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Title: Russian Aspect in Context Abstract:

We report on a large-scale experiment on Russian aspect in authentic contexts. We aim to discover the role of context in determining the use of perfective vs. imperfective aspect.

Russian aspect is acquired late by native speakers (Stoll 2001, Gagarina 2004), and is routinely

listed as the greatest obstacle facing second language learners (Martelle 2011 and references

therein). Descriptive grammars list dozens of adverbials and syntactic “triggers” that indicate

aspect fairly reliably. For example, *uže* ‘already’ is a trigger for perfective verbs, while *vsegda*

‘always’ is a trigger for imperfective verbs. But these triggers only work when they are available.

Our investigation shows that, in aggregate, the triggers from descriptive grammars appear in

association with only about 2% of verbs in corpus language samples. This suggests that the

known explicit contextual cues represent only the tip of the iceberg.

In our experiment, 500 native Russian speakers rated the acceptability of perfective and

imperfective forms in texts of 1100-1700 words representing various genres: narration,

interview, journalistic prose, scientific prose, and fiction. Our data shows that in most contexts

without known triggers, native speakers can correctly select perfective or imperfective aspect

based only on context, but there are some contexts where they allow both aspects (but report

meaning differences), and a continuum of contexts in between these two. Respondents are less

consistent in rating incorrect aspect choices. They also tend to choose the higher frequency item.

Unravelling structural, contextual, frequency and other factors and their relationship to the

selection of aspect is the goal of our analysis.

Stoll,S. 2001. The Acquisition of Russian Aspect. Dissertation, UC Berkeley.

Gagarina,N. 2004. Does the acquisition of aspect have anything to do with aspectual pairs? ZAS

Papers in Linguistics, 33:39-61.

Martelle,W. 2011. Testing the Aspect Hypothesis in L2 Russian. Dissertation, UPittsburgh.