

Information structure, perspectival structure, diathesis alternation, and the Russian Genitive of Negation

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1 Introduction and background

The Russian Genitive of Negation construction (Gen Neg) involves case alternation between Genitive and the two structural cases, Nominative and Accusative.¹ The factors governing the alternation have been a matter of debate for many decades, and there is a huge literature. Here we focus on one central issue and its theoretical ramifications.

The theoretical issue is the following. The same truth-conditional content can often be structured in more than one way; we believe that there is a distinction between choices in how to structure *a situation to be described*, and choices in how to structure *a sentence describing the (already structured) situation*. The distinction may not always be sharp, and the term Information Structure may perhaps cover both, but we believe that the distinction is important and needs closer attention.

Babby (1980), in a masterful work on the Russian Genitive of Negation, argued that the choice depended principally on Theme-Rheme structure; after initially following Babby (Borshev & Partee 1998), we later argued (Borshev & Partee 2002a,b) that the choice reflects not Theme-Rheme structure but a structuring of the described situation which we call Perspectival Structure.

Here we briefly review the phenomenon, Babby's Theme-Rheme-based analysis, and our arguments for a different analysis. We then consider Hanging Topics, partitive Genitives, and broader licensing conditions of Genitive case, raising the possibility that our counterexamples to Babby's use of Theme-Rheme structure might be explained away as examples involving Hanging Topics rather than (Praguian) Themes. We argue against that idea as well, but leave open the possibility that our Perspectival Structure may eventually be construable as a kind of information structure itself, if that notion can include some kinds of structuring of the situation as well as of the discourse.

1.1 The Genitive of Negation construction

The Russian Gen Neg construction involves substituting Genitive case for Accusative or Nominative optionally with many verbs when the whole sentence is negated (Borshev & Partee 2002a; Partee & Borshev 2002, 2004). Most researchers have held that a Gen-marked NP under negation, as in (1b) and (2b) below, may have narrow scope with

¹ We are grateful for valuable discussion of these topics over a number of years to Elena Paducheva, Ekaterina Rakhilina, Leonard Babby, Petr Sgall and Eva Hajičová, Wayles Browne, Catherine Chvany, Nomi Erteschik-Shir, Hana Filip, David Perlmutter, Tanya Yanko, and too many others to name; see acknowledgements in our earlier papers as well. For introducing us to Hanging Topics and discussion inspiring the new ideas in this paper, we are especially grateful to Maria Polinsky. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 0418311 to Partee and Borshev for a project entitled, 'The Russian Genitive of Negation: Integration of Lexical and Compositional Semantics.'

respect to negation, while a Nom- or Acc-marked NP must be interpreted outside the scope of negation.

- (1) a. *Otvét iz polka ne prišel.*
 Answer-NOM.M.SG from regiment NEG arrived-M.SG
 ‘The answer from the regiment has not arrived.’
- b. *Otveta iz polka ne prišlo.*
 Answer-GEN.M.SG from regiment NEG arrived-N.SG
 ‘There was no answer from the regiment.’
- (2) a. *On ne polučil pis’mo.*
 he NEG received letter-ACC.N.SG
 ‘He didn’t receive the (or ‘a specific’) letter.’
- b. *On ne polučil pis’ma.*
 he NEG received letter-GEN.N.SG
 ‘He didn’t receive any letter.’

A Nom- or Acc-marked NP is more likely to be interpreted as definite or specific,² while a Gen Neg NP often has ‘decreased referentiality’ and tends to be ‘(existentially) quantificational’ (Babby 1980; Jakobson 1971; Neidle 1988; Pesetsky 1982; Timberlake 1975) if the NP permits it; but even pronouns and proper names sometimes alternate. Sentence (3a) suggests that Masha is present but hidden, (3b) that she is not present.

- (3) a. *Maša ne vidna.*
 Masha-NOM.F.SG NEG seen-F.SG
 ‘Masha isn’t visible.’
- b. *Maši ne vidno.*
 Masha-GEN.F.SG NEG seen-N.SG
 ‘Masha isn’t to be seen.’

Especially for Object Gen Neg, many factors contribute to the (probabilistic) choice of Gen, including decreased ‘individuation’ of NP, decreased transitivity of verb (Mustajoki & Heino 1991; Timberlake 1975; Ueda 1993). A detail that will be important later is that in the case of subject Gen Neg, the sentence becomes ‘impersonal’ and the verb is invariantly Neuter singular, as in (1b) and (3b).

