

## The Russian Verb under the Influence of German Language

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of changes in Russian verb usage under the influence of the German language. The goal of the study is to analyse the deviations in the usage of Russian verbal aspect and in Russian verbs of motion. The material for the study comes from a corpus of oral and written texts collected from adult speakers of Russian in Germany. The empirical data show a number of changes in the use of Russian verb: uncertainty using verbal prefixes; an increase of analytical forms; no secondary imperfectivisation; a significant preference for perfective forms in the class of accomplishments (according to Vendler's verb classification) and replacement of multidirectional verbs of motion with unidirectional verbs. Though the number of deviations is rather large, there is no lexicalization of aspect. At present we can speak only about the tendencies of language development, not the new Russian language norms in Germany. Concluding, the results of the study will be compared with the research of Russian verb usage in the USA.

**Keywords:** heritage language, Russian, aspect, motion verbs, analyticity.

### 1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the Russian Revolution (1917) Germany has always been the "aim" of Russian emigration. Since 1990, migration to Germany has enormously increased. Two large groups have been migrating into Germany: the German minority in Russia and Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union. These groups account for at least 2.5 million people (BAMF, 2011). For most of these people Russian is their mother tongue. Because of the new country they live in, most people have switched to German as their primary language – the language of education and work. Russian remains often only as a family language. Such a separation and long residence in Germany make adjustments in Russian language, its grammar and vocabulary. The aim of this study is to analyze grammatical changes in Russian in verbal aspect usage and in Russian verbs of motion under the influence of the German language.

### 2. A Brief Description of Russian Verbal Aspect

There are many studies concerning Russian verbal aspect (e.g. Bondarko 1971; Comrie 1976; Maslov 1984; Zaliznjak 1997). In Russian there are two aspects - imperfective and perfective, which stand in opposition to each other. Imperfective and perfective verb taken together are called aspect pairs. A verb must be either perfective or imperfective. Simplifying the Russian aspectual system, it can be said that simple non-prefixed verbs are usually imperfective (*писатъ* - write) and denote an uncompleted or habitual event. Prefixed derivatives of simple verbs are usually perfective (*написатъ* – write; *подписатъ* - sign) and denote a completed event. The imperfective aspect is generally considered to be unmarked, whereas the perfective aspect is often marked.

In traditional linguistics it is supposed that almost every verb has two aspectual members

(imperfective and perfective). They both have the same basic lexical meaning, but they differ in their semantic components. These semantic components determine whether the verbal aspect is perfective or imperfective.

- (1) а. Иван строил дом.  
Ivan build-IMPF house.  
'Ivan was building a house.'
- б. Иван построил дом.  
Ivan build-PERF house.  
'Ivan built a house.'

In example (1a) the event is uncompleted and is described as a process and the imperfective aspect is used. In example (1b) the event is completed, the perfective verb form is used.

The aspect analysis of this study is based on Vendler's verb classification (1957). Vendler refers to the type of situation the predicate expresses based on its lexical class. A more detailed description of Vendler's verb classification will follow further.

{In this work only Vendler's classification - thus lexical aspect - will be discussed. For more about lexical aspect see Smith (1991)}.

### 3. A Brief description of Russian Verbs of Motion

There is a special class of verbs of motion in Russian. Most motion verbs have two lexemes: a multidirectional and a unidirectional lexeme. Both lexemes describe the same event but in different ways and are imperfective. The first set defines the verbs that describe the movement in one direction, and is called unidirectional:

- (2) К нам идет директор (едет ревизор).  
to us comes-UNID director (comes-UNID inspector)  
'the director is coming to us (the inspector is coming)'
- (3) С работы я обычно иду пешком (еду на метро).  
from work I usually go-MULTID on foot (go-MULTID by subway)  
'I usually go on foot from work (go on the subway)'

The other verbs are multidirectional and cover all other motion verbs. Multidirectional verbs have several meanings: an undirected, aimless action (around some space) often for an indefinite period of time (4); ability, habit, characteristic of the subject (5); type of motion per se (6); an action there and back several times (7), or even once in the past (8):

- (4) Мы ходили / ездили три часа по городу.  
we walked-MULTID/ drove-MULTID three hours in city  
'We were walking / driving three hours in the city.'
- (5) Ребенок уже ходит.  
child already walks MULTID  
'The child is already walking.'
- (6) Он приезжает к нам по выходным.  
he comes-MULTID to us at weekends.  
'He comes to us at weekends.'

