

Are Russian Aspectual Prefixes Empty Or Full (And Does It Matter)?

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A review of Laura A. Janda, Anna Endresen, Julia Kuznetsova, Olga Lyashkevskaya, Anastasia Makarova, Tore Nettet, and Svetlana Sokolova. 2013. *Why Russian Aspectual Prefixes Aren't Empty: Prefixes as Verb Classifiers*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica. References. xv + 211 pp. Paper.

Overview

The book *Why Russian Aspectual Prefixes Aren't Empty* (in further discussion, *Why*) interprets material contained in an online trove of information assembled by the seven authors on Russian verbal aspect pairs, whether of the so-called empty-prefix type, like *писать* : *написать* 'write' (called by them "natural" perfectives) or of the meaning-changing type, like *переписать* : *переписывать* 'rewrite' (called by them "specialized" perfectives). We will adopt that terminology here. The sites (<http://emptyprefixes.uit.no>), along with supplementary material adduced in regard to individual book chapters on <http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/book.htm>, are impressive for the amount and variety of information they contain. They list practically every Russian simplex (unprefixed) imperfective verb (1,429 in all, said to form 1,981 aspect pairs—because some of them are said to take more than one natural prefix), together with related morphological, semantic, and classificatory information. Both websites are important reference sources with which everyone interested in the morphology of Russian aspect will want to become familiar. The book is intended more for language teachers and pedagogical materials-developers than for linguists, but both will find it thought-provoking; and *Why* is easy to read. The book was reviewed in *SEEJ* (2014, 58.3, 565–66) by Irina Ivliyeva, and those wishing a quick rundown of the book's contents according to its chapter-by-chapter organization, from 1 to 7, may consult that review. Although the present review will also go through the book mostly chapter by

chapter, this reviewer felt that a work proposing that the field has been looking at formal aspect derivation for the past two hundred years or so incorrectly, as *Why* does, deserves a more thorough discussion of the ideas it contains than one can give in a quick run-through of its contents.

As one may deduce from the full title, *Why* attempts to demonstrate two main theses: (a) that prefixes of the natural type are not semantically empty, but instead mostly overlap semantically (are mostly redundant in meaning) with the lexical meaning of their base verb; and (b) verbs may be classified into action-types by the “natural” prefix or prefixes that occur with them. A corollary of (a) is that verbs can be viewed not as forming aspect pairs but aspect clusters, consisting of simplex verbs plus both the “natural” perfectivizing prefix(es) and the “specialized” ones that go with them—and that the boundary between natural and specialized perfectives is not rigid. A corollary of (b) is that the proclivity of given natural prefixes for verbs of given action-types, and vice versa, can be converted into a useful pedagogical methodology for teaching the Russian verb’s formal aspect system to learners of Russian. A major theme in the book is the notion of aspectual triplets, and the idea that most or maybe even all prefixed perfective verbs of whatever type form them. Trying not to be sidetracked by the book’s voluminous accompanying online databases and statistical analyses, this reviewer wishes to address some of the main ideas the book raises from the point of view of a member of its intended pedagogically-oriented audience. This will allow the discussion to remain simple and focused on issues with classroom relevance which is, in any case, also *Why*’s ostensive concern. Of course, *Why* also raises various questions of a linguistic-interpretive nature, and these will be addressed to an extent here as well.

The Empty Prefix Hypothesis

The authors of *Why* devote considerable space, beginning in Chapter 1 and continuing through Chapter 7, to polemicizing with what they call the “empty prefix hypothesis” and the corollaries they attribute to it, according to which natural aspectual prefixes signal nothing more than perfectivity, to which they oppose their own “overlap hypothesis” and its corollaries, according to which natural prefixes do not lose their meaning when attached to a simplex verb but rather bury their meaning

in it, as it were, becoming all but redundant with it, while still persisting in it (and also while still signaling perfectivity). This is an old question in Russian linguistics; according to Tixonov (1964, 42), it goes back as far as Lomonosov. The empty-prefix hypothesis is the easier to argue against today in that, as *Why's* own history of the issue in Chapter 1 (6–9) suggests, the doctrinaire version of it that *Why's* authors methodically attack throughout the book appears to be dying off of its own accord.

The present reviewer has always taken the idea of the “empty aspectual prefix” as a primarily heuristic notion, useful for sketching the broad outline of the Russian aspect system to beginning students and non-specialists in an introductory kind of way. Townsend says as much in 1975, and I think that most aspectologists today would agree (117). Prefixation in Russian verbal stock, inherited from Common Slavic, was certainly originally semantically motivated (it could hardly have been otherwise), and the inherited system still resonates to a degree in the modern system, as different as that system has become over the centuries. After all, prefixal meanings live on in their specialized combination with other verbs and, often enough, in the form of independent prepositions. The system of aspectual prefixation has always been, and remains, a semantically fuzzy means of simplex imperfective → prefixed perfective derivation, as compared to the more crisply delineated process of prefixed perfective → prefixed imperfective derivation achieved by suffixation. Not all verbs fit neatly into the system in the form of aspect pairs achieved by prefixation/suffixation (there are hundreds of aspect pairs formed by suffixation alone, and still more, like *иметь* ‘to have’, that do not form aspect pairs),¹ but in general outline that is the dominant formal system of aspect expression in Russian that has evolved. At least, most scholars other than the authors of *Why* believe so.

