Russian paucal constructions within a general typology of numeral constructions

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Numeral constructions greatly differ cross-linguistically as far as their structure is concerned. The main types (disregarding here word order variations) are roughly the following (Hurford 1994, 2003):

a. Numeral + Noun in the singular (or a number-indifferent form)
b. Numeral + Noun in the plural
c. Numeral + Classifier + Noun
d. Numeral + Preposition + Noun
e. Numeral + Noun in a certain case (DAT, GEN, PART)

Some linguistic systems make use of more than one device, depending on the numeral. In such ‘split’ cases, lower numerals (paucals) tend to behave in a more adjectival fashion (showing, for instance, agreement with the noun), whereas higher numerals are more noun-like (Corbett 1978: 363-368).

The morphosyntactic behavior of numeral constructions (‘homogeneous’ or ‘heterogeneous’ agreement) crucially depends on the function fulfilled by the NP and the case assigned to it (Babby 1987). When it is nominative or accusative, the construction may exhibit government relations between the numeral and the noun (or, rather exceptionally, the kind of ‘collaborative’ agreement that has been suggested for examples like dva stola ‘two tables’ vs. dve lampy ‘two lamps’, Corbett 2006: 85). On the contrary, when an oblique case is assigned to the NP, the numeral agrees in case with the noun, a pattern reminiscent of Finnish (kaksi miestä ‘two.NOM men.PART.SG’ vs. kahden miehen ‘of two.GEN men. GEN.SG’).

In the nominative and accusative functions, intra-Slavic variation in the structure of non-singular numeral constructions (especially paucal) is quite remarkable. On its basis, at least four groups are readily identifiable:

1. Languages with Num + NounPL: Czech, Slovak, Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian (despite some prosodic differences)
2. Languages with Sg, Du, and Pl.: Slovenian, Sorbian.
4. Languages devoid of noun declension but with a special numeral (adnumerative) form: Bulgarian, Macedonian.

This classification can be further complicated if one takes into account the effects of animacy on the lexical selection of the numeral: In Bulgarian, Slovak, and Sorbian, a.o., there are special numeral forms for animate referents, usually limited to paucal numerals (2 through 5 or 2 through 6). In Bulgarian, for example, only dvama učenici ‘two disciples’ is allowed, *dva učenici would be wrong; cf. dva grada ‘two towns’. This -ma has been analysed as a classifier. In Macedonian and Polish, in turn, this differentiation does not seem to have such specific limits.
Russian holds a special position (even among the East Slavic languages) within this typology of paucal constructions.

(i) There is clear-cut differentiation between paucals (dva, tri, četyre), including compound numerals containing paucals, and other numerals;

(ii) Not in all Slavic languages, but clearly in Russian, animacy has an impact on the morphology of paucal constructions (cf. vižu dva stola ‘I see two tables’ vs. vižu dvux studentov ‘I see two students’), and there is some degree of variation in the effects of animacy on paucals, which is unattested elsewhere in the grammar;

(iii) Modifiers (determiners, adjectives) within a paucal construction show plural morphology, a peculiarity that seems to have not many parallels (however, Hopi numeral phrases can be adduced in this respect, cf. Sadler 2011);

(iv) Grammatical gender also determines different aspects of the pattern (which has been reported to have parallels, for example, in Somali and Scottish Gaelic; cf. Saeed 1999, Corbett 2000: 212).

In this work, we explore the typological parallels of the Russian paucal constructions and contribute to the debate on these expressions by arguing that their historical development can clarify certain aspects of their synchronic properties nowadays. We partially follow the hypotheses acknowledging the existence of paucal morphology in Russian (explicitly in Corbett 1993, Bailyn & Nevins 2008, Perel’tsvaig 2010). However, we show that the development of both nouns and adjectives associated with paucal numerals (Žolobov 2003), as well as certain synchronic properties of the relevant structures, suggest that the actual Russian paucal pattern is an instance of an ongoing change and, as such, can be better described as a kind of hybrid in the sense that it involves not only paucal (nominative) morphology, but also shares morphosyntactic properties with the quantificational genitive we find in other parts of the Russian grammar.

References
Corbett, G. G. 2000. Number. CUP.
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