



Shortening mechanisms in construction morphology: the Russian *spec*-N construction

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Received: 26 June 2023 / Accepted: 26 September 2024
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Abstract

This study presents an in-depth analysis of Russian stub compounds in *spec* ‘special’ and their competition with the corresponding full adjective *special’nyj* ‘special’ followed by a noun. Couched in Construction Morphology the corpus-based analysis addresses four understudied areas in theoretical and Russian morphology: shortening mechanisms, competition between morphological words and multiword expressions, blocking, and compounding in Russian. It is argued that shortening mechanisms create words that are more than stylistic variants of the corresponding longer constructions, although full synonymy may occur under specific conditions. The diachronic and synchronic motivation of the shortening mechanism under scrutiny is analyzed in terms of economy, extravagance and expressiveness. Blocking is demonstrated to be statistical (involving tendencies rather than categorical rules) and bidirectional, whereby a morphological construction may be favored over a syntactic construction and vice versa. The proposed analysis adds to the knowledge of stub compounds in Russian and demonstrates how a wide variety of generalizations can be adequately accounted for in Construction Morphology.

Keywords Construction morphology · Russian · Stub compound · Shortening mechanisms · Blocking

1 Introduction

When the Kremlin calls the war in Ukraine a *specoperacija* ‘special operation’, they resort to a construction with deep roots in the Soviet period. This morphological con-

Earlier versions have been presented at Harvard University, Princeton University and Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. We are grateful to these audiences and to two anonymous reviewers for valuable input. Remaining shortcomings are our sole responsibility.

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struction, which we refer to as the “*spec*-N construction”, involves the formation of a so-called stub compound (Spencer, 1991: 346) by adding the first four segments of an adjective (*special’nyj* ‘special’ or *specializirovannyj* ‘specialized’) to a full or abbreviated noun.¹ The *spec*-N construction competes with the syntactic Adj+N construction, whereby an adjective (in our case *special’nyj* or *specializirovannyj*) modifies a noun. The Kremlin uses both the shorter *spec*-N and the longer Adj+N constructions to refer to the war in Ukraine.

The Russian *spec*-N construction is of interest for theoretical morphology because the construction is located at the intersection of four arguably understudied areas: (a) shortening mechanisms and subtractive morphology (Masini & Benigni, 2012: 429), (b) competition between morphological words and multiword expressions (Masini, 2019: 281–285), (c) blocking (Rainer, 2016: 13), and (d) compounding in Russian (which has received less attention than affixation, Benigni & Masini, 2009: 192, Nessel & Sokolova, 2019: 265–266).

In the present study, we offer a corpus-based analysis of the Russian *spec*-N construction couched in Construction Morphology. We address three questions: (a) Do shortening mechanisms create expressions that are more than stylistic variants of the longer construction? (b) What is the motivation of shortening mechanisms? (c) Do shorter/morphological constructions block longer/syntactic constructions?

In order to shed light on these questions, we created a database of all lemmas involving the *spec*-N construction in the sub-part of the Russian National Corpus that contain non-fiction texts.² The database contains 424 lemmas. For each lemma, we have the year of its first attestation, the number of attestations, as well as the number of attestations of the corresponding Adj+N construction with *special’nyj* ‘special’ and *specializirovannyj* ‘specialized’. The two adjectives share the four first segments, and the *spec*-N construction is therefore ambiguous between the two adjectives.

Our contribution can be summarized as follows. First, we argue that the *spec*-N construction creates words that may take on a life of their own and develop semantic and pragmatic properties that set them apart from the corresponding Adj+N construction. While this is expected since language tends to avoid synonymy, we also find examples where the only differences between the two constructions pertain to style. We propose that synonymy may occur when the following conditions are met: The Adj+N construction develops a narrow meaning that is carried over to *spec*-N, and at the same time *spec*-N relates to a semantic field that does not involve connotations to Soviet realia.

With regard to the second research question about motivation, we argue that it is helpful to distinguish between diachronic and synchronic motivation. We suggest that the diachronic motivation is related to the “maxim of extravagance” (Keller, 1994) and “economy”. The synchronic motivation, we argue, may be analyzed in terms of the principles of “expressiveness” and “economy”.

¹Throughout the article, Russian examples are given in transliterated orthography. Notice that *c* stands for the affricate /ts/: /sp^lets/. We refer to both *special’nyj* and *specializirovannyj* as “adjectives”, although the latter, historically at least, can be analyzed as a past passive participle of the verb *specializirovat’* ‘specialize’. The relationship between *specializirovannyj* and *specializirovat’* is tangential to the topic of the present study.

²The Russian National Corpus is available at www.ruscorpora.ru. Our database is available here: <https://doi.org/10.18710/SXI3TQ>.

When it comes to the third research question about blocking, we demonstrate that categorical blocking rules are not characteristic of the relationship between *spec*-N and Adj+N. Rather, our data range from situations where *spec*-N is dominant via balanced situations where both constructions are attested with approximately the same frequency to situations where Adj+N is the dominant option. If one accepts statistical tendencies as examples of blocking, our findings lend support to Masini's (2019) idea of "bidirectional blocking", whereby syntactic constructions may block morphological ones, and morphological constructions may block syntactic ones.

Our findings for all three questions converge, insofar as we need a flexible, multilayered framework that can accommodate gradient properties at various levels of generality from abstract constructional schemas to specific schemas for individual words. We argue that Construction Morphology (Booij, 2010, Masini & Audring, 2019) adequately accommodates the patterns we identify in the present study.

In addition to exploring theoretical questions, our analysis also contributes to Russian linguistics, insofar as we provide a detailed description of the *spec*-N construction. This sharpens our understanding of (stub) compounds in Russian, which represent an important, yet understudied field in Russian morphology.

Our argument is structured as follows. In Sect. 2, we provide an overview of the formal and semantic properties of the *spec*-N construction compared to Adj+N. Sect. 3 addresses the status of shortening mechanisms, before we turn to the motivation of such mechanisms in Sect. 4 and their relationship to the concept of blocking in Sect. 5. Our findings are summarized in the concluding Sect. 6.

2 The *spec*-N construction: presentation

Before we turn to theoretical questions, a brief presentation of the *spec*-N construction is necessary. In the following we outline its form (Sect. 2.1) and meaning (Sects. 2.2–2.4).

2.1 Form

As mentioned in Sect. 1, the *spec*-N construction involves adding the first four segments of the adjective *special'nyj* 'special' or *specializirovannyj* 'specialized' to a full or abbreviated noun. In the present study, we mainly focus on *special'nyj*, which is more frequently attested in our dataset than *specializirovannyj*. We refer to what comes after *spec* as a "filler", since this is an open slot in the construction that can be filled by a variety of lexical items:

- (1) a. Full noun as filler: *specoperacija* 'special operation' (from *operacija* 'operation')
- b. Abbreviated noun as filler: *specnaz* 'special operation force' (from *naznačenie* 'designation')

Traditionally in Russian linguistics constructions of this type, where one or both elements are shortened, are known as "stub compounds" or "stump compounds" in English (e.g., Spencer, 1991; Comrie et al., 1996) and "složnosokraščennye slova"

(literally ‘complex abbreviated words’) in Russian (Švedova, 1980: 139).³ For descriptive convenience, we will refer to the construction as *spec*-N throughout the article. A more precise representation of the structure is [*spec*[X]_N]_N, where X represents the filler and the subscript _N shows that both the filler and the resulting expression is a noun. We will return to the status of *spec*-N as a word in Sect. 3.1.

The *spec*-N construction competes with a full noun phrase containing the adjective *special’nyj* or *specializirovannyj* followed by a noun that serves as the filler in the construction. We will refer to this construction as Adj+N. We use the plus sign instead of a hyphen to emphasize that the construction is a phrase consisting of two words.

