

## On a Quirky Russian Idiom (*užas kakoj* + ADJ lit. ‘horror what.a + ADJ’ $\approx$ ‘incredibly ADJ’)

Igor Mel’čuk

*Èd Kinen? On užas kakoj tolkovyj!*  
‘Ed Keenan? He is incredibly intelligent!’

[A remark I overheard in a corridor of Leningrad University about fifty years ago, during a short visit of Professor Keenan to the ex-USSR; all these years it has been patiently waiting to be used. Today is the day!]

### 1 The Russian Expression *užas kakoj* + ADJ

#### 1.1 Introductory Remarks

Russian has highly colloquial sentences of type (1), which are quite common:

- (1) On byl *užas kakoj* umnyj.  
‘He was incredibly smart.’

It is the expression UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ] lit. ‘horror what.a [+ ADJ]’ = ‘very-very’ that will be examined in this paper: its status as a lexical unit, its syntactic structure, and its lexicographic description. As far as I know, Russian has another three expressions of the same form and meaning: ŽUT’ KAKOJ [+ ADJ] lit. ‘horror what.a [+ ADJ]’, as well as the popular STRAX KAKOJ [+ ADJ] lit. ‘fear<sub>(N)</sub> what.a [+ ADJ]’ and STRAST’ KAKOJ [+ ADJ] lit. ‘fear<sub>(N)</sub> what.a [+ ADJ]’. These three expressions are mutually substitutable with UŽAS KAKOJ in all contexts, so that whatever is said about UŽAS KAKOJ covers them too.

The main linguistic interest of the expression UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ] lies in its unusual syntax, which is still a source of much controversy. Let me emphasize that the present discussion is conducted in terms of dependency syntax (rather than phrase structure, or constituency, syntax).<sup>1</sup>

Russian actually has an open set of expressions similar to UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ]. I mean expressions each of which consists of two components:

- The syntactically central component is an interrogative-relative adjectival pronoun KAKOJ ‘what kind, which, what.a’; it will be referred to as **K-word** (*kto* ‘who’, *kogda* ‘when’, *kak* ‘how’, *kuda* ‘where to’, but also *čto* ‘what’, *skol’ko* ‘how many/much’, etc.; in English, similar lexical units are called WH-words).

<sup>1</sup>For details about dependency approach in syntax see, e.g., Mel’čuk (2009).

- The second component varies from one lexeme (like UŽAS) to an incomplete clause of the type ‘even your smart mother wouldn’t guess [what.a]’: *daže tvoja umnaja mat’ ne dogadalas’ by kakoj*. These quasi-relative clauses are constrained, but theoretically infinite in number.

The expressions of this type can be called **K-expressions**.

K-expressions in Russian have been studied rather extensively: Mel’čuk (2013), Iomdin (2010a), Iomdin (2010b), Testelec and Bylinina (2005a), Testelec and Bylinina (2005b), to name only the latest publications known to me (they contain a rich bibliography). Traditionally, these expressions are subsumed under the rubric of “indefinite pronouns” of a special type. However, the expression UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ] was not examined, and it is worth a discussion: being a K-expression, UŽAS KAKOJ and its three close relatives are by no means pronominal, but rather are obvious intensifiers.

Given the character of this paper,

- I will not systematically introduce all necessary notions and will have to rely upon endnotes and references;
- I will limit myself to the analysis of the expression UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ].

### 1.2 The Lexical Status of UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ]

The expression UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ] means ‘very-very [ADJ]’ and is used to modify an evaluative noun or a long-form qualificative adjective: it is a strong intensifier. Its main semantic property is as follows: *užas kakoj* intensifies “positive”, “negative” and “neutral” nouns/adjectives alike:

- (2) a. On byl užas kakoj umnica (čudak, bogač, merzavec, babnik)  
‘He was an incredible/incredibly intelligent man (excentric, wealthy man, scoundrel, womanizer).’
- b. On byl užas kakoj umnyj (strannyj, bogatyj, merzkij, meločnyj, dlinnyj, korotkij)  
‘He was incredibly intelligent (nice, wealthy, disgusting, petty, long, short).’

