Slavic Verbal Modifiers Mark Specificity on the Direct Object: Evidence from Polish Quantifiers

In Slavic languages verbal prefixes, or verbal modifiers (VMs), attach to most verbs to form ‘perfective’ actions (see (1)). The function of Slavic VMs has been commonly argued to be perfective (for more see Młynarczyk (2004), Labenz (2004), Schoorlemmer (1995), Verkuyl (1993), Smith (1991), Bogdan & Sullivan (2009)). To complicate matters, many VMs cause a change of meaning, or in some cases a complete change of meaning, in addition to creating a perfective action (see (2)).

 Młynarczyk (2004) & Labenz (2004) take this as far as to essentially claim that Polish VMs are only perfective (except for in cases where the verbal modifier causes a change in meaning). Verkuyl (1993; 1999) and Schoorlemmer (1995) however, claim that Slavic verbal modifiers function similarly to Germanic determiners. Młynarczyk (2004) provides numerous arguments against this analysis, mostly through empirical observations from her own native-speaker judgments, as well as observations made by other native-speaker Polish authors.

On an avenue of neglected research however, we see that, while using quantifiers such as “two times”, there are contrasts between verbs without a VM and verbs with a VM (see 3); the contrast seems to be specific vs. non-specific, or perhaps even definite indefinite on the DP object. Most marked are examples where the DP object is destroyed, or implied to be destroyed by the action (e.g., *eat*). The markedness of 3b parallels the markedness of the utterance in English when a definite article is used. Like in English with the definite article, a plausible interpretation of 2b is a generic one, where it is implied that the same type of sandwich was eaten twice.

1) The basic paradigm

a) pisa-ł-em list

 write-P-1sg.MASC letter

‘I wrote (impf) the letter’

b) na-pisa-ł-em list

 VM-write-P-1sg.MASC letter

‘I wrote (perf) the letter’

2) Change in meaning

a) *spać*~*do-spać*

 ‘sleep (impf)’~‘sleep enough (perf)’

b) *pisać*~*o-pisać*

‘write’~‘copy (perf)’

3) Quantifiers

a) dwa razy jad-ł-em kanapk-ę

 two times eat-P-1sg.MASC sandwich-FEM.ACC

 ‘I ate (impf) a sandwich two times’

b) #dwa razy z-jad-ł-em kanapk-ę

 two times VM-eat-P-1sg.MASC sandwich-FEM.ACC

 ‘I ate (perf) #the sandwich two times’

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