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GOD KNOWS HOW IT TURNS OUT: ON THREE CONSTRUCTIONS INCLUDING BOG 'GOD', ČERT 'DEVIL' AND SOME TABOO WORDS IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE OVER THE LAST THREE CENTURIES

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Abstract: The constructions with the anchor [Noun-Nom Verb (meaning 'to know')] are very productive in Russian. In this article we show that variables such as Bog 'God', čert 'devil' and xer/xren 'X/horseradish' have some common patterns, as well as some shifts with exclusive patterns in semantics and constructionalization.

Keywords: Russian language, construction, semantics, discourse formulae, diachrony

1 INTRODUCTION

The Russian language has three synonymous constructions based on the pattern *X znaet* ('X knows'), which express negative evaluation of an unknown or unspecified entity (in Endresen – Janda 2020) they are tagged as encoding Assessment in relation to knowledge) and can also function as discourse formula: *bog znaet* 'God knows', *čert znaet* 'devil knows' and *xer/xren znaet* 'X/horseradish knows'. They tend to be interchangeable and the pattern itself is described as highly productive (Zhukova 2021, p. 150) and typologically common (Kehayov 2009). All constructions formed accoording to this pattern can be used with interrogatives:

(1) *on dumal o nej* ***bog znaet čto*** 'He thought about her God knows what'
(2) *ona xodit* ***čert znaet gde*** 'She walks devil knows where'
(3) ***Xren znaet*** *počemu ona ušla* 'X knows why she went away'

It should be noted that *xren znaet,* 'X knows', appears in the Russian National Corpus (hereinafter RNC[1]) much later than *bog znaet,* 'God knows', and *čert znaet,* 'devil knows', thus being much more recent, as well as more colloquial and, due to its euphemistic nature, more derogatory. However, over the past three centuries each of these constructions, including *xren znaet*, has undergone a series of micro-diachronic changes in syntax and semantics, which as a result gave rise to fixed variants *(ne) Bog vest'* '(not) God knows' + *interrogative*, *čert-te* 'devil knows', lit. 'devil-*te*'+*interrogative* and *xz* (abbreviation of *xren znaet*), which are far from the original semantics. Thus, *ne bog vest'* expresses mediocrity and not the lack of knowledge, see (4). In these idiomatic variants not only is the interchangeability of the actor impossible (we cannot say **čert vest'* instead of *Bog vest'* or **bog-te* instead of *čert-te* with interrogatives), but the syntax can also be different. Thus, *xz*, originally abbreviated from a clause-like expression *xren znaet* 'X knows', is now often used as a predicate (5). Finally, the construction *čert-te X* (6) has a rather mysterious form, with a not entirely obvious etymology of *-te*, which results in alternative orthographic versions like *čerte X* and *čerti X*.

(4) *Služet* ***ne Bog vest' kakoj*** 'The plot is mediocre', lit. 'The plot is not God knows how' (RNC, 1975–1977)
(5) ***Xz****, možet ty i prav* 'X… knows, maybe you are right' (GICR, 2014)
(6) ***čert-te čto*** *tvoritsja* 'Devil-*te* knows what is happening' (RNC, 2011)

The micro-diachronic development of these constructions has not been previously studied on the corpus material. In related works on Russian they were mostly presented as synonymous (Zhukova 2021; Iomdin 2018). Only recently have the linguistic changes over the last three centuries begun to be treated as a separate subject of study and have been investigated in greater detail (see Rakhilina 2010; Pekelis 2020 inter alia). Our work continues a series of corpus linguistics studies on diachronic changes and focuses on the evolution of these three idioms, which deviated so strongly from the once synonymous variants of the same construction. The data are taken from the main corpus of RNC[2] and from the General Internet-Corpus of Russian (hereinafter GICR).[3] The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses *Bog vest'* and its evolution. Section 3 is focused on *čert-te*, its semantics and the etymology of *-te.* Section 4 presents the results on the syntax and semantics of *xz*. Finally, Section 5 summarizes the results of the study.

