

“The prominent verbs in interactions of aspect, tense and mood in Russian”, by Laura A. Janda, co-authored with Olga Ljashevskaya

We propose the “grammatical profile” as a means of probing the aspectual behavior of verbs. A grammatical profile is the relative frequency distribution of the inflected forms of a word in a corpus. The grammatical profiles of Russian verbs provide data on two crucial issues: a) the overall relationship between perfective and imperfective verbs and b) the identification of verbs that characterize various intersections of aspect, tense and mood (TAM) with lexical classes. There is a long-standing debate over whether Russian aspectual “pairs” are formed only via suffixation (the Isačenko hypothesis) or whether they are formed via both suffixation and prefixation (the traditional view). We test the Isačenko hypothesis using data on the corpus frequency of inflected forms of verbs. We find that the behavior of perfective and imperfective verbs is the same regardless of whether the aspectual relationship is marked by prefixes or suffixes; our finding thus supports the traditional view.

Introspective descriptions of Russian aspect have often connected the use of particular inflectional forms with certain uses of aspect; for example, the use of imperative forms with the imperfective aspect to produce expressions that are very polite. Grammatical profiles make it possible to identify verbs that behave as outliers, presenting unusually large proportions of usage in parts of the paradigm. In other words, this study shows which verbs are most frequent in their use in TAM combinations such as imperfective imperative, perfective imperative, imperfective non-past, perfective non-past etc. This analysis both gives substance to and extends previous introspective descriptions by identifying the verbs most involved in certain TAM-category interactions. We find, for example, certain phenomena that have not been the subject of previous research, such as the use of imperfective imperatives in requests for assistance and kind wishes, and the presence of neutral uses (neither polite nor rude) for both imperfective and perfective imperatives. The main driving force for use of imperfective non-past forms is apparently gnomic reference, rather than the durative meaning of the imperfective that is usually considered most prototypical. Perfective non-past is dominated by predictions (including promises and threats), as well as performative uses of verbs. Infinitive forms are associated with modal uses, and the corpus data suggest that imperfective infinitive are used primarily for deontic generic modality, whereas perfective infinitives express dynamic or deontic modality in reference to specific situations. perfective infinitives additionally participate in constructions with tentative verbs (meaning ‘try’), where they emphasize the difficulty or importance of an achievement. Imperfective past forms are associated with evidentials, habituals, and the narration of observations.

On a methodological level, this study contributes to current discussions on the use of inflected forms vs. lemmas in corpus studies. Whereas Gries (forthcoming) argues that inflectional forms do not necessarily provide a better basis for analysis than lemmas, Newman (2008) finds valuable information at the level of the inflectional form. We suggest that the appropriate level of granularity is determined by both the language and the linguistic phenomenon under analysis.

Gries, Stefan Th. Forthcoming. “Corpus data in usage-based linguistics: What's the right degree of granularity for the analysis of argument structure constructions?” In: Brdar, Mario, Milena Žic Fuchs, and Stefan Th. Gries (eds.). *Expanding cognitive linguistic horizons*. Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Newman, J. 2008. “Aiming low in linguistics: Low-level generalizations in corpus-based research”. *Proceedings of the 11th International Symposium on Chinese Languages and Linguistics, National Chiao Tung University, Hsinchu, Taiwan*. May 24 2008. <http://www.ualberta.ca/~johnnewm/Aiming%20Low.pdf>.