(7) Я вчера ходила на собрание.  
I yesterday went-MULTID to meeting  
'I went to the meeting yesterday.'

(8) Он ездил за границу.  
he travelled-MULTID abroad  
'He travelled abroad'

In my analysis I do not go beyond the unprefixing verbs of motion. For more about motion verbs see inter alia Isačenko (1975), Zaliznjak (1997) and Janko-Trinickaja (1982).

## 4. Original Research

### 4.1. Study description

To date, 50 migrants have participated in the study. All of them came from Russian speaking countries and have Russian as their first language. In terms of their age at the time of migration, the group is quite heterogeneous (see Table 1). All the participants were older than 16 at the time of the study.

Number of participants	Age at the time of migration	Length of stay (min; max)	Proficiency in Russian (min; max)
11	0-7	10; 22	71.5; 97.5
18	8-12	7; 22	81.5; 97
14	13-20	6; 18	79; 99
7	26-47	10; 34	91; 97.5

Table 1. Participants of the study<sup>1</sup>.

During the study, the corpus of oral and written texts was collected. The participants were asked to translate sentences (27 sentences)<sup>2</sup> and a text from German into Russian (262 words) and to write an essay on a familiar topic that they could choose themselves. A conversation about everyday life (about 20 minutes) also took place.

On the basis of the collected corpus of deviations from standard Russian, several tendencies were revealed: uncertainty using verbal prefixes; no secondary imperfectivisation; an increase of analytical forms and a significant preference for perfective forms in the

<sup>1</sup> Proficiency in Russian was measured using the vocabulary based method (Polinsky, 1996). The speakers were asked to translate 100 words from the basic vocabulary list (the Swadesh list) from German into Russian. The wrong word or no translation was counted as one point less, the wrong form 0.5 point less. The final number of points shows the lexical proficiency of a speaker. Polinsky shows that there is a correlation between lexical and grammatical proficiency.

<sup>2</sup> Working out the task the author was guided by the work of Dahl (1985). Participants had to translate sentences from German into Russian and put the verb into the past tense. The particular feature of the task was the following: in the German sentence the verb was given in the infinitive form (see the example below). It was done in an attempt to avoid interference from German. The past tense was requested to make speakers choose between perfective and imperfective.

Das Mädchen NÄHEN Kleider für seine Puppen gestern.  
Girl SEW-INF dresses for her dolls yesterday.

class of accomplishments (according to Vendler's verb classification) and replacement of multidirectional verbs of motion with unidirectional verbs. All the tendencies will be discussed in detail later.

## 4.2. Tendencies of Change

### 4.2.1. Uncertainty using Verbal Prefixes

Speakers of Russian in Germany often understand that a prefix is needed and select the one they find the most suitable. The wrong prefix does not affect the verbal aspect:

- (2) Есть там магазины дешевые <...> там все скупились (Russian in Germany, further RG)  
 There are shops cheap <...> there all buy up-PERF.  
 'There are cheap shops there <...> everyone bought a lot there.'  
 (Standard Russian: закупились-IMPF)
- (3) Деньги можно положить в свое дело (RG)  
 Money can be invested in one's business.  
 (Standard Russian: вложить-PERF)  
 'Money can be invested in one's own business.'

Prefix choice is often due to the influence of German, i.e. a speaker translates the prefix of German verbs with the same meaning and adds it to the Russian verbal root.

- (4) Это часть дерева, которая обкрывает dem Baumstamm (RG)  
 This part tree-GEN, that covers-IMPF trunk-DAT (in German).  
 (Standard Russian: покрывает-IMPF)  
 'This is the part of the tree that covers the trunk.'

The German prefix *um-* from the verb *umschließen* (cover, surround) has approximately the same meaning as the Russian prefix *об-*. It is possibly an example of borrowing from German.

