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## A NOTE ON ASPECTUAL PAIRS IN RUSSIAN\*

*For Eminentissima Galina Aleksandrovna Zolotova*

In this article, I shall present a *Gedankenexperiment* concerning the use of Russian perfective and imperfective verbal forms in what can certainly be recognised as an “aspectual pair” (at this place, I am not going to say anything about Russian perfective or imperfective verbs that do not have real “pairlike” imperfective or, respectively, perfective counterparts, e.g., about verbs like the “perfective tantum” *nadelat'* [e.g., *mnogo ošibok*]).

I call the operation I am entertaining a *Gedankenexperiment* because it involves an inordinary context that would occur, under normal circumstances, to virtually no one (and

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The following editorial remark must be added: the present text was meant to be offered to Professor Galina Aleksandrovna Zolotova in a Festschrift dedicated to Her, but has never been published. Instead, its unauthorised anonymous (not wholly idiomatic) translation into Russian (with the title: *Aspektual'nye [in lieu of: vidovye — AB] pary v russkom jazyke*) has appeared, unbeknownst to me, in the following volume: N.K. Onipenko (ed.), *Kommunikativno-smyslovye parametry grammatiki i teksta. Sbornik statej, posvjaščennyj jubileju Galiny Aleksandrovny Zolotovoj*. Moskva: Editorial URSS, 52-58 (and may I say: this translation has also replaced, in a way, a possible authentic and adequate Russian version of the article I of course had been in a position to submit, should anyone have cared to ask me to do so). The only contribution in English that has been published in the volume is that by Professor Nils B. Thelin.

the percentage of "normal circumstances", as I understand the expression "normal circumstances" here, in the entire domain of circumstances that anyone of us may actually have to do with can safely be represented by the figure 99.999 ... %).

The operation in question consists in inserting an appropriate past tense verbal form (or a future tense verbal form; but I shall confine myself in the sequel to the past tense) belonging to the pair *umeret' / umirat'* in the context that is given below, and inserting it so as to obtain what a native speaker's intuition suggests is the right choice, a choice that is in any case *prima facie* right.

The context reads:

- (1) Posle togo kak on umer, on vo vsjakom sluèae bol'se ne \_\_\_.

The conditions on the operation, as they have just been formulated, amount to a function, i.e. a relation that should yield one value only. And in fact the solution I have in mind is quite unequivocal. The unique value of the indicated function is given in (2) below:

- (2) Posle togo kak on umer, on vo vsjakom sluèae bol'se ne umiral.

Every native speaker of Russian, I shall assume, is ready to confirm that the solution as just specified is correct. Even though, as we have said above, the context in (1)-(2) is completely outlandish, the imperfective form suggests itself as an obvious choice to anyone who would contemplate the relevant speech situation in terms of the conditional "if I were to use sentence (2), I would really insert *umiral* rather than *umer* in that context, i.e. in context (1)".

It must be emphasised that what I claim is merely that the form *umiral* is the one which first springs to a native speaker's mind in the context under consideration, not that the perfective form *umer* is simply impossible, "ungrammatical" in that context. Under certain circumstances, it is the perfective form that would reasonably be used in the same context. Consider, for example, the following exchange:

- (3) A. – Sergej umer na etoj nedele.  
B. – Net, posle togo kak on umer na prošloj nedele, on bol'se ne umer.

Speaker B in (3) quite legitimately uses the perfective form (in both of its occurrences within his rejoinder) to correct, with regard to the question of the time of 'Sergej's' death, the statement made by A. Moreover, by doing so he attains the effect of colouring his correction with a special ring of sarcasm. True enough, B's possible utterance with *umiral* instead of *umer* must also be appraised as sarcastic or playful. However, in the latter case B's jest would consist in the mere fact of B's (provocatively, as it were) adding something that must be treated as a trivial truth (which should be known to the hearer no less than to B himself) where a matter-of-fact information needs nothing more than the utterance *on umer na prošloj nedele*. On the other hand, what is added in that possible utterance is the most neutral form (most neutral form relative to the context at hand) conveying that (otherwise really trivial) truth; as it happens, the form is the imperfective member of the pair *umer / umiral*. The special, we would say, sharp sarcasm proper to B's utterance in (3) is due to something over and above that addition in itself: it is due to the unique contrast between

the non-neutral form (*ne*) *umer* (non-neutral, that is, in the context we are considering) and the neutral form (*ne*) *umiral*.

