

Title: Russian “Purely Aspectual” Prefixes are a Verb Classifier System
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We hypothesize that the Russian “purely aspectual” prefixes are a verb classifier system parallel to the numeral classifier system in a language like Yucatec Maya (Lucy 1992). We present an extensive set of tests for this hypothesis. The tests include comparison of distributional data with definitions for classifier systems (McGregor 2002), plus five different statistical studies proving that the behavior of each prefix is unique and explainable by recourse to its meaning.

The tests are based on data from the Exploring Emptiness database of Russian prefixed perfectives (<http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/>) and the Russian National Corpus. All of the evidence confirms the hypothesis and at the same time supports the Vey (1952) and van Schooneveld (1958) proposal that the prefixes are never “empty,” but instead overlap with the meanings of the verbs. This analysis, however, establishes a specific network of meanings for each prefix, rather than assigning an abstract invariant meaning.

Though there have been some recent suggestions that Russian might have a verb classifier system (Majsak 2005, Plungjan 2011), this is the first comprehensive study to provide compelling empirical support for the argument. Recognizing Russian as a verb classifier language brings numerous advantages, facilitating cross-linguistic comparisons and improving both description and pedagogy.

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