- (5) Они бы сначала отплатили кредит (RG)  
 They COND firstly pay off-PERF loan.  
 (Standard Russian: выплатили-PERF)  
 'They should first pay off the loan.'

This could be another example due to the influence of German: the prefix *ab-* from *abzahlen* (pay off) has approximately the same meaning as the Russian prefix *от-*.

### 4.2.2. Increase of Analytical Forms

In Standard Russian there are two ways of expressing the future tense. Firstly, imperfective verbs form the future tense by means of an analytic structure: an inflected future form of the auxiliary *быть* (be) + an imperfective infinitive of the main verb (*я буду строить-IMPF, ты будешь делать-IMPF*). Secondly, the future tense of perfective verbs is built synthetically and denotes completed actions in the future (*я построю-PERF, ты сделаешь-PERF*).

The synthetic future tense (i.e. the future of perfective verbs) often disappears and is

expressed analytically. It is significant that a perfective verb is replaced by bringing two verbs together – the auxiliary *быть* and the imperfective infinitive:

- (6) Сегодня будет проходить большой праздник в городском парке (RG)  
 Today will.3SG take place great festival in city park.  
 (Standard Russian: пройдет-PERF)  
 ‘Today a great festival will take place in the city park’
- (7) Он будет обижаться (RG)  
 He will.3SG be offended-IMPF.  
 (Standard Russian: обидется-PERF)  
 ‘He will be offended.’

The study of Brehmer (2012) shows similar results. Brehmer studies the success of different groups in learning Russian as a third language. One of the groups consists of learners with a Russian background. i.e. the same group as described here. These speakers show a certain tendency to overgeneralise the analytic form in perfective contexts.

A similar tendency of expressing the meaning analytically is revealed concerning prepositional verbs. A prepositional verb is replaced by a combination of an inflected phase verb and an imperfective content infinitive:

- (8) Когда мне было пять лет, я стал сильно болеть. [one disease is meant] (RG)  
 When me was-N five years, I became-PERF very be sick-IMPF.  
 (Standard Russian: заболел-PERF)  
 ‘When I was five, I got very sick.’
- (9) Этот мужчина стал первым говорить (RG)  
 This man began-PERF first speak-IMPF.  
 (Standard Russian: заговорил-PERF)  
 ‘That man was the first to speak.’

#### 4.2.3. No Secondary Imperfectivisation

In standard Russian, an imperfective verb can be made perfective by means of prefixation. A prefixed perfective verb can be made imperfective by means of adding a secondary imperfective suffix. In these case we speak not about an aspect pair but a three-member aspect group (Maslov 2012, p. 68) :

*читать*-IMPF – *ПРО-читать*-PERF – *прочит-ЫВ-ать*-2.IMPF;  
*писать*-IMPF – *ЗА-писать*-PERF – *запис-ЫВ-ать*-2.IMPF

Imperfective verbs built from perfective ones are called secondary imperfectives.

In spontaneous speech no secondary imperfectivisation was found. In the exercise that was given to the participants, several sentences had to be translated using secondary imperfectivisation. There again, participants used no secondary imperfectives - all the forms were translated as simple imperfectives:

- (10) Иван пил две чашки кофе каждое утро (RG)  
 (Standard Russian: выпивал-2.IMPF)  
 Ivan drank-IMPF two cups of coffee every morning  
 ‘Ivan drank two cups of coffee every morning.’

#### 4.2.4. Preference for Perfective Forms in the Class of Accomplishments

Before coming to the next tendency it is necessary to give a brief description of Vendler's verb classes. Vendler (1967) divides all verbs into four classes: achievements, accomplishments, activities, states. Each class describes a particular event type. Decisive factors for dividing verbs into classes are the following: how long does the event continue and if there is a change of state or not (see Table 2). In an effort to simplify the description, a number of exceptions of general rules and nuances were left out.

