**Slavic Verbal Prefixation from a Typological Perspective**

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Verbal prefixes in the Slavic languages can be described in terms of three interconnected dimensions: their form, meaning, and function. This article reviews each of these dimensions, which serve as the basis for typological observations internal to the Slavic languages, with respect to the areal context of Slavic, and in a broader cross-linguistic perspective.

*Form*

The following aspectual prefixes were inherited from Late Common Slavic: *do*-, *jĭz*-, *na*-, *o(b)*-, *orz*-, *otŭ*-, *per*-, *po*-, *podŭ*-, *pri*-, *pro*-, *sŭ*-, *u*-, *vŭ*-, *vŭz*-, *vy*-, *za*-. We leave aside calques and borrowings in examples such as Russian *pred-videt’* ‘fore-see’ and *kontr-atakovat’* ‘counter-attack’. The verbal prefixes descended from a set of “prewords” that also yielded prepositions, and transparent parallels between most prefixes and corresponding prepositions remain in modern Slavic languages, such as the reflexes of \**otŭ* ‘away from’ and \**do* ‘to’. The aspectual prefixes can be directly attached to a (usually) imperfective verb stem, yielding a perfective verb; for example, the prefix *za-* added to the imperfective verb meaning ‘write’ yields a perfective verb meaning ‘record’ (see examples in Table 2 below). While aspectual prefixes can also be attached to adjectival and substantival roots to form perfective factitive verbs (Endresen 2014: Chapter 9) such as Russian *za-mutnit’* ‘obscure’ (from *mutnyj* ‘muddy’) and *o-svobodit’* ‘free’ (from *svoboda* ‘freedom’), our focus is on the combination of prefixes with verbs. “Prefix stacking”, the possibility of attaching more than one prefix to a verb, as in Russian *pere-za-pisat’* ‘re-record’, is attested across Slavic, for example in Russian (Svenonius 2008, Tatevosov 2013), Czech (Filip 2005), and Bulgarian (Istratkova 2004).

*Meaning*

Like the prepositions that are their etymological cousins, the Slavic verbal prefixes have spatial meanings that express paths. These paths are particularly evident when prefixes are combined with motion verbs, cf. Czech examples in Table 1, which illustrate a pattern found across the Slavic languages. Many such combinations transparently describe physical paths: Czech *pod(e)-jít* is composed of *pod*- ‘under’ plus *jít* ‘walk’ and means ‘go under’. But even in combination with motion verbs semantic shifts are not uncommon, as in the case of *na-jít* where ‘on-walk’ has come to mean ‘find’ in Czech and likewise across Slavic.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Prefix | Prefixed verb | Composite | Meaning of prefixed verb |
| *pod-* ‘under’ | *pod(e)-jít* | ‘under-walk’ | ‘go under’ |
| *v-* ‘in’ | *v(e)-jít* | ‘in-walk’ | ‘enter’ |
| *za-* ‘to a fixed point’ | *za-jít* | ‘fixed-walk’ | ‘stop by’ |
| *na-* ‘on’ | *na-jít* | ‘on-walk’ | ‘come upon, find’ |

Table 1: Some examples of prefixes that attach to the Czech verb *jít* ‘walk’

Prefixes appear with all kinds of verbs, often entailing metaphorical or metonymic shifts in meaning, usually motivated by their spatial meanings. Table 2 shows the same prefixes found in Table 1, this time in combination with the verb meaning ‘write’, and the reflexes across Slavic languages. The fact that signatures tend to appear under a text motivates the interpretation of ‘under-write’ as ‘sign’. Insertion is indeed writing text ‘in’ a document, and making a written record sets a text in a fixed place.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Composite = meaning | Russian | Polish | Czech | BCS | Bulgarian |
| ‘under-write’ = ‘sign’ | *pod-pisat’* | *pod-pisać* | *pod(e)-psat* | *pot-pisati* | *pod-piša* |
| ‘into-write = ‘insert’ | *v-pisat’* | *w-pisać* | *v(e)-psat* | *u-pisati* | *v-piša* |
| ‘fixed-write’ = ‘record’ | *za-pisat’* | *za-pisać* | *za-psat* | *za-pisati* | *za-piša* |
| ‘onto-write’ = ‘write’ | *na-pisat’* | *na-pisać* | *na-psat* | *na-pisati* | *na-piša* |