1.2 Babby’s 1980 Theme-Rheme-based analysis

Babby (1980) concentrated on subject Gen Neg, i.e., the alternation of Nom and Gen with intransitive verbs, arguing that subject Gen Neg sentences are almost always existential. He argued that Gen vs. Nom marking indicates that the NP is inside vs. outside the scope of negation, and that this in turn follows from whether the NP is part of the Rheme or is the Theme. His thesis that Theme-Rheme structure is crucial gains support from affirmative sentences, where the subject is invariably Nominative and existential sentences are distinguished only by their word order. Compare (1a–b) above with affirmative (4a–b).

- (4) a. *Otvét iz polka prišel.*
 Answer-NOM.M.SG from regiment arrived-M.SG
 ‘The answer from the regiment has arrived.’

² Although not obligatorily so. To conserve space, we omit quite a lot of details and caveats, focusing on what is most relevant for this paper. See our other cited papers for fuller descriptions.

- b. Prišel otvet iz polka.
 Arrived-M.SG answer-NOM.M.SG from regiment
 ‘There was an answer from the regiment.’

As (4a–b) show, Russian affirmative existential sentences appear to differ from predicative sentences only in word order, which Babby (1980) took to indicate a difference primarily in Theme-Rheme structure. Many others (starting with Chvany 1975; Perlmutter 1978; Pesetsky 1982) have taken (4b) to have Unaccusative syntax with VP-internal ‘subject’ in direct object position, and (4a) showing NP in canonical subject position. Babby (2001) argues that the NP in (4b) is not an object but a non-canonical subject, with the syntactic differences between (4a) and (4b) reflecting Theme-Rheme difference.

Babby also argued that intransitive (existential) Gen Neg sentences arethetic sentences, whereas their Nominative counterparts, with NP subject as Theme, are categorical.

Babby’s analysis of object Gen Neg also assumed a Theme-Rheme distinction: Thematic Acc-NPs remain outside the scope of negation, and Rhematic Gen-NPs fall within it. Those who analyze subject Gen Neg as Unaccusative hold that Gen Neg is in general restricted to underlying objects, which either stay *in situ* under negation (Genitive) or move to some position outside the scope of negation and are marked Accusative.

2 Arguments against the Theme-Rheme analysis and for Perspectival Structure

We have argued in several papers (Borshev & Partee 2002a,b; Partee & Borshev 2002) against ascribing the Gen-Nom and Gen-Acc distinctions to the postulated difference in Theme-Rheme structure. Our main argument has been the existence of Gen Neg examples in which the NP in the genitive can be argued to be the Theme, or part of the Theme, rather than the Rheme. Thus in Arutjunova’s (5) and our (6), the words *sobaki* ‘dog-GEN.F.SG’, and *kefira* ‘kefir-GEN.M.SG’ are the Themes (or part of the Theme) of these sentences. Both their most natural intonation pattern and their (most likely) interpretation in the given contexts support this point of view, which argues against Babby’s generalization.

- (5) Sobaki u menja net. (Arutjunova 1976)
 dog-GEN.F.SG at I-gen not.is
 ‘I don’t have a dog.’ [Context: talking about dogs, perhaps about whether I have one.]
- (6) [Ja iskal kefir.] Kefira v magazine ne bylo.
 [I looked-for kefir-ACC.M.SG Kefir-GEN.M.SG in store NEG was-N.SG
 ‘[I was looking for kefir.] There wasn’t any kefir in the store.’ (Borshev & Partee 2002a)

A second, indirect, argument concerns Babby’s theses that the main determinant of Gen Neg is scope of negation, and that Theme is outside the scope of negation, Rheme inside. But there are examples of Nom/Gen alternation in NPs with the NPI *ni odin* ‘not a single’, which occurs only under clausemate negation. The following (from Partee & Borshev 2002) are both to be read in the context of a preceding sentence like *My nadejalis’, čto na seminare budut studenty* ‘We hoped that (some of the) students would be at the seminar’.

(7) No ni odin student tam ne byl.
 But NI one-NOM.M.SG student-NOM.M.SG there NEG was-M.SG
 ‘But not a single one of the students was there.’

(8) No ni odnogo studenta tam ne bylo.
 But NI one-GEN.M.SG student-GEN.M.SG there NEG was-N.SG
 ‘But there was not a single student [or: not a single one of the students] there.’

