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978-0-521-14500-8 - A Grammar of Aspect: Usage and Meaning in the Russian Verb

J. Forsyth

Excerpt

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## 1

## THE CATEGORY OF ASPECT

In one sense the Russian verb presents a very simple structural picture, since it possesses only two sets of tense forms, a past and a present (e.g. писал, писала etc., and пишу, пишешь etc.) or a past and a 'future' (e.g. написал, написала etc., and напишу, напишешь etc.). This may be contrasted with, for instance, English or French, in both of which a large variety of tense or tense-and-mood forms exist, e.g. 'wrote', 'did write', 'was writing', 'have written', 'write', 'am writing', 'shall write' etc., or 'j'écrivais', 'j'écrivais', 'j'ai écrit', 'j'écris', 'j'écrirai' etc. On the other hand, the Russian verb possesses a complexity which is lacking in English or French, since generally speaking there exist two parallel sets of verb forms carrying identical lexical meaning, i.e. denoting one and the same type of action. Thus, corresponding to the set of forms in English illustrated above, which are generally referred to collectively as 'the verb *to write*', Russian has two sets of forms: imperfective—писал, пишу, пиши, писать etc.—and perfective—написал, напишу, напиши, написать etc. (Whether these two sets of forms should be considered as two separate verbs or as components of a single lexeme—varieties of 'the same verb'—remains a controversial question which need not interest us here.<sup>1</sup> I shall refer to them indifferently as, e.g. 'the verb писать/написать', 'the pair of verbs писать/написать'—the imperfective member of the pair always being given first—or as 'the verb писать'<sup>1</sup> and 'the verb написать'<sup>п</sup>. The superscript letters <sup>1</sup> and <sup>п</sup> are used throughout to draw attention to the aspect of the verb under consideration in a given example.)

Every time a Russian-speaker has to refer to an action for which in English some form of the verb 'to write' would be used, he must choose a form either of писать or of написать. It is the criteria of choice between these two possibilities which constitute the category of verbal aspect. This category is characteristic of all the Slavonic languages. Since such a pairing of verbs does not exist in English grammar (although English is capable of expressing by other means distinctions in *meaning* similar to those expressed by aspect in Russian) the usage of the Russian

<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of this question appears in Maslov, 1959: 167–72, with the conclusion that perfective and imperfective forms which express identical lexical meaning must be considered forms of one verb.

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verb is undoubtedly the most difficult feature of Russian grammar for English-speakers learning the language. As a result it has often been asserted that verbal aspect is a mystery which no non-Slav can hope to master, since it seems capricious and dependent upon the 'subjective choice' of the Russian speaker or writer. It is true that there frequently is freedom for the individual's 'subjective choice' of aspectual form in Russian (just as in English there frequently exists freedom of choice between, for instance, the simple past or past continuous) but the importance of this feature has been greatly exaggerated. There is a logical basis underlying the choice of aspect. A Russian selects one or other form for some (albeit unconscious) *reason*, and the relationship between the aspects depends upon an opposition of meanings and grammatical functions which constitutes part of the *system* of the Russian verb. The essential thing is to establish the nature of this opposition, and that will be our purpose in the first chapter.

1.1 *Traditional Definitions*

While it is agreed that in general Russian verbs exist in aspectual pairs, there has been considerable disagreement among linguists as to the precise nature of the relationship between the two verbs constituting a pair. Definitions of the category of aspect and of the specific functions of perfective and imperfective verbs remain varied and controversial.<sup>1</sup> Most definitions of aspect in Russian and other Slavonic languages have aimed at presenting an opposition of two basic meanings, one characteristic of the imperfective, the other of the perfective. The most popular explanation has been that first put forward by F. Miklosich, which opposes 'continuous action' (imperfective) to 'completed action' (perfective). This opposition is superficially adequate for many verbs in many contexts in which the perfective has a terminative meaning, e.g. он прочитал 'he read' (or 'finished reading') as opposed to он читал 'he read' (or 'was reading').