In other words, UŽAS KAKOJ [+ ADJ] does not retain in its meaning the negative nuances that could be due to its etymology: ‘horror’. (In this UŽAS KAKOJ is similar to the English adjective *terrific*). From this I conclude that UŽAS KAKOJ is a noncompositional phraseme — an **idiom**; from now on, it will be put into semi-brackets, which mark idioms:  $\lceil$ UŽAS KAKOJ $\rceil$ .<sup>2</sup>

### 1.3 The Syntactic Structure of the Idiom $\lceil$ UŽAS KAKOJ $\rceil$

As seen in (1) und (2), the idiom  $\lceil$ UŽAS KAKOJ $\rceil$  is clearly an adjectival, yet it can also function as an adverb, modifying a short-form adjective, an adverb or a verb; in this usage it has the form  $\lceil$ UŽAS KAK $\rceil$ :

- (3) a. On byl užas kak xoroš (bezobrazen, uměn, bolen).  
‘He was incredibly handsome (ugly, smart, sick).’

<sup>2</sup>About idioms see Mel’čuk (2011, 2012).

- b. Bylo užas kak smešno ⟨veselo, vkusno, blisko, daleko⟩.  
 'It was very funny ⟨hilarious, tasty, close by, far away⟩.'
- c. Ja užas kak ustal ⟨ljublju, nenavižu, xoču⟩.  
 'I am incredibly tired ⟨I like/hate/want very-very much⟩.'

Both variants are identical in their meaning and use; they are allomorphs of the lexical unit  $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$ .<sup>3</sup>

As a whole, the idiom  $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$  syntactically depends on the modified lexeme; and since the pronoun KAK(OJ) determines the distribution of this expression in the sentence, its morphological behavior (being its morphological contact point) and its meaning (the idiom is a qualifier, just as KAK(OJ)), it is its **syntactic head**:  $užas \leftarrow \text{pron-junctive-kakoj}[\leftarrow \text{modif-umnyj}]$  lit. 'horror  $\leftarrow$  **pron-junctive-how** [ $\leftarrow$  **modif-intelligent**]'.<sup>4</sup>

The Surface-Syntactic Relation **pronominal-junctive** plays an important role in the present study: it is proposed to represent the internal syntactic structure of all Russian Kexpressions — by subordinating the remaining component via its top node to the K-word.

#### 1.4 The Lexicographic Description of the Idiom $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$

The lexicographic description of the idiom  $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$  is straightforward:<sup>5</sup>  
 $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$ , idiom, adjectival.

##### Definition

$\ulcorner užas kakoj \urcorner$  [X]: 'very-very [X]'

##### SSynt-trees

$\ulcorner \text{UŽAS} \leftarrow \text{pron-junctive-KAKOJ} \urcorner \mid \leftarrow \text{N/ADJ}_{\text{LONG}}$

$\ulcorner \text{UŽAS} \leftarrow \text{pron-junctive} \text{---} \text{KAK} \urcorner \mid \leftarrow \text{ADJ}_{\text{SHORT}}/\text{V}/\text{ADV}$

##### Lexical Functions

Syn :  $\ulcorner \text{žut} \urcorner \text{ kakoj} \urcorner$  'very-very', **popular**  $\ulcorner \text{strax kakoj} \urcorner$  'very-very';  
 čudoviščno 'monstrously', neverojatno 'incredibly', potrjasajušče  
 'tremendously', užasno 'horribly', zverski 'beastly', žutko 'horribly', ...;  
 očen' 'very'

#### 1.5 Other Russian Idioms of the Form $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS} \dots \urcorner$

Russian has other idioms consisting of UŽAS and a K-word different from KAK(OJ):

- (4) a. K nam užas kto xodil.  
 'Some horrible people were visiting us.'
- b. i. S nim užas čto stalo.  
 'A horrible thing happened to him.'

<sup>3</sup>The description of  $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$  and  $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAK} \urcorner$  as allomorphs can be questioned; however, this problem is irrelevant to our discussion.