[1] https://ruscorpora.ru/en/

[2] https://ruscorpora.ru/en/search?search=CgQyAggBMAE%3D, about 375 million words, contains written texts from the middle of the 18th century to the present day

[3] http://www.webcorpora.ru/en/, more than 20 billion tokens, contains social media materials: networks VKontakte, LiveJournal blogs and the texts of *Žurnal'nyj Zal* (https://magazines.gorky.media/) dated 21st century

2 BOG ZNAET/VEST'

This part of the paper is devoted to the semantics of the earliest attested variant of the construction *X znaet* (X knows): *Bog znaet/vest'/vedaet* (God knows) + *interrogative* (*kto* 'who'/*čto* 'what'/*kak* 'how' etc.). This construction has indefinite, evaluative and intensifying meaning; all of them are attested already in the end of the 18th – beginning of the 19th century. Moreover, the construction has been used in all these meanings till nowadays, and the compositional interpretation is also possible. We will describe the scope of meanings based on corpus data, reconstruct a possible constructionalization path and put forward an explanation of the semantic shift towards indefiniteness and then to an evaluative and intensifying meaning.

Inkova (2006) demonstrates that *Bog znaet* + *interrogative* is less grammaticalized than *Bog vest'* + *interrogative* and can be interpreted compositionally, as 'God knows what/where/why etc.'. Indeed, *Bog znaet* + *interrogative* can be used with the adjective *odin* 'alone', with the adverb *tol'ko* 'only', the predicate is attested not only in present form (Inkova 2006, p. 450). Our data also confirm this thesis: see (7) for the illustration:

(7) *Tol'ko* ***odin bog znal****, čto tvorilos' v jeto vremja v ee duše.* 'Only God alone knew what was happening in her soul at that time.' (RNC, 2003)

The variant *Bog vest'* + *interrogative*, however, seems to be more idiomatic. It can be explained by the fact that the Old Slavonic form *vest'* is not semantically and grammatically transparent for the speakers of modern Russian. Although compositional interpretations (usage with *odin* 'alone' or *tol'ko* 'only', free word order) are attested in the corpus, such contexts are extremely infrequent (only 3 examples from the 19th century were found in RNC).

At the next step the construction *Bog vest'/znaet* (BZ) + *interrogative* evolves the indefinite semantics. So, the observed semantic shift is: *(only) God knows* → *nobody knows* (see (8)):

(8) *Ivan Petrovič idet v poxod i* ***bog vest' kogda*** *vorotitsja v Derbent.* 'Ivan Petrovič goes on a campaign and God knows when he will return to Derbent.' (RNC, 1830–1837)

The indefinite semantics and the place of the BZ-construction in the system of Russian indefinite markers is described in detail in (Inkova 2006); in this study we will concentrate on the development of evaluative and intensifying meanings.

Hence, the categories of time, location and quantity in some contexts allow the interpretation of the construction as the extreme point of the correspondent scale. This way, *BZ kogda* 'God knows when' means 'long time ago', *BZ gde/kuda* 'God

knows where/where to' means 'far', *BZ skol'ko* 'God knows how many/much' means 'a lot' (see (9), where *BZ skol'ko vremeni* 'God knows how much time' refers to a concrete period of two years).

(9) *Emu v samom dele kazalos', čto dva goda* ***— bog vest' skol'ko vremeni****, čto v dva goda on uspeet opjat' nažit' stol'ko, čtoby potjagat'sja s Moskvičom i peretjagat' ego.* 'It really seemed to him that two years were God knows how long, that in two years he would have time to make enough money again to compete with the Muscovite and win him over.' (RNC, 1829)

As for the interrogatives *kto* 'who', *čto* 'what', *kak* 'how', *kakoj* 'what/which', *gde* 'where', they evolve pejorative semantics within the *BZ*-construction. So, *BZ kto* 'God knows who' can be interpreted as a bad person, in (10) *BZ kak* 'God knows how' means 'badly, poorly'.

(10) *Žil on skupo: nedoedal, nedopival, odevalsja* ***bog znaet kak****.* 'He lived sparingly: malnourished, underdrinking, dressed God knows how.' (RNC, 1898)

A possible way of semantic shift is *'nobody knows who/what/how'→ 'anybody/ anything/anyhow'→ 'no matter who/what/how' → negative assessment*.

