Imperfective aspect in French and Russian – semantics vs. pragmatics.

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Outline

- A semantic, compositional approach to aspect and tense
- Aspect in Russian
- The French *imparfait* and past tense
- The Russian imperfective and pragmatic strengthening
Perfective aspect

- (1) At 8 p.m. John wrote a letter.
- (1’) À huit heures Jean écrivit une lettre.
- (1’’) V 8 chasov Vanja napisal pis’mo.
Imperfective aspect

- (2) (When I arrived) at 8 p.m., John was writing a letter.

- (2’) (Quand je suis arrivé) à huit heures, Jean écrivait une lettre.

- (2”’) (Kogda ja prishel) v 8 chasov, Vanja pisal pis’mo.
Aspect in compositional semantics

- events (Davidson) and reference time (Reichenbach).
- R (aka topic time, assertion time) – the glue between aspect and tense.
Aspects as temporal inclusion relations

- The perfective ("complete event interpretation"): \( e \subseteq t \)
  
  \[
  [[ \text{Pf} ]] = \lambda P \lambda t \exists e [P(e) \land e \subseteq t]
  \]

- The progressive imperfective ("incomplete event interpretation"): \( t \subseteq e \)
  
  \[
  [[ \text{lpf\_prog} ]] = \lambda P \lambda t \exists e [P(e) \land t \subseteq e]
  \]
A coherent treatment of aspect and tense

Problem: the imperfective in Russian and French is not restricted to a progressive interpretation

How do we capture the restriction of French viewpoint aspects to past tense?
Russian aspect

Every Russian verb form is

- Perfective (Pf) or
- Imperfective (Ipf)

Note: Different from French where grammatical aspect is primarily restricted to past tenses.
Aspectual morphology in Russian (simplified)

- atelic activities ↔ IPF: chitat’ (to read)

- "progressive" accomplishments (incomplete events) ↔ IPF: chitat’ pis’mo (to read the letter)

- non-progressive accomplishments (complete events) ↔ PF: prochitat’ pis’mo (to "through-read" the letter)
Aspectual morphology in Russian (cont.)

- Inherently telic predicates ↔ PF: otkryt’ okno (to open the window)

- "progressive" accomplishments (incomplete events) ↔ otkryvat’ okno (to open the window)
The perfective verbs form a morphologically homogenous group – prefixation

The imperfective verbs come from two sources – simplex verbs and secondary suffixation
Perfective verbs always denote complete events, but vary in lexical semantics (different prefixes)
Aspectual interpretation in Russian (cont.)

- Imperfective verbs are compatible with a whole range of interpretations:
  - Incomplete events (progressive)
  - Complete events
  - Habituals etc.
(3) Ja obedal.

I.NOM dine-IPF.PAST

- I was having dinner. *(at some particular time)*
- I used to have dinner. *(regularly)*
- I have had dinner. *(today)*
Key notions in Slavic aspectology

- underspecification
- context sensitivity
- markedness
- competition
- pragmatic implicatures
Aspectual competition

- Russian imperfectives with complete event interpretation:

(4) Kto chital_IPF_PAST ”Vojnu i mir”?  
Who has read ”War and Peace”?
I read “War and Peace” in the 6th grade, read it through in 6 days.
Aspectual competition (cont.)

- The perfective prochital in (5):
  the event of reading W&P is temporally included in an interval of 6 days: $e \subseteq t$

- The imperfective chital in (5):
  the event of reading W&P is temporally included in an interval of 1 year: $e \subseteq t$
The French imperfective past

(6) ?? Marie ouvrait_IPF la porte.

(Jayez 1999)

*Mary was opening/opened the door.*

- An anaphoric/presuppositional past tense
Imparfait (cont.)

*Imparfait* in French
(dynamic DRT version) ⇒

Assertion: \( \lambda P \[ e \mid P(e), t \subseteq e \] \)
Presupposition: \([ t \mid t < t0 ]\)
A huit heures, les voleurs entrayaient_IPF dans la banque, ils discutaient_IPF avec un employé, puis se dirigeaient_IPF vers le guichet principal.