	Duration of the event	Change of state	Aspect	Example
States	extended temporal intervals	-	imperf	<i>видеть (see), любить (love)</i>
Activities	extended temporal intervals/ mini events	-	imperf	<i>гулять (go for a walk), говорить (speak), прыгать (jump)</i>
Achievements	instantaneous	+	perf	<i>умереть (die), разбить (break), бросить (throw)</i>
Accomplish-ments	non-instantaneous temporal intervals	+	perf imperf	<i>читать книгу (read a book), прочитатъ книгу (have read a book)</i>

Table 2. Vendler's verb classes

Originally this classification was applied only to the English language. There were several attempts to apply the classification to Russian. In my analysis I used the application of the classification to the Russian language as carried out by Braginsky (2008) and Braginsky and Rothstein (2009). For a more detailed description of the verb classes see Braginsky (2008) and Braginsky and Rothstein (2009).

States denote events that have no changes or do not have any development. They take place over extended intervals of time and persist throughout the whole interval in which they take place. States are usually imperfective: *знать* (know), *видеть* (see), *любить* (love). States can change their class to achievements by means of prefixation: *узнать* (recognise), *увидеть* (notice), *полюбить* (fall in love).

Activities also continue for extended temporal intervals, but they consist of micro events of the same kind that cannot be subdivided any further. For example, the act of walking in *John walks* may be subdivided into the separate events of *taking steps*. The events of *raising a foot, moving it forward* and *putting it to the ground* are events which are no longer incorporated into the definition of *walk*. Activities are combinations of micro events that follow each other. Activity verbs are usually imperfective: *гулять* (walk), *говорить* (talk), *прыгать* (jump). Activities attain a semelfactive meaning by means of prefixation: *прыгнуть* (take a jump), *махнуть* (wave once), *толкнуть* (push once). A semelfactive event is instantaneous and expresses action as a single event without repetition or continuation. Semelfactive verbs are always perfective.

Achievements are near-instantaneous events and represent change from one state of affairs into another. Achievements are normally perfective: *умереть* (die), *разбить* (break), *бросить* (throw). They can undergo second imperfectivisation: *разбить* – *разбивать*.

Accomplishments are events involving change that continue for non-instantaneous intervals. They consist of series of discernible stages of micro events. Achievements are primarily associated with the perfective, but can be also imperfective: *читать*-IMPF *книгу* (read a book) – *прочитать*-PERF *книгу* (have read a book); *строить*-IMPF *дом* (build a house) – *построить*-PERF *дом* (have built a house).

The division of verbs into four classes is not only significant because of the different semantics of the event types but also because of different grammatical tests that can be carried out with different event types. One grammatical test that is significant for this study concerns compatibility with incremental modifiers. There are two types of incremental modifiers: *постепенно* (gradually) as in example 11 and *X за X* (X by X) as in example 12, both of which can occur only with accomplishments (perfective and imperfective):

- (11) a. Иван читал книгу страница за страницей.  
b. Иван прочитал книгу страница за страницей.

- (12) a. Иван постепенно читал книгу.  
b. Иван постепенно прочитал книгу.

The other event types are not compatible with incremental modifiers; there are however several exceptions which would not be described here.

There are several opinions as to whether the Vendler classes have to be applied to verbal roots or to the VP-level. Verkuyl (1972, 1993) affirms that the VP-level determines the classification. This affirmation was made concerning the English language (15). The same is likely true for the Russian language. The information that can be taken from the verb root does not seem to be useful in defining the event type. The grammatical form of the verb *читал* in (16a) and (16b) is the same, but only by considering the VP as a whole, the event type can be defined.

- (15) a. John built the house / three houses in a year/ \*for a year.  
b. John built houses for a year/ \*in a year.

- (16) a. Иван читал-IMPF → activity  
b. Иван читал-IMPF книгу → accomplishment  
c. Иван прочитал-PERF книгу → accomplishment

All collected verbal deviations of the study were tested using the incremental modifiers test. This was done to determine in which classes the deviations appear. In (17a) there is an original sentence from the collected corpus; in (17b) the process of testing is shown. All the mistakes made by the participants are left in the given examples unchanged. The mistakes made by speakers were corrected only in the test sentence (17b).