The difference in interpretation is that (7) presupposes a specific group of students to be quantified over, whereas (8) does not; but both are clearly under the scope of negation. So either Theme/Rheme does not determine Nom/Gen, or it does not correlate with outside/inside scope of negation.

Our alternative analysis (Borshev & Partee 2002a,b) invokes a different kind of structure, which we call *Perspectival Structure*. Starting with an analysis of existential vs. predicative sentences with a verb taking a ‘THING’ argument and an explicit or implicit ‘LOCation’ argument, as in examples (1a–b), (3a–b), and (7–8), we have argued that the sentences differ in diathesis choice, reflecting two different ways to structure the described situation. In a predicative sentence (1a, 3a, 7), THING is the *Perspectival Center*; in an existential sentence (1b, 3b, 8), LOC is the *Perspectival Center*. We give the analogy of ‘what the camera is tracking’: the protagonist when THING is *Perspectival Center*, the ‘scene’ when LOC is *perspectival center*.

Positing LOC as *Perspectival Center* in existential sentences, even when it is not explicit in the sentence, helps to explain the fact that Russian existential sentences can have proper names or pronouns as subjects; we argue that the ‘existence’ relevant to these sentences is always existence *relative to a given location*, namely the *Perspectival Center* location. Consider the following pair, where a pronoun shows Nom/Gen alternation.

(9) [Ja iskal Petju.] On ne byl na lekcii.
 [I looked.for Petja.] He-NOM.M.SG NEG was-M.SG at lecture
 ‘[I looked for Petja.] He wasn’t at the lecture.

(10) [Ja iskal Petju.] Ego ne bylo na lekcii.
 [I looked.for Petja.] He-GEN.M.SG NEG was-N.SG at lecture
 ‘[I looked for Petja.] He wasn’t at the lecture.

In this pair of sentences,³ the sentence-initial Theme is the same (*on/ego* ‘he-NOM/he-GEN’), anaphorically referring to the Rheme *Petja* ‘Petja’ of the preceding sentence. In (9), the THING *Petja* is chosen as the *Perspectival Center*: we consider *Petja*, and where he was, and we give the partial information that he was not at the lecture. In (10) the LOCation is the *Perspectival Center*; this suggests that either in or before my search for *Petja*, I went to the lecture expecting to find him, but *Petja* was not among those at the lecture.⁴

Our analysis is in many ways still close to Babby’s, and our *Perspectival Structure* has much in common with information structure. And since our distinction in *Perspectival*

³ We have given (9) and (10) the same translations, because the difference felt between them by a native speaker does not easily translate into English (see Chvany 1975: 157–158). We consider (10) an existential sentence (Borshev & Partee 2002a), but English does not permit a *there*-sentence with pronominal NP pivot.

⁴ Examples of this kind are also given by Padučeva (1992, 1997) to illustrate her distinction between ‘retrospective Observer’ (in (9)) and ‘synchronous Observer’ (in (10)); her synchronous Observer corresponds to the cases in which for us the LOCation is the *Perspectival Center*.

Structure does not correspond exactly to any established linguistic distinction, as far as we know, we do not consider the debate to be settled. In Borschev & Partee (2002a) we discuss several possible lines of defense for a position closer to Babby's.

Babby's own account of examples like (1b), (5), or (6) is that since Gen Neg marks an NP as part of the Rheme, word order can be used to mark something else, in this case Given vs. New; so the Gen Neg NPs we have called Theme, he would call Rhematic but Given. Similarly, Erteschik-Shir (1997 and p.c.) would propose that in any existential sentence the real Topic is an implicit 'Stage-topic' (including a possible overt LOC), and within the Focus there may be subordinate information structure, with *kefira* in (6) a 'subordinate Topic'.

A similar idea is found in Padučeva (1996: 119–120), citing Kovtunova (1976). Padučeva discusses the 'dislocation of part of a complex rheme', in which the 'rheme proper' is left at the end of the sentence with the main accent, and the remainder of the Rheme is dislocated leftward, usually to sentence-initial position, receiving secondary stress with falling intonation. Padučeva (p.c.) holds that example (6) can have two communicative structures: in the context in (6), *kefira* would indeed be Theme and unaccented, but the same sentence could occur with no prior mention of *kefir*, only of the store, and then *kefira* would be a dislocated part of the Rheme, with secondary falling stress. But we note that if Padučeva is correct about that, it would not support Babby's approach, because on Padučeva's approach, if *kefira* is a dislocated part of the Rheme it represents 'new' information, and it is only when *kefira* is part of the Theme that it would be interpreted as 'given'. Babby was trying to account for a 'given' interpretation still being part of the Rheme.