In their opening chapter, *Why* poses the rhetorical question of how reasonable it is to believe that a system based on a simple binary aspect distinction, i.e., +/- perfective, has sixteen different empty ways (by which they mean natural perfectivizing prefixes) of expressing perfectivity—prefixes that maintain their own independent meanings in

¹ As far as I can tell, the authors do not address the matter of purely suffixal aspect formation and what problems it might pose for their analysis and proposals, which focus on prefixation/suffixation as if it were the only important aspect-derivation mechanism.

other contexts (10). That is hardly an argument. Languages are not designed by efficiency experts, but evolve over time, using the material they have at their disposal. One could just as easily ask how reasonable it is to have seven different suffixes for expressing imperfectivity, which there are; see Swan in this issue. The difference between the two processes, prefixation and suffixation, is not that one is more or less numerous than the other, but that suffixation is absent of non-aspectual nuance, whereas prefixation is not entirely.

The variety of imperfective suffixes among other things reflects how the Russian system of aspect in its formal dimension was cobbled together over time from a multi-suffixal inheritance from competing East and South Slavic morpheme stock. The situation with prefixes is complicated by lexical borrowings from Old Church Slavonic, whose heavily Greek-influenced vocabulary left a trace on Russian among other places in the form of calques on Greek verbal prefixes, a matter to which one feels the authors of a work on Russian verbal prefixes owe more attention.² One does not want to put beginning students in the position of learning two different prefixal subsystems, Russian vs. Greek-inspired Slavonic, in order to learn verbs. For more on this matter, see the discussion of *пригласить* in the section *The Maslov Test and the Withering Away of the Aspect Pair* below.

The modern Russian aspect system may have become fully crystalized in its current state as late as the sixteenth or seventeenth century (see Dickey 2007, 341); Klimonov (2010) actually places it as late as the eighteenth century.³ During the course of aspect creation and its consolidation, it is not surprising that the prefixes that did, in effect, “blend in” most unobtrusively with the meaning of host simplex verbs, modifying their meaning the least, would eventually become coopted as markers of “natural” perfectivity with them, working in concert with the suffixes that derive imperfectivity for prefixed verbs in changed meanings (“specialized” prefixed verbs). The classic example of a

² Many Slavonic verbs can be recognized by the prefix they take: *воз-, из-, пре-, перед-, со-*.

³ Dickey thinks that a crucial moment was loss *но-* of the spatial or path meaning associated with the prefix *но-* in combination with *уми* ‘go’, sometime in the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries. Klimonov traces the onset of the modern system to the acquisition of the ability of the historically iterative suffix *-ыва(й)-* to express durativity and progressivity.

“blending” prefix is *на-* ‘on’ in its combination with *писать* ‘write’ and other verbs naming activities performed on surfaces. However, at the point that the grammaticalization of aspect definitively occurs, i.e., at the historical moment when a “natural” prefix acquires the status of a marker of perfectivity, the original semantic meaning of the natural prefix becomes not so much erased, backgrounded, or “bleached”, as Dickey (2007, 341) puts it, as it becomes largely irrelevant for that verb; i.e., it may be there but, for all practical purposes, one can ignore it.⁴ In the end, *я напишу* is how one says “I will get something written” in Russian.

Arguing against *Why*’s questioning of the idea of de facto empty aspectual prefixes is the fact that speakers do seem perfectly aware, as is evidenced by their everyday language use, of the purpose of prefixation as a means of expressing the simple perfective future or perfective past meanings of simplex imperfective verbs, preserving, to the extent possible, the lexical meaning of the base verb, a point made particularly effectively by Forsyth (1970, 39). Perhaps one can best illustrate the point with the example of newly introduced verbs like *гуглить* ‘to Google,’ a verb not registered by *Why*.⁵ If one asks Russian speakers how to fill in the blank *Я сейчас _____ гуглю его фамилию* ‘I’ll Google his last name right away,’ some speakers will choose *про-*, others *за-*, others *по-*, and others something else. As a search in Google shows, almost every major perfectivizing prefix is currently used in combination with this verb in what amounts to the simple future-perfective sense. The evidence from Google suggests that speakers choose what they think is the semantically most neutral way of putting this verb into the simple perfective future tense, no doubt relying both on their own intuition and on what they have heard other speakers say. Probably no choice is ideal,

⁴ Along with every other language teacher I know, I never fail to point out to students that it makes logical sense for *на-* ‘on’ to be chosen as the perfectivizing prefix for *писать* ‘write’ that *про-* ‘through’ is the logical prefix for perfectivizing *читать* ‘read,’ and analogously for other “natural” prefixed : unprefixed aspect pairs. It seems to me that the authors are addressing a less controversial issue than they consider it to be. The notions that aspectual prefixes retain some slight meaning while simultaneously functioning as markers of simple perfectivity are not mutually exclusive.

⁵ Although *гуглить* (with end-fixed stress) is relatively new, it has become quickly accommodated to Russian morphology and morphophonology; cf. the gerund *гугля*, past passive participle *прогуглен*, and so on.

just the best among the choices available, since all prefixes do convey a certain amount of collateral meaning. The fact that speakers do not automatically agree as to what choice of prefix is semantically the most neutral for this verb calls into question the idea, put forth by *Why*, that every verb, because of its meaning, will have a single logical “natural” perfectivizing prefix on which speakers will agree. Eventually, one assumes, majority usage will lead to the stabilization of one main perfectivizing prefix with *зуглуть*, but the negotiative process among speakers can take years to be complete, not just a moment of reflection, as these authors’ suggest.