<sup>4</sup>On criteria for syntactic heads see Mel'čuk (2009:25–40).

<sup>5</sup>The lexicographic description of  $\ulcorner \text{UŽAS KAKOJ} \urcorner$  is carried out in the framework of the Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary [= ECD]; see Mel'čuk (2006).

- ii. On *užas čto* vytvorjal.  
'He was doing some horrible things.'
- c. Mir *užas kuda* katitsja.  
'The world is going in a horrible direction.'
- d. On *užas skol'ko* stixov znaet.  
'He knows so many poems.'

In spite of their material similarity, these expressions are different idioms:

- ⌈UŽAS ← **pron-junct**–KTO⌋ 'horrible person/people'
- ⌈UŽAS ← **pron-junct**–ČTO⌋ 'horrible thing/things'
- ⌈UŽAS ← **pron-junct**–KUDA⌋ 'in a horrible direction'
- ⌈UŽAS ← **pron-junct**–SKOL'KO⌋ 'very much/very many'<sup>6</sup>

Each one needs its own lexical entry.

## 2 The Russian Expression UŽAS [, *kakoj*...]

### 2.1 Some Basic Facts About UŽAS [, *kakoj*...]

One could stop here, were it not for the existence of another Russian expression: UŽAS [, *kakoj*...], superficially very similar to the idiom ⌈UŽAS KAKOJ⌋, but in reality very different from it:

- (5) Užas, *kakoj* on byl glupyj.  
lit. 'Horror how he was stupid.'

The differences are semantic and syntactic.

#### Semantic differences

- UŽAS in (5) does not combine with 'positive' lexemes:

- (6) a. # Užas, *kakoj* on byl umnyj.  
lit. 'Horror how he was intelligent.'
- b. # Užas, *kak* on xorošo vygljadel.  
lit. 'Horror how he good looked.'

In other words, this UŽAS means '... is horrible'.

- The idiom ⌈UŽAS KAKOJ⌋ in (1)–(3) is a normal descriptive LU: it can be used in a subordinate clause (e.g. in reported speech), while the lexeme UŽAS in (5) is a signalative, which expresses the attitude/the belief of the Speaker and therefore cannot be used in a subordinate clause:<sup>7</sup>

- (7) a. Marina govorila, čto on byl užas kak umen.  
lit. 'Marina used to say that he was horror how intelligent.'

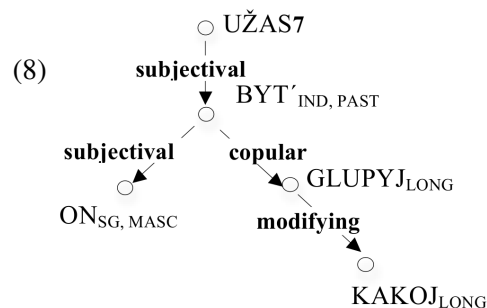
<sup>6</sup>However, not all K-words are capable of forming idioms with UŽAS:  
\*⌈UŽAS KOGDA 'when'/ZAČEM 'what for'/POČEMU 'why'⌋.

- b. \* Marina govorila, što užas, kak on byl umen.  
lit. 'Marina used to say that horror how he was intelligent.'

More specifically, UŽAS [, *kakoj* ...] means 'I signal that I believe that ... is horrible'.

### Syntactic differences

- 「UŽAS KAKOJ」 is an adjectival/adverbial idiom, while UŽAS is a single lexeme, whose part of speech is clausative:<sup>8</sup> UŽAS7 (MAS 1984 lists six senses of the word UŽAS, but misses the present one).
- UŽAS7 can be used alone as an interjection, constituting a complete sentence: *Užas!* 'Horror!'
- In the idiom 「UŽAS KAKOJ」 the pronoun is the syntactic Governor, while the lexeme UŽAS7 syntactically governs the clause that contains the interrogative-relative pronoun (in this case, KAKOJ):



- The idiom 「UŽAS KAKOJ」 does not take modifiers; the lexeme UŽAS7 can be modified by intensifiers PROSTO 'simply', TIXIJ 'quiet', ÈTO lit. ≈ 'it' (an intensifying particle):
- (9)
- Prosto užas, s kem on vstrečetsja.  
lit. 'Simply horror with whom he meets.'
  - Tixij užas, naskol'ko on obsčitalsja.  
lit. 'Quiet horror by how much he miscalculated.'
  - Èto užas, gde ego našli.  
lit. 'It horror where he was found.'

