Aspect and Negation in Czech and Russian

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The paper presents a contrastive analysis of aspect in contexts of negation in Czech and Russian. While past studies have shown a general tendency for the Czech perfective to be more common in narration than its Russian counterpart (Eckert 1984, Stunová 1993, among others), no contrastive studies have focused specifically on negation.

In our corpus, we found that the majority of examples showed a direct aspectual parallel between Russian and Czech. Aspect often differs, however, in three types of contexts: in contexts involving a certain duration in time, in contexts of real or potential repetition, and in sequencing. The authors propose that the differences between Czech and Russian can best be explained within the framework of the model of "totality" versus "temporal definiteness" proposed in Dickey 2000. According to this theory, in Czech the perfective aspect encodes a sense of totality, a view of the depicted situation as an indivisible whole. The Russian perfective is more complex, requiring a sense of temporal definiteness.

Consider (1), in which Russian encodes both predicates with imperfective forms, while Czech begins with the imperfective and then shifts to the perfective.

(1a) В те времена, когда ему ***не подавали*** отдельного вагона...,
ему и в голову ***не приходило*** опасаться чего-то. 36

(1b) V dobách, kdy mu ***nepřidělovali*** zvláštní vagon..., ***nikdy ho nenapadlo***,
aby se něčeho bál.

(A. Rybakov: Deti Arbata, 110/106-107)

The imperfective aspect of the first predicate establishes a sense of continuity, a broad temporal space in which relevant situation uniformly applies. For the second predicate, Russian continues with the imperfective aspect, since the perfective would require a sense of differentiation within the temporal space. In contrast, the Czech perfective requires only a sense of totality, a condition met by the inherent telicity of the verb *napadnout*. The imperfective would not be possible in Czech, because it would imply a sense of quantification within the predicate itself, a processual rather than punctual meaning.

In contrast, sequencing inherently implies a sense of temporal definiteness, as it presents the relevant event in a direct temporal link with events occurring before and after. Therefore, in Russian the perfective is favored. Czech, however, tends to focus instead on the telicity of the underlying event, regardless of its status within the temporal scheme of the discourse. Example (2) is typical.

(2a) Нины дома **не оказалось**.
(2b) Nina doma **nebyla**.
'Nina was not home.'

(A. Rybakov: Deti Arbata, 92/88)

In this example, the perfective aspect in Russian pinpoints the action along the foregrounded events of the narrative timeline. Czech, in contrast, encodes the stative situation of non-existence with an imperfective form.. Here, too, the aspectual differences between Czech and Russian can be explained by the differential meanings associated with the perfective in each language, totality and temporal definiteness, respectively.

References

Dickey, Stephen. 2000. *Parameters of Slavic Aspect.*
Eckert, Eva 1984. *A Contrastive Study of Czech and Russian Aspect.*
Stunová, Anna 1993. *A Contrastive Study of Russian and Czech Aspect.*