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Biaspectual Verbs in the Russian Language

Aspect is pervasive in the Russian language. What is aspect? Scholars give various definitions depending on the theoretical approach. For instance, Roman Jakobson, a Russian linguist, writes that aspect “deals with temporal values inherent in the activity or state itself” (1971), while the typologist Bernard Comrie states that “aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (1976). In general, we can say that aspect deals with the speaker’s viewpoint on a situation. A speaker can view a situation in its totality (perfective aspect) or in its ongoing state (imperfective aspect).

In the Russian language aspect is mandatory for all verbs. Verbs will express either imperfective or perfective aspect. Russian aspect is represented by morphology: prefixation or suffixation. Perfective aspect will be formed by adding a prefix to an imperfective verb. Thus, the vast majority of Russian verbs are paired that is, imperfective verbs will have perfective correlates.

Consider these examples (aspectual verbs are bolded):

1. *Ya **chital** etu knigu – ‘I was reading this book’ – Imp.*
2. *Ya **prochital** etu knigu – ‘I have read this book’ – Perf.*

Aspect is not to be confused with tense in the Russian language. Both of these examples take place in the past. The first example represents an imperfective aspect, that is, an ongoing event, while the 2nd example represents perfective aspect, that is, the event in its totality. Additionally, the verb in the 2nd example has a prefix *pro-* to express perfective aspect. In general, the vast majority of Russian verbs will form the perfective aspect through prefixation. There are 11 so-called “empty” prefixes that participate in the formation of the perfective aspect: *pro-*, *za-*, *s-*, *ot-*, *na-*, *po-*, *vy-*, *o- raz-*, *ob-*, *u-*. They are called “empty” because it is said that these prefixes have lost all semantic content and simply mark aspect.

However, there exists a group of verbs that can express aspect without any aspectual morphology; that is, both the perfective and the imperfective aspect are expressed by the same verb form. These are called Biaspectual verbs.

Consider these examples (Čertkova and Chang 1998):

3. *Vy **ispol’zujete** sejchas eti materialy - Are you using these materials now? – Imp.*
4. *Vy **ispol’zujete** zavtra eti materialy - Will you use these materials tomorrow? – Perf.*

As we can see from the above examples the bolded verb forms are exactly the same, yet they express different aspects. All biaspectual verbs are divided into two types: the verbs of Slavic origin and the verbs of foreign origin, i.e. borrowings. Verbs of Slavic origin comprise about 10% of all biaspectual verbs. Verbs of foreign origin comprise about 90% of all biaspectual verbs. All of these verbs come into the language with the suffix ‘-ova’ or its variants ‘-irova/izirova/izova’, and ‘-ficirova.’

Most previous studies have focused on verbs that have been present in the language for at least 100 years, if not more. Thus these verbs have had time to become incorporated into the language and even to develop aspectual morphology. Up to this point no one has investigated just the newer verbs to see how they behave in the language. As we all know, in the last 20 to 30 years, we have seen a lot of growth in technology, Internet, and social media and with this growth came new vocabulary terms. Furthermore, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, new political terms have entered the system. Some of the examples of these verbs are *promoutirovat’* ‘to promote’ (entertainment); *komp’juterizirovat’* ‘to computerize’ (tech); *installirovat’* ‘to install’ (tech). During my research, the two questions I sought to answer were the following: a) Do the recent borrowings behave similarly to the older borrowings, that is, do they resist aspectual morphology? b) Why do biaspectual verbs resist aspectual morphology?

To answer the first question, I took these recent biaspectual verbs and ran them through two language corpora: the Russian National Corpus and the British SketchEngine (RuTenTen subcorpus). A corpus is a collection of recorded texts and it represents how a language is used at a current stage. The Russian National Corpus consists of newspaper articles, literary works, essays, memoirs, and public speeches from the 18th century to the beginning of the 21st century. It contains over 265 million words. RuTenTen is a web-based corpus and pulls information from the internet: websites, blogs, and forums. The total word count in this corpus is over 14 billion. My reason for using these two corpora was to give me a good balance between the fairly conservative and heavily edited Russian National Corpus and the less conservative web-based SketchEngine corpus.

