

A radial category model for future tense in Russian: when the future is not future

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Keywords: Russian, future tense, aspect, radial category, polysemy

There are numerous contexts in which Russian verb forms that “normally” express future, don’t express future. This phenomenon was mentioned in the literature before; however, it did not receive enough attention. Already in the 1970s, before the era of linguistic corpora, the amount of non-future uses was estimated at around 1/3 of the perfective future verbforms (Forsyth 1970:120). A corpus-based grammar of Russian (rusgram.ru) provides a detailed description of different categories (order, prohibition, instruction, permission, performative use, near-modal use, opportunity, habituals etc.) of non-future use of future. Stojnova (2017) analyzed a dataset of 100 examples from the corpus.

The future meaning is prototypical for perfective non-past verb forms, and the additional meanings are extensions that are motivated by this central subcategory (Lakoff 1987: 91). Together the meanings form a radial category that will be shown during the talk. Future in this talk is defined with respect to Langacker’s (2008: 301) model of tense, where he considers future to be a projection from the view of immediate reality. Non-future uses are deviations from the future.

My study shows that Russian perfective non-past is polysemous, with as many as 40% of forms expressing something other than the future. These non-future meanings could be viewed as “gnomic” constructions, “general personal (as opposed to impersonal) expressions”, “performatives”, “conditionals”, “imperatives” etc. In the case of conditionals and imperatives we are not dealing with the standard grammatical forms for conditional and imperative. The perfective non-past, which usually expresses future, in these sentences expresses conditional and imperative, respectively.

Russian verbs can be said to exist in aspectual pairs consisting of a perfective and an imperfective verb with the same lexical meaning (Timberlake 2004: 409). As shown in Table 1, both aspects are possible in the past tense, which does not express person. Verb forms that express person are restricted to the present and future tense. In the present tense, only imperfective conjugated verb forms can describe ongoing actions. The future is expressed either by a non-past conjugated verb form of a perfective verb or by a periphrastic future consisting of the auxiliary verb *byt’* ‘be’ and an imperfective infinitive. However, although both aspects are very common in the past tense, there is a large difference between the attestation of perfective and imperfective future forms, which appear with a ratio of about 10 to 1 in the Russian National Corpus (RNC, ruscorpora.ru). However, my study shows that the perfective “future” forms only express future actions about 60% of the time.

In this talk, we draw attention to the contexts that make the non-future construals of perfective non-past verb forms possible in Russian. A preliminary study of 200 instances of perfective future verb forms from the RNC shows similar results confirming Stojnova’s claim that the categories are not discrete. It would be fair to say that all the meanings of the future connect to form a radial category.

	Imperfective	Perfective
Past	<i>pisal</i> ‘he wrote’	<i>napisal</i> ‘he wrote’
Present	<i>pišet</i> ‘s/he writes’ (non-past conjugated form)	–
Future	<i>budet pisat</i> ‘s/he will write’ (periphrastic)	<i>napišet</i> ‘s/he will write’ (non-past conjugated form)

Table 1. Aspectual contrasts in Russian: perfective future tense is bold-faced.

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