Although the present study focuses on the *spec*-N construction and its relationship to the Adj+N construction, it is important to keep in mind that the *spec*-N construction is a subtype of a more general stub compound construction. How many segments are imported from the full adjective to the stub compound? It seems difficult to state one overarching schema for the stub compound construction specifying how many segments or syllables are imported from the corresponding adjective.⁴ A functional approach seems more fruitful. We suggest that the form of stub compounds result from balancing two functional concerns, viz. “informativity” and “economy”. Informativity (a version of Grice’s 1975: 45 maxim of quantity) can be described as follows: “Import enough phonological material for language users to be able to recognize (and memorize) the word”. Economy, which we return to in Sect. 4.1 below, involves creating stub compounds that are as short as possible. Informativity favors longer stub compounds, since the more phonological material one incorporates, the easier it is to recognize the corresponding full adjective. Economy, on the other hand, favors shorter stub compounds. Diachronic evidence lends support to this approach. As pointed out by Alekseev (2010: 158–159), early stub compounds from the 1920s often contained only the first syllable of the adjective, e.g., *mo* from *moskovskij* ‘Moscow’ (cf. *Možedez* from *Moskovskij železodejatel’nyj zavod* ‘Moscow iron producing factory’). While such compounds were easy to pronounce due to their simple syllable structure, they went out of use, because *mo* was not sufficient for language users to recognize the full adjective. In later times, the longer string *mos* is used in stub compounds, such as *Mosfil’m* ‘Moscow film studio’. The longer stub compounds in *mos* provide a better balance between informativity and economy than the shorter ones in *mo*.

The interplay between informativity and economy results in considerable variation. Instead of proposing one schema for the construction, it seems more fruitful to assume a radial category organized around a prototype (Lakoff, 1987). The prototypical pattern seems to be to import the entire first syllable plus the onset of the following syllable (Alekseev, 2010: 174). Thus, in *gosbank* ‘state bank’ *go* is the first syllable and *s* is the onset of the second syllable in the adjective *gosudarstvennyj* ‘state’. However, in some examples the whole second syllable is integrated into

³In the literature it has been argued that in some cases the compound is older than the corresponding Adj+N construction, which is then created on the basis of the compound (Terkulov, 2017: 80). We will not discuss this question for the *spec*-N construction.

⁴While stub compounds based on adjectives seem to be the most widespread pattern, it is worth mention that there are examples where the first part of the stub compounds is taken from a noun in the genitive, e.g., *fizruk* from *rukovoditel’ fizkul’tury* ‘supervisor in physical education’.

the stub compound, as in *telekanal* ‘TV channel’, where *tele* represents the first two syllables of the related adjective *televizionnyj* ‘television’. In *pionerlager* ‘camp for members of Soviet communist organization for children’, the first three syllables of the related adjective *pionerskij* are integrated into the stub compound. While detailed discussion of this word-formation pattern is beyond the scope of the present study, it is worth noting that the *spec*-N construction follows the prototypical pattern, insofar as the first syllable *spe* plus the onset of the second syllable *c* (the affricate [ts]) are imported from the adjectives *special’nyj* and *specializirovannyj*.

2.2 Meaning: three “allostructions”

The addition of *spec* to a noun creates a stub compound which relates to an activity or situation that in some crucial way deviates from what is “normal” (Zemskaja, 2009: 57). The relevant activity or situation represents the background for the interpretation of the noun. In our database we have identified three types, which we may refer to as “allostructions”. We define “allostruction” as a member of a network of two or more grammatical constructions with very similar form and meaning (see Cappelle, 2006 and Nessel & Janda, 2023 for discussion).

- (2)
 - a. Nouns related to activities for (un)privileged persons: *specdača* ‘special holiday home’ and *spec’tjur’ma* ‘special prison’
 - b. Nouns related to activities for special purposes: *specodežda* ‘special clothing’
 - c. Nouns related to activities involving manipulation or secret goals: *spec-služba* ‘intelligence agency’

In examples like *specdača* ‘special holiday home’ in (2a) we are dealing with a situation where privileged people are able to take vacations at special holiday homes that are not accessible for the “average” or “normal” holiday maker. Words like *spec-tjur’ma* ‘special prison’ in (2a) take us to the opposite end of the scale targeting unprivileged people, such as people imprisoned for political reasons. In (2b), the relevant activity deviates from what is “normal” by virtue of having a special purpose, and words such as *specodežda* ‘special clothing’ are used in the relevant activity. This word typically refers to clothing used in factories, e.g., for activities that require protection. In (2c), the nouns in question are related to activities that involve manipulation or secret goals, such as *specslužba*, a term used about organizations carrying out secret intelligence operations. The borders between the three types are not clear-cut, and some words arguably belong to more than one group, a fact we will return to in Sect. 3.1.

2.3 Meaning: types of fillers

The activity or situation can be introduced directly through a filler that denotes the relevant activity or situation. However, the filler frequently introduces the activity or situation indirectly through a metonymic relationship, i.e., a contiguity relationship in space or time (Peirsman & Geeraerts, 2006, Radden & Kövecses, 1999).

- (3) Types of fillers:
- a. Activity: *speckurs* ‘special course’
 - b. Group: *specčast* ‘special (military) detachment’
 - c. Person: *specinstruktor* ‘special instructor’
 - d. Artefact: *specodežda* ‘special clothing’
 - e. Institution or company: *specbol'nica* ‘special hospital’ and *Spectrans* (name of company)
 - f. Location: *specpoligon* ‘special training area’

Speckurs in (3a) denotes a learning activity at a university or college, while the fillers in (3b–e) involve metonymic relationships of various types. In (3b–c), the activity is represented by the group or individual person that carries out the activity, while in (3d) the metonymic connection is between the activity and an artefact that is used to carry out the activity. In (3e–f), there is a metonymic connection between the activity and the institution, company or location where the activity takes place. These are widespread metonymic relationships, also in morphology (Peirsman & Geeraerts, 2006, Janda, 2011). Notice that the boundaries between the types in (3) are not always clear, and some nouns may be assigned to more than one type. For instance, *specbol'nica* ‘special hospital’ is arguably both an institution and a location.

2.4 Meaning: semantic fields

The examples of the *spec-N* construction in our database gravitate towards certain areas of experience, which we may refer to as “semantic fields”:

- (4) Semantic fields relevant for the *spec-N* construction:
- a. Military: *specčast* ‘special (military) detachment’, *specoperacija* ‘special operation’, *specpoligon* ‘special training area’
 - b. Government and bureaucracy: *speckomissija* ‘special committee’, *speczakonodatel'stvo* ‘special legislation’, *specsovetnik* ‘special adviser’
 - c. Industry and business: *specbank* ‘special bank’, *Spectrans* (name of company)
 - d. Education: *speckurs* ‘special course’, *specškola* ‘special school’, *specdoklad* ‘special lecture’
 - e. Service: *speccl'gota* ‘special privilege’, *specmenju* ‘special menu’, *specrejs* ‘special flight’

Although the meanings a word conveys and the area of experience it belongs to are different things, there are systematic relationships between the three meanings in (2) and the semantic fields in (4). For instance, words involving “manipulation or secret goals” in (2c) are typically recruited from the military semantic field in (4a).

3 The *spec-N* construction: more than a stylistic variant of Adj+N?

The *spec-N* construction involves a shortening mechanism since it results from the removal of part of an adjective. Shortened expressions have a controversial status. It

has sometimes been argued that such mechanisms “generally give rise to new expressions that cannot be properly considered new lexemes, but stylistic variants of already existing lexemes” (Masini & Benigni, 2012: 429). For instance, Thornton (2004: 558) suggested that Italian shortened forms such as *auto* ‘car’ (from *automobile*) may not be separate lexical items.

