence ;
- **argumentative discourse** : DW **p** makes it possible to solve a discursive stake (upstream orientation) ; the DW **p** sequence come as a whole, which is necessary for the discursive coherence ;

- **comment, digression, secondary detail** : the DW **p** sequence is in an external / break up position with the discursive link. Withdrawing the DW **p** sequence does not affect the discursive coherence.

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