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On Cognitive Approach to Language when Studying Russian Prefixes Expressing Relation to the Norm

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Abstract

The authors of the report attempt to provide a comprehensive description of some Russian verbal prefixes (including those denoting an action below, equal to or above the norm) based on the cognitive approach to language learning. In addition to theoretical ideas, the report describes an experimental methodology aimed at identifying various semantic features of homonymous verbal prefixes. This methodology has proved effective for teaching Russian as a second language.

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1. Introduction

Learning Russian presents a significant challenge for international students who are native in languages of a different type (especially Chinese, languages of Southeast Asia, Chukotko-Kamchatkan languages, etc.) due to grammatical and lexical differences between these languages and Russian.

To overcome these difficulties, teachers of the Department of Russian as a Second Language at National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University have created numerous study guides and published their methodological

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search in a number of scientific papers (Gnezdilova, 2013; Kobernik, 2013; Gardezi (Mukhacheva), 2014; Mikhaleva, 2013; Oglezneva, 2013; Kurikova, 2013; Tsoy, 2012; Sherina, 2013). Nevertheless, some of the problems facing learners of Russian as a second language remain unsolved and their solution requires the development of special methodological approaches.

2. Russian verbal prefixes

One of the problems facing learners of Russian as a second language is remembering the meaning of verbal prefixes and acquiring the ability to use them correctly.

Modern grammarians distinguish about thirty verbal prefixes in the Russian language. Many of them originated from prepositions and retained the meanings typical thereof. This is why the verbs formed with the help of such prefixes can enter into systematic relationships with one another. The relationships of synonymy, antonymy, and polysemy between logical units are inherent in all the languages of the world, and learners' knowledge of these relationships is actively used in language teaching practice in general and in studying the prefixal combinability of Russian verbs in particular.

Due to the ability of Russian verbal prefixes to enter into systematic relationships with one another, prefixed cognate verbs can form clusters, whose components have similar semantic elements. Among such clusters are the following antonymic pairs of verbs regularly formed in the Russian language with the help of the prefixes *v-*(*vo-*) and *vy-*: e.g. *vkhodit'/voyti v komnatu – vykhodit'/vyyti iz komnaty* (to enter the room – to leave the room), *vvozit' tovary iz-za granitsy – vyvozit' tovary za graniitsu* (to import goods from abroad – to export goods abroad), *za-* and *raz-/ras-*(e.g. *zavyazat' – razvyazat' uzel* (to tie – to untie a knot), *zaklyuchat' – rastorgat' dogovor* (to make – to dissolve an agreement), *za-* and *ot-* (e.g. *zakryt' – otkryt' okno* (close – open a window), *zavintit' – otvintit' kryshku* (screw – unscrew a lid), etc.

3. Prefixes serving to express the semantics of norm in verbs

Nedo- and *pere-*prefixed derivative verbs (e.g. *nedogret' – peregret' piscchu* (to underheat – to overheat food), *nedolit' – perelit' moloko* (to underfill – to overfill something with milk) hold a special place among the verbal antonymic pairs. Verbs with these prefixes are united by their common meaning of relation to the norm: the prefix *nedo-* in combination with a verb indicates that the action denoted thereby is below the norm, whereas a derivative of the same verb with the prefix *pere-* may have a meaning of exceeding the norm. The meaning of being equal to the norm is expressed by a cognate verb with a purely perfectiv prefix, e.g. *sogret' (to heat), nalit' (to fill)*. The words derived from one and the same verb form an antonymic scale with poles denoting the situations of falling short of the norm and exceeding the norm; the middle component represents the meaning of being equal to the norm (e.g., *nedosolit' – posolit' – peresolit' sup* (to undersalt – to salt – to oversalt a soup), *nedosushit' – vysushit' – peresushit' bel'ye* (to underdry – to dry – to overdry the washing)) (Efanova 2012). The semantic category of norm is universal and has regular means and ways of expression in language (Efanova 2013). This helps a learner of Russian as a second language to master the whole set of meanings expressed by the words derived from the same familiar verb with different prefixes and to understand the semantics of these words without resorting to a dictionary.

