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Why *послушать*, but *услышать*?

Why do so-called active perception verbs like *слушать* ‘listen’ and *смотреть* ‘look’ form perfective verbs with the prefix *по-*, while the corresponding passive perception verbs *слышать* ‘hear’ and *видеть* ‘see’ use *у-* for this purpose? One might think these are idiosyncratic facts that language learners simply have to memorize. However, in this short article we will pursue the linguistically more interesting hypothesis that the choice of prefix is semantically motivated. In particular, we argue that the properties “atelic” and “path” are part of the meaning of both *по-* and the verb stem, and that this semantic overlap motivates the choice of prefix in active perception verbs. Although both prefixes are equally challenging, due to considerations of space we will mainly focus on *по-* and active perception in the present study.

After a presentation of active and passive perception verbs in section 1, we discuss telicity and the PATH image schema in sections 2 and 3. Section 4 summarizes the contribution of the paper, and formulates some questions for further research that arise from our analysis.

1. Active versus Passive Perception

The notions of active and passive perception have been discussed *inter alia* by Rogers (1970) for English and Apresjan (1995:356ff.) and Padučeva (2004:202ff.) for Russian. As mentioned above, active perception verbs include verbs like *слушать* and *смотреть*, as well as their English equivalents *listen* and *look*. Leech (2004:28) describes active perception as follows: “I go out of my way, physically, to focus my attention on some object”. In the terminology of Vendler (1957), verbs of active perception describe activities, whereby an agent directs his/her attention at a patient. Padučeva (2004:203) observes that Russian verbs of active perception fulfill all criteria of agenthood, insofar as they combine with goal adverbials, duration adverbials and objects in the instrumental case. We

suggest that directing one's attention at something can be analyzed as metaphorical motion from the agent to the patient. Evidence for this comes from the simple fact that *смотреть* combines with *на* 'on' (e.g. *смотреть на кого-либо* 'look at someone') or *в* 'in' (e.g. *смотреть в окно* 'look out of the window') followed by the accusative case, a construction that is characteristic of directed motion towards a goal. Idiomatic expressions like *бросить взгляд* 'throw a glance' lend further support to an analysis of active perception as metaphorical motion.

Since the focus of this study is active perception, detailed discussion of passive perception verbs is not required for present purposes. Suffice it to say that verbs like *see* can denote a state whereby something is visible ("I can see him"), but can also involve a momentary change from unseen to seen ("I suddenly saw him"). In Russian, imperfective verbs like *видеть* and *слышать* represent states, whereas their perfective partners *увидеть* and *услышать* are achievements (Padučeva 2004:204). The term "passive perception" is suitable since "the perceiver is merely passively receptive" (Leech 2004:25), i.e. s/he passively receives impressions without making an effort to direct his/her attention towards the object. Since the subject of a passive perception verb does not carry out a willful and controlled activity, s/he is not an agent. We propose that passive perception can be analyzed as metaphorical motion from the object to the subject. Expressions like *бросаться в глаза* 'catch one's eye' provide evidence for an analysis along these lines.

The starting point for our study is a database that was created as part of the Exploring Emptiness research project at the University of Tromsø (<http://uit.no/humfak/8775/>). The database contains approximately 2,000 aspectual pairs collected from Ožegov and Švedova (2005), Evgen'eva (1999) and Cubberley (1982). By "aspectual pair" we understand a non-prefixed imperfective plus a prefixed perfective, where the dictionaries do not give a separate interpretation (толкование) for the perfective partner. In other words we are interested in pairs of verbs like *писать* 'write (ipf)' – *написать* 'write (pf)' which are given the same interpretation in the dictionaries. Not included in the database, on the other hand, are pairs like *писать* 'write (ipf)' – *переписать* 'rewrite (pf)' since the members of this pair have different meanings. In addition to information about prefixation, the database incorporates a semantic classification of the verbs from the

Russian National Corpus (<http://www.ruscorpora.ru>). Unfortunately, the classification does not cover all verbs in our database, but the material is sufficient for a study of perception verbs. Table 1 lists the perception verbs that combine with the prefixes по- or у-.¹ For the convenience of the reader, active perception verbs are boldfaced.

По-	По- / у-	У-
глядеть 'look'	видать 'see'	видеть 'see'
зариться 'hanker'		зреть 'see'
любоваться 'admire'		лицезреть 'behold with one's own eyes'
нюхать ² 'smell'		слыхать 'hear'
слушать 'listen'		слышать 'hear'
смотреть 'look'		

Table 1: Distribution of по-/у- for verbs of active/passive perception

As can be seen from the table, there is a strong correlation between the active perception verbs and the по- prefix. The question is why. In the following sections, we will attempt a principled answer involving telicity and the PATH image schema. We turn to telicity first.