<sup>7</sup>On the distinction "descriptive ≈ non-descriptive" and, in particular, on signalatives see Iordanskaja and Mel'čuk (1995, 2011) and Mel'čuk (2001:242–251). 「UŽAS KAKOJ」 passes also two other tests for descriptive units: it can be negated and questioned; cf.:

- (i)
- On vovse ne užas kakoj umnyj.  
'He is by no means very-very intelligent.'
  - On dejstvitel'no užas kakoj umnyj?  
'Is he really very-very intelligent?'

<sup>8</sup>Clausatives (from *clause*) are expressions that can stand alone constituting a complete clause, such as *Yes/No, Thanks!, Yuk!, Down [with N]!*, etc.

The three intensifiers can combine:

- (9) d. Èto prosto tixij užas, č'ju odeždu on dolžen nosit'.  
lit. 'It simply quiet horror whose cloths he has to wear.'

UŽAS7 can also be intensified by KAKOJ 'which', but not with all possible complements:

- (10) a. *Kakoj užas, čto on uexal!*  
'What a horror that he has left!'  
b. \**Kakoj užas, s kem on vstrečaetsja!*  
'What a horror with whom he is going out!'

The lexeme UŽAS7 belongs to a small, but noticeable series of nouns-clausatives: BE-ZOBRAZIE 'outrage', ČUDO 'miracle', KOŠMAR 'nightmare', POZOR 'shame', SKANDAL 'scandal', ŽUT 'horror', etc.:

- (11) a. Bezobrazie, čto on sebe pozvoljaet.  
lit. 'Outrage what he himself allows.'  
b. Prosto čudo, kak on risuet.  
lit. 'Simply miracle how he draws.'  
c. Èto košmar, radi kogo on takoe sdelał.  
lit. 'It nightmare for whom he did such a thing.'  
d. Pozor, kuda on otpravilsja.  
lit. 'Shame where he went.'

None of these lexemes (except for ŽUT') can be used as the first component in an idiom with a K-word. But all of them have a corresponding noun that is usable as a complement of a copula (and accepts, in this role, adjectival modifiers):

- (12) a. To, čto on sebe pozvoljaet, — čistoe bezobrazie.  
'What he allows himself is sheer outrage.'  
b. To, kak on risuet, — nevidannoe čudo.  
'How he deaws is a miracle never seen.'

However, numerous nouns that can be used as a complement of the copula, do not have corresponding clausatives:

- (13) a. To, čto on sebe pozvoljaet, — neslyxannaja naglost'.  
'What he allows himself is unheard-of insolence.'  
b. \*Naglost', čto on sebe pozvoljaet.  
'Insolence what he allows himself.'

The inverse is not true: any noun usable as a clausative can be also used as a complement of the copula.

## 2.2 The Lexicographic Description of the Lexeme UŽAS7[, *kakoj...*]

⌈UŽAS7⌋, clausative (nominal); signalative.

### Definition

*Užas, čto* X: 'I signal that I believe that X is horrible.'

### Government Pattern

X ⇔ I	
1.	čto CLAUSE
2.	CLAUSE <sub>(K-word)</sub>

*Užas, čto my ne možem okazat' ljudjam pomošč'*

'It is horrible that we cannot give these people some help.'

*Užas, skol'ko derev'ev povalilo!* 'It is horrible how many trees got uprooted.'

*Užas!* 'Horrible!'

