

Axel Holvoet & Anna Daugavet

Absolute concessive imperatives:

A cross-linguistic constructional idiom

Salos 2019

# Absolute concessive imperative construction

- concessive subordinator and/or scalar particle + 2SG.IMP
- characterizes a state of affairs diverging from the usual by depicting the course of action it could induce or the consequences flowing from it

# Absolute concessive imperative construction

Russian (RNC)

[*Vot i v Germanii v poslednie god-dva ponaotkryvalos' vsego stol'ko*],

*čto xot' zabyvaj pro Ermitaž i*  
**that CONC forget.IMP.2SG about Hermitage.ACC and**

*Tret'jakovku [...]* *i mčis' na*

Tretyakov.gallery.ACC and rush.IMP.2SG for  
*berlin-sk-ij èkspress.*

Berlin-ADJ-ACC.SG.M express.ACC.SG

‘[In Germany as well, so much (i.e. so many new musea) has opened over the last few years] that you could as well forget about the Hermitage and the Tretyakov Gallery and rush headlong for the Berlin express.’

# Concessive scalar particles and subordinators

- A concessive scalar particle specifies the minimal scalar value for which the speaker is prepared to settle (though a higher value is regarded as desirable):

Russian

*Xot' prisjad' na minutku.*

CONC sit.down.IMP.2SG for minute

'You could at least sit down for a minute.'

- Scalar particles often oscillate between minimal (*at least*) and maximal (*even*) scalar value.
- Concessive subordinators (*although, even if...*) often arise from concessive scalar particles

# Languages

- Northern Slavonic languages  
Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, Belorussian
- Baltic languages  
Lithuanian, Latvian
- neighbouring Fennic languages

# Cross-linguistic counterparts

This is a constructional idiom, with variable lexical content (apart from the concessive subordinator/particle);

A few instances have, however, become substantive idioms (with fixed lexical content):

*temno, xot' glaz vykoli (vytkni)*

Russian

*ciemno, choć/że oko wykol*

Polish

*tamsu, nors akį išdurk (į akį durk)*

Lithuanian

*tumšs, kaut/ka vai acī dur*

Latvian

‘it’s so dark that could poke an eye (one’s eye) out’

# Internal structure

- Xrakovskij & Volodin (1986): “two situations, one of which is real and is evaluated by the speaker as having been pursued to its utter limit, whereas the other (expressed by the construction with the concessive subordinator/scalar particle and the imperative) is potential and objectively follows from the real situation in the sense of being determined by it”.
- The resulting situation may be volitional or non-volitional.
- The two situations do not always have their syntactic realization; we will refer to their descriptions (which can be zero) as **propositions**.
- The situation that is being evaluated is referred to by **Proposition I**, the situation evoked as a means of evaluating this situation is referred to by **Proposition II**.

# Internal structure

[*Vot i v Germanii v poslednie god-dva*]

*ponaotkryvalos' vsego stol'ko, Prop I*

DISTR.SAT.open.PST.N everything.GEN so.much

*čto xot' zabyvaj pro Ermitaž [...]*

that CONC forget.IMP.2SG about Hermitage.ACC Prop II

*i mčis' na berlin-sk-ij èkspress.*

and rush.IMP.2SG for Berlin-ADJ-ACC.SG.M express.ACC.SG

‘[In Germany as well, so much (i.e. so many new musea) has opened over the last few years] that you could as well forget about the Hermitage and the Tretyakov Gallery and rush headlong for the Berlin express.’

# Internal structure

The first proposition is often left implicit. An introductory clause (**Intro**) facilitates its identification.

Intro	Prop I	Prop II
<i>Kad ir į parduotuvę eini,</i> 'Even when you just walk to the shop...'	— (...it is so slippery...)	<i>Tai nors dantim gatvėj kabinkis.</i> <b>CONC</b> cling with your teeth to the pavement.'

# Internal structure

Sometimes the introductory sentence is required for the contextualization of Prop I.