It is difficult to accommodate under this scheme, however, perfectives such as засмеялся 'he laughed' (or 'began to laugh') without resorting to somewhat tortuous logic to explain that here what is 'completed' is 'the beginning of the action'. A somewhat more accommodating view was therefore put forward by V. V. Vinogradov, who said that the action is considered in relation to some internal limit: a perfective verb

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Vinogradov, 1947: 477–537 for a detailed review of various theories; cf. also Maslov, 1962: 7–25.

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expresses an internal limit set to the action—it may be the point of completion or of beginning, or may refer to performance within a given time.<sup>1</sup>

Other investigators such as Shakhmatov have emphasised rather the duration of the action, considering that the imperfective expresses longer duration, the perfective shorter duration. Here ‘linear action’ is opposed to ‘punctual action’, e.g.

он стучал ‘he knocked’ (or ‘was knocking’)—‘linear’;

он стукнул ‘he knocked’ (once)—‘punctual’.

This opposition, however, applies only to a limited number of verbs which possess a semelfactive form,<sup>2</sup> and cannot be extended to all verbs.

The definition of aspect given in the *Academy Grammar* may be quoted as a typical attempt to cover all basic meanings of the aspects in one compromise statement (translation and italics mine):<sup>3</sup>

‘The category of aspect indicates that the action expressed by the verb is presented: (a) in its course, in process of its performance, *consequently* in its duration or repetition, e.g. жить, петь, работать, ходить, читать (imperfective); (b) as something restricted, concentrated at some limit of its performance, be it the moment of origin or beginning of the action or the moment of its completion or result, e.g. запеть, кончить, побегать, пропеть, прийти, узнать, уйти (perfective).’

As a basic definition this is unsatisfactory because, while giving the most obvious characteristics of usage of both aspects, it does not demonstrate any simple opposition between these characteristics—‘duration-or-repetition’ cannot be meaningfully opposed to ‘limited-at-beginning-or-end’. Too many alternative criteria are put forward—duration *or* repetition (the latter not being in any sense *consequent* upon the representation of the action as being in process), completion *or* result.

It is one thing to list the various meanings which can be carried or implied by forms of one or other aspect, but another to isolate the essential differences of meaning and function of imperfective and perfective verbs in such a way that the total range of usage of all forms can be seen to constitute a system with as few ‘exceptions’ and anomalies as possible.

1.1.1 *Functions of the imperfective*

Recent studies of aspect have aimed at isolating a grammatical category of aspect as clear-cut and unambiguous as those of, e.g. number, case and tense, divested of elements which are irrelevant to the strictly aspectual opposition of perfective : imperfective.

<sup>1</sup> Vinogradov, 1947: 497.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 2.3.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Academy Grammar*: I, 424.

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It is in fact definition of the meaning of the imperfective which causes trouble: the essential meaning of the perfective is relatively easy to discern and causes little disagreement among grammarians. But the characteristics of the imperfective which traditionally enter into definitions of its functions—expression of continuous action and of repeated action—are not essential. These two ‘meanings’ are not inherent in the imperfective verb, although admittedly they are frequently attached to it. The meanings of continuous action and repetition are entirely dependent on context—principally upon the presence of appropriate adverbs—and a context such as the following, in which the author has purposely deprived the reader of adverbs, clearly demonstrates the vagueness of the imperfective past tense. (The clauses have been set out on separate lines and numbered for ease of reference):

1. Кухня выходила<sup>1</sup> во двор;
2. была весна, двери не закрывались<sup>1</sup>,
3. у порога росла<sup>1</sup> трава,
4. блестела<sup>1</sup> пролитая на камень вода.
5. В сорном ящике появлялась<sup>1</sup> крыса.
6. В кухне жарили<sup>1</sup> мелко нарезанную картошку.
7. Зажигали<sup>1</sup> примус.
8. Жизнь примуса начиналась<sup>1</sup> пышно: факелом до потолка.
9. Умирал<sup>1</sup> он коротким синим огоньком.
10. В кипятке прыгали<sup>1</sup> яйца.
11. Один жилец варил<sup>1</sup> раков.
12. Живого рака брал<sup>1</sup> он двумя пальцами за талию.
13. Раки были зеленоватого, водопроводного цвета.
14. Из крана вылетали<sup>1</sup> вдруг сами по себе две-три капельки.
15. Кран тихо сморкался<sup>1</sup>.
16. Потом наверху заговаривали<sup>1</sup> несколькими голосами трубы.
17. Тогда сразу определялись<sup>1</sup> сумерки. . .

