

Pro-verbs in Russian: A tool for singling out the most salient submeaning of a prefix

Julia Kuznetsova & Svetlana Sokolova
University of Tromsø

The most “salient” representative of a category is the first that comes to mind (Schmid 2007). We propose a way to determine the relative salience of different submeanings on empirical basis. Research on the phenomenon of salience has mostly been focused on lexical units and constructions (Schmid 2000), but we offer a tool for singling out the most salient submeaning of a morphological element. Russian has pro-verbs that stand in place of a verb, similar to how a pronoun usually stands for a noun (see Raskin 1978, Krongauz 1998). We show that pro-verbs can reveal the most salient submeaning of a prefix.

Pro-verbs in Russian are characterized by two features: 1) etymologically their roots are usually derived from taboo words and names of animals (cf. the verb *figačit'* derived from *figa* that denotes a rude gesture or the verb *sobačit'* derived from *sobaka* 'dog'), 2) such roots present a unique situation: they have minimal semantic contribution and as a result are perfect for testing the meaning of the construction. Examples below show that the same verb *figačit'* can have such different meanings as 'produce' (1), 'hit' (2) or 'move' (3). Since pro-verbs are highly colloquial and infrequent in standard speech, we use the first 100 examples given by the Yandex search engine (www.yandex.ru) to characterize the distribution of semantic classes available for each verb.

A pro-verb used with a prefix shows a much smaller variation in meanings than the same pro-verb without a prefix. For instance, the verb *figačit'* is attested in more than seven different semantic classes, the most frequent of which are 'produce', 'hit', and 'move', illustrated below. However, 99 out of the first 100 uses of *prifigačit'* belong to the semantic class 'impact' triggered by the most salient submeaning of the prefix *pri-*, ATTACH, see (4). Similarly, *nafigačit'* in 67 out of 100 uses is characterized by the meaning 'produce' triggered by the submeaning ACCUMULATION of the prefix *na-*, while 47 out of the first 100 uses of *pofigačit'* mean 'move', which is triggered by the submeaning INGRESSIVITY of the prefix *po-* (see Endresen et al. 2012, Janda & Lyashevskaya 2012 for lists of the submeanings of the prefixes). A Russian verbal prefix can have spatial or actional submeanings, where a spatial submeaning localizes an event in space, while an actional submeaning refers to the internal temporal structure of the situation. Our method allows us to distinguish prefixes that focus more on spatial submeanings like *pri-*, as opposed to prefixes, which focus more on actional submeanings like *na-* and *po-*.

We show that the range of semantic classes for prefixed and non-prefixed pro-verbs is different. Non-prefixed pro-verbs appear in highly frequent constructions, function as verbal variables and obtain their meaning from the meaning of the construction. Since pro-verbs themselves do not contribute any meaning to their prefixed forms, analyzing the meaning of the prefixed pro-verbs reveals the most salient submeaning of the prefix, which is important in determining the prototype of a prefix.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) <i>Da včera ... figačil testo dlja jabločnogo piroga!</i>
'Yesterday [I] ... made a dough for an apple pie' | (2) <i>Ja daže molotkom figačil po udarniku.</i>
'I even was hitting the trigger with a hammer' |
| (3) <i>Avtobus figačil po vstrečnoj.</i>
'The bus was driving in the oncoming traffic lane' | (4) <i>Kak mikrofon na laptop prifigačil?</i>
'How to attach a microphone to the laptop?' |

References

- Endresen, A. et al. (2012) Russian 'purely aspectual' prefixes: Not so 'empty' after all?. *Scando-Slavica* 58(2), 229–290.
- Janda, L. A. & O.Lyashevskaya. (2012) Semantic Profiles of Five Russian Prefixes: *po-*, *s-*, *za-*, *na-*, *pro-*. *Journal of Slavic Linguistics*.
- Krongauz, M. A. (1998) *Pristavki i glagoly v russskom jazyke: semantičeskaja grammatika*. Moscow: Jazyki russkoj kul'tury.
- Raskin, V. (1978) On some peculiarities of the Russian lexicon, in D. Farkas, W. M. Jakobsen and K. W. Todrys (eds.), *Papers from the Parasession on the Lexicon*, Chicago Linguistic Society, Chicago, 1978, pp. 312-325.
- Schmid, H.-J. (2000) *English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells: From Corpus to Cognition*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Schmid, H.-J. 2007. Entrenchment, salience, and basic levels. In Geeraerts, Dirk and Hubert Cuyckens (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 117–138.