- (17) a. Пираты, ругаясь на друг друга, спрятали сокровище<sup>3</sup> (RG)  
(Standard Russian: прятали-IMPF)  
pirates swearing at each other hid-PERF treasure  
'The pirates were hiding the treasure and swearing at each other.'

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<sup>3</sup>All the mistakes made by the participants are left in the given examples unchanged.

б. Пираты, ругаясь друг с другом, постепенно/сундук за сундуком прятали сокровища.

It was found that the deviations in the classes of states, activities and achievements were minimal; only a few cases were found. Most of the verbal deviations appear in the class of accomplishments. This class will be the main object of the further analysis.

As was mentioned before, the class of accomplishments is the only class that can be represented by both aspects (imperfective and perfective). The aspect choice depends on the context. Contexts such as action in progress, repeated or habitual action and general factual contexts require the imperfective.

All the deviations in the class of accomplishments are reduced to the replacement of the imperfective forms by perfective ones in the imperfective contexts. Talking about actions in progress, speakers use the wrong aspect:

- (18) Она мне в течение двух недель показала город (RG)  
 she me during two weeks showed-PERF city.  
 (Standard Russian: показывала-IMPF)  
 'She showed me the city for two weeks.'

Repeated actions are also an error source:

- (19) В большинстве случаев они [рассказы] опубликовались под псевдонимом (RG)  
 in majority cases-GEN they were published-PERF under pseudonym  
 (Standard Russian: публиковались-IMPF)  
 'In most cases they were published under a pseudonym.'
- (20) Молодой студент писал небольшие юмористические рассказы, которых напечатали в газетах (RG)  
 young student wrote-IMPF short humorous stories, that published-PERF  
 in newspapers  
 (Standard Russian: печатались-IMPF)  
 'The Young student wrote short humorous stories that were published in newspapers.'

In some infinitive constructions the imperfective is required (for the description of all cases see Bojko 1973). No perfective verb can be connected with phase verbs like *начать* (begin), *стать* (begin), *закончить* (finish), etc. (Bojko 1973, p. 10; Tefras 1960, p. 333):

- (21) Просто так потратить [деньги] я не стала бы (RG)  
 just so spend-PERF [money] I not would COND  
 (Standard Russian: тратить-IMPF)  
 'I would not spend money for no important reason.'
- (22) Там стала кое-что сделать (RG)  
 there began something do-PERF  
 (Standard Russian: делать-IMPF)  
 'I began to do something there.'

The examples above (17-21) show the incorrect usage of accomplishment verbs in different contexts. The reason for these errors is likely the following: accomplishments are instinctively associated with the perfective, though they can be both perfective and imperfective. This is why speakers tend to use the perfective in combination with accomplishments even if it is grammatically incorrect.



#### 4.2.5. No Lexicalisation of Aspect

Little research has been conducted into the use of verbal aspect of heritage Russian in Germany (see Anstatt 2008; Clasmeier 2010). Tendencies similar to the ones presented in this article were found.

Though there are many deviations from standard Russian in verbal aspect usage, Anstatt, Clasmeier and I come to the same conclusion: there is no lexicalisation of aspect in the speech of Russian migrants in Germany. This means that both members of the aspect pair are present in the language and treated as a pair, not as two separate verbs with similar meanings.

#### 4.2.6. Replacement of Multidirectional Verbs of Motion with Unidirectional Verbs

Multidirectional verbs of motion are often replaced by unidirectional verbs. This happens in spontaneous oral speech and concerns all most often used verbs. In example 20 a habit is described:

- (20) Иногда мы идем в кинотеатре (RG)  
 Sometimes we go-UNID to cinema-PREP.  
 (Standard Russian: ходим-MULTID)  
 'We go to the cinema sometimes'

In example 21 the unidirectional verb is used in the context of an undirected, aimless action (around some space):

- (21) Ты будешь с ним на гастроли ехать, чтобы с ним быть [вместе] (RG)  
 You will with him on tours go-UNID in order with him be  
 (Standard Russian: ездить-MULTID)  
 'You will go with him on tour in order to be with him'

In example 22 a characteristic of the subject is described:

- (22) Я еще ни разу не летела (RG)  
 I yet not once not flied-UNID  
 (Standard Russian: летала-MULTID)  
 'I have never flown before'

Pfandl (1997) revealed the same trend studying Russian speakers in Austria.