(OLESHA: *Любна*)

The kitchen looked on to the yard. It was springtime. The doors were left open. Grass grew round the doorstep. Water spilt on the stones sparkled. A rat appeared in the rubbish-bin. Finely sliced potatoes were fried in the kitchen. A primus-stove was lit. The life of the primus started with a flourish—in a flare right up to the ceiling. It died down to a gentle little blue flame. Eggs danced in boiling water. One lodger boiled crayfish. He lifted the live crayfish with two fingers round its middle. The crayfish were of a greenish water-pipe colour. Suddenly two or three drops fell from the tap of their own accord. The tap blew its nose quietly. Then the pipes upstairs started talking in several voices. Then twilight suddenly became apparent. . .

The actions expressed by the verbs in phrases 5, 12, 14 and 16 are presumably repeated, implying such adverbs as *время от времени*, *каждый раз* (and one would expect to find in the English translation

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‘would appear’, ‘would lift’ etc.); while the lexical meaning of the verbs in 3 and 4 suggests that they denote continuous processes or states (‘was growing’, ‘was sparkling’). But in many of these sentences it is impossible to tell which view of the action is intended—whether, for instance, in 7 the appropriate adverb might be *сейчас* or *каждый день* (‘were lighting’ or ‘lit’?), in 11—*часто* or *сейчас* (‘used to boil’ or ‘was boiling’?), in 15—*сейчас, постоянно* or *время от времени* (‘was blowing’, ‘kept on blowing’ or ‘blew its nose’?). By robbing the verbs of adverbial accompaniment Olesha makes their contextual significance vague, with the aim of creating the feeling of dream-like semi-awareness of a multitude of phenomena impinging haphazardly upon a passive subject (a young boy).

Thus the expression of continuous action or repetition is not inherent in imperfective verb forms, but depends entirely on the context. There seems therefore to be no justification for presenting these as essential meanings of the imperfective, especially since several other nuances can be associated with this aspect. A notable example of these in the past tense is the expression of ‘two-way’ action (more strictly, cancellation of the direct consequences of the action). Familiar examples of this are: *К вам приходил Иванóв*, meaning ‘Ivanov called to see you’ (but has gone away again); *Он уже прочитал эту книгу. Он брал её в библиотеке*. ‘He has already read that book. He had it out of the library’ (i.e. he has now returned it). Although this usage of the imperfective is less common than the implication of continuous action or repetition, it is just as characteristic as either of these meanings, and cannot be ignored. (cf. 4.4).

A still more important use of the imperfective is ignored (and then treated as an anomaly) in definitions which dwell exclusively on continuous action and repetition: frequently the imperfective verb, not only in the past tense but in the future, imperative and infinitive, denotes quite clearly a single action which in objective reality is either already completed or is to be performed as a whole, e.g. *Вы читали «Анну Каренину»?* — *Читал* ‘Have you read *Anna Karenina*?’ ‘I have’; *Кто покупал эти билеты?* — *Я* ‘Who bought these tickets?’ ‘I did’; *Вы получили моё письмо?* — *Нет, не получал* ‘Did you get my letter?’ ‘No, I haven’t received it’; *Вы будете покупать эту шляпу?* ‘Will you buy (are you going to buy) this hat?’; *Пожалуйста, уходите!* ‘Please go away’; *Надо сейчас уходить!* ‘We must go now’. In none of these sentences is there any question of repetition, nor is there any reference to the duration of the action in time. The precise significance

of the imperfective in such sentences is discussed in subsequent chapters (cf. 4.5, 5.2, 7.2, 7.3, 8.6.2 etc.), but in general it can be said that the function of the imperfective here is simply to name the type of action, to identify it lexically, along with the grammatical meaning of the form concerned—past tense, future tense, imperative etc.—but without reference to perfectivity. This is such a common use of imperfective forms that it cannot be relegated to the status of an anomaly or exception: it can in fact be argued that this is the essential and only *inherent* meaning of the imperfective, from which the other ‘meanings’ mentioned above are derived.