2. Telicity

The concept of telicity has been the subject of extensive discussion in Russian and general linguistics (cf. e.g. Tatevosov to appear). However, for the purposes of the present article it is sufficient to say that verbs that combine with temporal adverbials consisting of за followed by the

¹ The Russian National Corpus classifies казаться 'seem', демонстрировать 'demonstrate', and тарашить 'goggle' as perception verbs, but these verbs are not included in the table. Казаться is not a verb of active or passive perception, but rather a verb of "inner seeing" (Радуцева 2004:205). Демонстрировать and тарашить combine with the prefixes про- and вы- that are outside the scope of the present study. Лицезреть is a somewhat archaic verb. The Russian National Corpus contains only four examples of this verb, all of which are from Turgenev. However, Библиотека Максима Мошкова (<http://lib.ru/>) contains several examples from contemporary literature. This suggests that лицезреть is still used in present-day Russian, and the verb is thus included in Table 1.

² Нюхать also combines with у-, but we suggest that нюхать and унюхать do not form a regular aspectual pair, and we will therefore not discuss унюхать in the present study.

accusative (e.g. за две минуты ‘in two minutes’) are telic. Temporal adverbials with a bare accusative case (e.g. две минуты ‘for two minutes’) are the diagnostic for atelic verbs. According to this test, active perception verbs are atelic. In examples like (1) and (2) the boldfaced bare accusatives cannot be replaced by phrases with the preposition за.³

- (1) Послушав **минуты две** давно знакомые, плоские фразы, Самгин невольно произнес слова, которые не хотел бы говорить вслух: [Максим Горький. Жизнь Клима Самгина. Часть 3 (1928)]
- (2) Предпоследняя машина остановилась возле нас / постояла / посмотрела на нас **минуты три-четыре**. [Передача “Полная версия” на радиостанции “Европа+” (2006.04)]

Imperfective verbs of active perception are activities that may go on for a while without producing a result. When activity verbs are perfectivized, the result is often a telic verb. For instance, the atelic and imperfective делать ‘do’ corresponds to the telic and perfective сделать. It is possible to say делать что-то две минуты ‘do something for two minutes’, but сделать что-то за две минуты ‘get something done in two minutes’. However, active perception verbs like смотреть and слушать do not easily lend themselves to construal as completeable processes that yield a result. And to the extent they do so, this meaning is already covered by the corresponding verbs of *passive* perception. The natural result of looking is seeing, and listening for something may lead to hearing it. The following examples illustrate the looking-seeing and listening-hearing connections for Russian:⁴

- (3) Пока он приносил вино, я в последний раз **посмотрел** себе под ноги и **увидел** пачку денег, перепоясанную довоенной

³ Unless otherwise is indicated, all numbered examples in this study are taken from the Russian National Corpus. Corpus searches were performed in November 2008.

⁴ It should be pointed out that the connections do not work equally well in all types of contexts. In the most felicitous contexts (illustrated in examples (3) through (5)), the active perception verb involves directing one’s attention to a location, while the corresponding verb of passive perception denotes discovering what one was interested in at the relevant location.

тридцаткой. [Фазиль Искандер. Время счастливых находок (1973)]

- (4) Если мы **посмотрим** на концы соломинки, то **увидим**, что один будет более светлый и блестящий, чем другой, так как он был прикрыт своим листиком. [Соломенные картины // "Народное творчество", 2004.04.19]
- (5) Митя на всякий случай **послушал** еще возле своей двери, ничего не **услышал**, заволновался оттого сильно и отпер ее, фанерную. [Дмитрий Липскеров. Последний сон разума (1999)]

If we assume that a perfectivized verb of active perception must be different from the corresponding passive perception verb, we must ask which other options there are. Is it, for instance, possible to form atelic perfective verbs in Russian? Although perfective verbs are typically telic, there are prefixes that yield atelic perfectives. The most productive pattern is *по-* with so-called delimitative Aktionsart. The following examples from Tatevosov (to appear) are illustrative:

- (6) Вася пописал письма́ два часа/*за два часа.
- (7) Вася попил сок пять минут/*за пять минут.

In (6) and (7), Vasja is engaged in writing letters and drinking juice, which are activities that are going on for a while without producing a result or yielding a change of state. The prefix *по-* establishes boundaries to the activity, and, accordingly, the delimitative verbs *пописать* and *попить* mean ‘be engaged in writing for a while’ and ‘be engaged in drinking for a while’. The meaning of perfective verbs of active perception resembles that of delimitatives. For example, *посмотреть* denotes the engagement in looking for some time, while *послушать* involves listening for a while.

We are now in a position to address the question that formed the starting point for our discussion of telicity: Is the choice of *по-* for active perception verbs arbitrary or is there any semantic motivation for this choice of prefix? We have found evidence favoring the latter option. We have seen that active perception verbs “need” atelic perfective partners, and that *по-* is the prefix par excellence for atelic perfectives in Russian.

The choice of *по-* therefore does not appear to be a random, idiosyncratic property, but is rather motivated semantically. In the following section, we will see that the *PATH* image schema provides further support for this hypothesis.

