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Research topic: Aspect and aktionsart
Method: Experiments with nonce-words, cloze-tests
Slavic language studied: Russian

Psycholinguistic studies of Russian aktionsarten

In this paper I report on two psycholinguistic experiments that were targeted at the Russian aspectual system. Revealing native-speakers' preferences in the use of various morphemes, the two studies shed light on the nature of the distribution and the motivation behind the choice of prefixes and suffixes associated with semelfactive and attenuative aktionsarten in Russian, as well as the phenomenon of aktionsarten in general. The semelfactive aktionsart describes doing something once and can be expressed by the *-nu-* suffix or the *s-* prefix (e.g. *kriknut'* 'shout once' vs. *sglupit'* 'do something silly once'). The attenuative aktionsart describes doing something slightly, and can be expressed by a variety of prefixes, *pri-* and *pod-* being the two most productive (*priotkryt'* 'open slightly' vs. *podpravit'* 'correct slightly').

Methodologically, the two experiments have a lot in common. In both cases corpus data was used in order to 1) formulate hypotheses and 2) direct the composition of experimental tasks. For semelfactives, Dickey and Janda's (2009) corpus study suggests that the distribution of the semelfactive morphemes is not arbitrary and depends on the morphological class of the verb and on its semantics. My own corpus study of attenuatives based on data from the Russian National Corpus suggests that semantics plays a major role in their distribution (Makarova forthcoming). Both experiments were conducted in written form and included clozed-test tasks, thus participants were not restricted in their choice of morphemes. Moreover, they were not asked to produce semelfactives or attenuatives specifically, rather, they were asked to provide "the best suitable form of a given verb". Thus, the participants had a choice whether to use aktionsarten or other verb forms as well as which affix to select. The contexts for the experiments included lexical triggers for the relevant aktionsarten.

Due to the different nature of affix variation in the two aktionsarten (suffix-prefix variation vs. prefix-prefix variation), the experiments differed in the type and the presentation of target stimuli. While in the study of attenuatives existing verbs of Russian were used, in the study of semelfactives I used nonce-verbs (cf. "wug tests" used by Berko 1958, Bybee and Pardo 1981, Rodina 2008, Chernigovskaya & Gor 2000, 2001, 2003, Gor & Chernigovskaya 2004, Gor 2006, and Murphy 2004). Nonce-verbs were presented in finite and non-finite forms in a way that made their morphological class clear and in contexts that provided informants with some hints about the possible meaning of the verb. The number of the stimuli in the experiments varied: 32 targets out of 44 stimuli for the semelfactive experiment, and 59 targets out of 164 stimuli for the attenuative experiment.

The number of participants (63 and 122, respectively) and consequently the large total number of data points provided sufficient data for statistical analysis. Although in general the experiments provided additional support to the hypotheses, the data obtained in the experiments enabled us to see the complex distributions of morphemes in more detail. Furthermore, the experiments shed light on the status of aktionsarten in the mental grammars of the native speakers of Russian. Thus, the experiments contribute to our understanding of Russian aspectual system.

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