Intro	Prop I	Prop II
<i>Kai tik mēgini pakurti,</i> 'Every time you try to light a fire	<i>rūksta kaip iš pragaro,</i> ...there is a hellish smoke...	<i>nors bėk iš namų.</i> <b>CONC</b> run away from home.'

# Internal structure

Prop I may also be sufficiently discourse-grounded to go without introductory clause

Intro	Prop I	Prop II
—	<i>Kai kam pinigų yra tiek,</i> ‘Some people get so much money...’	<i>kad nors kiaulių gardus kreik.</i> <b>CONC</b> litter the pigsties with it.’

# Intro/Prop I situationally given

The situation that is being evaluated can be referred to deictically, so that both Intro and Prop I are lacking.

Russian		
Intro	Prop I	Prop II
---	---	<i>xot'</i> <i>plač'</i> CONC cry.IMP.2SG
'It makes you cry.'		

# Scalarity

The ‘utter limit’ may be made explicit. In the former case Prop I contains a degree marker like ‘such’, ‘so much’, ‘so many’ etc. which licences a consecutive complement clause introduced by ‘that’.

## Lithuanian

Intro	Prop I	compl	Prop II
<i>Šaltis palenda</i> frost.NOM get.under.PRS.3 <i>po nagais,</i> under nail.INS.PL	rankas taip hand.ACC.PL so gelia, sting.PRS.3	<i>kad</i> that	nors šauk conc shout.IMP.2SG iš skausmo. from pain.GEN.SG

The cold gets under your nails, your hands ache so much that you could shout with pain.’

# Scalarity

Sometimes only the degree marker is present.

Russian			
Intro	Prop I	compl	Prop II
<i>Noč'ju</i> night.INS.SG <i>dumaju-dumaju:</i> think.PRS.1SG- think.PRS.1SG	<i>do togo plox-o</i> so much bad.N <i>stalo</i> become.PST.N	—	<i>xot' kriči</i> CONC shout.IMP.2SG
'At night I keep saying to myself: I feel so rotten I could shout.'			

# Scalarity

Sometimes only the consecutive complementizer is present.

Polish			
Intro	Prop I	compl	Prop II
<i>Najpierw odbijanie</i> first bouncing.NOM.SG <i>piłeczki</i> <i>o</i> ball.GEN.SG against <i>ścianę,</i> <i>potem</i> wall.ACC.SG then <i>basen</i> swimming.pool.NOM.S G <i>i</i> and	<i>wydolność</i> performance.ACC.S G <i>podniosę,</i> improve.FUT.1SG	<b>że</b> <b>that</b>	<i>choć</i> CONC <i>weź</i> take.IMP.2SG <i>a</i> and <i>w Pireneje</i> to Pyrenees.ACC.PL <i>idź</i> go.IMP.2SG
I'll start with bouncing a ball against a wall, then some swimming, and I'll enhance my performance so that I will be fit for a trek in the Pyrenees.'			

# Scalarity

Sometimes neither the degree marker nor the consecutive complementizer is present

Lithuanian			
Intro	Prop I	compl	Prop II
—	<i>Simpatiškas</i> nice.NOM.SG.M <i>vyrukas,</i> guy.NOM.SG		<i>nors kviesk</i> CONC invite.IMP.2SG <i>drauge pameškerioti.</i> together go.fishing.INF
Nice guy that, one of those you would want to invite to go fishing together.'			

# Sequence of clauses

The sequence of clauses may (rarely) be inverted

Latvian		
Intro	Prop II	Prop I
<i>Mājās</i> home.LOC.PL <i>pārgērbjos</i> change.PRS.1SG.REF L <i>un</i> and	<i>tā, kasit</i> thus that kill.IMP.2SG <i>kaut nost,</i> CONC away	<i>neceļas</i> NEG.raise.PRS.3.REFL <i>rokas</i> hand.ACC.PL <i>ko</i> anything.ACC <i>pasākt.</i> start.doing.INF
At home I change clothes and you could strike me dead, I don't feel up to anything.'		

## Distinctness of Prop I and Prop II

Prop I can be reduced to a noun expressing the bearer of the property that is being evaluated in a scale, and it can also be syntactically integrated in Prop II, acquiring a grammatical function assigned by the verb of Prop II, e.g., direct object.