The challenge was to get the right data, that is the verbs that were actually relatively new to the Russian language. First, I decided to take several dictionaries and collect all biaspectual

verbs. I used 4 different dictionaries and gathered a list of over 400 verbs. Next, I ran these verbs through the Russian National Corpus to see when their attestations were first recorded. While certain verbs might have entered the system more than 30 years ago, if their use was only recorded within the last 30 years, this was sufficient for those verbs to be on my list. I compiled a list of 40 verbs. Obviously more verbs than that entered the language in the last 30 years but if there was no record of them in both corpora, I did not include them into my dataset, since they would give me nothing to analyze. Additionally, because these verbs are recent borrowings, their usage in both corpora is still quite limited: that is, out of several million words, the uses of these verbs can be counted in the thousands and even hundreds.

A common trend that I have seen in my data is that the vast majority of the recent borrowings come in with the suffix ‘*-irova*’, variant of the suffix ‘*-ova*’; the second place belongs to ‘*-izirova*’, while ‘*-ova/izova*’ are practically not used. Out of the entire data set, 55% came in with the ‘*-irova*’ suffix. When I looked at the distribution of prefix/suffix ratio though, those verbs that come in with the suffix ‘*-ova*’ develop morphology more freely than those that come in with the variants of this suffix (80% of those verbs had some aspectual morphology). This is not surprising, since the suffix ‘*-ova*’ has Slavic roots. And in my research on the subject, some of the earlier biaspectual verbs that came into the language with this suffix had a higher rate of developing aspectual morphology than the verbs that came with the variants of this suffix.

Next, I put all the verbs through both corpora with all 11 prefixes. I found that biaspectual verbs resist aspectual morphological modification regardless of when they come into the language.

The total attestation number of these verbs in both corpora without prefixation or suffixation was 105,885; with prefixation the total count was 2,741. This is 2.6% of the total number; obviously not a lot. 19 out of 40 verbs or 47% did not have any prefixation at all. To look at the entire data set through a different lens, I divided these verbs into 4 groups based on the relative frequency of prefixation: a) prefixation less than 5%; b) 5-10%; c) 10-20%; d) anything over 20%. The group of verbs with prefixation of less than 5% comprised 70% of the total, a clear majority.

While we can see that some morphology is developing, the percentages of prefixation for each individual verb are still small. They range anywhere from less than 1% to 12%. The group

(d) with the highest rate of prefixation of over 20% is worth looking at. There are only 5 verbs in this group: *mikshirovat* 'to mix' (music) – 42%, *semplirovat* 'to sample' (music) – 30%, *tyuningovat* 'to customize' (auto) – 32%, *pirsingovat* 'to pierce' (art) – 25% and *melirovat* 'to lighten streaks of hair' (beauty) – 23%. There are a couple of interesting points here: if we look at the suffixes these verbs came in with, three of them are with the suffix '-ova'. Do not be confused by the presence of -ir in *melirovat*, in this verb, it is actually a part of the root from the French word *mêler*. And we already know that verbs with the suffix '-ova' have a higher rate of forming aspectual morphology. When we look at the other two verbs and their morphological make-up, it is very simple, for the original verbs consist of only the roots 'mix' and 'sample' to which a suffix '-irova' has been added for integration into the Russian language. I can only hypothesize here that the simplicity of the original roots has an influence on why aspectual morphology has been developing in these verbs at a higher rate. But I will have to go through the rest of the data and potentially biaspectual verbs outside of my data to confirm this hypothesis.

In conclusion, the trends of the recent biaspectual verbs are very similar to those of verbs that have been present in the language much longer. The numbers show that these verbs resist aspectual morphology. Most of them come in with the suffix '-irova' which puts constraints on morphological modification of these verbs given that this suffix is quite long already. Furthermore, as has been noted in other research, such issues as a pressure to keep the original verb form intact and even phonological features like stress have an influence on the morphological modification of these verbs.

The next steps in my research are to look at the "empty" prefixes. Are they really "empty"? I need to carry out further analysis of the groups of verbs and look for any common trends. I also need to look at the suffixation part of aspectual morphology which participates in the formation of a secondary imperfective from the perfective aspect to see how this trend develops in biaspectual verbs. I have yet to answer the second question of my research: Why do biaspectual verbs resist aspectual morphology? I want to thank SURF and the Wishek foundation for giving me the amazing opportunity. I want to thank my faculty mentor Gary Holland for his support and advice. He has been instrumental in my research and continues to provide invaluable feedback and insights into this topic. I also want to thank Slavic professor Darya Kavitskaya, who inspired me to do this research during one of her classes.