### 1.2 *Aspect as a privative opposition*

The logical concept which has proved to be useful in establishing the relationship between the aspects is that of *privative opposition*. Where a choice exists in a language between only two possibilities, e.g. in the English simple present tense between ‘write’ and ‘writes’, the criteria of choice between them may be expressed in two ways. Either one can say: ‘write’ is used with ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘we’ and ‘they’, i.e. in the first person singular and plural, the second person, and the third person plural, whereas ‘writes’ is used with ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘it’, i.e. with the third person singular; or, since ‘writes’ is so restricted in its usage compared with ‘write’, we can say that ‘writes’ is used with the third person singular only, and ‘write’ when not referring to the third person singular but to any other person. Since ‘writes’ is more restricted in its usage than ‘write’, its sphere of usage can be more easily and precisely defined; ‘writes’ can therefore be called the ‘marked’ member of the opposition ‘writes : write’. On the other hand, ‘write’ has a more extensive field of usage—not only is it used for several ‘persons’ of the present tense, but it also serves as the imperative form and as the ‘infinitive’ in many compound tenses. Thus ‘write’ has no clearly marked single function, and may be called the ‘unmarked’ member of the opposition ‘writes : write’. This illustrates the essence of a privative opposition: one term is defined positively, in terms of its essential and inherent meaning, and the other is defined negatively, as not inherently possessing the meaning of the ‘marked’ member, although it may nevertheless frequently express other meanings, and sometimes may even carry the meaning which is inherent in the ‘marked’ member—e.g. ‘write’ can occur (rarely and rather archaically) even with the meaning of third person singular in the subjunctive mood: ‘It is essential that he write.’

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The application of the concept of privative opposition to the analysis of the Russian verb was outlined first by Roman Jakobson, who wrote:

The question of the meaning of particular morphological categories in a language frequently leads to permanent differences of opinion and doubts among linguists. How are these variations to be explained?

A linguist, in considering a pair of contrasting morphological categories,<sup>1</sup> often starts from the assumption that both categories have equal rights (*sein gleichberechtigt*) and that each possesses its own positive meaning: category I has the meaning A, and category II the meaning B; or at least, that I means A, and II expresses the lack or negation of A. In fact the general meanings of correlative categories are distributed in a different way: if category I expresses the presence of meaning A, then category II does not express the presence of meaning A, i.e. it does not state whether A is present or not. The general meaning of category II compared with category I is limited to the absence of 'A-indication'. If in a given context category II expresses the absence of meaning A, this is merely one of the uses of the category in question: the meaning is here conditioned by the situation, and even if this meaning is the most common function of this category, the investigator nevertheless must not equate the statistically predominant meaning of the category with its general meaning. . .

By regarding as an essential relationship something which within the system of the language merely has the status of a possible relationship, grammarians end up by making rules with a great number of exceptions.<sup>2</sup>

The latter certainly has been the case with verbal aspect in Russian. The meanings of continuous action and repetition have been, and still are, frequently used as the basis of a description of the aspect system in which other meanings of the imperfective such as two-way action and simple denotation have to be treated as exceptions.