Russian			
Intro		Prop I	Prop II
<i>S</i> from <i>kak</i> when	<i>utra</i> morning.GEN.SG <i>vstanu,</i> get.up.FUT.1SG	<i>rubašku</i> shirt.ACC.SG	<i>xot'</i> CONC <i>vyžmi.</i> squeeze.out.IMP.2SG
When I get up in the morning, I could squeeze the sweat out of my shirt.'			

# Why “absolute concessive imperative”?

- The meaning of our construction is non-compositional:
- Prop I has no directive function; when the verb is volitional, one could interpret it as a generalized directive (“...one could as well...”), but it is often non-volitional
- The particle does not have the usual value it has when used with a true (directive) imperative.
- Concessive scalar particles (Nakanishi & Rullmann 2009, Crnič 2011) are used only in downward-entailing and deontic contexts; they usually specify the minimal scalar value for which the speaker is prepared to settle.
- But the scalar value may be reversed.

# Why “absolute concessive imperative”?

Russian

*Xot' prisjad' na minutku.*

CONC sit.down.IMP.2SG for minute

‘You could at least sit down for a minute.’ (minimal value)

But *xot'* also has maximal scalar value:

*Xot' ubej!*

CONC strike.dead.IMP.2SG

Minimal scalar value is pragmatically unlikely; the maximal scalar value occurs only in non-directive – mainly concessive – function:

*Xot' ubej, ne skažu!*

CONC strike.dead.IMP.2SG NEG tell.FUT.1SG

‘Even if you strike me dead, I won’t tell!’

# Why “absolute concessive imperative”?

- Imperatives often assume conditional or concessive function (an instance of subjectification: the addressee is requested to imagine a state of affairs rather than to bring it about)

Conditional meaning:

‘imagine  $p$ ; you will then see that  $q$  follows from  $p$ ’

*Give me a place to stand and I’ll move the world.*

Concessive meaning:

‘imagine  $p$ ; even if  $p$ ,  $q$  will still hold’

*Let him be a thief and a temple-robber, he’s a good commander.*

# Why “absolute concessive imperative”?

- The constructions under discussion can be explained by assuming that an inversion of propositions occurred, with the concessive imperatival clause embedded in a consecutive clause, according to the following model:

*It is very hot today.*

*Even if you walk about naked, it is very hot.*

→ *It is **so** hot today **that even** if you walk about naked  
[it is still very hot]*

As the concessive apodosis is implicit, we call the second part of this structure an **absolute concessive imperative**.

# Why “absolute concessive imperative”?

- This structure is preserved in the full variety of our construction (degree marker in Prop I, COMPL + CONC in Prop II:

*Odežda takaja mokraja | čto xot' vyžmi*  
clothes so wet | that CONC squeeze.out

- In the minimal variety at least three elements are left:

*Rubaška | xot' vyžmi*  
Shirt (NOM) | CONC squeeze.out

- With further syntactic integration:

*Rubašku | xot' vyžmi*  
Shirt (ACC) | CONC squeeze.out

- Our construction shows a lot of variation both language-internally and across the languages in which it occurs.
- We will now give an overview of the cross-linguistic variation.

# Sources

imperative forms in combination with concessive subordinators and/or scalar particles

- Russian National Corpus (600 mln words), *xot'*
- National Corpus of Polish  
(the balanced subcorpus, 300 mln words), *choć, że*
- Balanced Corpus of Modern Latvian (10 mln words), *kaut (vai), ka*  
imperative marker *-k-* in combination with concessive subordinators  
and/or scalar particles
- Corpus of the Contemporary Lithuanian Language  
(140 mln words), *nors*

Additionally Liina Lindström has searched and analysed Estonian corpus data for us

## Frequency (descending)

- Russian
- Lithuanian
- Polish, Latvian

We cannot yet say anything about frequency in Ukrainian, Belarussian and Estonian.

