Imperfectivization in Russian

Irina Mikaelian (1), Aleksej Shmelev (2), Anna Zalizniak (3)

(1) The Department of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures – The Pennsylvania State University
311 Burrowes, University Park 16802, USA
ixm12@psu.edu
(2) Dept. of Russian Linguistics, Moscow Pedagogical State University
M. Pirogovskaya 1, Moscow, Russia
shme.lev@ru.net
(3) Institute of Linguistics, Russian Academy of Sciences
B. Kislovskii 1/12, Moscow, Russia
anna-zalizniak@mtu-net.ru

Abstract

Imperfectivization can be understood in two different ways that should be thoroughly distinguished. The first corresponds to morphological imperfectivization, i.e. the derivation of an imperfective verb from a perfective one by the addition of a suffix. The second meaning of the discussed term corresponds to “obligatory imperfectivization”, i.e. a more general functional mechanism that forces the speaker to replace any perfective verb with an imperfective partner in contexts where perfective verbs are not allowed. The notions of aspectual correlation as opposed to that of aspectual partnership are discussed; a functional analysis of “aspectual trios” is proposed.

Keywords

Aspect, Russian language, imperfectivization, aspectual pair, aspectual correlate, aspectual partner, aspectual trio, Maslov criterion.

1 Maslov criterion

We consider that the key feature of the Russian aspectual system is the correlation of imperfective and perfective verbs forming aspectual pairs. We define the aspectual pair according to the Maslov criterion understood as follows: A perfective and an imperfective verb can be considered as an aspectual pair if and only if the imperfective verb can be substituted for the perfective verb in situations (such as descriptions of reiterated events or narration in historical present) where the latter is not allowed. We call these contexts “contexts of obligatory imperfectivization”. These are situations in which the speaker has to use an imperfective verb instead of a perfective one. Thus, while narrating in historical
present or describing an iterative situation, one should say *Prixožu, vižu, pobeždaju* ‘I come, I see, I conquer’ instead of *Prišel, uvidel, pobedil* ‘I came, I saw, I conquered’.

As known, the application of the Maslov criterion brings up questions of lexical identity of the perfective and imperfective correlates, uniqueness of the imperfective correlate for each perfective verb, and comparable frequency and stylistic status of the correlates. These questions lead many authors to doubt the validity of the Maslov criterion (cf. Перцов, 2001: 124-127). In our opinion, there is a major misunderstanding that needs clarification. The critics seem to take the Maslov criterion as a tool for establishing aspectual pairs. Since difficulties emerge when we apply the Maslov criterion to a particular perfective verb in a particular context, some scholars reject or ignore the Maslov criterion as a whole. It should be noted that those who reject the Maslov criterion, as a rule, do not ask themselves the question whether we really need the aspectual pair for the description of the Russian aspectual system. Wouldn’t it be better, indeed, to do without it and to present the perfective and imperfective verbs as independent lexical units, as Russian school grammar does?

As a matter of fact, rather than a tool for establishing aspectual pairs, the Maslov criterion should be taken as a definition and *raison d’être* of the aspectual correlation. When we say that we define the aspectual correlation according to the Maslov criterion, we want to say that an adequate description of Russian grammar should include a model of the Russian speaker’s linguistic competence. This competence is the ability to find an imperfective equivalent for a given perfective verb in contexts of obligatory imperfectivization. We consider the most adequate way of modeling this ability to be the substitution of the imperfective verb for the perfective verb. A very important feature of this substitution is its automatism; therefore, the speakers do not notice it. Thus, it is not by chance that, if asked to conjugate the perfective *dat’* in present tense, an unprepared Russian speaker would produce imperfective forms *daju, daeš’*, or that he/she would say that the past perfective *zakončil* and the present imperfective *zakončivaet* are forms of the same verb. Within our model, we will say that, by doing this, the speaker produces a substitution of one verb for another: he or she replaces the perfective verb with its imperfective correlate.

That said, we do not ignore the fact that in real speech production, the speaker can substitute for a perfective verb an imperfective verb that is not its “true” correlate, cf. *prokričat’ – kričat’, zaxodit’ po komnate – xodit’ po komnate, poljubit’ – vljubljat’sja*. In (Зализняк & Шмелев, 2001), such cases have been accounted for as instances of an aspectual relation (*vidovaja svjaz’*) rather than an aspectual correlation. In the present paper, the verbs entering into an aspectual relation in Maslov contexts, be they correlates or not, will be called “aspectual partners”.