Each of the prefixes that denote falling short of the norm has its own specific character. In particular, the prefix *nedo-* is a derivative itself. It was formed as a result of the combination of the negative particle *ne-* and the prefix *do-* denoting the final stage of a process aimed at reaching the norm (e.g. *dobrit' (borodu) – to shave (a beard) clean, dovintit' (bolt) – to screw down (a bolt), (koster) dogorel – (a fire) died down, doest' (sup) – to eat up (a soup), dozharit' (kotlety) – to finish frying (a cutlet), dokleit' (korobku) – to finish gluing (a box), dokrasit' (zabor) – to finish painting (a fence), domyt' (pol) – to finish washing (the floor), dopechatat' (stat'yu) – to finish typing (an article), dopech' (khleb) – to finish baking (bread), dopisat' (knigu) – to finish writing (a book), dopit' (chay) – to finish drinking (tea), dorezat' (baton) – to finish cutting (a baguette), dorisovat' (portret) – to finish painting (a portrait), dosolit' (sup) – to add more salt (to a soup), (bel'ye) dosokhlo – (the washing) dried out, dostroit' (dom) – to finish building (a house), doukomplektovat' (biblioteku) – to finish putting together (a library), dochertit' (chertezh) – to finish (a drawing), dochistit' (kartofelinu) – to finish peeling (a potato), dochitat' (knigu) – to finish*

reading (a book), *doshit'* (kostyum) – to finish sewing (a suit), etc.). The prefix *do-* is so productive in the modern language that it provides grounds for including verbs formed with its help in antonymic scales of words denoting the relation to the norm, e.g., *bel'ye nedosokhlo* – *vysokhlo* (*dosokhlo*) – *peresokhlo* (the washing did not get dry enough – dried out – got too dry). The *nedo-*prefixed verbs are also regularly formed in the Russian language, since falling short of the norm is a situation that can emerge in the course of any processes if these were discontinued before reaching their intended result, e.g., *nedobrit'* (*borodu*) – not to shave (the beard) clean enough, *nedovintit'* (*bolt*) – not to screw (a bolt) tight enough, *nedoest'* (*sup*) – not to eat up (a soup), *nedozharit'* (*kotlety*) – not to fry (cutlets) long enough, etc.

4. Polysemous Russian prefix PERE-

The prefix *pere-*, just like many other Russian prefixes, is polysemous and capable of taking not only the meaning of exceeding the norm, e.g., *perekrasit'* (*volosy v drugoy tsvet*) (to overdyer hair), but also that of repeated action aimed at reaching the norm, e.g., *pereshit'* (*plat'ye*) (to resew a dress), *perepisat'* (*stat'yu zanovo*) (to rewrite an article). At the same time, the *pere-*prefixed verbs, having taken the meaning of exceeding the norm, are usually unable to express repeated action by means of prefixal combinability; for example, if *sup peresolen* (the soup is oversalted), there is no way to make its quality reach the norm by salting it again. In order to explain the reasons for this phenomenon, it is necessary to make use of the knowledge of extralinguistic reality that each of us possesses.

Our research (15) helped us discover that verbs taking the meaning of repeated action with the help of the prefix *pere-* denote the processes controlled by the agent all along. If the results of these processes do not meet the requirements of the norm in the agent's opinion, the actions may be repeated, for example, *perekrasit'* (*zabor*) – to repaint (a fence), *peremyt'* (*plokho vymytyy pol*) – to rewash (the floor that was not washed well enough), *perestroit'* (*dom*) – to rebuild (a house), *perechitat'* (*zanovo knigu*) – to reread (a book once again), *perepisat'* (*stat'yu*) – to rewrite (an article), *pereshit'* (*kostyum*) – to resew (a suit), etc. On the contrary, the *pere-*prefixed verbs that denote exceeding the norm identify the processes that can be controlled only partially. Incomplete control over such processes results from the use of an active means, e.g., a substance (*pereslastit'* – to make something too sweet, *pereperchit'* – to add too much pepper), temperature (*perezhech'* – to overburn, *peremorozit'* – to overfreeze, *perekipyatit'* – to overboil) and some others (*bel'ye peresokhlo* – the washing got too dry). Results of this kind can lead to irreversible changes in the object; therefore, a repeated action on the same object is often impossible.

