On a Quirky Russian Idiom

(uzas kakoj + ADJ lit. ‘horror what.a + ADJ’ ≈ ‘incredibly ADJ’)

Igor Mel’čuk

Ed Kinen? On užas kakoj tolkovyj!

‘Ed Kinen? He is incredibly intelligent!’

[A remark I overheard in a corridor of Leningrad University about fifty years ago, during a short visit of Professor Kinen 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(N) what.a [+ ADJ]’ and STRAST KAKOJ [+ ADJ] lit. ‘fear(N) 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).1

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 (e.g., ‘who’, Kogda ‘when’, Kuk ‘how’, Kudo ‘where to’, but also Žo ‘what’, Skol’ko ‘how many/much’, etc.; in English, similar lexical units are called WH-words).

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

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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 qualitative 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 ⟨ˇcudak, bogat, merzavec, babnik⟩ ’He was an incredible/incredibly intelligent man ⟨excentric, wealthy man, scoundrel, womanizer⟩.’

b. On byl užas kakoj umnyj ⟨strannyj, bogatyj, merzkij, meloˇcnyj, 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:⌜UŽAS KAKOJ⌝.

1.3 The Syntactic Structure of the Idiom ⌜UŽAS KAKOJ⌝

As seen in (1) and (2), the idiom ⌜UŽAS KAKOJ⌝ 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 ⌜UŽAS KAK⌝:

(3) a. On byl užas kak xoroš ⟨bezobrazn, umën, bolen⟩. ’He was incredibly handsome ⟨ugly, smart, sick⟩.’

About idioms see Mel’čuk (2011, 2012).
b. Bylo užas kak smešno ⟨veselo, vkusno, blizko, daleko⟩.
   ‘It was very funny ⟨hilarious, tasty, close by, far away⟩.’

c. Ja užas-kak ustal ⟨ljublju, nenavižu, xoˇcu⟩.
   ‘I am incredibly tired ⟨I like/hate/want very-very much⟩.’

Both variants are identical in their meaning and use; they are allolexes of the lexical unit ‘UŽAS KAKOJ’.

As a whole, the idiom ‘UŽAS KAKOJ’ 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 ← pron-junctive-kakoj(← modif-umnyj) lit. ‘horror ← pron-junctive-how(← modif-intelligent)’.

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 ‘UŽAS KAKOJ’

The lexicographic description of the idiom ‘UŽAS KAKOJ’ is straightforward:

⌜UŽAS KAKOJ⌝, idiom, adjectival.

Definition

⌜užas kakoj⌝[X]: ‘very-very [X]’

SSynt-trees

⌜UŽAS ← pron-junctive–KAKOJ⌟ ← N/ADJ LONG
⌜UŽAS ← pron-junctive–KAK⌟ ← ADJ SHORT/V/ADV

Lexical Functions

Syn :

‘žut’ kakoj ‘very-very’, popular ‘strax kakoj’ ‘very-very’;
oˇcen ‘very’

1.5 Other Russian Idioms of the Form ‘UŽAS . . . ’

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 zto stalo.
   ‘A horrible thing happened to him.’

The description of ‘UŽAS KAKOJ’ and ‘UŽAS KAK’ as allolexes can be questioned; however, this problem is irrelevant to our discussion.

On criteria for syntactic heads see Mel’čuk (2009:25–40).

The lexicographic description of ‘UŽAS KAKOJ’ is carried out in the framework of the Explanatory Combinatorial Dictionary (= ECD); see Mel’čuk (2006).
On a Quirky Russian Idiom

2 The Russian Expression \( \texttt{UŽAS} \), \( \texttt{kakoj} \ldots \)

2.1 Some Basic Facts About \( \texttt{UŽAS} \), \( \texttt{kakoj} \ldots \)

One could stop here, were it not for the existence of another Russian expression: \( \texttt{UŽAS} \), \( \texttt{kakoj} \ldots \), superficially very similar to the idiom \( \langle \texttt{UŽAS KAKOJ} \rangle \), but in reality very different from it:

(5) \( \texttt{Užas, kakoj on byl glupýj} \).

lit. ‘Horror how he was stupid.’

The differences are semantic and syntactic.

Semantic differences

- \( \texttt{UŽAS} \) in (5) does not combine with ‘positive’ lexemes:

(6) a. \# \( \texttt{Užas, kakoj on byl umnyj} \).

lit. ‘Horror how he was intelligent.’

b. \# \( \texttt{Užas, kak on xorošo vygljadel} \).

lit. ‘Horror how he good looked.’

In other words, this \( \texttt{UŽAS} \) means ‘... is horrible’.

- The idiom \( \langle \texttt{UŽAS KAKOJ} \rangle \) in (1)–(3) is a normal descriptive LU: it can be used in a subordinate clause (e.g. in reported speech), while the lexeme \( \texttt{UŽAS} \) in (5) is a signalative, which expresses the attitude/the belief of the Speaker and therefore cannot be used in a subordinate clause:

(7) a. \( \texttt{Marina govorila, \vcto on byl užas kak umen} \).

lit. ‘Marina used to say that he was horror how intelligent.’