However, Masini and Benigni (2012: 441), who analyzed Russian shortened expressions with the *-ka* suffix (*električka* ‘commuter train’ < *električeskij poezd* ‘electric train’, *čitalka* < *čital’nyj zal* ‘reading room’), argue that such shortened forms may develop semantic, pragmatic, and formal features that make them different from the full forms they are derived from.

In order to clarify the relationship between shortened forms and full forms, we suggest distinguishing between two questions: Are the shortened forms morphological words (rather than syntactic phrases)? Are the shortened forms semantically and pragmatically different from the full forms?

3.1 Spec-N: words or phrases?

Establishing criteria for wordhood is notoriously difficult, but it seems relatively clear that while Adj+N is a syntactic phrase, shortening to *spec-N* gives rise to morphological words. Thus, it is possible to separate the two parts of the Adj+N construction with another adjective (e.g., *special’naja voennaja operacija* ‘special military operation’), but this is not possible for *spec-N*.⁵ *Spec-N* furthermore serves as the input for word-formation processes, a property that is not characteristic of syntactic phrases.⁶

(5) Formation of agentive noun:

- a. *specnaz* ‘special operation force’ → *specnazovec* ‘special operations soldier’
- b. *specslužba* ‘intelligence agency’ → *specslužbist* ‘intelligence officer’

(6) Formation of relational adjective:

- a. *specnaz* ‘special operation force’ → *specnazovskij* (relational adjective)
- b. *specslužba* ‘intelligence agency’ → *specslužbovskij* (relational adjective)
- c. *speckor* ‘special correspondent’ → *speckorovskij* (relational adjective)

The agentive nouns in (5) are attested in the Russian National Corpus, and the same holds for the adjectives in (6a) and (6c). The example in (6b) is attested on the internet.⁷ It seems impossible to form such words on the basis of Adj+N. It is worth pointing out that the agentive nouns and relational adjectives in (5) and (6) are clearly formed on the basis of the *spec-N* construction. For instance, *specnazovec* in

⁵If one wishes to add the adjective *voennyj* ‘military’ to the *spec-N* construction, the adjective must precede the entire *spec-N* construction: *voennaja specoperacija*.

⁶Admittedly, this criterion is not entirely clear, because there are some word-formation processes in Russian that form words based on phrases. Examples include *bessmertie* ‘immortality’ which is related to the preposition phrase *bez smerti* ‘without death’ and *zareč’je* ‘land on the other side of the river’ which is related to *za rekoj* ‘beyond the river’ (Townsend, 1975: 151).

⁷A google search performed on March 27, 2023, yielded 1170 hits for *specslužbovskij*.

(5a) must be based on *specnaz*; since there is no **nazovec*, we cannot assume addition of *spec* to an agentive noun.

Spec-N has many properties characteristic of compounds (including stub compounds). For instance, *spec-N* has one primary stress on the filler and may have a secondary stress on *spec*, which is a pattern found in many compounds (see Avanesov, 1988: 553 and Gouskova, 2011). Semantically, *spec-N* also resembles compounds. Compounds are often semantically non-compositional, in the sense that the meaning of the whole cannot be predicted from the meaning of the parts. By way of example, consider the Russian noun phrase *belaja ručka* ‘white little hand, white handle, white pen’ and the corresponding compound *beloručka* ‘person shirking rough or dirty (physical) work’. Both consist of *belyj* ‘white’ and *ručka* ‘little hand, handle, pen’. The meaning of the noun phrase is compositional, insofar as anything that is white and fits one of the meanings of *ručka* can truthfully be referred to as a *belaja ručka*. The compound *beloručka*, on the other hand, is not compositional, since it denotes a person rather than a hand, a handle or a pen, and since the person in question is not white in any sense of this adjective.

The meanings of the *spec-N* construction discussed in the previous section suggest that *spec-N* yields semantically non-compositional expressions in the same way as *beloručka*. We have seen that *spec-N* does not just denote anything “special” but involves activities or situations that deviate from what is normal or average in the three ways shown in (2). For instance, a *spectjur’ma* is not a prison that is special in any random way (say, by being located in a building that looks unusual). Rather, a *spectjur’ma* is a prison for certain types of prisoners. While the full phrase *special’naja operacija* can be used about any operation that is “special” in some way (e.g., certain kinds of surgery), *specoperacija* came into general use in the post-Soviet period in the narrower meaning ‘military operation involving special forces’. Arguably, after February 2022 the meaning has become even narrower, since the euphemism *specoperacija* is now the official term for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (Pavlova et al., 2023: 140). We hasten to add that compositionality as a criterion is not without problems, since Adj+N can also in some cases develop idiosyncratic meanings, a fact we will return to in Sect. 3.4.

Another semantic property relating *spec-N* to compounds is ambiguity among submeanings. By way of example, consider Russian compounds in *sam* ‘self’, which inter alia may have the following meanings:

- (7) a. Mechanism that carries out an action automatically: *samolov* ‘automatic trap’, *samovar* ‘samovar (automatic water boiler)’, *samopisec* ‘flight recorder’, *samosval* ‘dump truck’.
- b. Person who carries out an action directed towards him-/herself: *samoxval* ‘self-advertising person’, *samoučka* ‘self-taught person’, *samoubijca* ‘person who commits suicide’.

Some compounds are ambiguous among the submeanings in (7). According to the authoritative dictionary of Evgen’eva (1981–1984), for instance, *samostrel* can mean ‘arbalest, crossbow’ (a mechanism), as well as ‘person with self-inflicted wound (usually designed to escape military service)’.

Our database contains a number of expressions that are ambiguous among the submeanings in (2). Consider the following:

- (8) a. *Specbol'nica* 'special hospital': hospital for privileged patients (e.g., party leaders in the Soviet period) or hospital specializing for particular diseases (e.g., cancer)
- b. *Specavtomobil* 'special vehicle': vehicle for privileged persons (e.g., political delegations) or vehicle for special purposes (e.g., fire engine).
- c. *Specprodukcija* 'special production': production of goods for privileged persons or production for special (usually military) purposes.

Examples of this type suggest that *spec-N* may be insightfully analyzed as (stub) compounds.

3.2 *Spec-N*: semantically distinct?

Now that we have established that *spec-N* represents morphological words rather than syntactic phrases, the question arises as to the exact relationship between the morphological *spec-N* and the syntactic Adj+N construction. Are they semantically distinct?

In Sect. 2, we saw that the *spec-N* construction has a number of semantic properties that are not characteristic of Adj+N. As pointed out in Sect. 3.1, an instance of the *spec-N* construction does not denote just anything "special" or "specialized", but rather involves a certain activity or situation that deviates from what is "normal" in one of the three ways listed in (2). The resulting expressions therefore have a narrower meaning than the corresponding adjective phrases.

Here are two examples that clearly illustrate that the *spec-N* construction may produce words that are semantically distinct from the corresponding noun phrase:⁸

- (9) *Specodežda*: 'special clothing for work somewhere, at some factory'
- (10) *Speckurs*: 'series of lectures at a university or college, which involves in-depth treatment of a special topic of the curriculum, chosen by the lecturer'

In the case of *specodežda*, this word is reserved for clothing used in certain kinds of industrial production. If you, for instance, need to buy special clothing for a mountain hike, it would not be appropriate to refer to this as *specodežda*. In a similar vein, a course that serves some special purpose can only be referred to as a *speckurs* if it is offered by a university or a college. Clearly, examples like (9) and (10) show that the *spec-N* construction can yield expressions that are semantically distinct from the Adj+N construction. In the terminology of Cruse (2004: 155), the examples in (9) and (10) are not propositional synonyms with the corresponding Adj+N construction since the truth conditions for the relevant constructions are different.

3.3 *Spec-N*: pragmatically distinct?