Verbs that have entered the language in recent times tend to draw on a narrower range of prefixes in order to achieve perfectivization (Čertkova 1996, 110), suggesting that the principle of the semantic overlapping of any of sixteen prefixes’ meaning with the meaning of the base verb died out a long time ago as a productive means of forming perfective verbs from simplex imperfective verbs. Today what one sees in the gamut of simplex : prefixed aspect pairs reflects to a large extent aspectual history, a reality consolidated over the course of centuries. It is increasingly becoming the specialized function of a rather small group of prefixes—five, not sixteen—to perfectivize new verbs, essentially empty. Such prefixes largely equate to the authors’ so-called “big” (most frequently used) prefixes: *вы-*, *за-*, *по-*, *про-*, *с-*, discussed by them in Chapter 3. To an extent these “big” prefixes do seem to gravitate toward a few general action-types, as seems only natural, as the authors demonstrate in Chapter 3, but whether any practical use can be made of such a proclivity in beginning Russian classes, as is these authors’ main claim, remains to be demonstrated, and it needs to be demonstrated before one can take *Why*’s proposals seriously.

Sometimes a verb seems to combine with more than one natural prefix, in which case the original prefixal meanings can be detected in the form of slightly different semantic nuances and syntactic patternings, demonstrating that prefixation is not entirely empty of semantic content. At least, the authors propose to illustrate this idea in Chapter 4 by applying an impressive array of statistical tools to a case study of what they say are the three natural perfectives of the verb *грузить* ‘load’: *погрузить*, *загрузить*, and *нагрузить*. However, this chapter reveals a major methodological shortcoming that permeates the entire book.

Why's two dictionaries of reference for purposes of identifying multiple natural prefixed perfectives are Ožegov & Švedova (2001) and Evgen'eva (1999). However, these dictionaries do not exactly say, or rather they say considerably more, than that *погрузить*, *загрузить*, and *нагрузить* are the natural perfectives of *грузить*; that is just the authors' interpretation of what these dictionaries say, an interpretation that grows out of and supports their own line of reasoning. Additionally, these two dictionaries do not always agree with each other. Using these two dictionaries, and vetting their interpretation of them with a "panel of native speakers" (15), who, circularly, turn out to be four of *Why's* own authors, they identify more than 500 verbs taking multiple natural prefixes, among them the verb *грузить*.

All scholarly dictionaries, ranging from Dal' (1861) through Evgen'eva (1999) to Ušakov (2000/1947–48) list (a) *грузить*: *погрузить*, (b) *нагрузить* : *нагружать*, and (c) *загрузить* : *загружать*, in one way or another, as three separate verbs. The authors' chosen dictionaries, besides listing (b) and (c), also list either *загрузить* or *нагрузить* (Ožegov & Švedova 2001) or only *нагрузить* (Evgen'eva 1999) as perfectives of *грузить*, and they list *погрузить* as its "complex act" perfective. The easiest things to conclude from all scholarly dictionaries combined, from the nineteenth century to the present, are that (a) *загрузить* : *загружать* and *нагрузить* : *нагружать* are two independent verbs, differing slightly in meaning; that (b) the simplex verb *грузить* is in essence an aspectual orphan⁶ which, for purposes of forming a "complex-act" perfective, makes use of the prefix *по-*; and that (c) for expressing certain telic (goal-directed) senses of *грузить*, it borrows the perfective partner of either *нагрузить* : *нагружать* or *загрузить* : *загружать*, each with a slightly different nuance. That is one interpretation; the authors, without discussing what seems to this reviewer to be the most straightforward interpretation, have their own, differing one, on which they base many conclusions. However, for their conclusions to be persuasive, the authors need to identify more explicit and rigorous dictionary-independent discovery procedures that take into consideration the full range of complexity of the matter they are examining, procedures that are

⁶ Bulygina and Šmelev (1999, 104) refer to aspectual orphans as "imperfectiva tantum," and it seems to me that that is what *грузить* is.

understood and replicable by persons other than themselves. Until they do, their description of both multiple natural prefixation and secondary natural-perfective imperfectivization to form what they refer to as aspectual triplets (see discussion in *Continuing Issues with Verbs Showing Multiple Natural Prefixes* and *Aspectual Triplets and Secondary Imperfectives* below) lacks the rigor necessary for supporting meaningful statistical analyses of the sort they undertake, or for drawing the kind of broad conclusions at which they arrive. The authors of *Why* might consider accepting what their own dictionaries of reference are telling them that: *грузить* : *погрузить*, *загрузить* : *загружать*, and *нагрузить* : *нагружать* are three different verbs.

In the end, the “empty prefix hypothesis” and the “overlap hypothesis” do not seem that far apart. They are mostly the same hypothesis, expressed in different ways. The first hypothesis holds that, as far as aspect is concerned, *c-* in *сделать* ‘do’ is for all intents and purposes lexically irrelevant, the second that *c-* is for all intents and purposes lexically invisible. It is difficult to see an important practical distinction between one view and the other, certainly not one that is of any great moment for students of the language.

