

On the Semantics of Russian Aspect

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The perfective / imperfective distinction in Russian is often accounted for by means of such notions as (in)completeness and (a)telicity. For instance, the perfective aspect is proposed to encode complete, telic events (Forsyth (1970), Filip (2000)). Thus, (1) entails that Dima not only was engaged in writing a letter but actually finished writing it. In this paper, I will assume that this, most commonly accepted, view of the perfective is correct. In contrast, the relation between the imperfective aspect and atelicity is less clear. Some researchers assume that the imperfective encodes atelicity or partiality (e.g. Smith (1991)); others treat it as a default, “elsewhere” aspect which lacks a unifying semantics (e.g. Forsyth (1970)). In this paper I will reject both these approaches. In particular, I will argue that, although the imperfective aspect does not entail atelicity, it should be assigned a unifying semantics.

The fact that the imperfective aspect does not entail atelicity follows from its compatibility with telic event interpretation in certain usages / environments, which include, but are not limited to, negative sentences, interrogatives and Statement of Fact convention of usage. For instance, under the Statement of Fact convention, the imperfective is used to assert that a certain type of event has been instantiated; it is not crucial whether it has been instantiated once or several times. This usage is partly similar to Experiential Perfect in English. Crucially, a sentence exhibiting this usage of the imperfective is made true by a single event of the specified type, even if the event is telic. For instance, (2) asserts that the team has had the experience of winning. Importantly, a single winning event (which is an achievement) makes the sentence true. It follows that the imperfective aspect does not entail atelicity.

On the basis of these and additional facts to be discussed in the paper I agree with Forsyth (1970) and Borik (2002), among others, that the imperfective aspect is compatible with telicity. Its denotation does include single telic events, as well as pluralities of events. In this sense it is similar to plural number, which has been argued to denote both pluralities of individuals and single objects. Indeed, I propose that Russian aspect should be analyzed in the same terms as the singular / plural distinction in the nominal domain.

According to Sauerland (2003), the singular number contributes the presupposition that the NP to which it is attached denotes an atom (i.e. a single individual). In contrast, the plural is essentially neutral with respect to number, as it neither entails nor presupposes that the NP denotes a plurality of objects. Its interpretation is compatible with both pluralities and singleton sets. One possible formalization of this analysis is provided in (3). In turn, the fact that the plural form is often unacceptable when a single individual is involved is accounted for by means of a more general informativeness constraint, which essentially follows from Gricean maxim of quantity. This constraint dictates that whenever two competing forms are compatible with the intended interpretation, the form with a more specific (or restricted) meaning should be used. Thus, whenever both the plural and the singular are in principle acceptable, the singular, which corresponds to a stronger statement, has to be chosen.

I propose to assign essentially the same analysis to the perfective / imperfective distinction, the only difference being that number affects quantification over objects, and aspect, over events. The proposed analysis of Russian aspect is formalized in (4). The perfective aspect implies that the encoded event is atomic. This accounts for the fact that perfective sentences encode telic events (atomicity involves quantization and, thus, telicity) and cannot have a habitual reading (even their compatibility with phrases of the type *X times* is restricted). In turn, the imperfective aspect merely asserts that a certain event property has been instantiated. This instantiation can constitute either a single event or a series of events, either telic or atelic. This accounts for the wide range of meanings that the imperfective can have, including the acceptability of (2). In turn, the fact that the imperfective aspect is not normally used to encode a single telic event in an affirmative sentence results from essentially the same restriction on informativeness that constrains the usage of the plural form. Since a perfective clause makes a stronger assertion than its imperfective counterpart, whenever both are true and appropriate, the former has to be used. Thus, I argue that the usage of the imperfective form is restricted only pragmatically, and not by its

aspectually relevant semantic properties. I will demonstrate how the maxim of quantity, in combination with maxims of quality and relevance, accounts for the different usages of the imperfective aspect.

Finally, I will show that the proposed analysis is further supported by the choice of aspect in downward entailing environments. In these environments, the imperfective form becomes more informative than the perfective. Therefore, the use of the former is predicted to be less restricted, as it is not ruled out by the informativeness constraint mentioned above. I will demonstrate that this prediction is borne out. Imperfective clauses in downward entailing environments constitute assertions about pluralities of events as well as single events, even if the latter are telic. For instance, under negation, the imperfective aspect can be used to deny single telic events. Thus, (5) entails that Ivan did not visit Lena *even once*. (This is predicted under the proposed analysis, according to which (5) means that the event property *Ivan visit Lena* has not been instantiated.) In other words, the sentence denies not only pluralities of such events but also atomic events of this type. A different example is provided in (6), in which downward entailing environment is created by a universal quantifier. The sentence entails that every person who has lost a passport *at least once* knows how unpleasant this is. In other words, both individuals who lost a passport once and those who lost it several times fit the description. This means that the imperfective sentence is compatible with a single telic event scenario. I will demonstrate that this pattern holds in various downward entailing environments, including negative sentences (5), relative clauses embedded under a universal quantifier (6), interrogatives or complements of *doubt*.

1. Dima napisal pis'mo.
Dima wrote(perf) letter
Dima wrote / has written a letter.
2. Eta komanda uže vyigryvala.
This team already won(imp)
This team has already won (at least once).
3. [[Sg]] = $\lambda P\lambda x.P(x) \wedge \text{atom}(x)$
[[Pl]] = $\lambda P\lambda x.P(x)$
4. [[Perf]] = $\lambda P\lambda e.P(e) \wedge \text{atom}(e)$
[[Imp]] = $\lambda P\lambda e.P(e)$
5. Ivan ne naveščal Lenu.
Ivan NEG visited(imp)Lena
Ivan didn't visit Lena (not even once)
6. Každýj, kto terjal passport, znaet, kak eto neprijatno.
Everyone who lost(imp) passport knows how this unpleasant
Every person that has lost a passport knows how unpleasant this is.

Selected References:

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