However, neither such cases nor other difficulties that can arise when the test of substitution is applied to a specific perfective verb compromise the aspectual correlation as being defined according to Maslov criterion. This statement can be illustrated by means of the following analogy.

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1 This partnership is understood as a purely functional relation and does not impose restrictions on the morphological form of the partners.
Nobody would call into question that the singular and plural forms of nouns present a correlation. Moreover, most of the grammatical descriptions of Russian consider these forms as forms of the same word. It is also obvious that, while we use the singular when we speak about a single object, we should use a plural when speaking about several objects. This could be presented as a substitution of the plural noun for a singular noun. Thus, the plural of *tom* is the form *toma*, and this is not compromised by the fact that, having mentioned a volume of a small size as *nebolšoj tom*, we may use the expression *nebolšie tomiki* or even *nebolšie knižečki*. However, it is hardly possible that one would treat the forms *tomiki* or *knižečki* as the plural forms of the word *tom*. But if we admit the form *tomy*, we will have to specify that the plural form *toma* has *tomy* as its variant; we will also have to mark the latter as restricted (for example, using the mark “obsolete”).

Along the same line, we can imagine a model describing the substitution of an imperfective verb for the perfective one in contexts of obligatory imperfectivization as follows. The dictionary indicates the imperfective correlate (if it exists) for each perfective verb. The grammar indicates that this imperfective correlate is used “instead” of the perfective verb in contexts of obligatory imperfectivization that are properly described. The cases where the imperfective correlate is lacking are explicitly mentioned. Such an approach avoids many problems related to the definition of the aspectual correlation.

Thus, within this model, it is irrelevant whether we indicate in the dictionary the primary (non prefixed) imperfective verb as the correlate of the respective delimitative verb (i.e. the verb formed by the addition of the prefix *po-* to an imperfective designating a process) or write a grammar rule specifying that, in contexts of obligatory imperfectivization, the delimitative verbs are replaced by the corresponding non-prefixed imperfective verbs. The proposed model is attractive due to its logical simplicity. However, since we have admitted that the Maslov criterion cannot be used directly as a tool for establishing aspectual pairs, the question of how the latter should be established remains open. This problem will be addressed in section 3 of our paper.

Let us consider the following mental experiment. Imagine that we present perfective verbs, one after another, to a number of Russian informants and ask them to replace these verbs with an imperfective verb in Maslov contexts. In other words, we will ask them to retell a story in “the same words”, but using only the present tense or adding an explicit iterative marker (such as *Každyj raz*...). It seems obvious that, for a rather important number of verbs, all informants will produce one and only one corresponding imperfective verb. Thus, it will be *perepisyvat’* for *perepisat’*, *otkryvat’* for *otkryt’*, *davat’* for *dat’*, *javljat’sja* for *javit’sja*. This situation is typical in cases where perfective verbs present a morphological and semantic fusion of the prefix and the stem, and the prefixed (secondary) imperfective verb is stylistically neutral, cf. *otkryt’, otvorit’, zaklučit’, zaparet’*. These verbs have only one possible imperfective partner (cf. *otkryvat’, otvorjat’, zaklučat’, zapirat’*), which is also its imperfective correlate.

For the remaining verbs, the test will not give a unique result: different informants may propose different solutions; the same informant may propose two imperfective verbs for the same perfective verb; in addition, speakers may propose a substitution that they would estimate as not very appropriate, but used “for want of something better”. In what follows, we will focus our attention on these cases. Special attention will be paid to so-called “aspectual trios” formed by a non-prefixed imperfective verb (IMPF1), a perfective verb formed on it by
2 What does “imperfectivization” mean?

Let us consider now the term “imperfectivization”. It can be understood in two different ways that should be thoroughly distinguished. The first corresponds to morphological imperfectivization, i.e. the derivation of an imperfective verb from a perfective one by the addition of a suffix. This mechanism is highly productive and predictable, it only employs a limited set of morphemes, and their choice is determined by purely morphonological rules. The knowledge of these rules is part of a Russian native speaker’s linguistic competence, so that he or she can derive a secondary imperfective virtually from any perfective verb. In most cases (with some exceptions), the morphological imperfectivization results in an imperfective verb that is also the imperfective correlate of the source verb.