\*However, not all \( \texttt{K}-\)words are capable of forming idioms with \( \texttt{UŽAS} \):

\( \langle \texttt{UŽAS KOGDA} \rangle = \langle \texttt{ZA ČEŽM} \rangle = \langle \texttt{PO ČEŽM} \rangle \) ‘when’/‘what for’/‘why’.

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

More specifically, UŽAS [,...] 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:8 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):

\[(8) \]\n
\[ \begin{align*}
\text{UŽAS7} & \quad \text{subjectival} \\
\text{BYT INS, PASS} & \quad \text{sub} \text{jectival} \\
\text{KAKOJ} & \quad \text{opulator} \\
\text{ONSG, MAS} & \quad \text{modifying} \\
\text{ÈTO} & \quad \text{lit.} \approx \text{it' (an intensifying particle):}
\end{align*} \]

• 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):

\[(9) \]\n
\[ \begin{align*}
a. & \text{Prosto užas, s kem on vstrečaetsja.} \\
& \quad \text{lit. 'Simply horror with whom he meets.'} \\
b. & \text{Tixij užas, naskol'ko on obsčitalsja.} \\
& \quad \text{lit. 'Quiet horror by how much he miscalculated.'} \\
c. & \text{Èto užas, gde ego naliču.} \\
& \quad \text{lit. 'It horror where he was found.'}
\end{align*} \]

7On 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) a. On vovse ne užas kakoj umnyj.
'He is by no means very-very intelligent.'

b. On dejstvitel'no užas kakoj umnyj?
'Is he really very-very intelligent?'

8Clausatives (from clause) are expressions that can stand alone constituting a complete clause, such as Yes/No, Thank you, Yup!, 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 clothes he has to wear.’

UŽAS can also be intensified by KAKOJ ‘which’, but not with all possible complements:

(10) a. * Kakoj užas, č’ju 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!’


(11) a. Bezobrazie, č’ju on sebe pozvoljaet.
    lit. ‘Outrage what he himself allows.’

b. Prosto ďudo, kak on risuet.
    lit. ‘Simply miracle how he draws.’

c. Ėto košmar, radi kogo on takoe sdelal.
    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 the copula (and accepts, in this role, adjectival modifiers):

(12) a. To, č’ju on sebe pozvoljaet, — ďistoe bezobrazie.
    ‘What he allows himself is sheer outrage.’

b. To, kak on risuet, — nevidannoe čudo.
    ‘How he draws 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, č’ju on sebe pozvoljaet, — neslyxannaja naglost’.
    ‘What he allows himself is unheard-of insolence.’

b. * Naglost’, č’ju 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 UŽAS[7, kakoj,...]

\( \text{UŽAS} \), clausative (nominal); signallative.

**Definition**

\( \text{Užas, čto X} \): ‘I signal that I believe that X is horrible.’

**Government Pattern**

\[
\begin{array}{c}
X \\
\text{ČTO CLAUSE} \\
\text{K-word}
\end{array}
\]

\( \text{Užas, čto my ne možem okazat’ ljudjam pomol’} \)

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

\( \text{Užas, skol’ko derev’ev povalilo!} \)

‘It is horrible how many trees got uprooted!’

\( \text{Užas!} \)

‘Horrible!’

**Lexical Functions**

**Syn**: žut’ [čto CLAUSE] ‘horror’; užasno[čto CLAUSE] ‘it is horrible’

**Anti**: čudo [čto CLAUSE] ‘miracle’

**Magn**: tixij ‘quiet’; prosto ‘simply’; čto \( \equiv \) ‘it’; kakoj ‘what a’ | not \( C_{4}^{9} \)

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 \( \text{⌜UŽAS KAKOJ⌝} \);
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 \( \text{BYT} \) ‘be’ having as the subject a subordinate clause.

These subsets have an intersection: \( \text{UŽAS ‘horror’} \). The first and the third subsets are distinct: thus, \( \text{STRAX ‘fear’} \) belongs only to the first subset, and \( \text{POTRJASENIE ‘shock’} \) — only to the third one; the second subset is strictly included into the third one:

3 Four Conclusions

First, the idiom \( \text{⌜UŽAS KAKOJ⌝} \) and the lexeme \( \text{Užas[7, kakoj,...]} \) are beyond doubt two different lexical units, which require different lexical entries.

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

\( \text{That is, KAKOJ as a modifier of UŽAS is incompatible with a clause containing a K-word and depending on UŽAS[7].} \)
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 "UŽAS KAKOJ" 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/au (= 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 "UŽAS KAKOJ" and all its relatives are not indefinite and not pronouns.

Fourth, a similar type of idiom and a similar correlation with the corresponding clausative exists in Serbian (Mel’čuk and Miličević 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.’

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Affiliation
Igor Mel’čuk
Observatoire de linguistique Sens-Texte
Université de Montréal, Canada
igor.melcuk@umontreal.ca