Does the *spec-N* construction yield expressions that are pragmatically different from the corresponding Adj+N construction? For the purposes of the present study, we will say that two items are pragmatically distinct if they have different connotations

⁸Both definitions are based on the authoritative dictionary of Evgen'eva (1981–1984).

(“community attitudes”, Allan, 2007: 1047). As pointed out by Townsend (1975: 206), stub compounds are “particularly characteristic of the Soviet period and of Soviet administrative terminology”. Many instances of the *spec*-N construction therefore carry connotations to Soviet realia, e.g., to bureaucratic jargon or services for privileged persons such as party leaders. Such special services were prominent in the Soviet society, even if the communist ideology claimed to strive for a classless society. Adj+N appears not to carry such connotations, at least not to the same degree.

In jocular and ironic texts from the post-Soviet era, neologisms with the *spec*-N construction are sometimes used in order to evoke the Soviet connotations of the construction. Here are two examples from the Russian National Corpus:

- (11) Èto magija... Raskatyvaem **spectesto** v svetjaščujusja kolbasku, čtoby sdelat' iz nee nužnoe količestvo kolobkov, kotoryx my budem načinjat' **specnačinkoj** i pressovat' **specformoj**. (“Pjatoe Izmerenie”, 2003)
 ‘It’s magic ... We roll out the **special dough** to form a shiny sausage in order to make the required number of buns, which we will fill with **special filling** and press by means of a **special form**.
- (12) Pervoj že velikoj strojkoy prezidenta Putina stala roskošnaja rezidencija v Novo-Ogarevo, gde pomimo konjušen i vertoletnoj ploščadki predusmatrivalsja **specogorodik** dlja snabženija sem’i glavy gosudarstva ekologičeski čistymi ovoščami. (“Vslux o . . .”, 2003)
 ‘The first building project of President Putin was a luxury residence at Novo-Ogarevo, where in addition to horse stables and a helicopter landing site there was planned a **special vegetable garden** to provide the family of the head of state with ecologically clean vegetables.’

In (11), we find the neologisms *spectesto* ‘special dough’, *specnačinka* ‘special filling’ and *specforma* ‘special form’. The humorous effect arises from the contrast between the mundane topic (baking) and the connotations to Soviet era bureaucratic parlance. Example (12) is an ironic description of a luxurious residence for the Russian president which in addition to horse stables and a helicopter landing site includes a *specogorodik* – a special vegetable garden. The connotations to Soviet realia (and hence the jocular or ironic effect) would be lost if the *spec*-N neologisms were replaced by the corresponding Adj+N constructions. Notice that *specogorodik* includes the diminutive suffix *-ik*. The clash between the familiar and emotional diminutive and the official and pretentious enhances the humorous effect. Examples like (11) and (12) indicate that the *spec*-N construction may produce words that are pragmatically different from Adj+N.

3.4 *Spec*-N and synonymy: stylistic variants?

The arguments provided above suggest that *spec*-N is semantically and pragmatically different from Adj+N. However, from the fact that *some* expressions are different it does not follow that *all* expressions are different. In the following, we argue that there are examples where *spec*-N and Adj+N are mere stylistic variants. For the purposes of the present article, we use “style” in a broad sense about the strategies speakers

may use to adapt to various speech situations (e.g., of different degrees of formality, cf. Coupland, 2007: 6–7).

The fact that *spec*-N and Adj+N tend to be semantically and pragmatically distinct is not surprising. Aronoff (2019, see also Masini 2019) has argued that (complete) synonymy is not expected in morphology for extralinguistic reasons. Here, Aronoff places himself in a long tradition of linguists pointing out that language tends to avoid synonymy (see Nessel & Makarova, 2018: 71–74 for discussion with references). Already in Saussure's *Cours* (1983 [1916]: 167) it is stated that “inevitably the phonetic difference which has emerged will tend to acquire significance”, which indicates that complete synonymy tends to be avoided in language. Bloomfield (1933: 145) argued that “there are no actual synonyms”, and the same claim was made by Nida (1958): “there are no complete synonyms within a language”. In *Construction Grammar*, Goldberg (1995: 67) formulated the Principle of No Synonymy as follows: “If two constructions are syntactically distinct, they must be semantically or pragmatically distinct”.

However, it seems that there exist some examples of synonymy, where at least some native speakers of Russian (including one of the authors of the present study) find no semantic or pragmatic differences of the types we have explored in Sects. 3.2–3.3:

- (13) a. *spektor(respondent) – special'nyj korrespondent* ‘special correspondent’
 b. *specvypusk – special'nyj vypusk* ‘special issue’
 c. *specëffekt – special'nyj èffekt* ‘special effect’ (e.g., in movies, theater and computer games)
 d. *specprogramma – special'naja programma* ‘special program’

We acknowledge that there may be considerable variation among native speakers with regard to the assessment of examples like these, but we note that in at least one of the examples in (13) our intuitions are shared by Evgen'eva (1981–1984) authoritative dictionary, which defines *spektor* (*spec*-N) as a colloquial variant of *special'nyj korrespondent* (Adj+N). In other words, the only difference appears to be one of style.

Since languages tend to avoid synonymy, examples like the ones in (13) are somewhat unexpected from a typological and theoretical point of view. Therefore, we must ask what conditions must be met in order for such examples to arise. We propose two conditions. First, we hypothesize that synonymy can occur when the Adj+N construction develops idiosyncratic meanings, which are carried over to *spec*-N. Second, we suggest that synonymy is possible when *spec*-N is not connected to a semantic field that carries particular connotations to Soviet realia. If both conditions are met, we argue, synonyms of the type in (13) may arise, i.e., expressions with the same meaning (including connotations) where the only differences are stylistic.

Let us start with semantics. If we go back to (13), it appears that Adj+N has developed meanings that are narrower than one might expect of syntactic phrases. In the terminology of Masini (2019: 282), they may be considered “multiword expressions”, i.e., “items that are larger than a morphological word and are nonetheless stored in our mental lexicon”. For instance, *special'nyj korrespondent* is not a correspondent

that is “special” in some random way (say, by having an unusual appearance), but rather a reporter that covers a particular geographical area or topic for a newspaper or TV/radio station. *Special’nyj vypusk* in (13b) is not just any edition that is special in one way or other, but rather a special issue of a publication, typically devoted to a particular topic.⁹ In a similar vein, *special’nyj èffekt* is not just any effect that may be characterized as “special”, but rather a visual trick used in movies, theater, and computer games. *Special’naja programma* is more complex since it appears to have several meanings, all of which are narrower than what one might expect from a syntactic phrase. For instance, in the field of education a *special’naja programma* may be a curriculum for special training.

Additional evidence comes from collocations, i.e., combinations of words that occur more frequently than one would expect from the frequencies of each individual word (Pivovarova et al., 2017). Both *special’naja programma* and *special’nyj korrespondent* are listed among the top ten collocations for *special’nyj* in the Russian National Corpus.¹⁰ The fact that these nouns tend to combine with *special’nyj* is likely to be connected to the fact that these combinations develop narrow meanings.

The pragmatic criterion for synonymy refers to the absence of connotations to Soviet realia. In Sect. 3.3, we argued that such connotations are characteristic of the *spec-N* construction. However, it does not follow from this that *all* examples of *spec-N* display such connotations. It seems that the relevant connotations are connected to certain semantic fields, such as government and bureaucracy, which in turn relate to certain submeanings, e.g., activities and situations for privileged persons. However, far from all examples of *spec-N* are connected to such semantic fields and meanings, and thus escape the connotations to Soviet realia. A case in point is *specèffekt* ‘special effect’. In view of the global influence of Hollywood on movie making, it is possible that the Russian term is an adaptation from English *special effect*. This would explain why *specèffekt* has escaped connotations to Soviet realia.