This process can be classified as *semantic rebranding*: a semantic shift, where the derived meaning is an implicature of the source meaning (see more in Rakhilina et al. 2010, pp. 428–453). It is interesting that in pejorative contexts the BZ-construction can be replaced by the construction *interrogative + popalo* (lit. 'how/ what/who etc. fell'), which also has the semantics of randomness and of a negative assessment.

Furthermore, in some contexts BZ-expressions can also function as intensifiers. In (11) *BZ kak,* 'God knows how', is used as an intensifier and can be interpreted as 'very, a lot'. Cross-linguistically, the semantics of negative assessment is often combined with intensifying meaning (cf. Eng. '*terribly* important'; see more in Lorenz 2002).

(11) *Nakonec počuvstvoval on sebja lučše i obradovalsja* ***bog znaet kak****, kogda uvidel vozmožnost' vyjti na svežij vozdux.* 'At last he felt better and was glad, God knows how, when he saw the opportunity to go out into the fresh air.' (RNC, 1842)

Finally, the *BZ + interrogative* construction develops "de-intensifying" semantics by adding a negative particle *ne*. The expression *ne BZ kakoj/kak etc.* 'Not God knows what/how etc.' functions as a marker of mediocrity (see (12)).

(12) *Okončila* ***ne Bog vest' kak****, s troečkami.* '(She) graduated not even God knows how, with C grades.' (RNC, 2000)

It is remarkable that only *Bog* 'God' is attested with negation and de-intensifying semantics; the construction variants with devil and other creatures/objects are not normally used in such contexts.

The variants *Bog znaet* and more archaic one *Bog vest'* tend to convey different meanings (see Fig. 1). In combination with the conjunction *kak* 'how', *Bog znaet* is more frequently attested than *Bog vest'* almost in all functions. The only semantic domain where *vest'*-variant prevails is de-intensification. A comparative study of the two variants with different conjunctions is beyond the scope of the present paper, but the proposed semantic classification seems to be a good foundation for a detailed synchronic and micro diachronic corpus-based description of the BZ-construction.

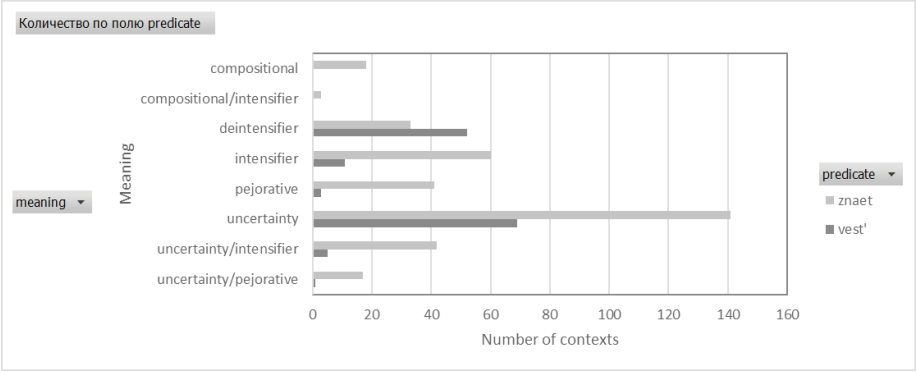


Fig. 1. Semantic distribution of predicates *znajet* and *vest'* 'knows' in the construction *Bog znajet/vest' kak* 'God knows how' in RNC, 18th century – present

3 ČERT-TE + INTERROGATIVE

Unlike the construction with *Bog* 'God', the construction with *čert* 'devil', since the earliest entries, (end of the 18th century) is not used with predicates of knowing other than *znat'*. The constriction *čert-te* seems to be interchangeable with *čert znaet* with interrogatives: *on pošël čert znaet/čert-te kuda* 'he went devil knows where' (= to an unknown place or direction, assessed negatively by the speaker). Semantically, *čert znaet* 'devil knows' + *interrogative* is similar to the construction with *Bog* and can also be used in both evaluative (13) and intensifying (14) contexts, although its usage tends to be more derogatory due to the semantics of *čert* 'devil':