The second meaning of the discussed term corresponds to what was called earlier “obligatory imperfectivization”, i.e. a more general functional mechanism that forces the speaker to replace any perfective verb with an imperfective partner in contexts where perfective verbs are not allowed. Hereafter we will reserve the simple term “imperfectivization” for this second meaning, and use the explicit term “morphological imperfectivization” for the first. In this way, by “imperfectivization”, we mean “substitution of an imperfective verb for a perfective verb in contexts of obligatory imperfectivization”.

Imperfectivization is obtained by three means:

1. Morphological imperfectivization (suffixation).

2. Deprefixation. This mechanism has a different status. Prefixed perfective verbs are morphologically derived from imperfective verbs, but the addition of a prefix cannot be considered as a regular mechanism of deriving perfective correlates; its function is limited to a lexical, not grammatical derivation. On the other hand, the deprefixation can hardly be considered as a real derivational mechanism, but it is the only adequate way to describe a regular substitution of the non prefixed imperfective verb for a prefixed one in Maslov contexts.2

3. The use of a semantically related imperfective verb formed from a different stem, or the use of a periphrasis.

The three strategies of the imperfectivization produce three standard types of aspectual pairs: 1) PF – IMPF2 (otkryt’ – otkryvat’); 2) PF – IMPF1 (napisat’ – pisat’); 3) Suppletive and semi-suppletive pairs (skazat’ – govorit’; stat’ – stanovit’sja). The system tends to conventionalize one aspectual partner as the aspectual correlate of each perfective verb. But

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2 See (Зализняк & Шмелев, 2000: 79); cf. the notion of usečenie pristavki in (Апресян, 1995: 106).
the potential partners that are generated by the two remaining mechanisms may also appear in real speech production, and their relevance may vary from verb to verb.

For example, the perfective *skomkat’* can have at least three possible aspectual partners which correspond respectively to each of the three means of imperfectivization: *skomkivat’, komkat’,* and *mjat’,* cf.:

(1) *Он прочел записку, скомкал ее и выбросил в мусорную корзину ‘He read the note, crunched it up and threw it in the wastebasket’:

(1.1) *Он прочитывает записку, скомкивает ее и выбрасывает в мусорную корзину ‘He reads the note, crunches it up and throws it in the wastebasket.’

(1.2) *Он прочитывает записку, комкает ее и выбрасывает в мусорную корзину ‘He reads the note, crunches it up and throws it in the wastebasket.’

(1.3) *Он прочитывает записку, мнет ее и выбрасывает в мусорную корзину. ‘He reads the note, crumples it and throws it in the wastebasket.’

The three strategies of imperfectivization presented above are listed in the order that corresponds to their rank in the system. First of all, suffixation prevails over deprefixation, and second, one does not bother to look for a correlate formed from a different stem if a conventional suffixed or deprefixed correlate can be found. Thus, since the perfective *udarit’* <kulakom po stolu> ‘to hit the table <with the fist>’ possesses a regular suffixed correlate *udarjat’* (i tut on udarjaet kulakom po stolu i govorit… ‘and then he hits the table with his fist and says…’), there is no need to consider the imperfective verb *bit’* as its correlate, though it can appear as its aspectual partner (*on bjet kulakom po stolu i govorit …*). Note that *bit’* should be admitted as aspectual correlate of *udarit’* <po vorotam> ‘to shoot <at the goal>’, cf. *On bjet (*udarjaet) po vorotam i zabivaet gol ‘He shoots at the goal and scores’. Along this line, the verb *mjat’* (ex. 3) cannot be considered the correlate of *skomkat’* because two better candidates exist (*skomkivat’* and *komkat’*).

When, for a particular perfective verb, the first and the second mechanism of imperfectivization enter into competition (as it is illustrated by the example of the verb *skomkat’* above), the choice between suffixed and de-prefixed imperfective partners is determined by one of the following strategies: the suffixed imperfective is perceived as semantically closest to the perfective verb and may be chosen when the speaker looks for a more exact expression. The deprefixed partner may be chosen when the speaker looks for a shorter or less heavy expression (the strategy of economy). It is very important to emphasize that outside this competition, i.e. when the perfective verb has only one possible corresponding imperfective partner of the same stem, no such connotation arises: if the imperfective partner does not have a competitor in Maslov contexts, it has exactly the same meaning as the perfective verb. The concurrence between two partners belongs to the issue of “aspectual trios” and will be addressed in section 3.