3.5 The role of frequency

What is the role of frequency? We suggest that if a filler noun occurs with high frequency in the Adj+N construction, the combination of adjective and noun may develop a narrow meaning, which they may carry over to the *spec-N* construction. In other words, we expect synonymy between the Adj+N and *spec-N* constructions to occur in cases where the combination of the full adjective and the filler noun is of high frequency. We may refer to this as the “frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis”, since it hypothesizes a relationship between frequency and synonymy.

In order to test this hypothesis, we consider the data in Table 1, which contains the most frequent filler nouns in our database, viz. all fillers that have more than 100 attestations with *special’nyj* and that occur at least ten times more frequently with

⁹*Special’nyj vypusk* may also be used about podcasts and is the name of a Russian TV show. We may analyze this as an extension from the meaning ‘special edition of a journal’.

¹⁰The collocations can be accessed under the heading *portret slova* ‘portrait of the word’ (<https://ruscorpora.ru/word/main>, accessed on April 2, 2023). The digital resource CoCoCo (Collocations, Collocations, Corpora, <https://cococo.cosyco.ru/index.html>, accessed on March 31, 2023) also singles out *special’naja programma* and *special’nyj korrespondent* as collocations in the Russian National Corpus.

Table 1 Fillers from our database that have more than 100 attestations with *special'nyj* and that occur at least ten times more frequently with *special'nyj* than with *spec-N*

Filler	# <i>special'nyj</i>	# <i>spec</i>	<i>special'nyj/spec</i> ratio
<i>Ustrojstvo</i> 'arrangement'	180	1	180,0
<i>Zakon</i> 'law'	159	1	159,0
<i>Pribor</i> 'apparatus'	134	1	134,0
<i>Žurnal</i> 'journal'	116	1	116,0
<i>Obrazovanie</i> 'education'	320	3	106,7
<i>Sistema</i> 'system'	112	2	56,0
<i>Korrespondent</i> 'correspondent'	434	8	54,3
<i>Literatura</i> 'literature'	260	6	43,3
<i>Razrešenje</i> 'permission'	193	5	38,6
<i>Komissija</i> 'commission'	542	17	31,9
<i>Programma</i> 'program'	310	11	28,2
<i>Vopros</i> 'question'	138	6	23,0
<i>Podgotovka</i> 'preparation'	275	13	21,2
<i>Klass</i> 'class'	129	7	18,4
<i>Naznačenje</i> 'designation'	387	22	17,6
<i>Organ</i> 'organ'	105	7	15,0
<i>Predmet</i> 'subject of study'	100	10	10,0

special'nyj than with *spec-N*. The column marked as “#*special'nyj*” gives the number of attestations with *special'nyj*, while “#*spec*” provides the number of attestations with the *spec-N* construction. The rightmost column contains the *special'nyj/spec* ratio, i.e., the number of attestations of *special'nyj* divided by the number of attestations of *spec-N* for a given filler.

Since the filler nouns in Table 1 are highly frequent in the Adj+N construction, the frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis predicts that for these fillers the *spec-N* and Adj+N constructions can be used interchangeably without a semantic difference. Is this prediction borne out by the facts? We notice that both *programma* and *korrespondent*, for which we argued that *spec-N* and Adj+N are synonymous in Sect. 3.4, are found in the table. Detailed analysis of individual corpus examples suggests that the remaining items on the list involve synonymy as well – with one exception, to which we return below. For some words, e.g., *zakon*, *pribor* and *žurnal*, *spec-N* is used with the same meaning as the corresponding Adj+N construction. For instance, the only attestation we have of *speczakon* is about a new law related to agriculture, and this is exactly how *special'nyj zakon* is used, viz. to denote a law that covers a certain field. For other words, e.g., *ustrojstvo*, *obrazovanie* and *sistema*, polysemy complicates the situation, since for these nouns the Adj+N construction is used in several meanings. However, the examples we have access to suggest that *spec-N* is synonymous with Adj+N in the most frequent meaning of this construction. By way of example, consider *specobrazovanie*. This word normally means ‘special education’ but is also attested in anatomy where it denotes special formations of ganglia (clusters of nerves). Our three attestations of *spec-N* are used about special education

and could have been replaced by Adj+N without a change of meaning. To summarize, examples like these are interesting because they suggest a relationship between high frequency and synonymy between the Adj+N and *spec*-N constructions, and thus lend support to the “frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis”.

We hasten to add that there is one clear exception in Table 1, where the prediction from the “frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis” is not borne out by the facts, namely *organ*. Here, *specorgan* has developed the narrow meaning of ‘secret service’, while Adj+N is used in a number of more general meanings. Although examples like *specorgan* complicate the picture, we nevertheless suggest that the “frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis” is on the right track, since it accounts for the majority of the data in Table 1.

We acknowledge that a more rigorous test of the frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis is difficult, since interchangeability is context dependent, and intuitions may vary considerably among native speakers. It would therefore be necessary to test a large number of contexts with a large group of language users. Such a test is beyond the scope of the present study, and the question of the relationship between frequency and synonymy is therefore left open for future research.

Even if the frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis appears promising, it should be pointed out that even if the frequency distribution reported in Table 1 may facilitate synonymy between Adj+N and *spec*-N, we are clearly not dealing with the only scenario that may lead to synonymy. Examples such as *special'nyj vypusk* ‘special edition’ and *special'nyj ÷ffekt* ‘special effect’ from (13) show that. In our database, *vypusk* is used approximately as frequently with *spec* as it is with *special'nyj*, while *÷ffekt* occurs much more frequently with *spec* than with *special'nyj*. In other words, even if the frequency distribution for these fillers is different from the frequencies in Table 1, *vypusk* and *÷ffekt* involve synonymy, as argued in Sect. 3.4.

To summarize, the frequency-to-synonymy hypothesis receives some support. However, rigorous test of the hypothesis is not straightforward. The hypothesis furthermore cannot explain all the examples under scrutiny, so it is likely that other factors than frequency are relevant as well.

3.6 A construction hierarchy

We suggest that the generalizations explored above can be accommodated in a construction hierarchy with three layers. The fragment in Fig. 1, which focuses on *spec*-N, illustrates this. We may refer to the top layer as the “constructional layer” since it contains a general schema for the relevant construction. The middle “allostructional” layer contains schemas for the three submeanings (“allostructions”, Cappelle, 2006 and Nessel & Janda, 2023) discussed in Sect. 2.2. The bottom “lexical” layer includes schemas for individual lexical items (unique combinations of *spec* and filler).

Taken together, the network captures properties shared by all instances of *spec*-N, as well as properties relevant for certain allostructions and individual lexical items. Each node in the hierarchy consists of a box where the upper part represents form and the lower part meaning.¹¹ As is customary in Construction Grammar and cognitive

¹¹Our notation differs from that of Booij (2010), who uses double headed arrows to represent the relationship between form and meaning.

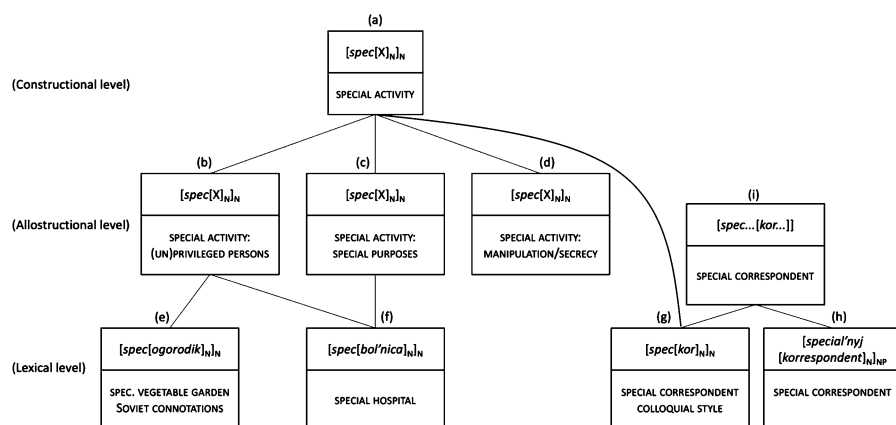


Fig. 1 Fragment of construction hierarchy for the *spec*-N construction

linguistics, “meaning” includes both semantic and pragmatic information (Langacker, 2008). We also include reference to stylistic differences in the lower parts of the boxes in Fig. 1. The lines connecting the nodes in the hierarchy connect a more specific schema (below) with a fully compatible, but more general schema (above). We would like to highlight three aspects of the hierarchy.