(13) *Malo li detej, kotorye… zanimajutsja* ***čert znaet čem*** 'You never know the children who ... do the devil knows what' (RNC, 2004)

(14) *Ona byla* ***čert znaet, kak*** *xoroša*. 'She was devil knows how beautiful.' (RNC, 2007)

In both (13) and (14) *čert-te* can be used instead of *čert znaet.* However, the origin of *-te* is vague. Historically, *-te* may be treated as a grammaticalized pronoun *te,* a short form of *tebe* (2SG.ACC) which later obtained an *-a* ending (modern *tebja* '2SG.ACC'). In this way, the evolution is likely to be tracked from *čert tebja znaet X* to *čert-te znaet X* and then to *čert-te X.* Yet the RNC demonstrates it the other way round: constructions of type *čert-te* appear much earlier than constructions of type *čert-te znaet* with interrogatives, thus making the origin of *-te* less clear. A more detailed study of the RNC shows the following stages of *čert-te X* evolution:

1. Mid 18th century–1820s: no entries of *čert-te X*, *čert znaet* is attested only as a separate clause expressing dissatisfaction and negative assessment:

(15) ***Čert znaet*****!** *Takoj golos, čto rastajat' možno* 'The devil knows! Such a voice that you can melt' (RNC, 1763–1774)

2. 1830–1880s: *čert znaet* 'devil knows' begins to be used with an object pronoun *tebja* 'you.ACC' as a separate clause expressing doubt and/or uncertainty. However, at this stage no idiomatic constructions with *čert tebja znaet* in an attributive position like *čert tebja znaet čto/gde/kuda* 'Devil knows you what/where/when' are detected:

(16) *Ty, brat,* ***čert tebja znaet***, *poteeš, čto li*. 'You, brother, the devil knows you, sweat or something.' (RNC, 1842)

3. Mid 19th century–1870s: the first entries of *čert-te* in informal imperative constructions expressing dissatisfaction. In (17), *(-)te*-form is a grammaticalized referential pronoun *te* contracted from *tebja*.

(17) *Ax*, ***čert-te voz'mi*** *sovsem! — skazal soldat.* 'Oh, (let) the devil take you! said the soldier.' (RNC, 1863)

4. The 1880s: *čert tebja znaet* gradually develops an evaluative semantics and starts to be used with interrogatives (18). At the same time, the construction *čert-te + interrogative* is also first attested (19). Apparently, *-te* results from the grammaticalization of *tebja* by analogy with the already common form *čert-te* in imperative constructions. However, unlike with imperatives, *-te* in *čert-te* is no longer referential with interrogatives:

(18) *no ved' ty*, ***čert tebja znaet, kakoj lentjaj****!* 'But you are, the devil knows what a slacker!' (RNC, 1886)
(19) *On ej slovo – ona dvadcat'*, *on to po-našinski*, *ona* ***čert-te po kakovskomu*** *norovit…* 'He said a word – she answered twenty, he spoke in our way, she, the devil (knows) in what way tries…' (RNC, 1883)

5. 1917: *čert-te znaet* begins to replace *čert-te* in an attributive position with interrogatives (20). Although the new construction did not become frequent (the RNC contains only 18 entries of *čert-te znaet* + *interrogative* over the last hundred years, see Fig. 2), it is found in texts of different genres (story, novel, diary, serial and article) written by twelve different authors and thus cannot be claimed to be accidental. Hence, we may argue the convergent origin of *čert-te znaet* + *interrogative* from *čert tebja znaet* and *čert-te* + *interrogative*:

(20) *Šokolad stal* ***čert-te znaet kakoj*** *drjan'ju*. 'Chocolate ... became the devil knows what rubbish.' (RNC, 1917)



Fig. 2. Distribution of *čert-te znaet* + *interrogative* by year in RNC, 18th century – present

6. 1975: the first entry of a merged spelling *čerte* instead of the initial separate *čert te* and later hyphenated spelling *čert-te*, the pronominal being completely grammaticalized. In the early 21st century, it also becomes spelled as *čerti* (22), the historical pronominal morphology thus being completely lost:

(21) ***Čerte čto****… Ja javno na pereput'je.* 'What the hell (lit. 'devil what')… I'm clearly at a crossroads.' (RNC, 1975)
(22) *Ja načinaju dumat'* ***čerti čto***. 'I'm starting to think what the hell (lit. 'devil what').' (RNC, 2003)

The loss of referentiality is typical for personal pronouns when performing as components of a discourse formula. Zhukova (2021, pp. 153–154) discusses the desemantization of *ego* '3SG.ACC.M' in constructions like *Bog/čert/xren ego znaet* (lit. 'God knows him') where *ego* no longer designates a concrete person or a situation as a whole. A similar process is documented in the history of an obscene expression *tvoju mat'* ('your mother-ACC', originally a complement of a taboo verb form *eb'* (vulgar 'copulate-IMP') (Uspenskij 2018, p. 256). In modern Russian, *tvoju mat'* no longer applies to the interlocutor and is used as a non-referential curse interjection. Since all expressions with *čert* are derogatory, constructions of type *čert tebja znaet* might have followed a similar path of pronominal desemantization and referentiality loss, giving result to the grammaticalization of *tebja* into *-te* and obtaining a more general meaning of negative assessment. Remarkably enough, according to the RNC, *-te* was initially grammaticalized in imperative constructions like *čert tebja (-> te) deri* 'Let devil tear you', where it functioned as a direct object (a pattern syntactically similar to *eb' tvoju mat'*) and only later expanded to attributive constructions with interrogatives.

4 XER ZNAET/XREN ZNAET/XZ

Fägersten (2012) claims that swearing usually belongs to an emotional situation, while Uspenkij (2018) correlates obscene phrases to ancient mythological, taboo formula; Zaliznjak (2014) demonstrates that elements *x**/xer/xren* (as well as *čert*) have the same semantic, syntactic, morphological and accent properties. All of these assertions should explain the interchangeability of the variable *Bog* 'God'/*čert* 'devil' with the *x**/xren/xer* 'obscene or euphemistic word'.

Due to Zaliznjak (2014, p. 274), the first substitute step was *xer znaet* 'X knows', where *xer* was a name for a Church-Slavonic letter *X* which was initially used as a euphemism to a corresponding obscene word *x*** (23).

(23) *Seli v kakoj-to avtobus i uexali* ***xer znaet kuda***. 'Got on some bus and left to xer knows where.' (GICR, 2014)

The word *xren* is used in the same function in modern Russian (24).

(24) *čast' smotalas' po domam, čast' rvanula v Fili i ešče* ***xren znaet kuda*** *tam*. 'some hit the road home, some rushed to Fili and xren knows where else.' (GICR, 2006)

The anchors *xer znaet/xren znaet* (as well as *x***) have the same constructionalization patterns as anchors *Bog znaet/čert znaet*. They can be used as an intensifier (25) as well as to express negative assessment related to uncertainty (26).

(25) *No eto že* ***xer znaet čto****! Tolja s otčajaniem ogljadel oboix.* 'But this is xer knows what! Tolya looked at them both desperately.' (GICR, 2009)
(26) *Vol'f Messing rabotajuščij v otdele Ananerbe ili* ***xren znaet gde to*** *tam.* 'Wolf Messing working in the Ahnenerbe department or xren knows where.' (GICR, 2010)

Example (27) shows us that *xer znaet/xren znaet* (as well as *x***) can appear not only as an anchor of constructions but also as independent discourse formula (compare to (15)). Thus we can claim a high level of grammaticalization of the construction.

(27) *V a l e r a (požimaet plečami).* ***Xer znaet****, družba, navernoe* 'VALERA (shrugs his shoulders). Xer knows, friendship, probably. (GICR, 2012)'

At the same time a few examples such as (28) and (29) are found. It means that sometimes Russian native speakers can extract the 'inner form' from these idioms, so we can see two multidirectional processes in language. It should be noted that words *vest'* and *vedaet*, which are archaic synonyms to the word *znaet'* 'knows', can be used with *Bog* (8)–(9). Thereby *x*** and its euphemisms retain semantic memory of structural elements of the construction.