The One-Form, One-Meaning Hypothesis and Radial Profiling

The authors do not explicitly invoke in their work the one-form, one-meaning hypothesis, which can be traced in Slavic especially to Roman Jakobson (1936), but this venerable theory drives their undertaking from beginning to end. For example, it is inherent in their insistence that, even though the meaning of prefixes like *за-* in *заасфальтовать* ‘to asphalt-*pf*’ cannot easily be detected, it is still there (11). Taking as axiomatic that a given aspectual prefix has to exhibit an underlying unitary meaning in all of its occurrences, in Chapter 2 the authors employ what they call radial profiling to derive the particular meanings (Jakobson’s *Sonderbedeutungen*)⁷ of what they call the “small” (less common) prefixes from an imputed “general meaning” (Jakobson’s *Gesamtbedeutung*), via mostly logical-looking metaphorical extensions of it. Later, in Chapter 3, they analyze the “big” (most common) prefixes according to how, on a

⁷ The authors do not use these terms, which come from Jakobson’s (1936) analysis of Russian case.

statistical basis, they relate to the semantic tags used in the Russian National Corpus (RNC), resulting in what they call a semantic profile for each prefix, also suggestive of a *Gesamtbedeutung*. Both related webpages reflect gargantuan efforts aimed at an exhaustive listing of supporting evidence, consisting of all simplex verbs with their prefixes of whichever type. Nevertheless, the problem remains that the semantic derivational chains they describe in Chapter 2 emerge only in retrospect and upon deep reflection. For the present reviewer, at least, there always comes a point in a derivational chain at which the logic of an imputed figurative extension, based on a preceding link, begins to elude him even in retrospect. As a teacher, I cannot require students to perform tasks that I am not able to do myself.

For a simple example (there are much more complex ones than this), I find it difficult to follow how the general meaning ARRIVE claimed for the prefix *при-* ends up producing by figurative extension the particular meaning ATTACH, ADD (so far, so good), and then, from it, ATTENUATE (that eludes me). Unfortunately for *Why*, one's acceptance of its conclusions depends crucially on one's being able to follow their particular metaphorical linkages everywhere without difficulty and, not only that, but productively and independently, and some semantic linkages are more difficult to follow than others—not surprisingly, since association through metaphor is as idiosyncratic and unpredictable as the impulse for it is universal. One cannot help noticing that the meanings that Van Schooneveld (1958, 160) attributes to the “big” prefixes *на-*, *по-*, *про-*, *с-* and those given to them by the authors of *Why* in Chapter 3 are rather far apart; and these are scholars who share the same aim of demonstrating the non-emptiness and the unitary meaning of “natural” aspectual prefixes. *Why*'s position is that anyone, regardless of methodological orientation, should be able without difficulty both to follow and to arrive independently at the same conclusions they do, but that is demonstrably not the case.

Continuing Issues with Verbs Showing Multiple Natural Prefixes

Chapter 5 of *Why* treats verbs that the authors claim display more than one natural perfectivizing prefix; mostly they describe verbs that take two such prefixes. This chapter raises the same question as Chapter 4: how does one know when a perfective prefix, say *за-*, forms a “natural”

perfective with, say, *грузить*, and is not instead an independent “specialized” perfective, paired with its own derived imperfective *загружать*? Traditionally, a prefixed perfective is “natural” when it does not form a suffixally derived imperfective, or forms one with such difficulty that a dictionary does not list it, but leaves its formation up to a speaker’s individual initiative; see further discussion in the section, *Aspectual Triplets and Secondary Imperfectives*, below. However, in *Why’s* Chapter 6, devoted specifically to the issue of aspectual triplets, it is claimed that essentially *all* prefixed perfectives, including ones they consider to be “natural,” are capable of deriving secondary imperfectives. The question then becomes: how does one know when a derived imperfective (say, *загружать*) is not so much the derived imperfective of a specialized prefixed perfective verb (*загрузить*) as it is a secondarily derived imperfective based on the natural aspectual pair *грузить* : *загрузить*, forming the aspectual triplet *грузить* : *загрузить* : *загружать*, as is claimed (176)? The authors’ position appears to be that in the end there are no such things as aspect pairs, only aspectual triplets. However, closer examination of the matter calls this idea into question.

One more-or-less reliable definition of a “natural” prefix is an operational one: negate the imperative of the prefixed perfective and see whether the prefix falls off, as in: *напиши ему* ‘write him’... *не пиши ему* ‘don’t write him’ (hence *на-* here is a natural perfective prefix). This test works mainly for volitional acts, so it cannot be applied to many or most of the verbs considered by *Why* to be multiply prefixed. Nevertheless, the verb *LOAD* is volitional, so this test may be applied to it.

One of the commonest uses of *загрузить* : *загружать* is ‘upload,’ as a computer file. The overwhelming evidence of Google is that the negative of *загрузи фото* ‘upload a photo’ is *не загружай фото* ‘don’t upload a photo.’ In other words, the prefix does not drop, suggesting the independent verb *загрузить* : *загружать*. These facts do not point in the direction of concluding that *загрузить* is an alternate natural perfective of *грузить* instead of being the perfective partner in the pair *загрузить* : *загружать*.

On the other hand, some senses of ‘load’ do seem to confirm the authors’ analysis, i.e., that *загрузить* can be used as a natural perfective of *грузить*. For example, the best negation of *загрузи меня работой* ‘load

me down with work' is *не грузи меня работой* 'don't load me down with work,' i.e., not *не загружай меня работой*; in other words, the prefix here drops when the sentence is under negation, suggesting that *загрузить* can, on occasion, be used as a natural perfective of *грузить*. It makes sense to conclude that the pair *грузить* : *загрузить* is an ad hoc aspectual pair, based on the borrowing of *загрузить* from *загружать* : *загружать* in order to help the verb *грузить* express perfectivity in this particular figurative sense. Nothing at all, at least nothing that I can think of, suggests that *загружать* is a derivational formation on *грузить* : *загрузить*, forming a triplet, as the authors claim. Maybe it sometimes can be used that way, but that question would need to be investigated separately.