### Lexical Functions

Syn : žut' [, čto CLAUSE] 'horror'; užasno[, čto CLAUSE] 'it is horrible'

Anti : čudo [, čto CLAUSE] 'miracle'

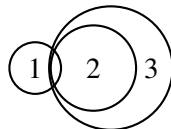
Magn : tixij 'quiet'; prosto 'simply'; èto ≈ 'it'; kakoj 'what a' | **not** C<sub>I.2</sub><sup>9</sup>

## 2.3 Summing Up

Russian has three subsets of the set of evaluative nouns:

1. four nouns that enter in combination with K-words to form idioms of the type ⌈UŽAS KAKOJ⌋;
2. nouns that can be used as clausatives and accept subjectival subordinate clauses;
3. nouns that can be used as the complement of the copula BYT' 'be' having as the subject a subordinate clause.

These subsets have an intersection: UŽAS 'horror'. The first and the third subsets are distinct: thus, STRAX 'fear' belongs only to the first subset, and POTRJASENIE 'shock' — only to the third one; the second subset is strictly included into the third one:



## 3 Four Conclusions

First, the idiom ⌈UŽAS KAKOJ⌋ and the lexeme UŽAS7[, *kakoj...*] are beyond doubt **two different lexical units**, which require different lexical entries.

Second, the internal **syntactic structure of the idiom** is as follows:

<sup>9</sup>That is, KAKOJ as a modifier of UŽAS7 is incompatible with a clause containing a K-word and depending on UŽAS7.

UŽAS ← **pron-junct**—KAKOJ

It is just the same structure as that of all K-expressions: a K-word and the rest, depending on it by the **pronominal-junctive** Surface-Syntactic Relation. Recall that syntactic dependency does not necessarily reflect semantic links: it specifies only word order and prosody. Especially so inside an idiom, which is semantically “unanalyzable,” in the sense that its own meaning cannot be distributed between its lexical components. In an idiom, the syntactic structure is laid bare: it cannot be correlated with meaningful relations between lexemes. Because of their syntactic structure, the idiom  $\lceil$ UŽAS KAKOJ $\rceil$  and all the similar ones should not be called amalgams, which is sometimes done, following Lakoff (1974): an amalgam is an indivisible unit, like the English wordform *am* IND.PRES.1SG or the French wordform *au* /o/ (= the result of amalgamation of the preposition *à* and the article *le*); but our idioms show clearly an internal syntactic structure.

Third, while the crushing majority of Russian K-expression are indefinite pronouns, the idiom  $\lceil$ UŽAS KAKOJ $\rceil$  and all its relatives **are not indefinite and not pronouns**.<sup>10</sup> Again, “Superficial similarity can be so deceiving!,” as said a hedgehog getting down from a boot brush.

Fourth, a similar type of idiom and a similar correlation with the corresponding clausative exists in Serbian (Mel’čuk and Milićević 2011:107): three Serbian expressions — *užas jedan* ‘horror one’, *strava jedna* ‘scare one’ and *čudo jedno* ‘miracle one’ — are used both as clausatives and adjectival intensifiers:

- (14) a. *Užas jedan, kako je dosadan.* lit. ‘Horror one how [he] is boring.’ ≈  
*On je dosadan užas jedan.* lit. ‘He is boring horror one.’ =  
 ‘... horribly boring.’  
 b. *Strava jedna, kako su ukusne.* lit. ‘Scare one how [they] are tasty.’ ≈  
*One su ukusne strava jedna.* lit. ‘They are tasty scare one.’ =  
 ‘... very-very tasty.’  
 c. *Čudo jedno, kako je nemiran.* lit. ‘Miracle one how [he] is unruly.’ ≈  
*On je nemiran čudo jedno.* lit. ‘He is unruly miracle one.’ =  
 ‘... very-very unruly.’

## Acknowledgements

Thanks from my heart to my first readers and critics: L. Iordanskaja and J. Milićević.

