

Title: Semelfactive and Tense in Russian

Author: Vance Holthenrichs

Abstract:

In my work, I sought to analyze the way semelfactive verbs are distributed across tenses, and to prove that this distribution skews strongly in favor of past tense. I built off of Зализняк, Шмелев (2000, p. 118-120) and Makarova & Janda's (2009) definition of semelfactives and define semelfactives as a subset of perfective verbs denoting instantaneous single acts (e.g. *мелькнуть* 'to flash'; *икнуть* 'to hiccup'), whose imperfective correlates, as defined by A. Plungian, often denote this single-act as repeated in quick succession (e.g. *мелькать*; *икать*) (Плунгян 2011, p. 211). I collected instances of the most frequent semelfactive verbs, to compare their occurrences in each tense (past and present-future) by utilizing the Russian National Corpus as a reflection of these verbs' typical occurrence patterns in use within the Russian language. Once all of the data was collected and synthesized into a table containing semelfactive verbs and other perfective verbs (e.g. *сказать*, *взять*), which I called my control group, a pattern became evident, which showed a strong inclination for semelfactives to occur in the past tense. By using a simple equation and taking the number of each semelfactive's entries in past tense and dividing that by the number of overall entries in every possible form (i.e. in past, future, or as an infinitive, participle, gerund), we get a precise number to see in what percentage of overall occurrences semelfactives are used in past tense. The data shows that semelfactives have a much higher rate of occurrence in past tense than other perfective verbs (e.g. semelfactive *стукнуть* 'to knock': 81%, while non-semelfactive *сказать* 'to say': 66%), and that some semelfactives occur almost exclusively in past tense (e.g. *хмыкнуть* 'to say hmmm' past tense occurrence - 98%). From this, we can conclude that there is a strong correlation between past tense and the usage of semelfactive verbs and that semelfactives are used in past tense constructions more often than other perfective verbs, which is, perhaps, due to their ephemeral, yet often unpredictable nature relegating that we typically only talk about them once they have been completed.

References:

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