First, we have placed the information about connotations to Soviet realia at the bottom level since there is considerable variation among lexical items. Schema (e) at the lexical level, which represents *specogorodik* ‘special vegetable garden’, illustrates this.

A second point concerns ambiguity between submeanings. In Sect. 3.1, we argued that such ambiguities are characteristic of *spec*-N and compounds in general. The relevant ambiguities can be represented as multiple connection lines between the lexical and allostructional levels. A case in point is *specbol'nica* ‘special hospital’ at the bottom level (schema f), which is connected to two submeanings (allostructions, schemas b and c).

Third, stylistic variants are captured as lexical schemas at the bottom level that are directly connected to the top-level schema. The schema for *speckor* ‘special correspondent’ at the bottom level (schema g) illustrates this. Its semantic and pragmatic identity with the corresponding instantiation of the Adj+N construction can be represented by means of the “linking schema” (i) with the relevant meaning. This linking schema contains the information shared by *speckor* and *special'nyj korrespondent*, including the entire semantic specification. The only difference is the stylistic annotation that the former is marked as “colloquial”, while the latter is not.

4 The *spec*-N construction: what is the motivation behind shortening strategies?

What is the motivation behind shortening mechanisms of the type we explore in the present study? Why would language users “pack” information from an already existing syntactic phrase “into another (morphological) lexeme” (Masini & Benigni, 2012:

447)? Masini and Benigni point out that “Russian is a highly inflectional language with a rich morphological system” and argue that this may render “the ‘morphological word’ the preferred, or ‘canonical’, kind of lexical unit [...] in that language” (Masini & Benigni, 2012: 447). While this is helpful as far as it goes, it is not clear why stub compounds would be a “preferred” option, since compounding in general is a less central word-formation strategy in Russian than affixation (Townsend, 1975: 201, Nessel & Sokolova, 2019: 265–266 for discussion). We suggest that it may be helpful to discuss diachronic and synchronic motivation separately. In the following, we propose a diachronic account in terms of “economy” and “extravagance” (Keller, 1994), while we relate the synchronic motivation to “economy” and “expressiveness”.

4.1 Motivation and diachrony: from economy to extravagance

From a diachronic point of view, “motivation” can be understood as the historical circumstances that led to the formation of the construction as a linguistic innovation at a certain point in time. According to Panov (ed.) (1968: 69–70), stub compounds were first used in telegrams as a way to make them shorter and cheaper and in military communication during World War I, but then spread to the press and to everyday speech (Panov (ed.) 1968: 69–70). While the original motivation seems to have been economy (the preference of the shorter form), we suggest that the spread and conventionalization of the *spec-N* construction and stub compounds in the language community can be understood in terms of Keller’s (1994, see also Haspelmath, 1999: 1055) “invisible-hand theory”. In particular, what we may call the “maxim of extravagance” seems relevant:

(14) “Talk in such a way that you are noticed.” (Keller, 1994: 101)

The idea behind this maxim is that linguistic innovations may occur when language users decide to break the rules of the language and say things in new ways, instead of following the conventions of the language. Breaking the rules may sometimes be socially advantageous, because such a behavior may give the language users increased attention from other language users. In their intent to be “socially successful with their speech” (Haspelmath, 1999), speakers may not only be particularly expressive but deviate considerably from established language norms by using an expression in an innovative sense. In contrast to “expressive morphology” (Zwicky & Pullum, 1987) and “linguistic creativity” (Bauer, 1983), extravagance goes beyond the individual speaker’s innovative language use and takes into account the eventual effect that innovations have on the language system and its structures.

Are there any historical circumstances where the maxim of extravagance becomes particularly relevant? We submit that the situation after the Russian revolution in 1917 represents a situation germane to linguistic extravagance. The Bolsheviks had just come to power, and their goal was to transform Russian society completely based on communist ideology. In the revolutionary spirit of the Bolsheviks, it was natural to break linguistic conventions as part of the effort to create a new communist society. The emergence of stub compounds can be understood against this background (see

Neset & Sokolova, 2019: 265–267 for discussion). According to Molinsky (1973: 15), stub compounds appeared in Russian “[i]n an attempt to ‘sovietize’ the language”. In the Soviet period stub compounds were perceived as a “truly revolutionary, popular way to create words” (Panov, 1968: 73).¹²

Our data concerning the *spec*-N construction (which was not the focus of Molinsky, 1973 or Neset & Sokolova, 2019) lend support to the idea that stub compounds occurred after the Russian revolution as an example of linguistic extravagance. We have tracked the earliest attestation of each example of *spec*-N in our database, and our data show that the first examples are attested in the 1920s and 1930s – shortly after the Russian revolution:

- (15) Attestations from the 1920s and 1930s (year of first attestation in parentheses)
- a. *specodežda* ‘special clothing’ (1920)
 - b. *specčelovek* ‘special person’ (1924)
 - c. *speckurs* ‘special course’ (1928)
 - d. *speckor* ‘special correspondent’ (1930)
 - e. *speckul’tura* ‘special culture’ (1930)
 - f. *spekartočka* ‘special card’ (1934)
 - g. *specpereselenec* ‘special deported person’ (1935)
 - h. *speckonvoj* ‘special convoy (of convicted persons)’ (1935)
 - i. *specstavka* ‘special wage’ (1935)
 - j. *specstal* ‘special steel’ (1936)
 - k. *specčast* ‘special military detachment’ (1938)

Although we cannot exclude that earlier examples of *spec*-N may have been coined before 1920, our data strongly suggest that the construction became part of the Russian grammar in the period shortly after the Russian revolution. While some of the early attestations, such as *specodežda* ‘special clothing’ and *speckor* ‘special correspondent’, appear to have no direct link to Bolshevik ideology, examples like *specčelovek* ‘special person’ and *speckul’tura* ‘special culture’ relate to the Bolsheviks’ effort to transform the society. Other examples refer to the grimmer aspects of Soviet realia, such as deportations to prison camps (*specpereselenec* ‘special deported person’ and *speckonvoj* ‘special convoy (of convicted persons)’).

Evidence in support of the relationship between *spec*-N, linguistic extravagance and the post-revolutionary period also comes from the fact that many examples of *spec*-N carry connotations to Soviet realia, as we have shown in Sect. 3.3 above. We may distinguish between three phases in the history of the *spec*-N construction. The first phase covers the years immediately following the revolution and encompasses examples such as those listed in (15). For the users of Russian at that time, the *spec*-N construction must have sounded innovative and been associated with the new ideology and the ambitious plans for the transformation of the society. In the second period, which we roughly may identify as post-war Soviet times, the *spec*-N construc-

¹²In the Russian original: “podlinno revoljucionnyj, narodnyj sposob slovotvorčestva”.

tion became mainstream and developed connotations to the Soviet bureaucracy. In this period, the three submeanings described in Sect. 2.2 became established. *Spec-N* is reported to have been one of the fifty most widely used shortening strategies in the Russian language of this period (Alekseev, 1966: 22).¹³ The *spec-N* construction survived the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in the third phase (the post-Soviet era) we find a number of new coinages, including *inter alia* names of companies (which may be considered stylistically neutral) and neologisms that evoke connotations to Soviet realia in a playful way, as discussed in Sect. 3.3.

