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# Aktionsart and Aspect in English and Russian: a Comparative Study 

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#### Abstract

Research on the topic of aktionsart has been exponentially growing in the last half century. The intricacies of how aktionsart is linked to other traits and how lexical aspect operates across different languages are topics that are subjected to ongoing research. Competing theories and approaches are still under hot discussion today. This work is set to offer a basic insight into the knowledge that has been gathered to this point about the notion of aktionsart. It is a comparative study that examines how verbs are classified in terms of aktionsart in Russian and English. An attempt will be carried out to outline whether Russian and English languages treat lexical aspect differently. The results suggest that they do not, and that in fact, despite the morphological differences, lexical aspect lies not in the morphemes, but rather in the lexical meaning they carry.


## 1. INTRODUCTION

This work will attempt to investigate the correlation between verb types in the Russian and English languages. To set the framework there will be a brief introduction to the topics at hand. discussing some of the approaches present today. To prove or disprove the similarities between the two languages, we will take a look at a text from a piece of classic literature and its translation into Russian, to inspect the verbal predicates and how they present the traits relevant to our research. The entries will be classified and examined in regards to the topic at hand. The criteria will be based upon the known theoretical explanations.

One of the most evident sources of difference between English and Russian is the heavy use of verbal prefixes of the latter. Grammarians cite up to 23 different prefixes that can be attached to verbs in the Russian language. The main axis of comparison will go through this question to later discuss whether aktionsart is treated all that differently
in the two languages. After diving into some theoretical background it is possible to speculate that, even though at first it might appear that they would, they would actually not. This will be the starting point and the main hypothesis of this study.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

There are several means of classifying verbs for our goal. One possible classification takes its base on the ideas proposed by Vendler (1957, re-published in 1967 in his book Linguistics in Philosophy). In this work a simplified and re-purposed classification will be used to focus on the comparison between the two languages. In his article 'Verbs and Times' Vendler establishes a core set of categories based on what he refers to as time schemata. After establishing whether a verbal predicates allows for continuous and progressive aspect or not, these verbs are open to be classified into four categories: 'activities', 'accomplishments', 'states', and 'achievements'. Thus, verbs that allow for the aforementioned type of grammatical aspect will fall into the group of 'state' verbs or 'achievement' verbs, while those that do not will fall into 'activities' verbs and 'accomplishments'. 'State' verbs are durative whereas 'achievements' are instantaneous, as can be showcased by the difference between the verbs 'know' and 'realize'. 'Activities' and 'accomplishments' differ from each other as the latter have a natural tendency to occupy a restricted stretch of time, while the former naturally do not. This establishes the difference between verbs such as 'running' and 'drawing'. 'Achievements' and 'accomplishments' are always telic.

In a similar yet contrary way, the classification proposed by Moens and Steedman (1988) took its root in the idea that linear temporal classifications of tense and aspect are not the most appropriate for linguistic classification. Their classification establishes a connection between the notion of event nucleus and the verbal predicates.

This connection is what helps us find the type of a given verb. Although they present compelling proof, and their tests for group classification are efficient, their ideas do not override the usability of Vendler's method and classification.

Another approach to the issue is that of Krifka (1989), who has proposed treating telicity as a grammatical and even morphological feature, basing his study on how Finnish telicity works. These are conclusions that cannot be backed up by data collected from either Russian or English. In fact, Krifka's definition of telicity has been criticized by Borik (2002) among others as the approaches for treating telicity are still a hot topic today. It is very hard to define endpoints and start points of verbs as the criteria for distinction is a thin line that can be easily blurred. Despite all that Krifka's interpretation and ideas regarding, what we cloud call, potential telicity are also compelling and usable. However, once again, they are not as crucial for the comparison we aim to make.

Having said that it is now possible to proceed to state that, for the purposes of this research, we are allowed to simplify and re-purpose Vendler's classification into three possible types of verbal predicates in regards to aktionsart. Our start point lies in separating those verbs that function as a state and those that do not, in other words to single out the predicates that allow for telicity to happen. This is very similar to how Vendler's classification operates. If a verb allows for continuous tense it is bound to be a state. In this study we will not go into the deeper aforementioned distinction. All the verbs that do not grammatically form constructions of the kind of '*I am knowing OBJECT' and '*I am loving OBJECT' are all regarded as states. Those verbs that are not states are processes. These are the same verbs that do not allow adjuncts that have the preposition 'for' or 'in' as their head.