Table 2: Some prefixes attached to ‘write’ across Slavic

Because the prefixes are polysemous, the same prefix can have different effects depending on which verb it combines with. In Table 3 we see that in addition to expressing ‘under’, *pod*- in Russian can mean that something is done ‘secretly’ (since things that are below are hidden), or to a ‘minimal’ degree (since small amounts are at the bottom of a scale).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *pod*- meaning | Imperfective verb | Prefixed perfective | Type of perfective |
| ‘secretly’ | *smotret’* ‘watch’ | *pod-smotret’* ‘spy on’ | Specialized |
| ‘minimal’ | *merznut’* ‘freeze’ | *pod-merznut’* ‘get a little frozen’ | Complex Act |
| ‘under’ | *itožit’* ‘sum’ | *pod-ytožit’* ‘sum’ | Natural |

Table 3: Russian examples of polysemy of prefix *pod*- and types of perfective verbs

The three examples in Table 3 further illustrate three types of perfectives created by prefixes (Janda et al. 2013). Specialized perfectives like *pod-smotret’* ‘spy on’ and the examples in the first three lines of Table 2 have meanings distinct from their imperfective base verbs. Complex Act perfectives like *pod-merznut’* ‘get a little frozen’ involve an atelic quantitative modification of the meaning of the imperfective verb, also often referred to as “Aktionsart” or “procedural” meaning. Other common examples of Complex Act perfectives are delimitatives prefixed in *po*-, perduratives prefixed in *pro*-, and ingressives prefixed in *za*-, as illustrated in Table 4. The Specialized vs. Complex Act distinction is also known as “qualifiers” vs. “modifiers” (Isačenko 1960: 222–224) and “lexical” vs. “superlexical” (Svenonius 2008).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Language | Prefix | Imperfective verb | Complex Act perfective |
| Bulgarian | *po*- ‘for a while’ | *sedna* ‘sit’ | *po-sedna* ‘sit for a while’ |
| Russian | *pro*- ‘through’ | *plakat’* ‘cry’ | *pro-plakat’* ‘cry all through (a period)’ |
| Polish | *za-* ‘begin’ | *kochać* ‘love’ | *za-kochać się* ‘fall in love’ |

Table 4: Examples of prefixes in Complex Act perfectives

In the case of a Natural perfective, the prefix merely perfectivizes the verb without significantly changing its meaning. There are two interpretations of Natural perfectives, namely that either the prefixes are semantically “empty” (Tixonov 1998: 32–33), or that the meaning of the prefixes overlap with the meanings of the verbs (van Schooneveld 1958, Isačenko 1960). Overlap is observed in both *pod-ytožit’* ‘sum’ since a sum is placed under a column of figures and *na-pisat’* ‘write’ since writing is done on a surface. In each Slavic language there is one or more prefix that has a relatively bleached meaning and is highly productive as a generalized perfectivizer and creates Natural perfectives from verbs regardless of semantic overlap. In Bulgarian *iz*- serves as a generalized perfectivizer; in Polish, Czech, Slovak, and Slovene the prefix *s/z*- fills this role; earlier in Russian the default perfective prefix was *po*-, but now *s*- and *za*- are gaining in productivity.

*Function*

The primary function of the Slavic aspectual prefixes is to create perfective verbs, as part of a complex morphological system that also includes suffixes that create secondary imperfectives and a semelfactive suffix that creates perfective verbs (reflexes of Late Common Slavic -*no̧*, as in Russian *čix-nut’* ‘sneeze once’ from *čixat’* ‘sneeze’). A typical pattern is to start with an imperfective verb like Russian *pisat’* ‘write’, add a prefix to get a Specialized perfective like *pod-pisat’* ‘sign’ and then add an imperfectivizing suffix to get a secondary imperfective like *pod-pisyvat’* ‘sign’ (for other patterns see Janda 2007a). This system is complex and fraught with both redundancy (e.g. the option to create secondary imperfectives even from Natural perfectives) and exceptions (e.g. some prefixed verbs are imperfective, especially when derived from non-directional motion verbs). While the status of the prefixes as derivational or inflectional morphemes remains an open question, the prevailing view is that aspectual prefixes derive perfective verbs (Avilova 1976: 153, Janda 2007b: 634). For an alternative view that posits “deprefixation” in Russian, see Zaliznjak and Mikaèljan 2014.