I did not consider it necessary to undertake a massive critique of all the verbs cited in Chapter 5 as examples of multiply naturally prefixed verbs. However, many verbs in *Why's* lists raise the same questions as LOAD. For example, how can one be certain that *вызубрить* and *зазубрить* are alternate natural perfectives of *зубрить* 'cram learning material mindlessly,' as is claimed, instead of being their own independent verbs, paired respectively with *вызубривать* and *зазубривать* which, by superficial appearances, they appear to be? Page after page of Google results address the verb *вызубривать*, taken as the head word for the aspect pair *вызубрить* : *вызубривать*,⁸ i.e., not as part of *Why's* proposed triplet *зубрить* : *вызубрить* : *вызубривать*. I am willing to be persuaded by argumentation that these Google pages are misguided, and that *вызубривать* is being used in these Google listings as an essentially dummy headword for *вызубрить*, which actually is better understood to be a natural perfective for *зубрить* (and that *вызубривать* is that verb's triplet), as these authors say, but it is disconcerting that *Why* cites Google results uncritically one moment to demonstrate a point, only to turn around the next moment and not

⁸ Increasingly, dictionaries tend to use the imperfective partner as the citation form, whether it is primary or secondary. Ožegov & Švedova (2001), based on Ožegov (1949), consider *вызубрить* to be the natural perfective of *зубрить*, while the more recent Evgen'eva (1999) apparently considers that *вызубрить* : *вызубривать* is a separate verb, but also lists *вызубрить* as the perfective of *зубрить*. Comparison of Ožegov to Evgen'eva might reveal a trend toward the elimination of triplets through the spinning off of independent verbs.

address evidence from Google when it seems to contradict their preferred interpretation of facts. Each verb in their list of aspectual triplets needs to be examined carefully and individually, using discovery procedures anyone can understand, agree upon, and apply independently.

A simple test is to ask oneself whether it is logical to answer *Что ты делаешь?* 'what are you doing?' with *Я вызубриваю стихотворение.* 'I'm rote-memorizing a poem.' Most speakers will interpret that answer to that question to be infelicitous, the better answer being *Я зубрю стихотворение.* The use of *вызубривать* is highly restricted, suggesting that it is part of a triplet, as the authors of *Why* suggest. In general, if a secondary imperfective fails the *Что ты делаешь?* test, or other such tests, showing that it is highly constrained in use, then it is a good candidate for the secondary imperfective in a triplet. If not, then not. The point is, until more satisfactory and explicitly described and consistent discovery procedures can be worked out for identifying (a) natural prefixed perfectives; (b) secondarily derived imperfectives belonging to aspectual triplets, and (c) independent prefixed perfective : prefixed imperfective pairs, procedures that do not rely only on dictionaries⁹ and, especially, not on the authors' own interpretation of what particular dictionaries intend by their often differing verb-citation strategies, one is entitled to put the conclusions, statistical and otherwise, of *Why's* Chapters 4, 5, and 6 on indefinite hold.

Aspectual Triplets and Secondary Imperfectives

In support of the claim that natural perfectivizing prefixes retain their meaning by folding it into the meaning of the simplex verb, the authors devote attention in Chapter 6 to a kind of aspectual triplet that consists of (a) a simplex verb, (b) the simplex verb's natural perfective, and (c) a secondary imperfective, suffixally derived from (b). As they argue, despite what is sometimes written or implied by elementary textbooks, some verbs (they suggest all verbs) of the traditional natural-prefix type can derive secondary imperfectives by retaining the prefix and deriving a secondary imperfective from it via suffixation. For example, *писать* :

⁹ After all, the authors of dictionaries have not necessarily written their verb descriptions while being attentive to the issues that interest the authors of *Why*.

написать ‘write’ can, barely, derive *написывать*; or *делать* : *сделать* ‘do’ can marginally derive *сделывать*.¹⁰ The existence of such aspectual triplets highlights the inherently less-than-ideal nature of the process of prefixation as a means of would-be “empty” perfectivization, and it arises as a compensatory mechanism for dealing with that imperfection. Namely, deprefixation (removing a natural prefix from its base) results in losing the overt telic (goal-attaining) marking of the verb embedded in the prefix, so an understandable impulse arises at times not to lose that overt telicity, while keeping the verb imperfective. Forming secondary *написывать* from *писать* : *написать*, *сделывать* from *делать* : *сделать*, etc., solves that problem by producing imperfective verbs that are still marked for telicity, usually in the meaning ‘get something done repeatedly;’ see *Why*’s example (167), taken from the RNC:

- (1) *и всё равно можно делать и сделывать, важно делать*
 ‘and all the same it is necessary to do things and **to get things done**; the important thing is to do things.’

Why’s methodology excludes the RNC or Google from commenting on the question of natural vs. specialized perfectives; that task is assigned to their dictionaries and their native-speaking panel’s interpretation of them. By contrast, *Why* makes generous use of the evidence of both the RNC and Google to identify aspectual triplets, a decision that is fraught with problems. Some of their cited secondary imperfectives in triplets, like *сделывать*, have no more than a couple of hits in the RNC or in Google, while others, like *вызубривать*, can have thousands. Some, like *сделывать*, are not listed in standard dictionaries, while others, like *вызубривать*, are. A word’s not being listed in a dictionary might suggest that the lexicographer considers the word to be substandard or illiterate (as the native speakers I consulted consider *написывать* and *сделывать* to be).¹¹ Whether they are or not can be debated, but it is not debatable that forms like *сделывать* and *загружать* are not analogous. The former, *сделывать*, is exceedingly rare and of

¹⁰ All native speakers consulted in connection with this review (some five in all) categorically reject *написывать* and *сделывать* as being possible in grammatical Russian but, for the sake of discussion, let us assume that they are possible.

