

On the semantics of the so-called empty verbal prefix *na-* in Bulgarian and Russian

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In Slavic languages many verbal prefixes derive from prepositions. These prefixes are all polysemous, and they usually form the perfective aspect when attaching to imperfective verb stems. In addition to perfectivization, the prefix often adds some lexical meaning to the verb stem. Most of these prefixes, however, have uses that traditionally have been called desemantized, bleached, grammaticalized, empty, purely aspectual etc., indicating that in these uses the prefixes contribute little or nothing to the meaning of the prefixed verbs, beyond the meaning of perfective aspect itself.

If such prefixes indeed are empty, why do different verb stems select different empty prefixes? If there are empty prefixes, it should be possible to answer such a question. I haven't come across any such answer in the literature.

I suggest, following Janda (1986), that empty prefixes do not exist. The 'empty' prefixes are in fact neutralized. The meaning of these verbal prefixes overlap (fully or in part) with the meaning of the base verbs, many of which are also polysemous. In other words, the semantic contribution of the prefix (in one of its submeanings) is neutralized in the context of a verb stem with a similar meaning.

In my paper, I will compare Bulgarian and Russian instances of neutralized *na-*. The main focus will be on the Bulgarian examples, and on how they relate to the different submeanings of the prefix.

The most thorough analysis of Bulgarian verbal prefixes is found in Ivanova (1966, 1974). According to her, the most desemantized uses of *na-* belong to the 'generally resultative' Aktionsart, the meaning of which is quite close to (but not identical with) the meaning of perfective aspect. The description of *na-* in the Bulgarian academy grammar (1983) is also written by Ivanova. There *na-* has nine different word formation types, the most productive of which is described as resultative only. However, Ivanova does not use the term 'empty prefix'.

In the present study, the description of *na-* and its submeanings will be given within a cognitive prototype model. I know of no cognitive analysis of *na-* neither in Bulgarian nor in Russian. However, there is a great deal of overlap between the submeanings of Slavic verbal prefixes and the prepositions they derive from. Therefore, Kustova's (2001) analysis of the Russian preposition *na* will provide a starting point for my analysis of the prefixes.

References :

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