

“An implicational model for Slavic aspect”

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The facts of Slavic aspect present two contrary characteristics: they are baffling in their range of specific uses, yet clearly betray a simple conceptual opposition. This is a classic and intractable case of grammatical polysemy, where both the underlying concept and its relationship to real instantiations have proven extraordinarily difficult to comprehend. Scholars have sought to define the opposition in terms of abstract features (or feature-like descriptions), and pedagogues have compiled long incoherent lists of how the aspects are actually used, but these two approaches are irreconcilable. The problem lies in the attempt to define an abstract linguistic opposition in terms of abstractions (features), which lack the complexity requisite to account for the real variety of implementation. Abstract features are conceptually very shallow; they offer little in the way of implications that would organize and motivate the aggregates of uses. I will propose instead a model based not on abstractions, but on a basic human experience that inspires many implications. This basic human experience sorts things in the world according to texture, opposing hard solid things (like a rock, a block of wood, a pencil, a leaf), to things that are not solid (like water, sand, or smoke; we will call these “substances” for lack of a better term). This distinction carries with it many implications concerning what you can and cannot do with solids and substances, and these implications are relevant to the distribution of perfective and imperfective in Slavic.

In brief, the argument proceeds as follows. All languages use concepts of objects in space to understand time (though each language does so in its own way; cf. Haspelmath 1997). Slavic aspect performs ontological metaphor on events, treating all events as objects. The aspectual system parallels classifier systems for nouns, distinguishing two temporal “shapes”: perfective (corresponding to a solid) and imperfective (corresponding to a substance). The present moment (NOW) behaves like a solid. There are many facts that everyone knows about solids and substances, which map directly onto observed patterns of aspectual use, for example: solids cannot share space with other solids, but substances can share space with both solids and substances (this explains facts of sequencing and simultaneity); only solids have edges, and can form infinitely thin slices (this explains facts of boundedness, durative, and punctual uses); there is something inherently satisfying about holding a solid, but nothing to grab ahold of with a substance (this explains facts of result, completion, contracts, failure, attempts, and categorical denial); solids have edges that can impose boundaries or potentially inflict harm, whereas substances are soft and spreadable (this explains facts of negation and politeness with imperatives, and beginning and ending); only substances can stream (this explains facts of determinedness of motion verbs); solids are unique wholes, but substances are non-unique infinitely divisible masses (this explains facts of unique as opposed to constant or repeated acts); from a distance, many solids can look like a substance, and substances can be held in solid containers (this explains facts of aspectual derivation). This model and its ramifications both for the theory of aspect and for language pedagogy will be explored in detail. I will also demonstrate how this model comports with previous models of aspect.