In fact the concept of privative opposition is particularly useful in the analysis of the relationship between the aspects in Russian. It both fits the facts of aspectual usage and provides a clue to the system which may be assumed to underlie the choice of aspectual forms by Russian-speakers. The definition of aspectual relationship as a privative opposition given by Yu. S. Maslov in connection with Bulgarian equally well applies to Russian: 'the category of perfective and imperfective aspect . . . is the reflection of the speaker's (or writer's) objectively conditioned choice between two views of the action denoted by the verb: it may be presented as an indivisible whole (как . . . неделимое целое)—perfective, or without reference to the totality (целостность) of the action—imper-

<sup>1</sup> The word 'category' is used by Jakobson not only to denote the generic grammatical concepts of number, gender, case, tense, mood, aspect etc., but also, as here, to denote the *members* constituting such a category, e.g. singular and plural; masculine, feminine and neuter; perfective and imperfective etc. Maslov, 1965: 55 rightly recommends that only the generic concept should be referred to as a category, and not the individual members.

<sup>2</sup> Jakobson, 1932.

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fective'.<sup>1</sup> Professor Maslov quotes an earlier definition along these lines by L. Razmusen (1891) which is in some ways clearer: the perfective expresses 'an action considered as a single whole (одно целое)', while the imperfective expresses 'an action considered only from the point of view of its concrete, denotative features (вещественных (знаменательных) своих признаков) without reference to its totality'.<sup>2</sup>

In the present work a definition of the meaning of the perfective aspect is put forward which is based on those of Razmusen and Maslov, but attempts to take into account more explicitly the intrinsic semantics of verb-forms as well as the syntactic-narrative functions of aspect, namely: *a perfective verb expresses the action as a total event summed up with reference to a single specific juncture.*

Such a definition may appear less concrete than those which mention 'completion', 'repetition', 'action in progress' etc., as positive meanings of either aspect. The inadequacy of any more concrete definition has, however, been demonstrated in a general way above and, it is hoped, this will become more apparent in the course of the detailed analysis of the usage of various forms which follows.

### 1.2.1 *Functions of the perfective*

The basic meaning of the perfective defined above leads to certain corollaries:

(a) Frequently the action described by a perfective verb brings about a change in the state of affairs prevailing before the occurrence of the action, e.g.

был стакáн	он разбил <sup>p</sup> стакáн	стакáн разбит
there was a glass	he broke the glass	the glass is broken

Here разбил<sup>p</sup> marks the transition point between the two states был стакáн and стакáн разбит.

(b) The perfective verb is consequently used whenever emphasis is placed upon such a new state of affairs produced by the action, i.e. the result or consequences of the action.<sup>3</sup> Since it expresses only the transition to the new state produced, the implication of the perfective is that

<sup>1</sup> Maslov, 1959: 309.

<sup>2</sup> Originally in *Журнал Министерства Народного Просвещения*, 1891: 379; quoted by Maslov, 1959: 310.

<sup>3</sup> This does not mean that 'result' is the principal meaning of the perfective, as is assumed, for instance, by Mazon. Many actions expressed by perfective verbs, e.g. сказал, проснулся, produce no results beyond themselves (although they may in reality produce, or at least be followed by, *consequences* and a change in the prevailing state of affairs).



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the result of the action performed remains in force after the event described, up to the moment of speaking or up to the time when another action reported subsequently annuls this result. For instance, он открыл<sup>р</sup> дверь 'he opened the door' implies either that the door is still open now, or that the narrative will continue, to express, or at least imply, a subsequent event such as...и вышел 'and came out', or Вечером мы удивились, найдя дверь открытой, и заперли её 'In the evening we were surprised to find the door open, and we locked it.'

(c) The total performance of the action and production of its result may be a necessary pre-condition for the performance of another action: if the new state of affairs were not produced, the next action could not take place, e.g.

он открыл<sup>р</sup> дверь и вышел  
открыв<sup>р</sup> дверь, он вышел  
he opened the door and went out

(d) In general, perfective verbs are used to express sequence of actions—occurrence of perfective verb forms one after another implies clearly that the events described occurred in the same sequence, e.g. он встал<sup>р</sup>, умылся<sup>р</sup>, оделся<sup>р</sup> etc., 'he got up, washed, dressed' etc.