The question I want to give some thought to here reads: what is the linguistic motivation behind the use of the imperfective form *umiral* in our fancy context as the primary form fitting it and behind the difference between this primary kind of encoding and the encoding (no doubt having a secondary character) of the basically identical information by means of the perfective form *umer*.

Let us confront our case with the possibilities of deriving the imperfective form (in Russian aspectual pairs) envisaged in one of the treatments of Russian aspects that have appeared in the last decade, viz. the one offered by Maaïke Schoorlemmer [Schoorlemmer 1995].

The author specifies three main “imperfective triggers”: habituality (as the intended content), the context of negated modals (where a member of an aspectual pair is to be embedded), and what she calls “telic presupposition”.

None of these factors can be responsible for the imperfective form in (2).

First, it is evident that *ne umiral* in (2) is not the negation of a possible sequence of deaths of the same person following his death accepted by the speaker in the first place. To see that it is not, it is enough to become aware of the fact that it would be contrary to the intention of (2) to continue by saying something like

- (4) Posle togo kak on umer, on vo vsjakom sluèae bol’še ne umiral; v eto vremja (posle togo kak on umer v pervye) on umer liš’ odin raz.

Second, there is no negated modal in (2) (however broadly this notion might be conceived of by Schoorlemmer).

As for the concept of “telic presupposition”, Schoorlemmer explains it in the following way: the speaker takes it for granted that both he and the hearer know that the relevant event has taken (will take) place. Under this interpretation, we would have to claim that (2) is self-contradictory: the speaker of (2) clearly denies any further death of the person in question, whereas the alleged presupposition brought in by the imperfective form (a presupposition suggested in Schoorlemmer’s theoretical proposal) amounts to the speaker’s knowledge of some such death, reinforced, to boot, by his knowledge of the addressee’s awareness of the same “death after death”. However, there is of course no trace of contradiction in (2). Thus, the last interpretation of the imperfective form offered by Schoorlemmer is inapplicable to (2), either (in addition to the interpretations considered before).

The same conclusion is also valid, should one think of the negation attached to *umiral* as expressing a denial of the presupposition formulated above, or in other words a suspension of any knowledge claim concerning the death: (2) is quite evidently opposed to anything like ‘I do not know whether or not he died at any time after his death as mentioned previously’: (2) is quite definitive in dismissing any claim of ‘his’ “death after death”.

At this point, I shall make an independent comment on Schoorlemmer’s idea of “telic presupposition” as triggering the choice of the imperfective form (this comment is “independent” in the following sense: it is not directly relevant to the solution of the problem which I have set out to consider in this article).

There are a number of flaws in what Schoorlemmer submits.

First, the factive presupposition in *wh*-questions cannot be a trigger of the imperfective form for the simple reason that it is present in any *datum quaestionis* of a *wh*-question,

including those (much more frequent) *wh*-questions where a perfective form occurs. In this respect, there is no difference between Schoorlemmer's example [Schoorlemmer 1995: 112]:

(5) Kto ubiral komnatu?

and its counterpart with the perfective form:

(6) Kto ubral komnatu?

(which is certainly much more probable in most situations where an identification of the person responsible for the otherwise unquestionable act of putting the room in order is sought for).

Second, it is simply not true that in a *yes/no*-question where the speaker tries to elicit a confirmation of an event which he considers real it must be the imperfective form that will be used. Thus, questions like the one in the example below with just a slight modification of the original example in [Schoorlemmer 1995: 113], a modification explicitly showing the speaker's epistemic option:

(7) Vy pokupali apel'siny, verno?

have quite normal counterparts with the perfective form, on the pattern of

(8) Vy kupili apel'siny, verno?

On the other hand, it is empirically wrong as well that without the speaker's epistemic option like the one illustrated above "the imperfective verb would be inappropriate" [Schoorlemmer 1995: 113]; the following utterance:

(9) Ja ne znaju, vy pokupali apel'siny?

is as licit as the utterance:

(10) Ja ne znaju, vy kupili apel'siny?

even if the frequency of perfective forms in *yes/no*-questions, like in *wh*-questions, is certainly higher than that of imperfective forms. (By the way, when the author says that the question:

(11) Vy pokupali apel'siny?