Tests for possible contrast suggest that the LOCATION in (6) is still a Theme; so if *kefira* is also Theme, what is the Rheme? The sentence might be a case of Verum-focus, and these have special properties; see our discussion in Borschev & Partee (2002a), where we examine an extended paradigm of Gen vs. Nom examples varying in word order (LOC (NEG) V THING vs. THING (NEG) V LOC), various properties of the subject NP, and varying the LOC from more situation-like ('at the lecture') to more static ('in the store across the way'). We note there that not all of the examined word orders are equally felicitous with 'neutral intonation', which we have tried to keep as the intended intonation for all of our examples. In some cases in which we put a Gen Neg NP in initial (presumably Theme) position, informants tend to want the LOC to precede the negated verb as well, as it does in (6), suggesting that even if the THING can be Theme in a Gen Neg sentence, the LOC must be part of the Theme as well. In Borschev & Partee (2002a), we left these issues open.

One possible advantage of Babby's analysis was that it provided a source for the greater presuppositionality of NPs marked Nom or Acc, since Themes are generally taken to be more presuppositional than Rhemes (Hajičová 1973, and many other authors). We make a similar claim for Perspectival Center with a similar basis: in order to structure a sentence from the perspective of some participant of a situation, that participant must be presupposed to exist. We believe, however, that it is easier to extend our analysis to the kind of presupposition found in the *ni odin* 'not a single one' examples (7–8), where it is the domain of quantification that must be presupposed to exist and be familiar, than to accept such a negatively quantified expression as a Topic or Theme.

3 Hanging Topics and a re-examination of ‘Topic Gen Neg’ examples

In our arguments against Babby’s claim that Theme-Rheme structure was crucial for Russian Gen Neg, we, like Babby, and like most of the Russian literature, relied on a conception of Theme-Rheme structure with Praguian roots. We are aware that there are diverse conceptions of information structure, and that the situation might look different under other conceptions. We have recently learned⁵ of relevant work on ‘Hanging Topics’, topics which are not necessarily integrated into a given sentence, like the well-known Japanese *wa*-topic in (11).

- (11) Sakana-wa tai-ga oishi-i.
fish-TOPIC red snapper-SUBJECT be delicious-NONPAST
‘As for fish, red snapper is delicious.’
(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Topic-prominent_language)

Maslova & Bernini (2006), drawing on Langacker (1993), argue that Hanging Topics often involve a possessive-like relation (possession, part-whole, kinship, arguments of relational nouns) to a participant in the comment, such that the description in the comment is likely to give relevant information about the entity or concept in the topic. This observation suggests a possible basis for the generalization observed by Polinsky (p.c.) that nominals in the base generated Hanging Topic position are often marked with oblique case, especially tending toward genitive/partitive.

What is important for our concerns is that Russian apparently allows genitive Hanging Topics, some of which look similar to examples we have used in arguing against Babby. If genitive case may be licensed by the Hanging Topic construction itself, then it is possible that what we took to be a ‘Gen Neg’ genitive topic in the *kefira* example might alternatively be an independently generated Hanging Topic and not a counterexample to Babby’s claim about Gen Neg.

Polinsky (p.c.) mentions known examples of genitive topics in Russian which cannot be the result of movement because they would be ungrammatical in the putative source position.

- (12) a. Teatrov v gorode bylo dva.
theater-GEN.PL in town was-N.SG two
‘Of theaters, there were two in town.’
b. dva teatra
two theater-GEN.SG
c. *dva teatrov
two theater-GEN.PL

The numeral *dva* ‘two’ in Russian governs genitive singular on the noun; hence the genitive plural *teatrov* ‘of theaters’ must be a Hanging Topic generated *in situ*. But Hanging Topics do not necessarily manifest incompatibilities with a possible base position inside the sentence; if we replace *dva* ‘two’ in the example above by *pjat* ‘five’ or *mnogo* ‘many’, which govern genitive plural, the sentence would be ambiguously analyzable as having a fronted topic or a Hanging Topic.