## References

- Iomdin, Leonid. 2010a. Gipoteza o dvux sintaksičeskix načalax. In *Teoretičeskie problemy russkogo sintaksisa. vzaimodejstvie grammatiki i slovarja*, ed. Ju. Apresjan, I. Boguslavskij, L. Iomdin, and V. Sannikov, 129–140. Moskva: Jazyki slavjanskix kul’tur.  
 Iomdin, Leonid. 2010b. Sintaksičeskie frazemy: meždu leksikoj i sintaksisom. In *Teoretičeskie problemy russkogo sintaksisa. vzaimodejstvie grammatiki i slovarja*, ed. Ju.

<sup>10</sup>Testelec and Bylinina (2005a,b) remark that Russian K-expressions include two other types of pronoun: deictic pronouns (*Ja zadam vot kakoj vopros*) and interrogative pronouns (*Ko mne včera ugadaj kto priexal?*).



- Apresjan, I. Boguslavskij, L. Iomdin, and V. Sannikov, 141–190. Moskva: Jazyki slavjan-skix kul'tur.
- Iordanskaja, Lidija, and Igor Mel'čuk. 1995. Traitement lexicographique de deux connecteurs textuels du français contemporain: 「EN FAIT」 vs 「EN RÉALITÉ」. In *Tendances récentes en linguistique française et générale (volume dédié à David Gaatone)*, ed. H. Bat-Zeev Shyldkrot and L. Kupferman, 211–236. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Iordanskaja, Lidija, and Igor Mel'čuk. 2011. Illocutive parenthetical verbs in russian. In *Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Meaning-Text Theory, Barcelona, September 8-9 2011*, ed. I. Boguslavsky & L. Wanner, 120–133. See also: <http://olst.ling.umontreal.ca/pdf/IordanskajaMelcuk2011.pdf>.
- Lakoff, George. 1974. Syntactic amalgams. In *Chicago Linguistic Society; Papers from the 10th Regional Meeting*, 321–344.
- MAS [= *Malyj Akademičeskij slovar'*]. 1984. *Slovar' russkogo jazyka*. Moskva: Russkij jazyk.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2001. *Communicative organization in natural language. the semantic communicative structure of sentences*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2006. Explanatory combinatorial dictionary. In *Open problems in linguistics and lexicography*, ed. G. Sica, 225–355. Monza (Italy): Polimetrica Publisher. See also: <http://www.polimetrica.com/?p=productsList&sWord=lexicography>.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2009. Dependency in natural language. In *Dependency in linguistic description*, ed. A. Polguère & I. Mel'čuk, 1–11. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2011. Phrasèmes dans le dictionnaire. In *Le figement linguistique: la parole entravée*, ed. J.-C. Anscombre and S. Mejri, 41–61. Paris: Honoré Champion.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2012. Phraseology in the language, in the dictionary, and in the computer. In *Yearbook of phraseology*, ed. K. Kuiper, volume 3, 31–56. New York/Berlin: de Gruyter Mouton.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2013. Mestoimennye vyraženiya s imenem čertyxatel'nym tipa [*Ona uexala*] čert znaet kuda i im podobnye v russkom jazyke. *Russkij jazyk v naučnom osveščenii*. [to appear].
- Mel'čuk, Igor, and Jasmina Milićević. 2011. The “Budalo jedna!”-type construction in contemporary Serbian. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics* 19:85–118.
- Testelec, Jakov, and Elizaveta Bylinina. 2005a. O nekotoryx konstrukcijax so značenijem neopredelennyx mestoimenij v russkom jazyke: amagal'my i kvazireljativy. Moskva: Seminar “Teoretičeskaja semantika”, IPPI RAN, 15.04.2005.
- Testelec, Jakov, and Elizaveta Bylinina. 2005b. Sluicing-based indefinites in Russian. In *Formal approaches to slavic linguistics 13: The south carolina meeting*, ed. S. Franks, F. Gladney, and M. Tasseva-Kurkchieva, 355–364. Michigan Slavic Publications: Ann Arbor, MI.

## Affiliation

Igor Mel'čuk  
 Observatoire de linguistique Sens-Texte  
 Université de Montréal, Canada  
[igor.melcuk@umontreal.ca](mailto:igor.melcuk@umontreal.ca)