"is not whether something has been done or not, but whether the speaker's presupposition was right" [Schoorlemmer 1995: 113-114], she runs into a contradiction: "the speaker's presupposition", in her own terms, is 'the addressee has bought oranges'; 'whether or not something has been done', in this context, is equal to 'whether or not the addressee has bought oranges'; and 'whether or not the speaker's presupposition was right', in this context, is equal to 'whether or not the addressee has bought oranges' as well. Thus, it

appears that, according to the author, question (11) is about ‘whether or not the addressee has bought oranges’ and is not about ‘whether or not the addressee has bought oranges’.)

Third, it is, again, empirically untrue that the distribution of the following two sentences:

(12) *Vot dom, kotoryj Vasja pokazyval tvoej sestre.* (= (56c) in [Schoorlemmer 1995: 113])

(13) *Vot dom, kotoryj Vasja pokazal tvoej sestre.*

is governed by the consideration of whether the addressee “is aware of Vasja’s showing any houses to his sister” (cf. (12)) or whether he “is not aware of the same thing” (cf. (13)) (“unless it is possible to interpret it [(12)] as a progressive or habitual” [Schoorlemmer 1995: 113, fn. 40]; of course, both these possibilities may be taken to be out of the question in our case).

The truth of the matter is that both the following utterances:

(14) *Vot dom, kotoryj, kak ty znaeš’, Vasja pokazal tvoej sestre.*

and

(15) *Vot dom, kotoryj upomjanut v putevoditele kak zaslu• ivajušëij special’nogo vnimanija. Kstati, k tvoemu svedeniju, Vasja pokazyval ego tvoej sestre.*

are O.K. (with (15) by no means implying any iterativity or any coincidence of some stretch of the relevant action with some other event or its temporal part). The above discussion of Schoorlemmer’s suggestions concerning her “telic presupposition” as a factor responsible for the use of the imperfective form shows that they are not in a position to explain either the special case we have taken up in this article or other questions relevant to the major problem at hand which is so important in Russian grammar (as well as in the grammar of other Slavonic languages), the problem of the mutual relationship between members of aspectual pairs.

It is rather surprising that Schoorlemmer has not even drawn into consideration Nils Thelin’s well developed aspectological conception (as presented, e.g., in [Thelin 1985] which, like all the other aspectological works by Thelin, is absent from Schoorlemmer’s bibliography). The pivotstones of his interpretation of the contrast “perfective vs. imperfective” — discourse “foreground” as responsible for the perfective member, discourse “background”, in particular, “proper background”, as responsible for the imperfective member of an aspectual pair — may in some way be related to the same or similar intuitions as those she has tried to give vent to, unfortunately, with little success. This is not to say that I am inclined to base my own approach on Thelin’s specific ideas as they stand.

Let us now revert to our thought experiment, i.e. to our “case study” of aspectual choice.

I cannot offer a full answer to the question of why it is the imperfective form which is the primary choice in (2) and of what the exact place of the counterpart of (2) with the perfective form is. Such a full answer would amount to nothing lesser than a complete

theory of Russian aspects or at least of Russian aspectual pairs. That kind of task vastly exceeds the boundaries of this article.

I shall close it with just a very sketchy outline of what I now think is the right solution to our initial puzzle and simultaneously of the main idea of a comprehensive and adequate theory of Russian aspectual pairs (which I assume would also be valid, with regard to other Slavonic languages, at least for Polish).

Obviously, the closest negation counterpart of (2), i.e. a related sentence without negation, besides the one resulting from the substitution of *ešce umiral* for *bol'še ne umiral* in (2), is (16) below:

(16) Posle togo kak on umer, on ešce raz umer.

This observation suggests the simplest answer: the imperfective form is induced by negation. However, such a simple answer would ignore the fact we have emphasised earlier on, viz. the fact that negation does not exclude a clause with a perfective form (cf. (3)), even though there remain some functional differences between the two possibilities of negated clauses and even though the most natural encoding of a negated clause is indeed by inserting the imperfective form.

