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# Time-Expression in German and Russian. Right-Hand Half of the Clock Qvadrant with its Expression Particularities, Common to Both Languages

Abstract: *One of the most frequently used approaches in common languages allover is asking and answering about the time (hour and moment of the day). In popular culture of every language there are several, well established, manners of expressing the reality of the fourth dimension, by making use of the linguistic law of minimal effort. Generally, in most languages, there are two consecrated ways of giving/receiving information about time: the official and the unofficial way, the main conceptual differences between the two being the context, the purpose and the percent of accuracy. Nevertheless, German and Russian share a common particularity concerning the expression of first half of an hour in unofficial speech. Since this is the most relevant aspect in analyzing the stream and evolution of a language in its mobility and constant interaction with archetypal mentality of the people, we decided to take a short view into the conceptual thinking mechanisms behind time expression in current informal language of the two languages, from a philosophical point of view. The paper is divided in three main sections: the first is strictly theoretical and describes the modalities of interacting about time in the languages of reference. This section makes use of grammar concepts and focuses on main differences and structural details, but also on implied lexicology. The second part discusses the common particularity in both languages, also from a descriptive point of view, while the third treats the subject from the perspective of linear-time-philosophy in the European area, the perfect space for allowing this 'off the usual' particularity to happen, unlike the Asian space, characterized by the concept of time-cyclicity.*

Key words: *time expressions, patterns, official, unofficial, common particularity, hour*

## 1. Hourly time expression in German and Russian

### 1.1. Introduction

One of the most essential chapters in the study of a language, regardless of the intentionality and the depth of one's study, refers to the ability of addressing questions and receiving answers concerning time, usually expressed by three variables: moment of the day, hour and minute. The first variable is more general and retains a particular interest

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through distant history, despite its lack of accuracy. But the modern era, along with the current obsession for time in western and European space, has turned time into an economic measurement, increasing the need for accuracy in expressing time, which made the second and third variable (hour and minute) the mainly used references in conversations about time. This accuracy has become a leitmotiv of our current civilization, along with the development of modern, easy-handling clocks, which even indicate seconds and, sometimes, milliseconds – in the case of electronic measurement. Throughout time, from the emergence of calendars and use of sand glasses and sun shadows to the modern age of over-precise clocks, people have developed ways of handling the time situation, by creating specific patterns common to most of the languages, to which they added the specificity characterizing each particular language.

## 1.2. Common patterns

One of these common patterns involves expressing time in two different manners, formal and informal. Formal language, which is maybe the most simple and effective approach, easily recognizable and applied in international information exchanges, it is also the easiest to learn and understand. People prefer it for its simplicity along with the accuracy which makes it a playground for science and technical use. This more 'mathematical' type of time-referencing usually shows no grammatical difficulties whatsoever, as it involves only two dimensions: numerals and relation-words. Hence we shall describe very shortly the traits of official time-telling in both languages, given the fact that this issue shows no difficulties that may concern us in this paper.

Another common pattern refers to the unofficial language and involves the division of an hour ion a decimal and half decimal (five) basis, namely the circuit of an hour is divided in twelve sections of five minutes each. This is mainly due to the empiric mathematical convention of decimal basis, but also the semiotics of numbers and their spiritual-charged value, in this instance, number five is less important, but its relevance is related to the fact that it is the result of dividing sixty to twelve, which is being considered a sacred number in most cultures and mythologies. Irrespective of the ancestral motivation of these distribution choices, in current times this is a widely spread archetype in common perception, which gave rise to the separation of time during an hour not in minutes, as in official language, but in “sets” of five minutes and multiples of five minutes. Hearing in common speech expressions like:

(1) *It’s twenty three past five*.

has become a mark of over-correctness, which, depending on the case, can be interpreted negatively for the person who says it, or, at best, as a simple peculiarity, excepting the case when the person who asked about the time has specifically mentioned he/she needs to know the exact time in minutes. Otherwise, the common answer is given by approximation to the nearest 'five-minutes set', for example, in the previous case, a more likely answer would be:



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(2) *It's twenty five past five*.[2]

Moreover, such division of time led to other markers which may have nothing to do with numbers. For example, two of the best known markers of time are 'the quarter' and 'the half', although these are not only markers of time, but are used in a series of many other contexts.