4.2 Motivation and synchrony: expressiveness and economy

From a synchronic perspective, “motivation” may be understood as the circumstances that make a speaker use the *spec-N* construction at a given point in time. An in-depth analysis of this question is beyond the scope of the present study, but it stands to reason that the motivation may depend on the relationship between the *spec-N* and Adj+N constructions. In cases where the two constructions are semantically or pragmatically distinct, we suggest that the motivation is “expressiveness” (Zwicky & Pullum, 1987). For cases where the two constructions are (near) synonyms, the motivation may be connected to “economy”.

As demonstrated in Sect. 3.2, *spec-N* is often semantically different from Adj+N, as shown by examples such as *specodežda* ‘special clothing for use in factories’, which is not the same as *special’naja odežda* ‘special clothing (in general)’. In cases like this, the motivation for using *spec-N* rather than Adj+N must be the desire to express the meaning that sets *spec-N* apart from Adj+N. This account carries over to cases where the two constructions may be semantically identical, but pragmatically different. In cases where connotations to Soviet realia are important, *spec-N* is the best way to convey such connotations.

However, we have also argued that there are cases where the two constructions are mere stylistically different ways to convey the same semantic and pragmatic information. For instance, the use of *spektor* instead of *special’nyj korrespondent* to refer to a special correspondent may be conditioned by stylistic factors. The more colloquial the style, the more likely the use of *spektor*. In the limiting case, where even stylistic differences are minimal, the ultimate motivating factor for *spec-N* may be the principle of economy, whereby other things being equal a shorter expression is preferable to a longer one.

4.3 Interim conclusion: motivation and construction morphology

The analysis we have sketched is not very detailed, but seems sufficient to justify the relevance of the notions of “extravagance”, “expressiveness”, and “economy”. How do these concepts relate to the Construction Morphology analysis we proposed in Sect. 3.6? Since our analysis intends to be synchronic, the diachronic generalizations explored in Sect. 4.1 should not be incorporated directly in the construction

¹³In this period, it is possible that the frequent use of *spec-N* may in some cases have been connected to obscurantism, i.e., the desire to conceal the real nature of Soviet institutions from average citizens. It is, however, difficult to test this hypothesis empirically.

hierarchy. However, the semantic and pragmatic properties that emerged from the diachronic development of the construction are adequately accommodated. The principles of “expressiveness” and “economy” are part of our synchronic analysis of the construction, but they are nevertheless not incorporated directly in the construction hierarchy. While the fact that *spec-N* has distinct semantic and pragmatic properties and is shorter than *Adj+N*, is represented adequately in the construction hierarchy, the principles of “expressiveness” and “economy” themselves are not part of the hierarchy, but rather reflect general cognitive capacities that impact the interaction between competing constructions such as *spec-N* and *Adj+N*.

5 The *spec-N* construction: does it block the use of the *Adj+N* construction?

Rainer (2016: 1) defines blocking as “the non-occurrence of some linguistic form, whose existence could be expected on general grounds, due to the existence of a rival form”. As Gardani et al. (2019: 17) point out, “[i]t has long been known that the use of morphologically complex words or word forms that comply with the requirement of a regular pattern can be hindered by the existence of an established synonym”. Typically, a shorter, simpler and often irregular expression blocks a longer, more complex and regular one:

- (16) a. Morphologically simplex words block morphologically complex words: *knife* instead of “*cutter*” and *thief* instead of “*stealer*” (Rainer, 2016: 1, Gardani et al., 2019: 15).
- b. Morphological constructions block syntactic constructions: *tomorrow* instead of “*the day after today*” (Gardani et al., 2019: 15)

Rainer (2016) argues for a flexible theory involving statistical tendencies rather than categorical rules, and Masini (2019), who analyzes Italian data, suggests that “bidirectional blocking” takes place. Thus, a morphological construction may block a syntactic one as in (16b), but a syntactic construction may also block a morphological one. As an example of the latter, Masini (2019: 286) mentions the syntactic construction *capo dello stato* ‘head of state’ in Italian, which blocks the morphological **capostato*.

In the following, we show that categorical blocking is not characteristic of the competition between the *spec-N* and *Adj+N* construction. Our data furthermore lend support to Masini’s idea that a multiword construction may be preferred over a morphological construction, although, as mentioned, we are dealing with tendencies, not categorical rules.

The only potentially categorical blocking rule emerging from our dataset can be stated as follows:

- (17) If the filler is not a full-fledged noun, *spec-N* blocks *Adj+N*.

Table 2 Number of fillers with various percentages of *spec-N*. Only fillers with 10 or more attestations in our database are included, i.e., 222 out of 424 lemmas in our database

	#fillers
0–9%	91
10–19%	39
20–29%	21
30–39%	11
40–49%	15
50–59%	11
60–69%	7
70–79%	4
80–89%	3
90–100%	20
Total	222

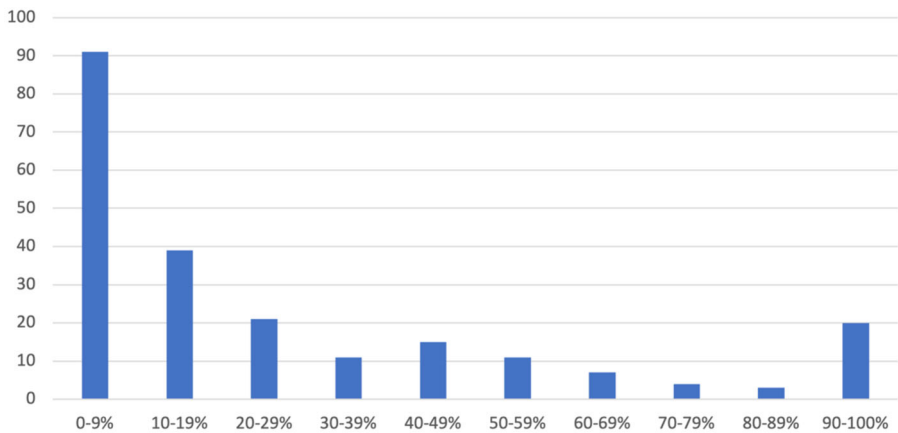


Fig. 2 Number of fillers with various percentages of *spec-N*. Only fillers with 10 or more attestations in our database are included, i.e., 222 out of 424 lemmas in our database

Thus, for shortened fillers like *naz* (from *naznačenie* ‘designation’) only *spec-N* is possible (*specnaz* ‘special operation force’), while *Adj+N* is not (**special’nyj naz*).¹⁴ However, this rule is due to a general requirement in Russian that the head of a noun phrase be a full-fledged noun, i.e., an expression that can occur alone in a syntactic slot requiring a noun. Since the rule in (17) follows from a more general principle, we arguably do not need to include (17) in our analysis of *spec-N* and *Adj+N*, and we also do not need to include it in a theory of blocking.

The remainder of our dataset represent statistical tendencies rather than categorical blocking rules. The tendencies range from fillers that strongly prefer *spec-N* via fillers that frequently combine with both constructions to fillers where *Adj+N* is the dominant option. The situation is summarized in Table 2 and Fig. 2, where we divide

¹⁴Admittedly, our database contains one single attestation of *Adj+N* with a shortened filler: *special’nyj kor* ‘special correspondent’.