So far, the functions of perfective verbs have been discussed only in isolated sentences. Many of the meanings of one or other aspect, however, arise only from the interplay of verbs in a continuous context. The following excerpt from Paustovsky's story 'Лёнька с Малого озера' shows the typical roles of verbs of both aspects in narration:

1. К трём часам дня вы вышли<sup>р</sup> на песчаный бугор среди болот...
2. День быстро темнел<sup>1</sup>,
3. сумерки уже зарождались<sup>1</sup> под неприветливым небом,
4. и приближалась<sup>1</sup> ночь...
5. Мы кричали<sup>1</sup>
6. и прислушивались<sup>1</sup>.
7. Ветер шумел<sup>1</sup> в ответ в мёртвых чашах
8. и приносил<sup>1</sup> хриплое карканье вороньих стай.
9. Потом где-то за краем земли и болот слышался<sup>р</sup> ответный крик, протяжный и слабый.
10. Голос приближался<sup>1</sup>.
11. Затрещал<sup>р</sup> осинник,
12. голос слышался<sup>р</sup> совсем рядом,
13. из чаши вышел<sup>р</sup> веснушчатый мальчик...
14. Он осторожно шагнул<sup>1</sup> по валёжнику босыми ногами
15. и нес<sup>1</sup> в руках старые сапоги.
16. Он подошёл<sup>р</sup> к нам
17. и застенчиво поздоровался<sup>р</sup>.

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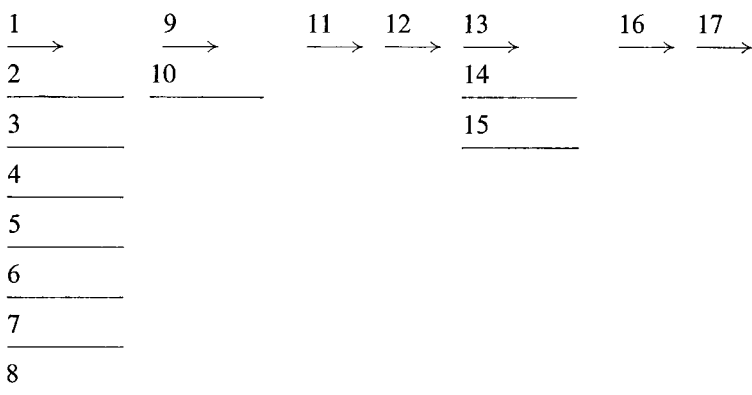
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Towards three o'clock we emerged upon a sandy hillock surrounded by marshes. . . Daylight was swiftly fading, twilight was gathering under the unfriendly sky and night was approaching. . . We shouted and listened for an answer. The wind sighed among the lifeless thickets and carried to us the hoarse cawing of flocks of crows. Then from somewhere beyond the end of the earth and the marshes an answering call was heard, faint and drawn-out. The voice was coming nearer. There came a cracking of twigs in an aspen thicket, the voice rang out close at hand, and out of the thicket came a freckle-faced boy. . . He stepped carefully over the fallen branches on bare feet, carrying in his hands a pair of old boots. Shyly he came up and greeted us.

Each perfective verb denotes an action which is a new event, bringing about, or at least marking the transition to, a new state of affairs, and thus carrying the narrative forward. The imperfective verbs, on the other hand, do not present dynamic changes, but rather facts relating to the background—in 7 a continuous state, in 2 and 3 progressive changes, in 5 and 6 repeated actions etc.—all accompanying each other more or less on a single plane of time, with no clear indication of concurrence or sequence. In contrast with the perfective verbs, the imperfectives tend to hold up the narrative of events rather than carry it forward. The series of verbs in the passage can be represented graphically in the following way, using arrows following each other across the page to denote the events expressed by perfective verbs, and horizontal lines to indicate the static impressions without sequence conveyed by the imperfectives.



Because of its role in carrying a narrative forward from event to event, the perfective verb has been described as 'dynamic'<sup>1</sup> or 'kinetic'.<sup>2</sup> The action as something actually performed seems as it were to be

<sup>1</sup> Vinogradov, 1947: 563.<sup>2</sup> Ward, 1965: 238.