Therefore, if we wish, in spite of the difficulty just indicated, to respect the strong intuition saying that the imperfective form is a kind of redundancy device accompanying negation, in, at bottom, a manner proper to inflectional markers (in fact, I am inclined to look at the aspectual contrast as belonging to inflection), we have to think of a double role of negation.

This Janus face of negation can be set in relation to the notion of events which are just the kind of phenomena that have their Russian exponents in the shape of aspectual pairs. What a relation can it be?

At this point, it is necessary to recall the simple fact that events are always positive and that they are necessarily embedded in sequences of different events, these sequences constituting time. Now, objects or persons participating in events, at least at certain time intervals, can be characterised by simple absence of events of a certain kind; in fact, most possible kinds of events are alien to any object or person; consequently, their absence is an important part of the sum total of characteristics individuating those objects or persons. Such absence of events can only be represented by detracting from a temporally anchored event, now taken as an event type, that very temporal trait. This is the primary negative counterpart of an event predicate: a feature unrelated to (a particular) time. It is here that the imperfective form enters into the picture. Should we wish to change that picture dually (as negation requires), we must delete negation and thus obtain what normally counts as positive imperfective forms. On the other hand, however, we can contemplate a fully-fledged event, i.e. an event at some specific time (the time not necessarily being spelled out in detail), and ultimately decide that that event at that time has not come true or will not come true or is not wanted to come true. It is here that the perfective form with negation enters into the picture.

What B's rejoinder in (3) alludes to explicitly, by means of its perfective form, is a possible contemplation, say, by the addressee, of a specific event occurring at a particular time, this event, as it happens, being the person's named as on 'he' second death. It is this feature that gives rise to the feeling of strikingly sharpened sarcasm proper to B's utterance in (3) (compared to (2)).

To sum up. What I propose is to take seriously the highly valuable (unfortunately, largely forgotten) intuition voiced long ago by Jacques Veyrenc [Veyrenc 1980: 134-136]. Veyrenc spoke of “*négation immanente*” (or “*absolue*”) and of “*négation d’échéance*” (or “*relative*”). I think there were some drawbacks inherent in his presentation; they were twofold: on the one hand, his intuition was described in a rather impressionistic and vague way, on the other hand, it was not pushed far enough, to the point of a comprehensive explanation (the author employed his distinction to account for a partial domain of occurrences of competing aspectual forms). Still, he pointed in the right direction. The proposition I submit as worth considering is that of a reconstruction of Veyrenc’s two negations in terms of, on the one hand, negative event characterisation of objects, a characterisation which is, in a natural way, deprived of the time sequencing feature (and in that sense is a primary negative event characterisation), and on the other hand, a direct denial of an imaginable event in its normal apprehension, i.e. as including the time sequencing feature (this kind of negation application can be taken, complementarily, to be secondary). The first mode of application of negation corresponds to Veyrenc’s “*négation immanente*”, the second, to Veyrenc’s “*négation d’échéance*”.

It is fair to mention, at this point, another author who has rightly called special attention to the role of negation in aspectual choice and whose contribution to the development of aspectology should not be underestimated (even if I am not just repeating his ideas). I refer to Axel Holvoet [Holvoet 1989].

The lack of space does not allow me to provide even a partial argumentation that would substantiate my proposition (or contribute to a substantiation of it) in a due way. Still, my initial example in itself seems to be very telling in this regard. Showing it has been meant as at least a good hint at a possible global theory of Russian aspectual pairs I envisage.

In addition to it, I shall point to just one more, and this time quite authentic, case of aspectual choice. Someone noticed, while being midway in writing a two page letter, that he was using a sheet with some text on the reverse side; still, he decided to keep that sheet rather than write the relevant (rather long) part of his letter once again in a more befitting way, i.e. on a new sheet of paper; here is the apology he added on the second page of the letter:

(17) Prostite, èto ja ne budu perepisyvat’ naèalo etogo pis’ma.

What he had in mind, was obviously the complete action of rewriting the whole part in question, not just some indefinite initial moments of that possible action. Nevertheless he spontaneously applied the imperfective form in the respective negative clause.

## References

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