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Russian verbal aspect and nomina actionis

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RUSSIAN VERBAL ASPECT AND NOMINA ACTIONIS

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1. Problem statement

The combination of verbal and nominal attributes makes nomina actionis an object of particular attractivity. The investigation of the extent of their verbality both in synchronic and diachronic perspectives reveals some interesting correlative trends and once again confirms the Saussure'ian idea on the close connection between the system and its history.

In contemporary Russian nomina actionis have significant semantic and functional limitations. According to BAS[1], in the Russian language there are about 33 000 verbs (including voice and aspect forms), whereas verbal nouns are only 5500. This causes some perplexity, because:

1. In West Slavic languages nomina actionis are much more regular than in Russian, and basically keep making up aspectual pairs, like verbs.

2. In the old Russian of X-XIII centuries nomina actionis were very common. During XIV-XVII centuries their range had been expanded even more, together with the development of aspectual verbal forms; there had appeared many new paired verbal nouns (such as *подвязывание — подвязание* 'tying') differing in aspectual semantics.

But within the next two centuries a significant amount of verbal nouns for some reason disappeared from the Russian language, which led to loss of pairing, minimization of their "aspectual" differentiation and limitation of their functionality.

2. Questions and probable answers

Why did these nouns disappear in the Russian language so rapidly and massively, and why are they much more preserved in the Polish, Czech and other West Slavic languages? It seems strange also that the nouns which disappeared had been derived mostly from verbs of perfective aspect.

Let us compare the diachronic changes in the corpora of Russian verbal nomina actionis according to the quantitative analysis of the dictionaries data.

Nomina actionis in the old Russian of XI – XIV c.[2]:
~ 40% paired verbal nouns "imperfective – perfective" (*жалование – пожалование, грабление – пограбление*),
~ 30% single verbal nouns "imperfective" (*блещание, веселование*),
~ 30% single verbal nouns "perfective" (*изглаголание, възыскание*).

Nomina actionis in the Russian of XVI – XVIII c.[3]:
~ 60% paired verbal nouns "imperfective – perfective" (*нагруживание – нагружение, сгребание – сгребение*),
~ 30% single verbal nouns "imperfective" (*изубытчиваніе*),
~ 8% single verbal nouns "perfective" (*сбытіе*),
~ 2% other paired verbal nouns.

Nomina actionis in the contemporary Russian[4] :
~ 10% paired verbal nouns "imperfective – perfective" (*спасание – спасение*),
~ 30% single verbal nouns "imperfective" (*ловля, бренчание*),
~ 1% single verbal nouns "perfective" (*воззвание, завоевание*),
~ 60% other paired verbal nouns (*варение – варка).*

This might have been explained by the fact that Russian nouns have no aspect and, therefore, the marked aspect opposition member — the perfective aspect verb — does not form deverbatives. But why then the latter are easily derived from *peredelat'* 'change', *pobelit'* 'whitewash', but do not derive from *porisovat'* 'to draw a little', *povspominat'* 'to indulge in memories a little' or *perecelovat'* 'to kiss [all of the present persons]'?

3. Discussion

According to recent comparative studies of semantics and functioning of the verbal aspect (Dickey 2000; Barentsen 2011, 2013)[5], the grammatical content of perfective aspect in Western and Eastern Slavic languages is not identical: in the first subgroup the basic meaning of perfective aspect is a simple concept of totality, while in the second — the concept of temporal definiteness.

Despite the common history of the formation of Slavic aspect, the semantic space of perfective aspect in Western Slavic languagesis wider than in Eastern Slavic languages. In Western Slavic languages nomina actionis are much more numerous, and their aspect correlatedness is practically regular. It seems possible that totality does not prevent the formation of nomina actionis, while temporal definiteness turns out to be incompatible with the temporally stable nature of nouns.

This idea is confirmed by our study: a solid analysis of the productivity of all Russian verbs in relation to verbal nouns demonstrates clearly that **the only semantic feature** which flatly would not coincide with the noun form, prevents the transposition of a verb into a noun, or is being lost in the course of nominalization — is **the presence of a quantitative-temporal limit** of the action denoted.