Another common pattern worthy of mention is the common perception of time as a circle (the regular archetypal shape of a clock) separated by a vertical axis which visually divides the time into first half (i.e. 'after' the sharp hour) and the second half (i.e. 'before' the next sharp hour). We shall enhance this pattern in the second part of the study, as it is the previously mentioned common particularity of the referenced languages concerning the perceptions of time in these specific linguistic cultures.

Also a pattern may be considerate the need of specifying the amount of accuracy or approximation. In Russian language, for instance, this can be done either semantically or grammatically. In first case, "the fault" usually belongs to the clock (the device), which is either sharp, either delayed or ahead, either stopped, while in second, the idea of approximation vs. accuracy depends on the grammatical case involved. This idea will be enhanced later in the paper.

Last common pattern refers to the need expressed in common language of framing a particular moment into a specific part of the day for preciseness, in order to compensate for the economical use of only half of number allocated to ordering the 24 hours of a day. For example, the formulas in familiar language can be accompanied sometimes by words like *утро* (morning), *день* (day), *вечер* (evening), *ночь* (night) in Genitive case *утра*, *дня*, *вечера*, *ночи*:

(3) *Передача наченается в десять часов утра*.[3]
(4) *Он идёт домой в семь часов вечера*.[4]

### 1.3. Asking about time in German and Russian language

Syntactically, questions and answers about time, in both formal and informal language, can derive two parts of speech: subject and adverb of time. The first refers to the moment of speech as the subject of the question. In German, the questions are:

(5) *Wie viel Uhr ist es?*[5]
(6) *Wie spät ist es?*,[6]

while the corresponding questions in Russian are:

(7) *Который час?*[7]

[2] Of course, this is a common sense observation, it doesn`t have the character or the claim of being a basic rule in unofficial time expression.
[3] The show starts at ten o'clock in the morning.
[4] He goes home at seven o'clock in the evening.
[5] What's the time?, [2], pp. 68
[6] Idem, [2], pp. 72
[7] Idem, [1], pp. 169



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(8) *Сколько времени?*[8]

Although the questions may be semantically similar, the answers entail a small grammatical difference. In German, the general formula of time (or weather) is based on impersonal sentences, which subjects are render by impersonal pronouns like *it is (it' s)*, having as a corresponding in German the formula *es ist*. In Russian there's the particularity of non-using the verb *быть* (to be) at present tense to express subject's action/state. Instead, they use an elliptical formula, composed of adverb сейчас (now) and time formula, also divided in numeral and noun (hour and minute – where necessary).

In case of adverbs of time, questions differ. In German, the generic approach is *wann?* and *когда?* in Russian - the equivalent of 'when?' in English; but there is another, more specific question referring to hour:

(9) *Um wie viel Uhr?*[9]
(10) *В котором часу?*[10]

An interesting remark, grammatically speaking, related to the last question in Russian refers to the specificity of using two different cases to express the idea of an hour, with the difference that, by using one case (here the Accusative), a person can tell the exact hour, while using the other, Prepositional, one can say the hour by approximation. This nuanced expression takes place only in current language, and we will illustrate it with a few examples. For instance, the question

(11) *В котором часу?*

uses the Prepositional case, and the answer involves the use of the preposition *в* (in), common to both cases. But, as previously mentioned, regular use of Accusative semantically translates the idea of accuracy:

(12) *в час*[11]
(13) *в три часа*[12]
(14) *в шесть часов*[13]

Instead, if using the other case, would mean a certain degree of variation:

(15) *Он вернулся домой во втором часу.*[14]