⁵ We are grateful to Maria Polinsky for bringing hanging topics to our attention; references to Polinsky (p.c.) below refer to e-mail correspondence in March-April 2006.

Looking back at examples of ours and Arutjunova's that showed Gen Neg topics, we have to try to tell whether they could be Hanging Topics by seeking variants like (12a). In addition to (5), (6) and (10), our previous examples include the following:

- (13) [Ja napisal emu i ždal otveta.] Otveta ne prišlo.
 [I wrote him and waited.for answer-GEN] Answer-GEN.M.SG NEG came-N.SG
 'I wrote to him and waited for an answer.] No answer came.' (Borschev & Partee 2002a: 193)
- (14) [Myši v dome est'?] — Net, myšej v dome net.
 [mouse-NOM.F.PL in house is?] No, mouse-GEN.F.PL in house not.is
 '[Are there mice in the house?] — No, there are no mice in the house.'
 (Arutjunova 1997)

These seem to fall into two classes. Examples (10) and probably (13) do not seem to be Hanging Topics; the topic is an essential participant of the sentence. Similarly for Babby's (15), though he analyzes the genitive pronoun not as Theme but as 'given', within the Rheme.

- (15) Navodčik ... ždal komandy. No eë ne posledovalo.
 gunner waited command but it.GEN.F.SG NEG followed-N.SG
 'The gunner waited for the command (to fire). But it didn't come.'
 (Babby 1980: 118)

But (5), (6) and (14) may be amenable to a Hanging Topic analysis. One can construct examples similar to our *kefira* example (6) without negation, and one can find examples with or without negation in which the topic genitive expression would be ungrammatical inside the sentence. The examples use the genitive plural *deneg* 'money' and the mass genitive singular *vodki* 'vodka'.

- (16) a. Deneg u nego bylo mnogo / malo.
 money-GEN.PL at him-GEN was-N.SG much / little
 'He had a lot of/little money.' or 'Of money, he had a lot/little.'
- b. Deneg u nego sovsem ne bylo.
 money-GEN.PL at him-GEN altogether NEG was-N.SG
 'He didn't have any money at all.' or 'Of money, he didn't have any at all.'
- c. Deneg u nego do čërta. (Also OK: U nego do čërta deneg.)
 money-GEN.PL at him-GEN to devil
 'He has a hell of a lot of money.' or 'Of money, he has a hell of a lot.'
- d. Vodki bylo zalejsja. (??Bylo zalejsja vodki.)
 vodka-GEN.F.SG was-N.SG pour-your-fill-IMP.SG
 'Of vodka there was 'pour-your-fill'.'
- e. Vodki bylo kot naplakal. (*Bylo kot naplakal vodki.)
 vodka-GEN.F.SG was-N.SG cat wept
 'Of vodka there was [so little that] the cat wept.'

The examples in (16) may support the hypothesis that the genitive NP in (5), (6) and (13) could be a Hanging Topic. What is clearest is that there is no felt difference in kind between the affirmative (16a) and the negative (16b). Examples (16a–e) all seem to

involve predications of amounts — how much money he had, how much vodka there was. The amount ‘predicates’ include both common quantifiers *mnogo*, *malo* ‘much, little’, which routinely take Gen-marked noun complements, and idiomatic quantity expressions (a PP in (16c), an imperative verb in (16d), and a clause in (16e)) which vary in the degree to which they can be used as derived quantifiers from easily to not at all. *Vodki* ‘of vodka’ in (16d–e) must be a Hanging Topic if it is a Topic at all,⁶ and the NP in (16a–c) presumably can be. The variations on (8) in (17a–c) below include what may be a plural Hanging Topic: the plural genitive form in (17a–b) would be ungrammatical in construction with *odnogo* ‘one-GEN’, but on the other hand the second author notes that (17b) is the most natural of the three and that it should not have a comma intonation.

- (17) a. ?No studentov, ni odnogo tam ne bylo.
 But student-GEN.M.PL NI one-GEN.M.SG there NEG was-N.SG
 ‘But as for (the) students, there was not a single one there.’
- b. No studentov tam ne bylo ni odnogo.
 But student-GEN.M.PL there NEG was-N.SG NI one-GEN.M.SG
 ‘But there was not a single one of (the) students there.’
- c. ?No studenta ni odnogo tam ne bylo.
 But student-GEN.M.SG NI one-GEN.M.SG there NEG was-N.SG
 ‘But there was not a single student [or: not a single one of the students] there.’