¹¹ Seemingly, so do *Why*’s two dictionaries of reference, neither of which lists *написывать* or *сделывать*. Here as in other instances, the authors readily accept evidence from their dictionaries that supports their thesis, but not evidence that does not.

limited applicability; the latter, *загружать*, is common, can be used to answer *Что ты делаешь?* and, arguably (I would say, inarguably), in contemporary Russian is its own verb-half, pairing with *загрузить*.

The authors present the occurrence of secondary imperfectives with natural aspect pairs as though it were irrefutable proof that the prefix of the natural aspect pair retains a detectable lexical meaning and thus disconfirms the “empty prefix hypothesis,” but it is not self-evident that it does. What the prefixed imperfective in an aspectual triplet retains is the prefix’s telicity, not necessarily its lexical meaning, which is a separate question that could be independently investigated. Secondary imperfectives like *сделывать* are stylistically highly marked, and they are most often used iteratively, conatively, duratively, and in the historical present, i.e., not progressively (see also Soboleva 2014 *passim*). When used in the historical present, the secondary imperfective in a triplet is often used picturesquely, self-consciously, and ironically (hence, above all, colloquially), as a paraphrase of an action that could have been stated stylistically neutrally in the normal present tense; see Kuznetsova & Sokolova’s example (2010, 13–14):

- (2) “Карлик” (сосжитель Мандельштамов) в не-брежном тоне (вчера) рассказывает, что в №4 “Знамени” новые стихи Пастернака. О. *взволновывается* / *волнуется*. Умоляет меня купить. ““Karlik” (Mandelštams’ neighbor) in casual tone (yesterday) is saying that there are new verses by Pasternak in issue 4 of “Знатја.” О. gets excited. [He] begs me to buy [it].’

The form *взволновывается* here is a more vivid and time-stretching historical present paraphrase of past perfective *взволновался* than *волнуется* would have been, since *взволновывается* preserves the perfectivizing and telic-emphasizing prefix *вз-* (whose power to make the verb perfective is over-ridden by the imperfective suffix *-ыва(й)-*). One can easily detect the conscious word-play and intentional irony¹² inherent in the verb choice. The distinctness of meaning conveyed by

¹² In other words, what Kuznetsova and Sokolova’s example of *взволновывается* appears to illustrate is the purposeful breaking of a commonly accepted grammatical principle to achieve stylistic effect. It is not clearly appropriate to pay attention to such examples of ad hoc, speaker-dependent rule-breaking in formulating one’s description of Contemporary Standard Russian (CSR).

взволновывается as compared to *волнуется* or *взволновался* is subaspectual and stylistic, not lexical, hence the existence of aspectual triplets like this in no way impugns the empty-prefix hypothesis. It seems to me that it rather supports it, but the most one can say is that it says nothing about it whatsoever.

Despite what *Why* attempts to demonstrate, aspectual triplets of the *волноваться : взволноваться : взволновываться* type are a relatively minor phenomenon in Russian and of limited productivity.¹³ Beginning students do not need to be taught them any more than they need to be taught slang, for even an advanced non-native speaker will hardly ever succeed in using them appropriately. In a sense, dictionaries already make that decision for students by not listing forms like *взволновываться*. If a derived prefixed imperfective verb is productive and can be used without stylistic restraint in any sub-aspectual imperfective meaning (which is not the case with *взволновываться*), then it is not part of a triplet: it is its own independent verb-half. In any case, until better discovery procedures are elaborated, one feels inclined for the time being to decertify entire swathes of proposed aspectual triplets in *Why*'s lists.

Referring to the authors' clustering idea (discussed in *Overview* above), only if pairs like *написать : написывать* or *сделать : делывать* were ever to develop into regular aspectual pairs, such that *написываю, делываю, взволновываюсь*, etc., could be used without difficulty in all subaspectual meanings of present imperfective 'write,' 'do,' 'be agitated,' etc., leaving verbs like *писать, делать, и волноваться* as orphan imperfectives, would one be able appropriately to speak of a set of prefixed perfective verbs "clustering" or "orbiting" around a simplex base verb. For all one knows, this is where things are headed in Russian, consolidating the centuries-old process of the acquisition of all possible imperfective aspectual submeanings by the suffix *-ыва(й)-*, but until that should happen, the traditional view of a system consisting of de facto empty prefixed perfectives and meaning-changing prefixed perfectives,

¹³ One is reminded here of equally marginal formations like iteratives *делывать, писывать, and читывать*, which can be found in Google, but which cannot be formed productively; which standard dictionaries do not list; and which many or most speakers reject as belonging to CSR. Like aspectual triplets, they are probably not something on which one should build a theory of aspect formation in CSR.

each type with its own means of deriving imperfectives (deprefixation or suffixation, respectively; see below), describes the system currently in effect and, consequently, the one that should be taught in the classroom.