It may be four o'clock, but it might be three and a half, a quarter to four, four twenty, twenty to five and so on. The use of one or the other case is optional, with a small exception that enforces the use of Prepositional disregarding the semantic nuance. It`s the case of *в половине* (half), always used at this case, never with Accusative:

(16) *в половине четвёртого*[15]

[8] Idem, [1], pp. 169
[9] At what time?, [2], pp. 68
[10] Idem, [1], pp. 171
[11] at one o'clock, [1], pp. 172
[12] at three o'clock, [1], pp. 172
[13] at six o'clock, [1], pp. 172
[14] He comes back home at two o'clock.
[15] at three and a half



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This is the type of subtlety we don`t find in German , although both languages are known for their expressivity, especially concerning time and space coordinates, and the quality of state vs. moving of verbs, expressed mostly by the use of different cases and prepositions.

### 1.4. Information about the time in official language

Formal language is named like this because it is used in formal and official situations, where the accuracy is prior to style in speech. It is being used in the exact fields, such as radio, TV, train-station announcements, airports and so on. In case of personal interaction between the giver and the receiver of the information, are being used the same questions as in the informal speech. The difference consists in the formality of the answer, which depends on the relation between the collocutors, but also on the environment and situation. These two are necessary but not sufficient conditions if taken separately. To illustrate this argument, we have chosen three hypothetical situations:

*Case 1*

Between the interlocutors is an official relation (for example two senators which barely know each other), but they are finding themselves in an unofficial environment. Let`s suppose they coincidently meet while walking their dogs in the park. Since they don`t have a personal relation, their status would apparently make them use the formal language if talking about the time, but since the situation and place are not official, most likely they would use the colloquial, informal language.

*Case 2*

Now let's consider the other situation, when two people in a friendly relationship (like co-workers) find themselves in an official environment, for example at work. Let's say that these two people are cashiers at the train-station. If asked, one would not use the formal language to express current time, given the unofficial relation between the two, despite the environment.

*Case 3*

In the same environment as in previous case, if a customer asks one of the cashiers about the time, the answer will be, in most of the cases, official. The mention of the moment of day (*a.m.* or *p.m.*) is optional, given the fact that it is obvious on regularly basis, but the exact hour in such circumstances is crucial, as it's no relation between the costumer and the cashier – which makes it formal, and they are finding in an official place, so both requirements are fulfilled.

As an observation, statistically speaking, official expression of time is less common in everyday life, and has only a limited area of use in determined situations. From the grammar point of view, formal time expression doesn`t pose any difficulties, because it is constructed on numeral basis, using one way equivalent to the clock way, with no connectors and no ambiguities in the expressing of hour, because it is based on full 24 hours denomination. Consequently, it can be no confusion between 9 o'clock in the



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morning and 9 o'clock in the evening, given the fact that one is expressed by numeral 'nine' and the other one by numeral 'twenty one'. Another particularity in the formal time-telling is the habit of using only numerals for efficacy and minimal effort. Long version of such expression would be, for instance:

(17) *Es ist acht Uhr und elf Minuten*[16]
(18) *Сейчас восемь часов одиннадцать минут*[17]

but the compressed version would only be:

(19) *Es ist acht Uhr elf*[18]
(20) *Сейчас восемь одиннадцать*[19]

### 1.5. Comparative colloquial time-telling in german (die unoffiziel Uhrzeit) and russian language (выражение часа)

To express the preciseness of an hour, Germans use two consecrated expressions:

(21) *Es ist Punkt acht* or
(22) *Es ist genau acht*[20],

while Russians simply mention the hour, without reinforcing the idea of punctuality. What appears to be a particularity in Russian language is the use of cases to express different hours of the day. This is due to regimen of numerals used in expressing time. Therefore, if time expressed is one o'clock, the numeral is eliminated from expression, for purpose of the minimal necessity, but the defined noun shall take the Nominative plural form:

(23) *Сейчас час*[21]

If the time represents the hours 'two', 'three', 'four', noun shall take the Genitive singular form, as it is the required form for these three simple numerals:

(24) *Сейчас три часа*[22]

Following the same specific pattern, hours from 'five' to 'twelve' shall require the Genitive plural form of the defined noun:

(25) *Сейчас шесть часов*.[23]

Now we will pass to the second, more difficult part, of expressing the time intervals in-between an hourly interval, beginning with the first, right-hand half of the axis-cutter circle.