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3 This choice may also be determined by a specific context. Indeed, Maslov contexts are not homogeneous, and some of them are more restrictive.
Scholars remark frequently that secondary imperfective verbs (IMPF2) are often perceived as artificial, rare or obsolete in modern Russian (Апресян, 1995: 109; Гак, 1998: 153; Гиро & Микаэлян, 2006, Петрухина, 2000: 95). But it turns out that different speakers evaluate the acceptability of particular secondary imperfective verbs in very different ways. The verbs that seem artificial, heavy, clumsy, etc., to one speaker, are accepted as quite natural by another. At the same time, even the most unusual and strange secondary imperfective verbs can be found on the Internet, and some of them are quite frequent, cf. zapodazrivat’, vstepenyvat’sja, and even zabluživat’sja (see Mikaelian, Shmelev, Zalizniak, 2007).

3 Choosing aspectual correlate

According to the above, we can propose the following procedure for establishing the aspectual correlate from a set of imperfective partners.

We start by testing the first strategy, i.e. we look for a common and stylistically neutral IMPF2 that functions as an aspectual partner of the perfective verb. If such a verb is found, it should be recognized as the aspectual correlate of the considered perfective verb. If the corresponding IMPF1 is also used in Maslov contexts as a partner of this perfective verb, its use should be recognized as an occasional substitute of the IMPF2 determined by the strategy of economy mentioned above. For instance, this is the case for the IMPF1 mesti, which can function as an aspectual partner of the verb podmesti (having podmetat’ as its regular correlate).

If the IMPF2 is not found, the second strategy applies: we look for an IMPF1 that would satisfy the status of the aspectual correlate of the considered perfective verb. This strategy allows for establishing such pairs as porezat’ – rezat’, pomerit’ – merit’, postroit’ – stroit’, sdelat’ – delat’, etc.

If the two imperfective partners are equally common (still in Maslov contexts), we obtain a more difficult situation. We know that such cases are relatively rare, but they do exist. The easiest to solve is the case of such morphological trios as ššit’ – ššivat’ – ššt’, where the two imperfectives correspond to two distinct meanings of the perfective verb. In this case, we obtain two aspectual pairs (ššit’ – ššt’ <platj’e> ‘to sew <a dress>’ and ššit’ – ššivat’ <dva kuska vmeste> ‘to sew <two pieces together’>). This is also the case with the morphological trio postavit’ – postavljat’ – stavit’, which results in pairs postavit’ – postavljat’ ‘to deliver’ and postavit’ – stavit’ ‘to put <the kettle on the stove’>. In this case, the perfective verb has two very different meanings that should be treated as homonyms.

But for some trios, the problem cannot be solved so easily, and this is the case of one of the most discussed trios pročitat’ – pročityvat’ – čitat’ ‘to read’, where we cannot claim with certainty that the perfective verb has two distinct meanings. In such cases, we may expect a

4 More precisely, for an IMPF2 that has the same stylistic label as the corresponding perfective verb. Thus, the verb poxerivat’ is stylistically marked to the same degree as the perfective poxerit’. In this paper, we do not consider the cases where the perfective verb can have two corresponding IMPF2, cf. zagotovit’ – zagotavlivat’ – zagotavljat’. These cases have been treated correctly as morphological variants in the literature.
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distribution of uses of the two imperfective partners according to contexts (still within Maslov contexts). This distribution is not always easy to grasp and does not always allow for postulating two distinctive meanings of the perfective verb. If such a distribution is found, we can assume two aspectual pairs pročitat’ – pročityvat’ and pročitat’ – čitat’, where the two imperfectives are focusing on different semantic components of the perfective verb. If not, we may want to define it as a “free variation” (which seems to be the case for pogibat’ and gibnut’ in the trio pogibnut’ – pogibat’ – gibnut’, and some others), similar to the free variation of two IMPF2, cf. prostudit’sja – protužat’sja – protuživat’sja.