For example, the semantics of quantitative-temporal limit increases with the growth of intensity – and with it the productivity of these verbs falls:

Aspectual semantic of the verbs	Number of verbs in contemporary Russian[1]	Number of motivated nouns	Percentage	Examples
attenuative	94	95	100%	*Приостановка, пристукивание*
intensive-processual	18	14	75%	*Выпытывание, выведывание*
intensive-amplifying	46	20	45%	*Распаривание, раскурка*
amplifying-intensive	68	9	13%	*Разгул, разлет, **but:** Распрыгаться - ?*
intensive-quality	103	-	-	*Набушеваться - ? Насидеться -?*
excessive-intensive	22	-	-	*Уездиться - ? Упрыгаться - ?*
prolonged-amplifying	10	-	-	*Дожидаться- ? Доискиваться -?*

These data are also confirmed by our preliminary analysis of the material of Ukrainian and Polish languages; in other words, it may be spoken about an interlingual tendency. It is likely that namely this trend had led to the disappearance of a great many of Russian nomina actionis.

Even in our time aspect is not finally completed as a grammatical category (Apresian 2013)[6]. It concerns not only formal ways, but also semantics of aspect. Aspect is semantically variable in the diachrony. Yet in XIX c. the perfective forms were used in functions which are unusual for contemporary Russian. E. g.:

> *Любящее и гордое сердечко, — подумал я* [Иван Петрович], *— а как долго надо мне было* <u>*заслужить*</u>*, чтоб ты для меня стала... Нелли* (Dostojevskij)[7].

4. The proposed solution

There are reasons to believe that in the course of developing of the Russian verbal aspect not only means of perfectivation / imperfectivation had been forming, but also the content of the aspect category had been changing. The aspect category was (and maybe still is) semantically movable: in the process of formation of Russian perfective aspect the semantics of temporal definiteness consistently intensified, occupying gradually a dominant position in it. A side effect of this process have become the above mentioned noticeable changes in the system of Russian (wider — Eastern Slavic languages) nomina actionis.

Selected reference notes

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[1] BAS — Chernyshov V.I. (ed.) (1948—1965). Slovar' sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo jazyka: V 17-ti t. Moskow, SPb.

[2] In: Sreznevskij I.I. (1893–1907) Materialy dlja slovarja drevne-russkago jazyka po pis'mennym pamjatnikam. T. 1 – 3. Moskow; Avanesov. R.I. (ed.) (1988) Slovar' drevnerusskogo jazyka (XI–XIV vv.): V 10 t. Moskow.

[3] In: Slovar' Akademii Rossijskoj, po azbuchnomu porjadku raspolozhennyj (1789 – 1794). SPb., ch.1 – 6

[4] In: Chernyshov V.I. (ed.) (1948—1965). Slovar' sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo jazyka: V 17-ti t. Moskow, SPb.

[5] See, e.g.: Dickey S. (2000) Parameters of Slavic Aspekts. A cognitive approach. Stanford. 2000; Barentsen A., Genis R., van Duijkeren-Hrabova M. (2011) O shodstvah i razlichijah mezhdu russkim, pol'skim, cheshskim i horvatskim jazykami pri vybore vida v sluchajah „ogranichennoj kratnosti” // Tezisy III Konferencii Komissii po Aspektologii Mezhdunarodnogo Komiteta Slavistov. Paduja; Barentsen A., Genis R., van Duijkeren-Hrabova M.(2013) Voprosy sopostavitel'nogo izuchenija sluchaev ogranichennoj kratnosti // The semantic scope of slavic aspect. Abstracts: 39–42.

[6] Apresian Juri D. (2013). Grammatika glagola v Aktivnom slovare russkogo jazyka // The semantic scope of slavic aspect. Abstracts.

[7] Karaulov Ju. (ed.) (2010) Slovar' jazyka Dostoevskogo. Idioglossarij. G – Z. Moskow.