[16] It's eight o'clock and eleven minutes.
[17] Idem.
[18] Now it`s eleven o'clock and eleven minutes.
[19] Idem.
[20] It's eight o'clock sharp.
[21] It's one o'clock sharp.
[22] It's three o'clock (sharp).
[23] It's six o'clock (sharp).



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In order to express the elapsed time from the exact hour, the Germans and Russians, like all European cultures, use multiples of five minutes to approximate the minute-values. The first of them has two different ways of expressing the same temporal reality. One is by referring to the overcome hour, to which they add the number of multiples of five by using the preposition *nach*, English equivalent of 'past'. Examples would look like this:

(26) *Es ist fünf nach acht*.[24]
(27) *Es ist zwanzig nach acht*.[25]

In the common use, this is the most logical formulation of the time, by adding the sub-measurement units (minutes) to the main unit (hour of reference). Only the second way, the common particularity which they share with the Russians, is a little strange, because they take as waypoints the hour to come. About this aspect we will discuss later, in next section, which analyzes separately this particular aspect.

What`s more to add is the replacement of otherwise said fifteen minutes to 'a quarter of an hour' (*Viertel* in German and *четверть* in Russian). Nobody would use the first version in the common language, by reasons of convention and economy of language. The same thing happens to the southest point on time-circle, representing in official language thirty minutes having as corresponding informal addressing the word half (an hour), that is *halb* in German and *половина* in Russian.

Analyzing the left-hand 'hemisphere' of the clock we notice a particular view in German time-culture. For their known preciseness, they insist on taking as a reference point the middle of one hour. In this case, the expression of 8.35 could be translated into German in two ways:

(28) *Es ist 25 Minuten vor 9*. or
(29) *Es ist 5 Minuten nach halb neun*.[26]

The first case is the regular means of expressing the number of minutes left before next complete hour, using preposition *vor*, the German equivalent of 'to' (words that have the same meaning in this case, but not the same value, as *vor* may be translated 'in front of'). The second case uses the half hour as a waypoint for expressing time. This may be applied to the third quadrant of the circle, form 30 to 45 minutes. After that, the last 15 minutes of an hour are presumably better expressed by preposition *vor*, as we get closer to next full hour.

In Russian language, same phenomenon happens while drawing nearer to next sharp hour in the left-hand side of the clock. The general formula consist of preposition *без*, the number of minutes remained before the hour of reference (in Genitive case, because of the preposition used) and the name (number) of the hour in Accusative case. Examples may look like this:

(30) *Сейчас без десяти час*.[27]
(31) *Сейчас без четверти двенадцать*.[28]

[24] It's eight o'clock and five minutes.
[25] It's eight (o'clock) and twenty minutes.
[26] It's eight (o'clock) and thirty five minutes.
[27] Now it`s twelve (o'clock) and fifty minutes.
[28] Now it's eleven (o'clock) and forty five minutes.



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## 2. Reporting time to the next major unit of measure is a way of looking into the future and accelerating the time - a mark of our civilization

As we have previously mentioned, the tradition of every language, emerging from the collective subconscious of a civilization, develops some patterns to express daily facts, which become so often repeated that they lose their initial purpose or justification in such manner that nobody thinks anymore about the initial meaning of those patterns implemented and consecrated over time. But taking the time to closely analyze a certain problem and following the back thread of a concept, from nowadays form to initial significations can lead to various discoveries about the anthropological evolution of the human mentality in a certain area. This type of analyze, when made over a different language, can be determined by curiosity, but, in some cases, by a knowledge shock, given the striking differences observed at first look. Such differences may be identified in the way in which the Russians, along with the Germans, use the hour-to-come as a reference point for telling the hour. We named the Russians in the first place because, unlike the Germans – who also have an alternative for expressing the exact same idea -, they based their entire system of telling the time on this forward hour presumption.