At eight, the robbers entered the bank. They discussed with a clerk and then they moved towards the main desk.
Quelques minutes plus tard, Pierre et Bruno apparaissaient dans un panache de poussière, slalomant entre les croissants de dunes à plus de 100 km/h devant le vieillard hélébé. (internet)

A couple of minutes later, Pierre and Bruno could be seen to emerge (were emerging) out of a cloud of dust, slaloming among the dunes at more than 100 km/h before a dazed old man.
(9) Maigret reprit la petite auto noire et, quelques minutes plus tard, il pénétrait dans la brasserie de la place de la République.

Maigret once more took the little black car, and a few minutes later he entered the café at the Republic square.
Imparfait narratif (cont.)

"The [assertion time] is viewed as spanning the whole event [...] but not beyond [...], whence the peculiar flavour of the narrative Imparfait: one follows completely some eventuality, then shifts to the next one, etc." (Jayez 1999)

- $t \subseteq e$; here: $t = e$
Open question: is it possible to capture all the interpretations of *Imparfait* in the semantics?
What about the obligatory use of *imparfait* in counterfactuals? A default past tense?
(10’) Were it not for him, things could have been much worse.

(10’’) Cela aurait_COND pu être bien pire s’il n’avait_IPF pas été là.

(10’’’) Esli b ne on, vse konchilos’_PF_PAST by_SUBJ_PART kuda khuzhe. (Russian)
(11) Kogda my vstretilis’,
when we met_PAST.PF
on chital "Vojnu i Mir".
he read_PAST.IPF “War and Peace”

“When we met, he was reading “W&P”.”
Why not a complete event interpretation of (11) – ”When we met, he had read W&P”? 

There is a better form for this interpretation: PF 

There is a better interpretation for this form: the progressive
Division of labour: IPF vs. PF – progressive vs. ”past perfect”

(11’) Kogda my vstretilis’, when we met on … "Vojnu i Mir". he … “War and Peace”

- chital_IPF (”was reading/had read”) or
- prochital_Pf (”had read”)?
A complete event interpretation is not available for Ipf whenever a progressive interpretation is possible.
A pragmatic approach

- Truth-conditional approaches to Russian aspect are not the whole story because they don’t consider *alternative* forms which the speaker could have used.
- The competition perspective suggests an Optimality theoretic approach.
- How and when does the complete event reading of Ip survive?
Partial blocking – second round

- “The unemployed form may soon find a new job, generally expressing something closely related to but subtly different from the canonical interpretation that one might have expected” (Beaver & Lee, 2003:140).
By associative learning (Benz 2006) it is expected that the interpretation of Pf gets strengthened to include an implicature of the current relevance of the result state.
(12) Kto otkryl_PF_PAST okno?
who opened window.
“Who has opened the window?”

*Implicature:*
the window is currently open
Pragmatic strengthening of lpf: the convention of annulled result

(12’) Kto otkryval_IPF_PAST okno?
who opened window.
“Who had the window open?”

Implicature:
the window is currently closed
Pragmatic strengthening (cont.)

(13) Vanja priekhal_PF_PAST.
    Vanja has arrived (literally: “Vanja arrived”)
    > current result, i.e. Vanja is currently present.

(13’) Vanja priezzhal_IPF_PAST.
    Vanja has been here (literally: “Vanja arrived”)
    > cancellation of result, i.e. Vanja has left again and is currently absent.
Pragmatic strengthening of Ipf

- Generalization:
- When no small assertion time (reference time, t) is contextually available, division of pragmatic labour results in pragmatic strengthening of Ipf.
A "counterfactual" imperfective (Grønn, 2008)

(14) Srazu reshilo_PF_PAST partiju 22.Qb3.  
22.Qb3 immediately decided the outcome of the game.

(14’) Srazu reshalo_IPF_PAST partiju 22.Qb3.  
22.Qb3 would immediately have decided the outcome of the game.
After accepting the pawn (i.e. if black had accepted the pawn), white would have won a piece: 16... Nxa4 17.b5 Bxb5.
Partial blocking of Ipf in chess annotations