5. Experience in using the cognitive approach in language when studying the semantics of Russian verbal prefixes

In order to make it easier for international students to memorize the meanings of Russian prefixes and the rules of their use, we have developed an original methodology based on the cognitive approach to language learning. This methodology consists of several stages. At first, students are to name all the meanings of the Russian prefix *pere-* that they know and then think of and write down some examples of word combinations with these verbs, in which the prefix has the meaning of exceeding the norm and repeated action, and classify them into two groups in accordance with the semantics of the prefixes (the latter is performed in writing). After that, students receive a task to compare the verbs of the two groups and answer the question whether the same verb can be in both the groups simultaneously. The students then check their answers by means of an explanatory dictionary of the Russian language or with the help of their teacher. In the course of the following discussion, students answer the teacher's leading questions and thus find the relation between the verb's ability to take one of the two meanings with the prefix *pere-* and special aspects of the process denoted by this verb (complete or incomplete controllability of the action and participation of an active means in the process). The discussion helps students to ascertain that the meaning of exceeding the norm is typical of the *pere-*prefixed verbs denoting an action under incomplete control that leads to irreversible changes in the object, whereas the meaning of a repeated action is denoted by the *pere-*prefixed verbs that identify the processes controlled over the whole period of their duration. At the final stage of the methodology, students work with the verbs outside their active vocabulary, e.g., *dubit'* (*kozhi*) – to tan (leather), *komplektovat'* (*biblioteku*) – to put together (a library), *modnichat'* (to follow the fashion), *molot'* (*zerno*) – to mill

(grains), *mochit'* (yabloki) – to pickle (apples), (*testo*) *kisnet* – (the dough) turns sour, (yabloki) *speyut* – (apples) ripen). Students look up the lexical definitions of these verbs and then, without using a dictionary, try to define the meanings that these verbs take, when *pere*-prefixed. The work is concluded by a collective discussion of the reasons why prefixed verbs take the meanings of exceeding the norm or repeated action.

We have tested this methodology in groups of senior international students of TPU majoring in engineering. The teaching sessions with the use of this methodology involved 25 students including 14 students from China, 8 from Vietnam, and 3 from Mongolia. Only three students failed the task.

6. Conclusion

The research findings on Russian verbal prefixes expressing relation to the norm and the evaluation of these findings led us to a number of conclusions on their theoretical and practical significance.

1) When analyzing the semantics of linguistic items, we should consider systemic relations between them. This approach makes the research comprehensive and enables us to review linguistic facts exactly as they exist in the mind of those who use or learn this language.

2) Research into the meanings of linguistic items provides information on the extralinguistic reality and ways of perceiving it. This information can be used to check and confirm the scientific data available. At the same time, studying linguistic meanings from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics makes it possible to detect the correlations between the ways linguistic items work and the extralinguistic reality that no one has noticed before.

3) Since the systemic relations between lexical items are language universals and many extralinguistic facts reflected in the meanings of linguistic items are universal as well, the knowledge of these facts and relations can be useful in developing methodologies of language teaching including of Russian as a second language. To test this hypothesis, we have created a methodology for studying the semantics of Russian verbal prefixes by native speakers of other languages. It is based on the knowledge they have of the antonymic relations between the linguistic items as well as of the actions denoted by these verbs that are verbs that are common knowledge. The methodology we have developed is experimental per se and requires further improvement. Nonetheless, even the initial results of its usage show the productivity of the cognitive approach for teaching Russian as a second language and confirm the need for further theoretical research of language semantics from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics, as well as for new ways to use the findings of such research in practice.

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