In the following, we shall describe and exemplify this curious manner – curious for us – of thinking forward towards time. Everything during a first half an hour uses a new formula consisting of the number of minutes (multiples of five) which have past from the previous hour and the ordinal numeral representing the hour-to-come in Genitive case, masculine, singular form. So even if there have past only five minutes since, let's say, eight o'clock, the hour which has past doesn't even show up in the context, but single reference is about the next hour, which, in this case, will be nine o'clock. Let's have a few examples to illustrate this:

(32) *Сейчас пять минут третьего*.[29]
(33) *Сейчас четверть шестого*.[30]
(34) *Сейчас половина десятого*.[31]

The right-hand half of clock depends only on these formulas for expressing the time. The left-hand half has possibility to express same temporal reality this way or by using preposition *без*, of which we have spoken earlier.

The same phenomenon occurs in the German language, where one could express the time by saying

(35) *Es ist Viertel neun*[32]
(36) *Es ist drei Viertel neun*[33]

Or – even more imprecise:

(37) *Es ist kurz vor 9/ kurz nach 9*[34]

[29] Now it's two (o'clock) and five minutes. (*Textually*, `it's five (minutes) to three`)
[30] Now it's five (o'clock) and a quarter of an hour. (*Textually*, `it's a quarter to six`)
[31] Now it`s a half past nine. (*Textually*, `it's a half to ten).
[32] It's four forty five minutes (*Textually*, `it's a quarter to nine`)
[33] It's eight and three quarters. (Textually, `It's three quarters of nine.`)
[34] It's short before nine/ past nine.



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meaning very generally some minutes.

Now that we have reviewed all the shortcuts for sharing information about time in both familiar and official way, let's try to take a look at some inner motivation behind the option for this choice of words.

## 3. A few considerations about this off-the-road behavior and a possible explanation from different time approaches

This part is merely a point of view, a speculation of philosophical character (but not only) and an attempt to discover the inner resorts which lead to establishing this pattern in the expression of time. The seed of this pursuit lies in one of Saussure`s ideas, about the interaction between language and reality. If spoken of abstract concepts, the reality we have in mind is not the reality of objects, but a higher-order reality, which refers to concepts, structures, imagination and whatever the people can project with their mind, based on everyday inter-changes with the objective reality. Language is actually the mirror of this inter-change, and an interface for a common supra-perception of the world in a particular civilization. Studying the language, along with the traditions, is like making radiography of the collective mental of a people.

### A general view of time, from different perspectives

Practically speaking, the notion of time seems to be one of the best known and simple, as if we look at the clock and see those needles crossing equal intervals of the quadrant we believe we know for sure what the time is. Same thing when we consider the position of the sun or other planets or when we tear the pages of the calendar representing the days which have past…

The problem changes when we try to reasonably explain time, search for its nature or define its meaning. In philosophy or science books we often find writings of many great thinkers, referring to time, but none of them has yet reached a conclusive result. We soon realize that this notion of time, which, at the first glance, we thought we can define, becomes an enigma if we overpass the simplistic interpretation given by common sense.

Until the past century there were two types of approaches at this level: the metaphysical approach and the physic-mathematical one. The first offered us a series of "imaginary explanations, filled with mystery", while the second exposed an anonymous time, an abstract symbol of succession in spatial order, created by practical spirit of humanly reason.

Beginning with the last century, to both old forms had been attached the form of psychological time, according to whom the real time is not the conventional one, determined mechanically by the equality of quadrants or constant by periodicity of external nature; but by real time, the one that one of us lives and experiences.