The Maslov Test and the Withering Away of the Aspect Pair

Many or most professional discussions of Russian aspect pairs are introduced by discussion of the Maslov (1948, 307) test, according to which the imperfective partner of a verb is defined operationally, from the point of view of the perfective aspect partner. The Maslov test probably owes its longevity to the fact that it takes a pragmatic approach to the matter, specifying a procedure anyone can apply. Taking a past perfective verb used in context, one asks oneself what the historical present paraphrase of it would be; see Zaliznjak, Mikaèljan, and Šmelev's (2010, 5) illustration of this test:

(3a) Тут он почувствовал острую боль, схватился за сердце и упал. 'here he felt-*pf.* a sharp pain, grabbed-*pf.* at his heart and fell-*pf.*'

(3b) Тут он чувствует острую боль, хватается за сердце и падает. 'here he feels-*impf.* a sharp pain, grabs-*impf.* at his heart and falls-*impf.*'

Forsyth (1970, 35) analyzes the Maslov test in detail. By its nature the Maslov test suggests that the first form of aspectually paired verbs is not the imperfective form but the perfective; that the imperfective form is derived from the perfective form either by deprefixation or by suffixation, depending on whether the verb is a natural perfective or a specialized one.¹⁴ Accordingly, under Maslov the topic of "aspect partners" becomes turned into a matter of describing finite forms of the same lexical verb. In both instances—imperfective deprefixation and imperfective suffixation—one is dealing with historically derivational processes which, in modern Russian, have become a means for producing not different verbs, but different inflectional forms of the same verb.¹⁵

¹⁴ A number of people have made this suggestion over the years; see discussion in *Why*, 7–8.

¹⁵ The question of whether aspect derivational processes in Russian are word-formative (*словообразательные*) or word-inflectional (*словоизменительные*) is, of course, one of long standing in Russian linguistics, and was stated explicitly as long ago as 1948 by

The authors of *Why* repeatedly stress (10, 113, 200) the inefficiency of having to memorize, in connection with each simplex verb, first the verb and then, later and seemingly randomly, the natural prefix—one out of their pool of sixteen potential ones—that goes with it. To the extent that this is a major pedagogical concern, and it either may or may not be,¹⁶ it can be addressed by introducing simplex verbs as the Maslov test suggests, together with their natural perfectivizing prefix from the beginning. In this way, the problem, if in fact it exists, will automatically disappear. I see nothing wrong with representing, for example, that the Russian word for ‘write’ is (на)писать, for ‘read’ (про)читать, for ‘do’ (с)делать, and so on. This is certainly easier than assigning 1,429 simplex verbs to twenty-seven RNC action-types (which are far from being the simple pigeon-holes one might expect them to be), and then deducing on logical-semantic-metaphorical reasoning which aspectual prefixes combine with them, whether natural or specialized, as is these authors’ alternative proposal; see *Prefixes as Verb Classifiers* below.

Prefixes as Verb Classifiers

Chapter 7 of *Why* is devoted to the proposition that aspectual prefixes function in Russian as verb classifiers. Based among other things on drawing parallels between Russian verbal prefixes and numerical noun-classifiers in Mayan languages (which classify nouns, when quantified, according to the physical substance or shape of which their referents are constituted, see Hopkins 2012), the idea seems to be this: perfectivization is a kind of quantification of the verbal act, in the sense that it reduces or sums up an action to a single performance of it. In order to quantify (i.e., perfectivize) an unprefixated verb, one needs to choose from among sixteen potential prefixes. The appropriate natural aspectual prefix “homes in” on the verb, as it were, according to its action-type. Prefixes can be used,

Vinogradov (*Why* 7). See also discussion in Percov (1998). The question ultimately depends on whether native speakers look upon pairs like *писать* : *написать*, or *переписать* : *переписывать*, as being different forms of the same verb, and in my estimation they do. This is ultimately a question for psycholinguists to answer.

¹⁶ This is a question that should be resolved experimentally, not rhetorically. Personally, I have not noticed that students have inordinate difficulty remembering which ‘natural’ prefixes go with verbs like *делать*, *писать*, *читать*, *просить*, and so forth, once they are shown what the prefixes are.

therefore, to classify verbs into different action-types; conversely, the action-type of a simplex verb can be used to predict which natural perfectivizing prefix it will take. This is an attractive idea, and many imaginative arguments are adduced by *Why* in support of it, but as a teaching method it remains a hypothesis waiting for someone to put it to a practical test in the Russian language classroom, by experimentally examining whether it is a preferable or even a possible way to teach Russian verbs.

Interestingly, almost the exact same study as *Why*, with the same organizational principles, pedagogical orientation, interests, concerns, and methodology (including a special interest in aspectual triplets and a chi-square statistical analysis of “big” prefixes vis-à-vis semantic classes of verbs) was already conducted in 2005 by Martelle, a study that is not cited in *Why*. Martelle’s somewhat less ambitious corpus of perfectivizable simplex verbs came to only 900 (as compared to *Why*’s 1,429), and her semantic classes were based not on the RNC, but on Talmy (1985), and she assigned semantic tags to the Russian verbs herself (at the time, those of the RNC were probably not available). For the meanings of the aspectual prefixes, she relied on Townsend (1975, 123–133). Her conclusion was that “the association [of prefixes and action-types] is statistically significant, but not very strong” (Martelle 2005, 1). By contrast, the authors of *Why* find that their own statistical analysis of essentially the same material, relying on tags from the RNC in combination with their own suggested prefixal meanings and their own self-designed figurative interpretation of them, yields results that are both significant and strong—strong enough, in their estimation, to warrant a theory that aspectual prefixes are verb classifiers. The fact that two essentially like-minded sets of scholars applying the same orientation and statistical methodology to the same set of facts to answer the same questions arrive at opposing conclusions should make one pause before attempting to adopt the conclusions of *Why* as a teaching strategy.