Slavic prefixes additionally behave as a verb classifier system: they perform the function of “lexico-grammatical unitizers” (Dickey and Janda 2015, cf. also Majsak 2005: 339–345, Plungjan 2011: 413–416). Most unprefixed imperfective verbs express undifferentiated, non-discrete situations (activities or states), and the addition of a prefix creates a discrete unit, a bounded event. Prefixes classify events by their outcomes in two different ways: 1) as “sortal” classifiers that group events according to the type of units that they constitute, and 2) as “mensural” classifiers that create units by measuring the outcomes of events. In both Natural and Specialized perfectives (cf. all examples in Tables 1 and 2, plus examples so labeled in Table 3) prefixes function as sortal classifiers, whereas in Complex Act perfectives (as in *pod-merznut’* ‘get a little frozen’ and examples in Table 4) prefixes function as mensural classifiers.

*Slavic-internal typological perspective*

Based on a series of parameters Dickey (2000) suggests a geographic continuum of aspect in Slavic. In the eastern group (Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Bulgarian) aspect expresses temporal definiteness, limiting perfective verbs to contexts of sequentiality. By contrast, in the western group (Czech, Slovak, Sorbian, and Slovene) aspect expresses totality/boundedness. Polish and BCS constitute a transitional zone. The behavior of prefixes as classifiers largely reflects this division. Throughout Slavic we find prefixes that function as sortal classifiers, creating both Specialized and Natural perfectives. However, only in the east, namely Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Bulgarian, and Polish do we find productive use of prefixes to form Complex Act perfectives, where the prefixes function as mensural classifiers.

*Areal typological perspective*

On the basis of a detailed inventory representing morphological and functional-semantic parameters of perfectivizing prefixes in languages across Central and Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, Arkadiev (2014, 2015) identifies two typological clusters with regard to perfectivizing prefixes: (Balto-)Slavic vs. Kartvelian(-Ossetic). Slavic languages exhibit prefix stacking, delimitative Aktionsart, secondary imperfectivization, and a perfectivizing suffix. By contrast, Kartvelian languages tend to avoid the aforementioned features while exhibiting features that Slavic prefixes tend to lack, such as expression of deixis, and co-occurrence with phasal predicates and with inflectional Aorist and Imperfect (except Macedonian and Bulgarian with both inflectional and prefixal aspect). Since Kartvelian languages do not belong to the Indo-European family, this convergence cannot be attributed to genetic inheritance, nor does Arkadiev find evidence of contact-induced developments in major grammatical features, although contact may play a role in smaller features such as the semantics of prefixes.

*Broader cross-linguistic perspective*

Cross-linguistically it is common for a verbal category like aspect to evolve from lexemes like the Slavic “prewords” that express spatial concepts (Bybee et al. 1994). While about two-thirds of the world’s languages distinguish perfective vs. imperfective aspect, Slavic aspect is typologically unusual in two ways (Dahl 1985: 71–85), both of which are relevant to prefixes. In most languages, imperfective is the semantically marked member of the opposition, but in Russian it is perfective that is marked both semantically and formally since a typical simplex verb is imperfective, and perfective is most often overtly marked with a prefix. Aspect is usually confined to only part of the verbal paradigm (usually the past tense), but in Slavic it is a characteristic of an entire verb, and as a derivational morpheme a prefix occurs throughout the paradigm.

As classifiers, Slavic aspectual prefixes point to parallels with languages that have classifiers for nouns, where the traditional term “numeral classifier” is a misnomer. In both classifiers for nouns and classifiers for verbs we observe (Dickey and Janda 2015):

* sortal classifiers exhibit a range from high overlap with the most typical unit (as in the case of Natural perfectives), to low overlap with an alternative construal of the unit (as in the case of Specialized perfectives);
* mensural classifiers that create units not inherent to the base (as in Complex Act perfectives);
* polysemy of classifiers;
* semantically bleached all-purpose classifiers.

Verb classifier systems have been recognized also in some languages of Australia (McGregor 2002), as well as east and southeast Asia (Chao 1968, Matthews and Leung 2004, Paris 2013).

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