Now, let us examine chains of verbs such as merit’ – pomerit’ – primerit’ – primerjat’ (‘to try <a dress>). These are cases where an IMPF1 that constitutes the unique correlate of some perfective verb also functions as an aspectual partner of a different, but semantically and morphologically related perfective verb. This is a relatively frequent occurrence in Russian that has been mentioned by many scholars, starting with Isačenko (Исаčенко, 2003/1960: 169-171). In our opinion, though, it has not received adequate interpretation. Consider the chain formed on the verb merit’. This verb can function as an aspectual partner of both pomerit’ and primerit’, but it is the only aspectual partner for the verb pomerit’ and should be recognized as its aspectual correlate. It can still be used occasionally as a semantically less specific synonym of the verb primerjat’. The same is true for the chain rezat’ – porezat’ – narezat’ – narezát’. In Maslov contexts, the verbs rezat’ can be substituted either for the verb porezat’ or for the verb narezat’, but it is the aspectual correlate of the verb porezat’. When used instead of narezat’, it shows a less specific meaning generally compensated by the contexts (cf. Ona režet/narezaet xleb na tonkie kuski ‘She cuts the bread into thin pieces’). Such examples can be produced ad infinitum.

We have to consider now the situation where a common IMPF2 of a given perfective verb cannot be found or is perceived as definitely artificial, ugly, etc., cf., for example, the verb skančivat’sja ‘to pass away’ derived from skončat’sja by a regular morphological imperfectivization. (This verb is attested on the Internet, though in very few occurrences). If a standard IMPF2 is not found, the second strategy is employed. If it produces a satisfactory result, i.e. results in an IMPF1 that can function as an aspectual partner of the tested verb, it should be recognized as it correlate. Thus the verb čuvstvovat’ is a partner and the correlate of počuvstvovat’ while the verb ljubit’ is neither a partner nor the correlate of poljubit’ (cf. the verb kričat’ mentioned above, which is a partner but not the correlate of the verb prokričat’).

If the second strategy does not produce a satisfactory result either, the third strategy is employed, i.e. we look for a verb with a similar meaning formed on a different stem. The third strategy can result in the following situations: We find an imperfective verb that is not an aspectual correlate of any other perfective verb. In this case, this verb should be recognized as a suppletive correlate of the tested perfective, cf. skazat’ – govorit’ ‘to say’, složit’ – skladyvat’ ‘to put together; to sum’. This case is relatively rare, but it is very important for the system because of the high frequency of verbs that constitute suppletive pairs.

If the identified imperfective verb functions as the aspectual correlate of another verb, it should be recognized as an (occasional) partner of the perfective we are considering, cf. the verb okaživat’sja (from perfective okažat’sja) as an occasional partner for očutit’sja ‘to find oneself <in a place>’. The paraphrases belong to the same type, cf. načinat’ plakat’ ‘start crying’. 
Let us illustrate the three strategies using the verb *poljubit*’ ‘to come to love; to fall in love’.

The first strategy (morphological imperfectivization) results in a very doubtful, though attested, verb *poljubljat*’. The second strategy (deprefixation) produces the verb *ljubit*’, which cannot replace the verb *poljubit* in Maslov contexts and does not qualify for the aspectual correlate, cf. *On poznamilsja s Mašej, poljubil ee i ženilsja* ‘He met Masha, fell in love with her, and married her’ – *On znakomitsja s Mašaj, *ljubit ee, i ženitsja* ‘He meets Maša, falls in love with her, and marries her’.

We then test the third strategy and obtain an aspectual partner *vljubljat’sja*, which is not the correlate of *poljubit*’, but of *vljubit’sja*. Note that for verbs that do not have an aspectual correlate of any of three types, the dictionary should mention the existence of such occasional aspectual partners. But one should be aware that they cannot be considered as aspectual correlates of the corresponding perfective verbs, their status being very similar to the status of the gen. pl. form *mečtanij* used instead of the missing respective form of the noun *mečta*.

4 Conclusion

Thus, it has been shown that the correlation between two verbs of opposite aspects manifests itself in functional imperfectivization, that is, replacement of a perfective verb with an imperfective one in Maslov contexts. This correlation forms the basis of the Russian aspectual system. However, since the outcome of this substitution is unambiguously determined only for a part of Russian perfective verbs (that have a standard aspectual correlate), we have made a distinction between the notions of aspectual partner (any imperfective verb that can be substituted for a given perfective verb in contexts of obligatory imperfectivization) and aspectual correlate (the partner that constitutes an aspectual pair with the original perfective verb). We have proposed a procedure for establishing the aspectual correlate from a set of imperfective partners.

Obviously, the solutions proposed in this paper do not settle all problems that we encounter when treating the Russian aspectual system in grammatical and lexicographical descriptions. These difficulties certainly reflect the instability of this area of the linguistic system. However, in our opinion, they do not compromise the approach proposed in this paper.

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