# Russian

- several thousands of *xot'* 2sg.imp are found in RNC;  
266 out of the first 600 results are identified as ACIC
- the Russian construction is the only one that has been given attention in the literature: Isachenko (1960), Xrakovskij & Volodin (1986), Percov (2001), Podlesskaja (2004), Prozorova (2007), Kuznecova (2007), Dobrushina (2008)

# Russian

Alternatives for *xot'* are *prjamo* (*xot'*) 'directly' *prosto* (*xot'*) 'simply'

[*Takaja čertovščina voditsja,*

*čto prjamo beri šapku*

that PTC take. IMP.2SG hat.ACC.SG

*da i ulepetyvaj kuda nogi nesut.*

PTC and run.away. IMP.2SG where leg.NOM.PL carry.PRS.3PL

'[There are such evil forces at work here] that you'd like just to take your hat and run away wherever your legs carry you.'

# Russian

- A binary CONC + imperative construction presenting mutually exclusive alternatives envisaged as a reaction to the situation described in Prop I:

*Možno narvat'sja na takogo diletanta,*

possiblecome.upon.INF.REFL on such.ACC.SG.M dilettante.ACC.SG

*čto xot' smejsja, xot' plač.*

that CONC laugh.IMP.2SG.REFL CONC cry.IMP.2SG

‘Sometimes you hit upon such a dilettante that you don’t know whether to laugh or to cry.’

# Russian

- A marginal variety of ACIC involves the construction ‘take and V’, which seems to be less common in Russian than in the other languages

*Mne stalo tak tošno, takaja toska,*

1SG.DAT become.PST.N so sick.N such.NOM.SG.F sadness.NOM.SG

*čto xot' beri i tjavkaj.*

that **CONC take.IMP.2SG** and **yelp.IMP.2SG**

'I felt so sick and sad that I (literally: you) could start yelping.'

*Odežda mokraja, xot' voz'mi da vyžmi.*

clothes.NOM.SG wet.NOM.SG.F **CONC take.IMP.2SG** and

**squeeze.IMP.2SG** 'The clothes are so wet that you could take and squeeze the water out of them.'

# Russian

- ACIC in Russian is that it is usually associated with imperfective verbs. Only 55 (20%) of 266 corpus examples are perfective, including (but not limited to) some fixed expressions (listed in the dictionaries)

*Deneg v kasse — xot' šarom pokati.*

money.GEN.PL in cashbox.LOC.SG CONC ball.INS.SG

roll[PFV].IMP.2SG

‘There is no money in the cashbox, (it is so empty that) you could roll a ball around.’

# Polish

The National Corpus of Polish (balanced subcorpus, 300 mln words), yields 3 instances of ACIC containing *ze choć*, less than 10 instances of *choć* and about 100 examples with *ze*.

# Polish

- *że choć*

*Nasz agent wynajął pałac Borchy na Miodowej,]*

*ale znaleźliśmy go w takim stanie,*

but find.PST.1PL 3.SG.ACC in such.LOC.SG state.LOC.SG

*że choć łeb sobie rozbij z rozpaczy!*

that **CONC** head.ACC.SG RFL.DAT **smash.IMP.2SG**from despair.GEN.SG

‘[Our agent has rented the Borch palace on Miodowa street], but we found it in such a state that you could have smashed your head in despair!’

# Polish

- *choć*

*Co wtedy? Pustka, choć w łeb*

what then    emptiness **CONC** in head.ACC.SG

*sobie strzel.*

**REL.DAT shoot.IMP.2SG**

‘What next? (Such an) emptiness you could even put a bullet in your head.’

# Polish

- że

*A bywają                    takie                    listy,*

but happen.PRS.3PL    such.NOM.PL    letter. NOM.PL

*że    w ogóle    zapomnij.*

**that at.all            forget.IMP.2SG**

*[Na przykład ktoś do nas pisze tak <...>]*

‘But there are also such letters that you would simply want to forget them.

*[For example, someone writes to us thus <...>]’*

# Polish

- One variety of the absolute concessive imperative, only found on the internet, incorporates the construction ‘take and V’ and shows several varieties, with *choć*, *że*, and *że choć*.