### 5. The Russian Verb in the USA

Polinsky (1996, 2007, 2009), Laleko (2010), Pereltsvaig (2005) and many others study the language of Russian Heritage speakers in the USA. Heritage speakers are "individuals raised in homes where a language other than English is spoken and who are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language" (Polinsky 2007, p. 368).

The Russian verb undergoes significant restructuring in the USA. There is no present tense in the speech of Heritage Speakers any more. The infinitive, past tense or imperative

are used instead. This leads to considerable reduction in the verbal paradigm and to the weakening of the aspectual paradigm.

Aspect members are lexicalised in Russian in the USA. This means that there are no longer two aspect members. Generally one form is retained; the other one is entirely lost. Verbs of achievements and accomplishments are mostly retained in the perfective form:

- (23) Я никогда не прочитал та книга (American Russian, further AmR)  
 I never not read-PERF this book  
 (Standard Russian: читал-IMPF)  
 'I have never read that book'

States and activities are often lexicalised in the imperfective form:

- (24) Он прятался он висел из окна (AmR)  
 He hid-IMPF he hung-IMPF from window  
 (Standard Russian: спрятался-PERF)  
 'He was hanging from the window sill, hiding'

Such distribution is due to the intuitive idea, that achievements and accomplishments are perfective and states and activities are imperfective.

As shown above speakers use both perfective and imperfective aspects. There is no general preference for any aspect. Pereltsvaig (2005) analysed the corpus collected by Polinsky in an attempt to find rules of using verbal aspect in Heritage Russian. She concludes that the decisive factor in using perfective or imperfective aspect is the "bounded Path". A Path is bounded if it has a clear endpoint or transition from one state into another (Pereltsvaig, 2005: 385). Thus "aspectual marking in American Russian encodes the bounded Path feature associated with the verbal root: verbs with bounded Path are marked with the perfective morphology, whereas verbs without bounded Path are marked with the imperfective morphology" (Pereltsvaig, 2005: 388). She also argues that only lexical aspect remains in Heritage Russian in the USA.

The next tendency in Russian in the USA is the rise of analytical forms. A prepositional verb is replaced by a combination of an inflected phase verb and an imperfective content infinitive:

- (25) Она никогда она не начнет говорить ко мне первая (AmR)  
 She never she not will begin speak to me first  
 (Standard Russian: заговорит-IMPF)  
 'She would never speak to me first'

Another tendency is replacement of multidirectional motion verbs with unidirectional verbs:

- (26) В воскресенье я ехал в Вашингтон с мои друзья (AmR)  
 In Sunday I went-UNID in Washington with my friends  
 (Standard Russian: ездил-MULTID)  
 'On Sunday I went to Washington with my friends'

## 5. Conclusions

On the basis of the collected data concerning Russian speakers in Germany, the following tendencies were revealed: uncertainty using verbal prefixes; an increase of analytical forms; preference for perfective forms in the class of accomplishments; no secondary imperfectivisation, replacement of multidirectional verbs of motion with unidirectional verbs. No lexicalisation of aspect was found. It must be said that these deviations are not inherent to all Russian speakers in Germany; they only show the tendencies of future language development.

In Heritage Russian in the USA similar tendencies were found, but they are much further reaching. The total number of mistaken aspectual forms found in the corpus of Polinsky is 38 out of 150, which is 25% (Pereltsvaig, 2005: 371). The number of mistakes in the German corpus is several times less.

Comparing results of this study with the research of Polinsky (1996, 2009), Laleko (2010) and Pereltsvaig (2005) concerning Russian verb in Heritage Russian in the USA, I can affirm that verbal aspect in Heritage Russian in Germany is relatively stable, although it shows some deviations that form trends in language development. A rather small number of deviations (as compared to Heritage Russian in the USA) are due to the shorter residence periods of Russian-speaking migrants in Germany. Another reason for the smaller deviation number is the higher proficiency of the speakers who participated in this study.

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