Slavic aspectual prefixes and numeral classifiers: Two kinds of lexico-grammatical unitizers

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Abstract

What do Slavic aspectual prefixes have in common with numeral classifiers? Our answer is that the parallels are compelling, both in terms of breadth and depth. The grammatical function of numeral classifiers is to form and classify units for the referents of nouns, and we argue that Slavic aspectual prefixes have the function of forming and classifying units for the referents of verbs. Numeral classifiers contribute a meaning of discreteness to objects, whereas Slavic aspectual prefixes do the same for events. Just as there are various types of numeral classifiers, there are also various types of Slavic aspectual prefixes. We find that the patterns identified for numeral classifiers are consistently matched by the grammatical behavior of the various types of aspectual prefixes throughout the Slavic linguistic territory. We furthermore anchor this comparison in a variety of ways, taking into account distributional and semantic evidence, and the effects of construal, foregrounding, definiteness, and transnumerality. In the places where this comparison breaks down, the causes are inherent differences between the domain of nouns and the domain of verbs. We suggest that Slavic aspectual prefixes and numeral classifiers should be considered to be verbal and nominal instantiations of a general category of lexico-grammatical unitizers.

1. Introduction

Our basic claim is that numeral classifiers and verb classifiers perform similar functions as lexico-grammatical unitizers for the respective word classes of nouns and verbs and that this analogy is particularly apt for an analysis of verbal prefixes in the Slavic languages. The shared function of specifying default, common or ad hoc units of individualization is the basis for the term **unitizer**, which has been applied to numeral classifiers (cf. Broschart, 2000:260; Lucy, 2000:334; the latter in fact proposes calling numeral classifiers ''numeral unitizers'' to more properly capture their grammatical nature). Slavic aspectual prefixes behave like numeral classifiers in that they identify and classify units of verbal activity: events. We make an innovative argument for typological correspondence that can contribute to a better understanding of both noun and verb classifiers. Our claim brings with it a wide-ranging series of effects and implications that we explore in this article.

We begin in Section 2 by reviewing some analogies between nouns and verbs, focusing on specific areas of convergence and divergence that are relevant to our argument. Section 3 presents previous work on Russian ''purely

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perfectivizing'' prefixes as the verbal analogs of sortal numeral classifiers and extends this analysis to all telic perfectives in all Slavic languages. The remaining perfectives, namely atelic perfectives found mostly in the eastern parts of the Slavic territory, are compared with mensural numeral classifiers in Section 4. The arguments in Sections 3 and 4 are buttressed by further parallels between Slavic perfectivizing prefixes and numeral classifiers in Section 5, among them the structure of the meanings of classifiers and how they can affect the construal of both objects and events, as well as the phenomenon of general classifiers, and effects of foregrounding, definiteness, and transnumerality. We sum up our findings in Section 6.

2. Analogies between nouns and verbs

Our argument rests on a comparison between nouns and verbs. While analogies between these two word classes have often been made by linguists (see Janda, 2004 for numerous references and discussion), we will make use of some details that are perhaps less obvious in this connection, but particularly relevant to the behavior of Slavic perfectivizing prefixes. Nouns prototypically refer to objects and substances whereas verbs refer to situations.[1] More specifically, achievements and accomplishments are crisply delimited events analogous to discrete solid objects, whereas states and activities are analogous to substances.[2] In Slavic languages, base verbs are typically imperfectives and refer to states and activities that can be reified into events by means of perfectivizing prefixes. Physical motion events that unfold in both space and time, which we take to be prototypical, have trajectories that parallel the shapes of discrete objects.

However, there are some important differences due to the facts that (a) objects are stable in time, whereas events are not, and (b) time is inherently directional with only one dimension, whereas space is not directional and has three dimensions. Objects can often be viewed in their entirety, but this is less true of events because they unfold over time. As a result, we speak of beginnings and endings with respect to events, but of edges with respect to objects. Temporal stability makes it easy for numerous objects to be perceived simultaneously, but this is less possible for events.[3] Objects can be foregrounded, often with substances as background, like shells on the sand of a beach. Nouns that are highly salient are those that are central to a narrative and therefore emphasized or repeated. Foregrounding in the verbal domain is manifested as the sequence of causal plotline events along the single dimension of time, against the background of states and activities that form the setting. Definite reference is more pronounced in the nominal domain; while it is possible for speakers and hearers to refer to events as part of shared knowledge, this is less common.

An important conceptual parallel between verbal roots on the one hand and bare nouns in numeral classifier languages on the other is **transnumerality**. Numeral classifier languages tend to lack obligatory plural inflection, and this fact has been explained broadly in terms of the **transnumerality** of nouns in numeral-classifier languages (cf. Bisang, 1999:114, citing Greenberg, 1972). Similarly, Zhang (2013) considers all nouns in Mandarin Chinese to be non-count nouns. For example, in the following Mandarin example (taken from Rullmann and You, 2006) the noun *shu* 'book' can only be translated as 'one or more books'.

(1) *Zuotian   wo mai le **shu***
     Yesterday I   buy PF book
     'Yesterday, I bought one or more books.'

The basic transnumerality of bare nouns in numeral classifier languages can be seen as a feature common to Slavic verbal roots, inasmuch as verbs themselves do not inflect for the number of events, for the reasons given above: events tend not to coexist in large numbers due to their temporal instability. Thus, we suggest that it is the default transnumerality both of nouns in numeral-classifier languages and of verbal roots in Slavic that motivates the category of lexico-grammatical unitizers in each type of language.[4] All of these parallels, both those that show convergence of nouns and

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[1] For the sake of readability we use the terms ''noun'' and ''verb'' in this article to indicate both nouns and verbs and the objects and situations to which they refer.

[2] On these parallels cf. also Mehlig (1994) and Langacker's (1987a) descriptions of the profiles of count and mass nouns.

[3] Langacker's (2008:109–112) notion of scanning is relevant here: events designated by verbs are usually scanned sequentially, whereas objects are usually scanned in a summary fashion, i.e., all at once. But note that objects can be scanned sequentially in fictive motion, in which case we can talk about their ''beginnings'' and ''ends'' (for example, of a road) as well.

[4] Why Slavic would grammaticalize prefixes as lexico-grammatical unitizers for its verbs in contrast to other Indo-European branches/languages such as Baltic, Germanic or Greek (in which prefixes have not been grammaticalized as aspectual markers) is a complex diachronic question. In short, there is evidence that the complete univerbation of spatial particles and verbs combined with the loss of concrete spatial meanings by some prefixes created a unique situation in Slavic, which did not exist in the other language groups mentioned above and which led to the effects in Slavic under discussion. Unfortunately this issue cannot be addressed further here.