(28) *den'* ***xren vedaet*** *kakoj..::)* 'the day is xren knows what.*::)*' (GICR, 2014)
(29) *u nego očerednaja forma bor'by so skinami, buržujami ili ešče* ***x** vest'*** *s kem...* 'he has another form of struggle with skins, bourgeoisie, or even x** (f*ck) knows with whom…' (GICR, 2007)

Another parallel and multidirectional process is a situation in which people use the construction *xz* (from *x znaet* 'x knows' (30)). They sustain the main obscene word and their euphemisms (such as *xer* and *xren*) using the initial of every one of these words to express the same grammar and semantics (31). We have already seen the exact same process when people started using *xer znaet* as the euphemism with the initial letter naming (23). However, now they can sustain the euphemism of the euphemism.

(30) *Vit'ka* ***x znaet*** *gde.* 'Vitka is x knows where.' (GICR, 2006)
(31) *Uexal sjuda, i privet, i* ***xz*** *gde on tut.* 'He left here, and hello, and xz where is he here.' (GICR, 2010)

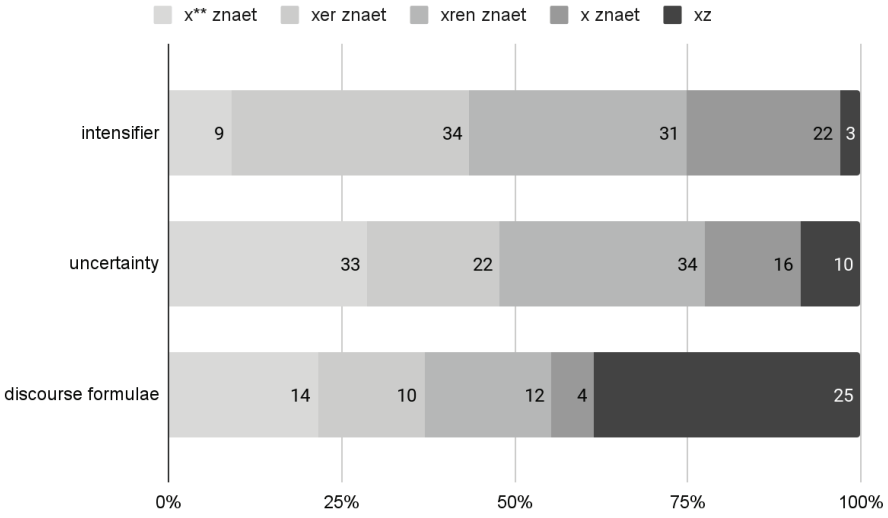


Fig. 3. Semantic distribution of x**/xer/xren/x znaet/xz in GICR, 2004–2015

Fig. 3 shows that *x*** tends to uncertainty and functions as a discours formula, and *xer* and *xren* tend to intensifiers; whereas *xz* is used more often as a discours formula due to its semantic erasure. Interestingly, *xer* is structurally closer to *xren* and *x*, which is explained by the fact that *x*** is simply obscene – it often expresses only emotion, meanwhile *xer/x* is rather an intensifier. It is clear to the speaker that *xer/x* is almost obscene, but he does not use it obscenely, choosing a euphemism as an intensifier, while *xren* is already more erased.

Moreover, today the construction *xz* is not only used as a discourse formula but also as a predicate (32), unlike *Bog vest'* and *čert znaet*. Fig. 4 shows the quantitative distribution (per cent) of usages of the construction *xz* comparing to "entire" forms such as *ja xren znaet* (33) in predicate position.