Polinsky (p.c.) raised the interesting possibility that the Hanging Topic construction might itself provide a non-veridical operator licensing Genitive, given that in Russian certain intensional verbs, modals, imperatives license genitive/partitives; this would add the Hanging Topic construction to the family of non-veridical operators licensing Genitive explored by Neidle (1988), Bailyn (2004), and in our current work. As Babby (1980) noted, following Jakobson (1971), there is a range of meanings for partitive genitive NPs in argument position that is broader than simply ‘partitive’, all of them in a sense less directly referential and more quantificational. And Timberlake (1975) had observed that Gen Neg fits this pattern by indicating that ‘none’ of the entity participates in the action.

But while this latter set of examples, (5), (6), (13) and (16), with their partitive-like or kind-like NPs, may look like Hanging Topics, all those examples have neuter singular (impersonal) verbs, even (16d–e). Babby (1980) observed that not only Gen Neg subjects give rise to impersonal verbs, but so do partitive subjects licensed by a modal or used to focus on quantity rather than referential identity, i.e., all Genitive ‘subjects’.⁷ This fact argues that the genitive NP in these examples is still the subject: its genitive case is essentially linked with the verb’s being impersonal.

This observation leads to a deeper question: if *kefira* in (6) were a Hanging Topic, then would (6) cease to be an existential Gen Neg sentence? Suppose the structure were as in (18) below.

⁶ It ‘feels’ to the second author as if the construction in all of (16a–e) is actually subject plus ‘amount predicate’, not a Hanging Topic construction. Babby (1980: Ch. 4) discusses ‘quantificational’ genitives, which, like Gen Neg, fill roles otherwise filled by Nom subjects of intransitives or Acc objects of transitives.

⁷ In what respects genitive ‘subjects’ are ‘subjects’ is a topic of much debate; but since for the Hanging Topic discussion the relevant distinction is between an NP with a syntactic role in the sentence and one that is only a base-generated topic, we can just call them subjects.

- (18) [Kefira]_{HTopic} [v magazine ne bylo]_{IP}
 Kefir-GEN.M.SG in store NEG was-N.SG

What is the structure of the clause to which the Hanging Topic is adjoined? It is still a (remnant of an) existential sentence, not a predicative sentence; that is evident from the impersonal form of the verb. For it to be well-formed, it needs a Gen-marked NP with the role *kefira* would have if it were inside the clause; if we posit a null NP (stipulatively at best), it could hardly be the Rheme if it is null and coindexed with a Hanging Topic, so it would still violate Babby's generalization that the subject of existential sentences is always the Rheme. We conclude *kefira* in (6) is almost certainly not a Hanging Topic after all, and that even if it were there would still be problems for Babby's generalization.

So many if not all Thematic Gen Neg examples are resistant to reanalysis as Hanging Topics. The examples that look most like Hanging Topic involve partitivity, which may reflect the likelihood that Gen Neg evolved out of the partitive genitive (Levinson 2005).

What makes these examples look like Hanging Topics is the 'disagreeing morphology' we see in examples (12), (16d–e) and (17a–b). The 'disagreeing morphology' shows that they cannot be derived by movement of the noun out of a quantifier phrase, but it does not show that they could not themselves be partitive subjects.⁸ As Jakobson (1971) and others have argued, Genitive NPs have a range of interpretations tending toward 'quantitative', 'partitive', and 'kind' or 'property' meanings, as opposed to the more 'referential', 'individuated' meanings of Nom/Acc NPs. Examples like (16a–e) need more work to show whether they involve a kind of quantity-predication on a Genitive subject.

We conclude then by reaffirming our thesis that the Theme-Rheme distinction does not make quite the right distinction for the licensing of Gen Neg. Our next task will be to investigate alternative notions of information structure such as those described in Maslova & Bernini (2006) to see if our Perspective Structure coincides with any of them. In our other work we have argued that the Nom/Gen and Acc/Gen alternations reflect a diathesis alternation which in turn reflects different ways of structuring the described situation rather than different ways of structuring a sentence, but Maslova and Bernini argue convincingly that both kinds of structuring are essentially involved in many kinds of topic constructions, so there may be a way to construe our Perspective Structure as a kind of information structure in the end.

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⁸ See footnote 6.

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