3. The *PATH* image schema

Image schemas can be thought of as abstract “skeletons” grounded in everyday experience that are crucial in structuring our mental world (Hampe (ed.) 2005). Frequently mentioned examples are *CENTER-PERIPHERY*, *CONTAINER*, *FRONT-BACK*, *PART-WHOLE* and *PATH*. The *PATH* image schema is crucial in well-studied metaphors such as *LOVE IS A JOURNEY*, where a relationship is construed so as to follow a *PATH* that usually involves challenges. In section 1, we saw that active perception involves directing one’s attention to something, and we argued that verbs of active perception designate metaphorical motion from the subject to the object. In other words, the semantics of verbs like *смотреть* and *слушать* include a *PATH* from the subject to the object. If we assume that the choice of *по-* is semantically motivated, we expect the *по-* prefix to have a meaning that includes the *PATH* image schema, or at least a meaning that is compatible with this image schema. In order to test this hypothesis we must consider the meaning of *по-* in some detail.

It is well known that *по-* occurs in five *Aktionsarten* in Contemporary Standard Russian, one of which is the delimitative discussed in the previous section (Isačenko 1960:224ff., Švedova (ed.) 1980:366):

- (8) Meanings of *по-*:
- a. resultative (e.g. *построить* ‘build’)
 - b. ingressive (e.g. *полететь* ‘(begin to) fly’)
 - c. delimitative (e.g. *постоять* ‘stand for a while’)
 - d. distributive (e.g. *побросать* ‘throw (distributively)’)
 - e. attenuative (e.g. *поостыть* ‘cool off somewhat’)

In the following we will focus on the first three meanings, which provide sufficient detail for present purposes. The simplest case is the resultative in (8a). Verb phrases like *построить дом* ‘build a house’ denote a telic process that culminates when the house is completed. Such a process

represents a metaphorical PATH. The start of the building process represents the beginning of the PATH, which leads to an end point, when the building process is finished.

The so-called ingressives in (8b) represent a more complicated case. Prototypical examples are motion verbs like пойти ‘(begin to) walk’ and полететь ‘(begin to) fly’, which as suggested by the glosses are said to indicate the beginning of an action. Evidence for this account comes from sentences like the following, where пойти is used about an action that was interrupted before the intended goal was reached:

- (9) Вчера пошла на лекцию; мне по дороге стало плохо. (Tolskaya 2007:364 and 2008:30)

However, it is well known that verbs like пойти can be used in contexts where it is clear that the goal was reached. The following examples from Švedova (1980:367) illustrate this:

- (10) Я поехал в город и остановился там у знакомых.

- (11) Я пошла в магазин и купила там хлеба.

We will not discuss examples of this type further. Regardless of how one chooses to analyze examples like (10) and (11), it is clear that verbs like пойти and полететь involve a PATH. What is not clear is whether the PATH comes from the prefix. It seems quite uncontroversial to assume that the meaning of unidirectional motion verbs like идти and лететь encompasses a PATH, and that this carries over to the prefixed verbs пойти and полететь. Nessel (2008) proposes an analysis along these lines and points out that this approach enables us to assume that по- has the same meaning in all perfective motion verbs including clearly atelic verbs like походить ‘walk for a while’ and полетать ‘fly for a while’. While Nessel’s monosemy approach facilitates a simple analysis of motion verbs, we would like to point out that there is nothing in the data that forces us to assume one invariant meaning of по- for all motion verbs. As shown in (8), по- is clearly polysemous, and it may well be that it has different meanings in different types of motion verbs. The problem is that it is anything but easy to come up with empirical tests that will enable us to choose between

Nesset's monosemy approach and an analysis of *по-* as a polysemous item for motion verbs.

In his analysis of Old Russian, Dickey (2007:348) argues that the "INGRESSIVE-PARTIAL TRAJECTORY expressed by O[ld]Rus[sian] *пойти* ['go'] bears a striking resemblance to the RELATIVE DELIMITATION meaning expressed by delimitative verbs". In other words, Dickey suggests that the delimitative Aktionsart is a metaphorical extension from the ingressive, where both classes of verbs denote the (partial) traversal of a path. If one adopts this analysis for Contemporary Standard Russian this implies assuming a PATH as part of the meaning of both ingressives and delimitatives.

With these remarks on the meaning(s) of *по-* in mind, we return to the main question in this study, i.e. whether the choice of *по-* is semantically motivated for verbs of active perception. As shown in the beginning of this section, such verbs establish a metaphorical PATH from subject to object. We have furthermore seen that *по-* is compatible with this image schema, and at least some of its meanings include a PATH. The choice of prefix therefore does not appear to be random. Active perception verbs choose a prefix with a meaning that is akin to their own semantics.

4. Concluding remarks

In this article we have shown that active perception verbs combine with *по-*, whereas verbs of passive perception prefer *у-*. We asked if the choice of *по-* for active perception verbs is semantically motivated, and advanced two pieces of evidence in favor of this hypothesis. First, it was demonstrated that the choice of *по-* is motivated insofar as this prefix is used to form atelic perfective verbs. Second, we showed that the PATH image schema is relevant both for *по-* and for active perception. Both pieces of evidence involve conceptual overlap, i.e. semantic properties that occur in verb stem and prefix simultaneously. The question arises whether this kind of overlap can be detected in passive perception verbs and possibly in other groups of verbs as well. However, this issue must be left for future research.

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