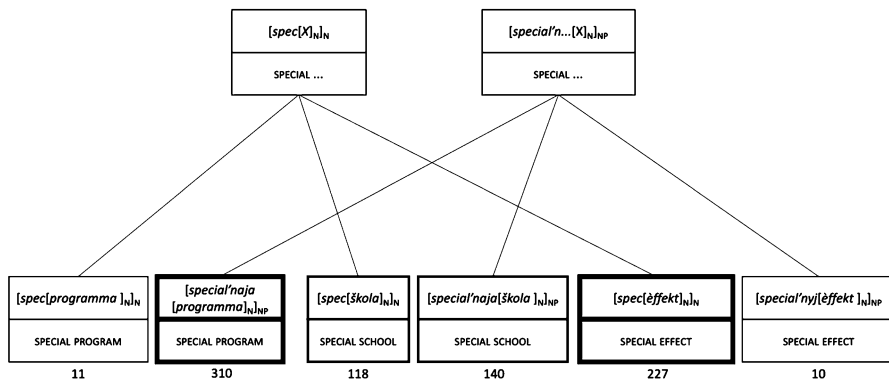


Fig. 3 Fragment of construction hierarchy with representation of different degrees of entrenchment. Numbers below the terminal nodes indicate the number of attestations in our database

our data in ten groups. In the row marked as “0–9%”, we include fillers where *spec-N* occurs in less than 10% of the examples (and, therefore, Adj+N accounts for more than 90% of the attested examples with these fillers). The table shows that we have 91 such fillers in our dataset. The row marked as “10–19%” contains 39 fillers where *spec-N* covers between 10 and 19% of the data. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the row marked as 90–100%, where *spec-N* is the dominant option that accounts for 90% or more of our data. As shown, we have 20 items of this type in our dataset.

Two observations can be made on the basis of the table and figure. First, we see that the whole spectrum is represented in our data. There is no category (percent range) that is unattested. Second, we see that there are more fillers that prefer Adj+N over *spec-N* than there are fillers where *spec-N* is the dominant construction. If we summarize the number of fillers where Adj+N is dominant (i.e., where *spec-N* accounts for less than 50% of the examples), this amounts to 177 fillers. There are only 45 fillers where the dominant option is *spec-N* (i.e., where *spec-N* accounts for more than 50% of the examples). This arguably lends supports to Masini’s (2019) idea that multiword constructions may block morphological constructions, although, of course, our data do not involve categorical blocking, only statistical tendencies.

How can the situation described in Table 2 and Fig. 2 be accommodated in Construction Morphology? Consider the fragment of a construction network in Fig. 3, which incorporates the degree of entrenchment of the construction schemas. Entrenchment can be understood as the degree to which a construction represents an established pattern in the mental grammar of language users (Langacker, 2017: 42). Although the relationship is not straightforward (Schmid, 2017 and 2020), entrenchment is related to frequency; all else being equal, a highly frequent schema is more entrenched than a schema with lower frequency. In Fig. 3, we represent entrenchment as boxes with lines of various degrees of thickness. The thicker the line, the more entrenched the schema.

Figure 3 juxtaposes three types of situations.¹⁵ To the left, we have the schemas for *special'naja programma* vs. *specprogramma*, where Adj+N is the dominant option. Therefore, the lines around the schema for *special'naja programma* are thicker than those of *specprogramma*. In the middle portion of the network, we have schemas for *special'naja škola* and *specškola* 'special school', which illustrate a situation where the two constructions are used with approximately the same frequency in our dataset.¹⁶ Finally, the schemas for *special'nyj èffekt* and *specèffekt* 'special effect' in the rightmost portion of the figure represent situations where it is *spec*-N that is the most entrenched option.

6 Concluding remarks

The present study offers a detailed analysis of the Russian *spec*-N construction and its competition with the Adj+N construction. Couched in Construction Morphology, our analysis revolves around three theoretical questions.

The first question concerns the status of constructions resulting from shortening mechanisms. Are the resulting constructions more than stylistic variants of the longer constructions they are related to? We have demonstrated that *spec*-N represents morphological words rather than syntactic phrases, and that these words may take on a life of their own and develop semantic and pragmatic properties that set them apart from the corresponding instances of the Adj+N construction. However, we have also identified examples where the only difference between the two constructions pertains to style. Such examples are unexpected, insofar as language tends to avoid synonymy. We have proposed that synonymy between *spec*-N and Adj+N may occur when two conditions are met. First, Adj+N must develop a narrow meaning that is carried over to *spec*-N. Second, the construction must escape connotations to Soviet realia, which often set *spec*-N apart from Adj+N. We have hypothesized a relationship between synonymy and frequency, which accommodates some, but not all attested examples of synonymy.

The second question pertains to the motivation of shortening mechanisms in language. We have suggested that it is helpful to explore this question from a diachronic and a synchronic point of view. We have accounted for the diachronic motivation of *spec*-N in terms of economy and the "maxim of extravagance", which we have related to the political situation after the Russian revolution in 1917. From a synchronic

¹⁵Since our focus is on entrenchment, the schemas in the figure do not include detailed representations of the semantic, pragmatic, or stylistic properties of the relevant constructions. The figure also does not include schemas for all constructions since they are tangential to the discussion of entrenchment. Paradigmatic relationships are important in Construction Morphology and can be represented by means of coindexation (see, e.g., Booij, 2010: 52–66). In order to capture the paradigmatic generalization that the same filler nouns occur in both the *spec*-N and Adj+N constructions, we have included an index _i in the filler of both schemas at the top of Fig. 3. As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, in cases where the filler is an abbreviated noun (e.g., *speckor* 'special correspondent') there is a paradigmatic relationship between the abbreviated noun and the corresponding full noun (e.g., *speckorrespondent* 'special correspondent'). It is possible to capture this relationship by means of coindexation: [_s_ip_je_kc_i[kor_N]]_N and [_s_ip_je_kc_i[korrespondent_N]]_N.

¹⁶Notice that both *specškola* and *special'naja škola* are attested in two closely related meanings in our dataset: (i) 'school for talented students' and (ii) 'school for students with learning challenges'.

perspective, we have proposed an analysis of motivation in terms of economy and expressiveness.

The third question we have explored, is blocking. We have demonstrated that categorical blocking rules are not characteristic of the constructions under scrutiny in the present study. Our data range from situations where Adj+N is dominant via balanced situations where both constructions are used with approximately the same frequency to situations where *spec*-N is the dominant option. This arguably lends support to Masini's (2019) idea of "bidirectional blocking", whereby a morphological construction may block a syntactic construction and *vice versa*.

Our findings for all three questions converge, insofar as we have shown that all the relevant generalizations can be accommodated in Construction Morphology. In particular, a three-layered construction hierarchy enables us to represent information about semantics, pragmatics, style and entrenchment that is relevant for the three theoretical questions discussed above.

In addition to analyzing shortening mechanisms from a theoretical perspective, our study contributes to Russian linguistics. Our synchronic and diachronic analysis of the *spec*-N construction adds to our knowledge of stub compounds in Russian, which has been a somewhat understudied area of the Russian language.

The analysis we have proposed presents several alleys for future research. Of particular importance is the role of frequency in shortening mechanisms. A more detailed investigation of frequency may sharpen our understanding of the Russian *spec*-N construction and of shortening mechanisms in language in general.

At the end of this article, we return to the example we started with: *specoperacija* 'special operation'. As pointed out in Sect. 3.1, this instance of the *spec*-N construction has become a euphemism for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With its connotations to Soviet parlance this euphemism has proved an important instrument in Kremlin's rhetoric. In this way, our analysis of the *spec*-N construction offers a small but significant contribution to the understanding of the political discourse concerning the war in Ukraine.

Funding Open access funding provided by UiT The Arctic University of Norway (incl University Hospital of North Norway). We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Norwegian Research Council (Norges Forskningsråd), grant 300002.

Declarations

Competing Interests We are not aware of any conflicts of interest regarding this article.

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