Syntactic doubling as a type of syntactic repetition

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Repetition is proved to be relevant for syntax. Its relevance manifests itself primarily in agreement (values one or several features are copied from one constituent to another) and in serialization (very often each of components of a serial verb bears identical morphosyntactic values, see Aikhevald, Dixon 2006, and a slightly different view in Haspelmath 2015).

There is, however, a more exotic phenomenon which requires identity between syntactic constituent. It can be termed ‘syntactic doubling’.

This strategy is employed by a small class of Russian implicative verbs, such as načat’ ‘begin’, dobit’šja ‘manage, reach’, dojit’ do ‘reach’, otoimstit’ ‘revenge (oneself)’ and some others. These verbs all have a syntactic pattern with the combination to + čto, where to nominalizes a sentential argument and čto is the most frequent Russian complementizer. In this pattern, the verb form in the embedded clause can repeat the form in the matrix clause:

- **Example (1):**
  
  Način-i-te s togo čto vyber-i-te ed-u.
  
  ‘Begin with choosing food.’

- **Example (2):**
  
  Nado otomsti-t’ emu tem čto ignorirova-t’ ego.
  
  ‘You should revenge yourself upon him by ignoring him.’

The fact that the strategy demonstrated in (1) and (2) is really doubling is rather obvious. Imperative in (1) and infinitive in (2) become impossible in embedded clauses if the matrix clause contains another form – in (3), for instance, imperative in the matrix clause does not allow imperative in the embedded one:

- **Example (3):**
  
  Otomst-i emu tem čto ignorirova-t’ ego.
  
  ‘Intended: Revenge yourself upon him by ignoring him.’

Thus, the syntactic pattern in (1) and (2) must be formulated as ‘The embedded verb repeats the form of the matrix verb’.

This repetition (syntactic doubling) is interesting in that it overrides general restrictions on the use of verb forms. For instance, the Russian imperative in imperative proper use is only found in main clauses (see, though, Ljutikova 2008 on some exceptions). The story of infinitive is another: of course, infinitive is used in embedded clause, but (outside the doubling strategy) not with the complementizer čto. Cf. examples with the verb bojat’šja ‘be afraid’ which can be used either with infinitive (4) or with čto (5), but not both (6) is ungrammatical:

- **Example (4):**
  
  Ja boj-u-s’ ošibi-t’-sja.
  
  ‘I am afraid to make a mistake.’

- **Example (5):**
  
  Ja boj-u-s’ čto ošib-u-s’.
  
  ‘I am afraid that I will make a mistake.’

- **Example (6):**
  
  Ja boj-u-s’ čto ošibi-t’-sja.
  
  ‘I am afraid that I will make a mistake.’

Russian doubling predicates do not form a homogenous group: they differ from one another by (1) the set of forms which can be copied to the embedded clause and (2) (non)-existence of alternative strategies without doubling.

For instance, the verb načat’ ‘begin’ allows doubling of imperative, infinitive, and subjunctive. In contrast, with dobit’šja ‘reach’ or dojit’ ‘go to’, imperative cannot be copied to the embedded clause.
A possible explanation of the existence of doubling lies in the fact that contexts like (1) and (2) combine implicativity and irreality. On the one hand, in constructions with implicative verbs like ‘begin’, the matrix and the embedded events form in a sense one event (the implicative verb denotes an interpretation of an event or a function of the event denoted by the embedded verb – e.g., in (1), the event ‘choose food’ is interpreted as the beginning of a complex situation). Thus, the identity of forms reflects a strong affinity between the two events.

On the other hand, a real form (for instance, a present tense form) cannot be used in contexts like (1) and (2), because it would bear a wrong meaning that the embedded event must obligatorily take place, which is not the case (in (1), the speaker only proposes the hearer to carry out an action).

However, the syntactic motivation is also relevant here. Combinations of to + complementizers differ from patterns without to in the choice of verb forms. For instance, the combination of to + the unreal complementizer čtoby allows for the use of infinitive ():

(7) On nastaiva-l-Ø na tom čtoby he.NOM insist-PST-SG.M on that.LOC COMP all-SG.ACC discuss-INF
vs-e obsudi-t’.

‘He insisted on discussing everything.’

At the same time, infinitive is usually incompatible with čtoby without to;

(8) *On xote-l-Ø čtoby vs-e obsudi-t’.
he.NOM want-PST-SG.M COMP all-SG.ACC discuss-INF

Intended: ‘He wanted to discuss everything.’

I can propose that to introduces a clause which is more syntactically autonomous from the matrix one than an embedded clause introduced by a bare complementizer (see similar assumptions in Knjazev 2009). In a sense, an embedded clause in structures with to + complementizers are not strictly controlled / governed by the main clause and can choose different syntactic strategies, different from canonical complementation strategies (complementizers, infinitives and so on). In the case under analysis, they choose to copy the verb form from the main clause. Not surprisingly, without the marker to, the doubling strategy becomes ungrammatical.

References