The average person, one suspects, would find that Mayan nouns are much easier to classify according to the substance or shape of which their referents are composed (for example, wax is easily distinguishable from wood or water) than they would find Russian verbs to classify according to their action-type—twenty-seven different ones. The logic of

a classification of verbs according to the perfectivizing prefix(es) they naturally take could work only if one could demonstrate that native speakers of Russian share the authors' sense of what the aspectual prefixes mean in both their basic and extended senses, and that speakers actually do, "in their head," classify verbs according to the perfectivizing prefix they take. The best laboratory would be provided by new verbs entering the language (like *зугнуть*), of which there is no lack. What is needed is not a statistical demonstration of affinity between verbal prefixes and action-types. Statistics are intrinsically unable to distinguish between what is fossilized history and what is synchrony. Without a demonstration that their model reflects psychological reality, it is difficult to argue that *Why's* statistics reflect the contemporary state of Russian rather than the history of aspect development up through the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth century.

One gathers from *Why's* description of Mayan that in order to become a competent speaker of that language, one must perforce master its system of nominal classifiers.¹⁷ The analogous thing is just not true of Russian aspectual prefixes, as one sees every day in the Russian language classroom. For example, it is perfectly possible to approach the verb *пригласить* : *приглашать* 'invite' by saying that it means "to request to attend or participate," and that it is the effective Russian equivalent of English *invite*, French *inviter*, German *einladen*, Polish *zaprosić* : *zapraszać*, Slovak *pozvať* : *pozývať*, Hungarian *meghívni*, and so on (note, by the way, the variety of prefixes used by the different languages), and then move on. Actually, with this particular verb, there seems to be no other choice, for *Why's* list of simplex verbs does not include the Slavonic-derived imperfective verb *гласить* 'assert, state, proclaim'; these two clearly related verbs, *гласить* and *пригласить* (the second apparently a calque on Greek *προσκαλεω*), are mutually unassociable in their system. In Chapter 2 (26–27) the authors list the various kinds of verbs with prefixes to which their analysis does not extend, such as verbs formed on prefixed nouns, adjectives, and numerals, as well as on contemporaneously non-existing simplex verbs, like *разуть*, 'unshoe.' To these may be added not only pairs like *гласить*

¹⁷ That task may not be that difficult, as most Mayan noun classifiers are transparently cognate with some generic noun. For example, in Chuj, the classifier for animals is *nok*, which also means 'animal'; see Hopkins (2012, 413).

and *пригласить*, but also verbs that derive aspect purely suffixally, of which there are hundreds, like *скользнуть* : *скользать*, as well as suppletive aspect pairs, like *сказать* : *говорить*. It would have been helpful if, among their other exhaustive lists, the authors had included a list of all verbs that fall outside their system for any number of formal, semantic, or historical reasons. From the pedagogical point of view, one requires such a list in order to determine how many verbs would need to be taught in a different, non-classifier way, greatly adding to the challenge and complexity of teaching Russian aspect according to their suggested method. It makes a difference whether one is talking about hundreds of exceptional verbs or only a few dozen.

The authors recommend a wholesale revision of Russian pedagogy and teaching materials so as to reflect their view that natural perfectivizing prefixes classify verbs according to their action-type, and this recommendation is presented in Chapter 7 as this book's ultimate conclusion. The next logical step would be to design a teaching module and test it in the classroom. The authors seem to think that there will be a rush to rewrite textbooks based on their suggestions, but it seems to this reviewer that that is rather their responsibility.¹⁸

Conclusion

The idea of using a book as a key to online sites that back up its conclusions with examples and statistics is a novel and welcome idea, and one would like to see more such books and articles written along this line. The authors of *Why* are to be commended for their generosity in making their data open and accessible to other researchers; and the reader is further grateful for the clarity with which they lay out their theses and arguments. The book unquestionably causes the reader to examine and re-examine his or her understanding of the role of aspectual prefixation/suffixation in Russian. However, authorial enthusiasm, strength of conviction, clarity of exposition, and a wealth of supportive data is not enough, for reasons mentioned, to persuade this reviewer that *Why's* description of Russian aspect formation, even if here and there it rings true, is an overall improvement over the traditional

¹⁸ On their book-dedicated website they do offer some prefix-analysis exercises for students, but they seem to be aimed more at advanced-level learners than at beginners.

description and classroom presentation the authors hope to replace. The main problem is that, since their system hypothesizes uniformity of semantic association across speakers and languages, it is in practice weak on predictability and replicability. The contribution most likely to be of value to scholars and teachers, besides the extensive and well-done bibliography, and the typological compendium of prefixed verbs attached via the Internet to Chapter 2, is the account in Chapter 3, also linked to online resources, of the distribution of the “big” aspectual prefixes over the semantic tags assigned to verbs by the RNC. While that chapter is interesting, and the demonstrated correspondences between prefixes and verb-types are greater than one might have expected, one is ultimately not persuaded that “Russian prefixes are in effect a verb-classifier system analogous to those proposed for Mandarin Chinese, Hindi-Urdu, and a number of Australian languages” (199–200).

The final chapter on this subject undoubtedly has not been written. In the meantime, what beginning learners of the language need to know about the Russian verb system is that, one way or another, by utilizing the devices of prefixation, suffixation, and suppletivity, (a) for most verbal lexemes the system shows aspect combining with tense in a way that produces, for any given verbal notion, five main tense-aspect meanings: past-imperfective, past-perfective, present-imperfective, future-perfective, and future-imperfective; and (b) it expresses these tense-aspect meanings with forms which, for pedagogical purposes, are traditionally presented as a matched pair of verbs, one perfective and the other imperfective.¹⁹

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¹⁹ To be sure, the traditional classroom presentational model is not without its problems. It encourages students, for example, to expect that the logical future-tense version of an ‘achievement’ verb (as per Vendler 1957) like *я приглашаю* will be *я буду приглашать*, whereas a better choice in most instances will be *я приглашу*.

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