# Polish

- *że choć*

*Najpierw odbijanie piłeczki o ścianę,*

first bouncing.NOM.SG ball.GEN.SG against wall.ACC.SG

*potem basen i wydolność podniosę,*

then swimming.POOL.NOM.SG and performance.ACC.SG improve.FUT.1SG

*że choć weź a w Pireneje idź*

that CONC take.IMP.2SG and to Pyrenees.ACC.PL go.IMP.2SG

‘I’ll start with bouncing a ball against a wall, then some swimming, and I’ll enhance my performance so that I will be fit for a trek in the Pyrenees.’

# Polish

- *choć*

[*Najpierw [samochody] próbowały wyminąć policjanta i jechać przeciwnym pasem a potem to już jeden wielki korkociąg*].

*Choć weź i żurawiem te samochody*

CONC **take.IMP.2SG** and crane.INS.SG DEM.ACC.PL.Ncar.ACC.PL

*poprzestawiaj.*

**move.IMP.2SG**

‘[First [the cars] tried to bypass the policeman and to drive on the opposite lane, and then everything became one great jam.] It would have taken a crane to move these cars.’

# Polish

- *że*

*Fabula kończy się w taki sposób,*

plot.NOM.SG end.PRS.3SG REFLin such.ACC.SG.M way.ACC.SG

*że weź i teraz czekaj na kontynuację.*

that **take.IMP.2SG** and now **wait.IMP.2SG** for continuation.ACC.SG

‘The plot ends in such a way that you cannot help waiting for the continuation.’

# Polish

- In Russian we can still discern the original pattern with *čto xot'* if there is a degree marker in Prop I and only *xot'* if it is lacking. In Polish, *że* does not necessarily correlate with a degree marker but tends to oust *choć*.

# Polish

- Interaction with an originally presumably infinitival construction introduced by *tylko* ‘only’ or *nic tylko* ‘nothing else than’

[*To nie tylko super pielęgniarka ale i człowiek...*]

*nic tylko do rany przyłóż.*

nothing only to wound.GEN.SG apply.IMP.2SG

‘She is not only a super nurse but also a [super] person—a balm for any wound.’

# Polish

- cf.

*[Ten to potrafi budować miłą, serdeczną atmosferę, wzajemne zrozumienie...]*

*Nic, tylko do rany przyłożyć..*

nothing only to wound.GEN.SG apply.INF

‘That one knows how to build up a nice, cordial atmosphere and mutual understanding... his manner could soothe any wound’ (lit. ‘you could apply him to a wound’)

# Lithuanian

The Corpus of the Contemporary Lithuanian Language (140 mln words) yields more than 200 examples that can be identified with ACIC.

The Lithuanian variety of the ACIC is similar to the Russian one in that it is consistently introduced by the concessive/scalar *nors*. It can be preceded by the complementizer *kad* 'that', but this is not obligatory.

# Lithuanian

- *kad nors*

*Taip stinga energijos ir nuotaikos,*  
so be.lacking.PRS.3energy.GEN and mood.GEN

*kad nors išprotėk.*  
**that CONC** get.mad.IMP.2SG

‘I feel such a lack of energy and the right mood that it drives me mad.’

- *nors*

*Tokios trumpos eilutės — nesutelpa*  
such.NOM.PL.F short.NOM.PL.F verse.NOM.PL fit.into.PRS.3

*man, nors išprotėk.*  
1SG.DAT **CONC** get.mad.IMP.2SG

‘A verse is so short I can hardly get anything into it—it would drive you mad.’

# Lithuanian

- In more than one third of 200 examples the imperative form of a verb is preceded by the verb *imti* ‘take’, also in the imperative form.