According to the classical physics, the universe is quadri-dimensional. The space is considered as tri-dimensional and capable of being analyzed by means offered by the



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Euclidian geometry. As for time, the classical physics thinks of it as a uni-directional course from past towards future, the present being the meeting-point of those two temporal domains. It postulates the absolute character of time, which means that each event can be tied to a numerical value called time and all the clocks shall agree about the interval of time that separates two events. This allows us to establish a precise temporal order, by observing their simultaneity and succession. Fallowing this pattern, a philosophy dictionary published in 1978 states that "time reflects length of existing phenomenon, their simultaneity and succession; being *in* time is being one after the other".

On the other hand, according to the new paradigm of the modern physics which, among others, it denies the even existence of laws, equations and fundamental principles of the universe, which they consider to be simple creations of human mind in purpose to put some order into the cumulated scientific knowledge, time and space are also simple language elements. .

Kant believes that the time is only the subjective condition of our intuition, but if we separate it from the subject, it becomes nothing. Nevertheless, in report to the things we know by experience (empirical things), the time is necessary objective.

Of course, many other philosophers, physicians and thinkers have expressed their point of view regarding the time. Despite the variety of opinions, it can be said that the definition of the time is extremely difficult. For example, the book "A short history of time", written by a great physician of our time, Stephen Hawking, in 1994, is not a simple attempt of formal definition of the time.

To this thoughts about time are given other dimensions by the biologists and psychologists. There is a so-called biological time, connected to the fundamental features of life, such as the metabolism, reproducing, growth and development. Unlike the chronological time, the flow of biological time doesn't seem to be uniform; it varies from one species to another and from an individual to another, depending on the manner of conscious reception by living organisms in chronological time. Living creatures seem to have born mental structures that allow them to perceive the spatiality, temporality and, probably, causality. "For a six years old child, a chronological year is perceived as a very long period of time, equal to the sixth part of his life until that moment. An eighty years elderly finds a chronological year as an eighties part of its life and, as a consequence, won't find it so long as to it's great grandson."[35]

As for the psychological time, its subjective character is obvious and needs no more explanations after the very well known pleading of Einstein for relativity.

This being said, there is only one major reference perspective about time: the religious perspective. According to it, time can be viewed as linear, in Christian and, generally, occidental perspective, or circular, in Asian world, dominated by the belief in metempsychosis. This affects the people in their report to every day-time, as the Occidentals value more the notion of time (as in the famous Latin saying "fugit irreparabile tempus"), than the Asians, for which the time is a perpetual came-back and a continuous… present.

[35] [3],pp. 66, *Поговорим о времени* (Let`s talk about time)



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## Conclusion

Having this idea in mind, as a premise and justification for our attempt, we shall drill beneath the surface of an apparently not important detail, such as mentioning the number of minutes reported to the next hour. Indeed, at first sight, people might take for granted such a commonly used expression, mostly because they got so used to this formula, that they aren't even aware of its significance anymore.

The direction for research is from this point backwards. So let's have a look to what actually means the use of this reflex. In our culture, we are accustomed to the habit of putting the full, past hour in the first place, when expressing the time. It seems more logical to do so, given the fact that the same method applies in mathematics, when writing a fraction accompanied by a whole number (like 1 ½). The number we write first, and then comes the fraction. But in the case of Russian and German, as we have previously seen, the logic we know is reversed. Somehow we suspect that it isn't due to the numbers ordering, but has something to do with the perception of the time in these two cultures.

One idea might be to determine whether this might occur in other areas of civilization like, for instance, Asia or India, which are structurally different from our culture. Of course, this is quite unlikely given their cyclic perception of the time. But why these areas and not like others? Simply because of their absolutely different, quite opposite perception of time. What I have tried to underline here is only the fact that such reversions could only be possible in an occidental space because of the reasons mentioned above. As we argued, what exactly means, is the tendency towards future, an attempt to overcome time faster, a desire to look into the future, to call it, to refer to it as it would already be a part of the present. Subliminally, this might be a way of transmitting the idea of hope, always connected to what may come in the plurality of time, unlike Asian cultures, which report to a `present continuous` as their only possible dimension.

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