The difference between terminativity and telicity and its reflection in the morphosyntax of Russian

YULIA ZINOVA & RAINER OSSWALD
(Heinrich Heine University, Düsseldorf)

A common criterion for distinguishing atelic and telic phrases in English is their compatibility with time measure phrases (MPs) preceded by for versus in. In Russian, by contrast, for-phrases are expressed by an accusative NP while in-phrases correspond to a PP headed by the preposition za- (whose basic spatial meaning is ‘behind, beyond’):

(1)  a. Anna čitala\textsuperscript{PF} des’at’ minut.
    Anna read.PST.SG.F ten.ACC minute.PL.GEN
    ‘Anna read for ten minutes.’
  b. Anna dočitala\textsuperscript{PF} knigu za des’at’ minut.
    Anna do.read.PST.SG.F book.SG.ACC za ten.ACC minute.PL.GEN
    ‘Anna read/finished reading the book in ten minutes.’

The examples in (1) illustrate the well-known correlation of telicity, perfectivity and prefixation in Russian and other Slavic languages. There is an ongoing debate as to which extent this correlation is governed by strict rules. Borer (2005), among others, assumes that Slavic prefixes encode telicity on the verb; Filip (2003), on the other hand, points out that while all perfective verbs may be regarded as semantically telic, prefixes should not be viewed as perfectivity or telicity markers.

If one assumes that perfective verbs are telic then the test of telicity by means of time adverbials does not work for Russian. It is neither obligatory for a telic verbal description to be compatible with a za-headed temporal PP nor does the compatibility indicate that the predicate denotes single completed events. The prefix po- with its ‘somewhat/for some time’ interpretation is a case in point of the former fact. For instance, the verb počitat\textsuperscript{PF} (‘to read for some time’) is perfective and denotes bounded reading events, but it is only compatible with accusative temporal adverbials:

(2)  a. On počital\textsuperscript{PF} knigu p’at’ minut.
    he po.read.PST.SG.M book.SG.ACC five.ACC minute.PL.GEN
    ‘He read the book for 5 minutes.’
  b. *On počital\textsuperscript{PF} knigu za p’at’ minut.
    he po.read.PST.SG.M book.SG.ACC za five.ACC minute.PL.GEN

Corre (2015), following Padučeva & Pentus (2008) and Mehlig (2008), therefore argues for an extended notion of telicity which includes cases of terminativity as encoded by delimitative po-.

The goal of the present paper is to model the semantic difference between terminative and telic predicates and to relate it to their morphosyntactic encoding in Russian. To this end, we take a closer look at verbs of motion since they provide a useful window
into the relation between scalar structure, terminativity and telicity. Russian verbs of motion comprise a limited set of basic imperfective verbs which exist in two forms: *determinate* (directed, unidirectional) and *indeterminate* (multi-directional, non-directed). Like Kagan (2016), we assume that determinate motion verbs lexicalize a *path scale*, in contrast to indeterminate verbs. When prefixed with *po-,* indeterminate verbs but not determinate verbs can take an accusative time MP. Prefixation with *pro-* gives rise to verbs which behave like *po-*prefixed verbs with respect to accusative time MPs, but which can also combine with *za-*headed time MPs (cf. Table 1).

The different effects of the two prefixes can be explained by assuming that *pro-*, in contrast to *po-,* imposes a closed scalar structure as the dimension of measurement on the selected scale, which may be time or path depending on the type of the motion verb. The information contributed by the prefix *po-* is just the presence of the initial and final stages of the event, whereas in case of *pro-*, these stages are in addition bound to the minimum and the maximum degrees of the scale (or scale segment). In traditional terms, *pro-*prefixed verbs are telic event predicates while *po-*prefixed verbs are not. In order to distinguish the latter from atelic predicates, we call them *terminative*, following the terminology mentioned above. This leads to a three-way distinction: atelic/terminative/telic. While the attachment of *za-*headed MPs requires a telic event predicate, the attachment of accusative MPs depends on the scale selected for delimiting the event: accusative MPs are only possible if the event is measured along the time scale and not along any other (e.g. path) scale.

Following Zinova (2017), we model the semantic elements and constraints just described by employing a frame-based decompositional system with types and relations in line with Kallmeyer & Osswald (2013). In this model, *pro-* imposes a closed scalar structure as the measure dimension (the value of the event attribute MDIM) on a scale component provided by the verb frame. Moreover, *pro-* binds the minimum and maximum of the closed scale introduced by MDIM to degrees on the selected scale that are required to hold at the initial stage (INIT) and the final stage (FIN) of the event, respectively. The prefix *po-*, by contrast, simply characterizes the event as bounded by introducing the attributes INIT and FIN into the frame representation.

In the talk, we will also briefly address the question as to which extent the distinction between terminativity and telicity shows up in other languages.
References