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The Discourse Function of Iterative Verbs in Czech

Analyses of the so-called iterative verbs in Czech (ie, unprefixated verbs derived from corresponding imperfective simplex forms by the suffix -va-) have failed to take into account the verb form's discourse function. There are two exceptions to this: Stunova 1993 ("A Comparative Study of Russian and Czech Aspect") notes that Czech iteratives are often used in discourse-initial positions, and Danaher 1996 ("A Semiotic Approach to the Semantics of Czech Habitual Verbs") adds that the verbs also appear in discourse-final position. In the literature on iterative verbs in languages other than Czech, the discourse level also seems to be all but ignored. The exception here is Suh 1992 ("Past Habituality in English Discourse"), which examines the differing discourse functions of the English verbal paraphrase "used to" and the auxiliary "would" in its habitual-iterative meaning.

Examination of over 300 contexts containing iterative verbs in a corpus of contemporary literary Czech shows that verbs of this type fulfill a range of discourse functions:

1. The verbs serve as introductions to discourse and are frequently used to make a shift to a new discourse topic. Native speakers of Czech report that iterative verbs, unlike corresponding imperfectives in the same context, establish the expectation that the topic will be commented upon or qualified in some way. In other words, they are generally not statements unto themselves, but windows for further reflection.

2. They can also serve as the main verb in statements summarizing, often in a pithy generalization, immediately preceding discourse. In this usage, they function as discourse codas.

3. They are often used in parenthetical or side comments which deepen background knowledge by confirming or, less often, denying assertions made in the foregrounded discourse. Sometimes these verbs are used, instead of corresponding imperfectives and without lexical supplementation, to implicitly motivate or explain foregrounded information ("X happened because of backgrounded situation Y").

4. They are regularly used in what can be called contrastive discourse: they convey information which is opposed to conventional wisdom (eg, unexpected information) or which runs directly counter to assertions previously made in the foregrounded discourse.

How can we make sense of this range of discourse functions and at the same time understand the verb form's behavior in discourse as coherent with its status as a habitual/generic form? Traditional approaches to the meaning of iterative verbs which rely on discreet semantic features cannot even begin to shed light on this question.

I will offer a conceptually natural explanation grounded in Langacker's 1997 account of generic and habitual expressions ("Generics and Habituals") and Fauconnier's theory of mental spaces as extended to tense-aspect categories in Cutrer 1994 ("Time and Tense in Narrative and Everyday Language"). Meanings associated with Czech iterative

verbs in various contexts and at various levels of language will be shown to result from the conceptual distancing inherent in all genuine expressions of genericity/habituality as well as from the partitioning of information in different mental spaces as discourse is cognitively processed. The proposed paper is, to my knowledge, one of the only applications of the theory of mental spaces, a potentially powerful explanatory framework, to Slavic data.