

Verbal Prefixes in Russian: Conceptual structure versus syntax

I address the problem of widespread polysemy of Russian verbal prefixes and argue that different uses of a single prefix share a core conceptual meaning, and this conceptual meaning combines with another meaning component which is a function of its syntactic position

1. Background. I adopt a neo-constructivist viewpoint where the meaning rests partly on what is brought from the lexicon and partly on the syntactic structure (cf. Borer (2005) and Ramchand (2008)). I also use Ramchand's first phase syntax approach, where a verb may contain initiation, process and result projections, which host the corresponding thematic arguments. I also rely on the lexical/superlexical distinction between prefixes (Svenonius (2004), Babko-Malaya (1999)), where the lexical prefixes are located in the *res* (for result) part of the syntax, while the superlexical prefixes are above aspect.

I propose a finegrained substructure inside each prefix class, where both *res* and *proc* (process) heads are a possible locus of prefix insertion (cf. intermediate prefixes *do-* and *pere-* by Tatevosov (2008)).

2. Argument structure. I start with the hypothesis that each prefix heads a small clause where it takes two arguments (optionally distinct from the verbal arguments), which may move up to the verbal thematic argument positions. The complex structure of a prefix (cf. split PPs in Svenonius (2003)) allows for the asymmetric relationship between the arguments, where the external argument corresponds to figure and the internal argument corresponds to ground, while either may surface as the verb's direct object (2).

Admitting both nominals and events as prefixal arguments allows us to preserve the uniformity of the prefix meaning. For example the prefix *pro-* with the basic meaning 'through' contributes the relational content in any of the following situations: the resultee moving through ground, the initiator moving through event, the event happening through the resultee, and so on. The inner argument structure of the verb determines the position where the prefix is inserted and the arguments that are assigned to it.

3. Time-space. The core meaning of the prefix is compatible with the scalar structures provided by either time or space: the same prefix refers to spatial domain with directional verbs and to the temporal domain with non-directional verbs. For example, the prefix *pro-* refers to the length of the path in (1a), while in (1b) the same prefix refers to duration of the activity.

- (1) a. Pro-jti pjatj kilometrov.
PRO-walk^{dir} five kilometers.
'to walk five kilometers.
b. Pro-xoditj pjatj chasov.
PRO-walk^{non-dir} five hours
'to walk for five hours.'

When added to a directional motion verb, prefixes behave as lexical, and the arguments correspond to resultee and path. The result of a directional motion verb is the displacement of a figure along the path specified. Thus, the prefix describes the change of location of the *resultee* in respect to *ground*.

When the same prefix is added to a non-directional motion verb, there is no result implied, and it behaves as a superlexical prefix, so the arguments are initiator and event. The superlexical prefix refers to the *initiator*'s involvement in the *event*, i.e. the activity described by the main verb. The presence of the *res* vs. *init* projections and availability of the corresponding arguments determines where the prefix is inserted.

4. Figure-ground reversal. After closer examination of transitive verbs we may notice that sometimes the direct object of the verb looks more like figure (2a) and sometimes like ground (2b).

- (2) a. pro-bitj dyrku v stene
through-hit hole in wall
 to make a hole in a wall
 b. pro-bitj stenu.
through-hit wall
 to breach a wall

In the first case, the hole is **through** the wall. In the second case hitting happens **through** the wall. In both cases the wall acts as the path traversed (Rheme), parallel to 'five km' in (1a). Like path, the wall is a proper object of the verb 'hit', while in (2a) the prefix introduces an unselected object (hole) (*bitj dyrku), which is created as the result.

The matching of argument structure to conceptual content allows for a certain flexibility of interpretation. The verbs may contain or not contain the *res* projection depending on the argument structure. Some surface direct objects are resultees, others are undergoers, and some others turn out to be rhemes, and prefixes may scope over each depending on insertion site, deriving polysemy.

5. Conclusion Thus, the analysis allows us to preserve a single lexical entry for cognate prefixes. The meaning variation is determined by the syntactic position of prefixes, and their argument structure is predicted depending on the inner structure of the verb. While the lexical entry specifies the kind of transition (lexical distinctions, idiomatic usages), the lexical entry is unspiced for the domain and scope of the transition. This information is provided by the syntactic structure.

References

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