[*Jei bent snigtų, tai kokį besmegenį draugą susiridenčiau,*]

*o dabar nors imk ir su termosu*

but now **CONC** **take.IMP.2SG** and with

thermos.flask.INS.SG

*šnekėkis.*

**talk.IMP.2SG**

‘If it snowed I could at least make a snowman for a friend, but as things are, I could just as well talk to my thermos flask.’ (i.e. I feel so lonely)

# Lithuanian

- A unique formal feature of the Lithuanian variety is that the verb ‘take’ can be in the past active participle rather than in the imperative:

[*Žinai, tu visai europietišškai atro dai. Nuostabingai!*]

*Nors ėmęs vežk tave tiesiai*

**CONC take.PPA.NOM.SG.convey.IMP.2SG 2SG.ACC straight**

*į Paryžių.*

to Paris.ACC

‘You know, you look quite European. Wonderful!] One could take you straight to Paris.’

# Latvian

The Balanced Corpus of Modern Latvian (LVK2018, 10 mln words) yielded only a few instances of ACIC, including those beginning with *kaut* (*vai*) and *ka*.

Additionally the scalar particle *vai* (also used as an interrogative marker and a marker of disjunction) can be added

[*Atlikušie trīsarpus makanie maizes kukuļi ar katru dienu pārakmeņojās*]

*kaut vai ar cirvi cērt.*

**CONC ptc** with      **axe.ACC.SG chop.IMP.2SG**

[The three remaining huge loaves of bread turned to stone a bit more every day] you could have chopped them with an axe.'

# Latvian

- Idiomatic expressions also present a variety of ACIC introduced by the complementizer *ka* without *kaut*, as in Polish.

*Tik slīpēts, ka neej par tuvū.*  
so cunning.NOM.SG.M **that** NEG.go.IMP.2SG PREPnear.ACC.SG

‘(This person) is so cunning that you’d better not go too close.’

# Latvian

- A variety that has no initial marker but has the marker *vai* between the verb and its adverbial modifier

[*Uztaisa tik cīsiņu celofānā un plastmasas logus saliek*  
*un pēcāk smoc vai nost,*

and afterwards **suffocate.IMP.2SG PTC down**

[*jo ventilācijas uzlabošana neesot paredzēta*].

‘[They just make a sausage wrapped in cellophane] and put in plastic windows, and after that you could as well suffocate, for repair of the ventilation is not provided for.’

# Latvian

- The construction *smakt vai nost* is used not only in the imperative, but in all possible forms, cf.

(Anatols Imermanis, 1914–1998, *Mortona piramīda*, 1971)

*Pats jau smaku vai nost,*

self.NOM.SG.M PTC **choke.PST.1SG** PTC **down**

[*viss viļņoja acu priekšā, un man vajadzēja pieslieties pie sienas, lai nepakristu.*]

‘I was myself choking, everything was whirling before my eyes, and I had to lean against the wall in order not to fall.’

- The Latvian variety of our construction has interacted with a Fennic scalar construction *V + scalar particle + resultative adverb*

# Estonian (courtesy of Liina Lindström)

- In Estonian the absolute concessive construction contains (*kas*) *või*, a scalar particle not used as a concessive subordinator; this suggests that Estonian borrowed the construction from elsewhere (Russian?)
- But in Estonian the construction interacted with an indigenous scalar construction Verb + Scalar particle + resultative adverb
- *See oli pöörane jant, naera või surnuks.*
- this was crazy prank laugh.IMP.2SG CONC to.death
- ‘This was such a crazy prank you could have laughed yourself to death’
- *Ta naerab ennast või surnuks.*
- ‘He laugh.PRS.3SG self.PART CONC to.death
- This variant was borrowed into Latvian
-

# Areal aspects

- The nucleus of the area of occurrence of our construction seems to comprise Russian, Belorussian (?) and Lithuanian
- In Polish the construction has largely been absorbed by another construction with similar function, *tylko* + INF
- In Estonian the construction was modified under the influence of an indigenous scalar construction
- In Latvian the construction has undergone Fennic influence: it has a model corresponding to Russian/Lithuanian and a model borrowed from Fennic

# In conclusion

- The absolute imperative construction is a constructional idiom with a distinct semantic profile but a highly fluid syntactic structure and a highly variable set of lexical constructional markers.
- Wherever its origin should be sought, it has proved highly successful in cross-linguistic transmission, retaining its semantic profile but undergoing local modifications, caused by interaction with other constructions and/or areal contacts.