

Russian prefixes with motion verbs: Conceptual Structure vs. syntax

Inna Tolskaya
Tromsø

I address the problem of widespread polysemy of Russian verbal prefixes, particularly when added to motion verbs. I argue that multiple instantiations of a single prefix share a core conceptual meaning, and receive the specific denotations as a function of its syntactic position, thereby shifting part of the computational burden from the lexicon to the syntax.

When added to a directional motion verb, prefixes behave as lexical and the meaning refers to spatial domain, but when the same prefix is added to a non-directional motion verb, it behaves as a superlexical prefix and its meaning is associated with the temporal domain. Furthermore, the prefixes in the spatial and temporal domain demonstrate an intriguing parallelism: in the spatial domain, the prefixes may refer to beginning, duration and end of the path (i.e. source, route and goal), while when applied to the temporal domain the prefixes are associated with beginning, duration and completion of the event in time.

I will argue that:

1. There is a single lexical entry for each prefix, which contains its core conceptual meaning and a set of syntactic features, which specify the kind of transition involved.
2. The syntactic structure of a motion verb contains, among others, the following terminals: duration, completion and inception above aspect phrase, and path, source and goal in the result projection inside VP.
3. Lexical prefixes, when applied to directional motion verbs, modify path; the same prefixes, in their superlexical function, when applied to non-directional motion verbs, modify time. The denotation of a path or time reading for one and the same prefix results from the core conceptual meaning mapped onto the syntactic position.