

# From lexical triggers to contextual cues: Sentence complexity and aspectual choice in Russian narrative sequences

Svetlana Sokolova  
UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, Norway  
svetlana.sokolova@uit.no

Keywords: aspect, sentence complexity, coordination, corpus study, Russian

Selecting a perfective or an imperfective verb presents a challenge for non-native speakers of Russian. Descriptive grammars list various lexical “triggers” that indicate that only one aspect is available (e.g. the Russian adverb *uže* ‘already’ is associated with perfective (PF) aspect whereas *vsegda* ‘always’ is used with imperfective (IPF) verbs). Although lexical triggers predict aspect with fairly good reliability (96%), they appear in association with only 2% of verbs in corpus language samples (Reynolds 2016). Since additional factors are clearly needed, we investigate the relationship between sentence complexity and aspect, hypothesizing that this contextual factor helps predict the choice of aspect. We focus on the number of verbs, the number of subjects, as well as the presence or absence of coordinating conjunctions.

We test this hypothesis through a quantitative study of Russian narrative sequences from the Russian National Corpus (RNC), where a “narrative sequence” is a coordinating sequence of verbs (two or more), with or without a coordinating conjunction, with one or more subjects. Based on the observation made by Stunová (1993), it is assumed that IPFs very rarely appear in Russian narrative sequences. Unlike previous studies that limit their analysis to specific sequences containing IPFs (cf. the sequences V1pf+and+V2ipf and V1pf+V2ipf+V3pf analyzed by Zorichina-Nielsson 2014), the goal of this study is to discover the basic patterns that underlie the distribution of aspectual forms in Russian coordinating sentences.

The first stage of this project included a pilot study, run on the disambiguated modern subcorpus of the RNC (1950-2017). The automatic query searched for two verbs ‘indicative, past’ (aspect unspecified) with a distance between the verbs being defined as “from 1 to 2” (to get short temporal modifiers into the sample if there are any). After randomly extracting one example per author and excluding contexts with subordinate clauses and direct speech, we manually tagged the remaining contexts for: 1) the number of verbs and aspect, 2) conjunctions, and 3) the number of subjects. The predictions were that IPFs would be highly infrequent and would rather appear in sequences with two verbs (since these are likely to express simultaneity, see examples in Xrakovskij 2009: 19).

The results of the pilot study confirmed the first prediction. As expected, IPFs in Russian narrative sequences are rather rare (24 out of 210 sentences) but they are more likely to appear in longer sequences. In the sequences with two verbs, whenever IPF is present it is the last verb in the sequence, bearing the semantic tags ‘existence’, ‘location’ or ‘perception’ ((1) *Zdes’ i rodilsja-PF, zdes’ prožival-IPF Arkadij Lukjanovič*). For sequences with three verbs, IPFs that appear usually stand first introducing a contrast ((2) *Šel-IPF on po ulice <...>, upal-PF i umer-PF*), whereas in longer sequences the position of IPF is not specified. The latter sequences usually enumerate various actions of a person over a long time span. All of these basic patterns involve one subject, sentences with several subjects present a combination of these patterns.

Whereas examples like (1) have been described in linguistic literature before (see Dickey 2000; Zorichina-Nielsson 2014), this approach makes it possible to draw additional contexts into the picture. We will show what kind of semantics stands behind each of the patterns mentioned above and will extend the study to sequences with a larger interval between verbs. From a cognitive perspective, this will allow us to investigate whether different coordinating sequences represent different constructions and whether not only the proximate units but also the distant ones trigger aspectual choice.

## References

- Dickey, S. M. 2000. *Parameters of Slavic Aspect: A Cognitive Approach*. Stanford: CSLI.
- Reynolds, R. J. 2016. *Russian natural language processing for computer-assisted language learning*. Doctoral Dissertation, UiT The Arctic University of Norway.
- Stunová, A. A. 1993. *A contrastive study of Russian and Czech aspect: Invariance vs. discourse*. Amsterdam.
- Xrakovskij, V. S. 2009. Taksis: semantika, sintaksis, tipologija. In *Tipologija taksisnyx konstrukcij*, V. S. Xrakovskij (ed.), Moskva: Znak, 11-113.
- Zorichina-Nielsson, N. 2014. Nesoveršennyj vid i suksessivnost’. K voprosu o netrivial’nyx kontekstax v russkom jazyke v plane prošlogo. *Scando-Slavica*, 60:2, 172-188.