(32) *Eto gruppa «Ranetki» :)* ***Ja xz****, kto jeto. Serial takoj est', vrode by.* 'This is the band «Ranetki» :) I xz who it is. There is such a series, it seems.' (GICR, 2009)

(33) ***Ja xren znaet****, skol'ko tam ljudej nado i daže ne pomnju sut' vsex.* 'I xren knows how many people are needed there and I don't even remember the essence of it all.' (GICR, 2010)

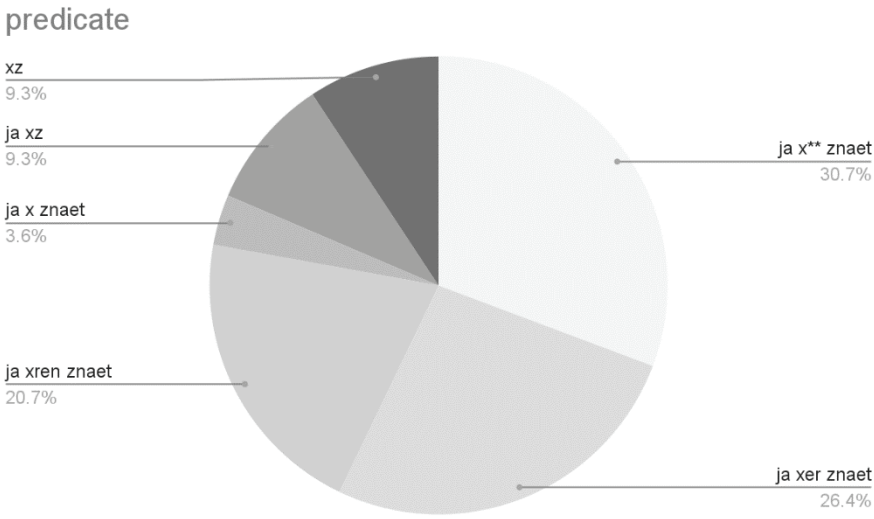


Fig. 4. Quantitative distribution of x**/xer/xren/x znaet/xz using as a predicate in GICR, 2004–2015

At the same time (again as with discussed above examples with *xz* instead of recognizable as obscene *xer znaet* (34)) the situation of rethinking changes the construction (both: the anchor and the meaning). Compare the situation with *ne Bog vest'* (12), although it should be noted that such usages are occasional.

(34) *znakomit'sja mne prixodilos' pust'* ***ne xz kak*** *original'no, no uspešno.* 'I had to get acquainted, even if not xz as originally, but successfully.' (GICR, 2008)

When someone uses *xz* it means they don't know something because it "knows" someone euphemized, however when someone uses *ne xz* ('not xz') the meaning of *x* is erased more, while only the meaning of *z* still exists (however, it also happens the other way around) (see (35)). In other words there is a double constructionalization occurring in the reason of dropping semantics twice (exactly as with *xz*).

(35) *Blin v moej komnate 3 krovati,* ***ja ne xz*** *na kakoj spat'.)))* 'Damn, there are 3 beds in my room, I not xz what to sleep on.)))' (GICR, 2015)

Actually, in the current situation with literally a little anchor *xz* of the construction, we have seen at least three parallel and multidirectional processes.

First, it has started functioning as construction (31), second, it has a double constructionalization twice (32), (35). More than that, we can notice a resemantization in the entire form (29)–(30).

5 CONCLUSION

Thus, we have considered three paths of development of the construction *X znaet* 'X knows' based on the corpus data and revealed the following peculiarities of usage:

1. The construction comprises a broad range of meanings: indefinite, evaluative and intensifying, it can be used as a discourse formula and compositionally. God, devil, and obscene x-words are interchangeable; only God-construction developed the meaning of de-intensification and mediocrity. However, some occasional examples with obscene x-words are also found.
2. We put forward a possible path of constructionalization and the mechanism of the semantic shifts. This phenomenon is mainly described for adjectives and adverbs, but still remains understudied for constructions. Our preliminary results demonstrate that this field of research is rather promising.
3. The devil-construction developed a peculiar variant with -te, which may be interpreted as a grammaticalized pronoun form. We demonstrated that the construction might have undergone the process of pronominal desemantization and referentiality loss: in the data we observe the grammaticalization of *tebja* (you.ACC) into *-te* and the shift towards the semantics of negative assessment.
4. The x-words are remarkable with the development of peculiar syntactic properties: the whole construction becomes abbreviated and starts being used as a predicate ('I x-knows'). So, we observe bleaching of the original semantics and demonstrate the process of double constructionalization and re-semantization of this variant of the construction.

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