Process verbs, on the other hand, can be telic or not. Some processes remain grammatical when complemented by such adjuncts, and some do not. This will be the basis for our test of telicity. Thus, a simple verbal predicate such as 'the train arrived at the station' can prove to be telic if it allows itself to be modified by an adjunct headed by the preposition 'in'. A telic predicate can never be modified by an adjunct the nucleus of which is the preposition 'for'.
(1) *The train arrived at the station for two days
(2) The train arrived at the station in two days

The verbal predicate in examples 1 and 2 is therefore telic. On the other hand the examples:
(3) He wrote books for two days
(4) *He wrote books in two days
illustrate that the predicate 'to write books' is atelic. It will be labeled as 'process' in the data gathering process.

This test can also be used to further identify state. States verbs reject both structures and create ungrammatical sentences following this test:
(5) *She loved him in two days
(6) *She loved him for two years

It is important to note that each of these verbs by themselves, and within the predicates they represent can be interpreted to belong to any given verb type. The two examples above, for instance, can be interpreted as grammatically correct, but in that case the verb 'to love' would no longer have the same meaning the one predicated by the ungrammatical sentences.

Although this test is not without its flaws, its success rate is more than enough for the purposes of this research, as all the predicates in the data gathering procedure can be tested with it since this very same examples translate almost perfectly into Russian. There exist, however, some inconsistencies. The 'for' and 'in' adjuncts tests are trickier to employ in Russian, as the meaning of these adjuncts is not narrow enough. In Russian it is possible to employ a much higher variety of prepositions to express similar meanings to that of 'for' and 'in'. The distinction between stative and non-stative verbs, however, remains the same.

## (7) *Ona lyubila ego za dva dnya <br> She loved him for/in two days

Slabakova (2001), in her chapter about English and Slavic telicity argued that to stating that bound morphemes add exclusively grammatical content to the verbs would not fit with the Universal Grammar panorama, in a similar way as stating that auxiliaries add just lexical content is wrong just as well. Her comparison of Russian and English focused on the notion of structural positioning of modifiers. She states that a variety of features might influence lexical aspect, including bound morphemes and prefixes, but there is no basis to state that all languages work the same way in regards to this topic. Russian, for instance, differs heavily in this regard from English. However,
the way meaning is conveyed remains similar. This creates a further case to assume that Russian will not treat aktionsart morphologically, and that it will work in a similar way to that of English. The verbs that we will find in our data gathering process, in both languages, will thus share their classification in regards to aktionsart.

To sum up, there are several ways to classify verbs and this study will use the most convenient straight forward classification to attempt to see whether Russian and English languages treat lexical aspect differently. The preliminary hypothesis would stand that they do not, and that, in fact, despite the morphological differences, lexical aspect lies not in the morphemes, but rather in the lexical meaning they carry.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

To carry out this contrastive task, one hundred entries have been gathered sourced from the renowned novel Oliver Twist, by Charles Dickens. The focus has been laid upon predicates in preterit form, as those are the most efficient source of classifiable verbs. The entries are displayed in the annex. They are composed by the raw transliterated Russian utterance, followed by the verbal element of the predicate in isolation, its type, the original verbal element as written by Dickens and the predicate within its context: the full original utterance from the novel. The information will be displayed in a similar manner to the following:
(8) 17 - sprosil bedniy Oliver - Process - Poor Oliver inquired

The items in bold will have their own column in the table to ease the task of finding verbs and comparing them face to face with their counterparts. The center
column will display the type of verb that is assigned to that entry according to the telicity test mentioned in the last section.

## 4. DISCUSSION

First of all, it is important to mention that Russian does not feature a core distinction between simple and progressive past. Russian, as other languages such as Spanish, operates in terms of perfectivity. To avoid diving too deep into grammatical details, we can go straight to the bottom line and state that checking whether a verb allows a progressive form is not possible in Russian in the same way it is possible in English. An easy way to identify a verb as a state is to see whether it allows the attachment of the prefix 'za-'. This prefix adds, among others, the lexical meaning of 'to begin doing' an action when attached to a verb. After adding this prefix, we find a way to cheat this lack of continuous tense, and check whether a construction such as '*Ya zalyubil yeio' (*I began and I still am loving her) is possible or impossible in Russian. In this case it is impossible, confirming that just as in English, the verb 'to love' is a state type of verb.

Following that we can dive right into the gathered data. A quick look at the entries might at first suggest that Russian verbal predicates belong to one type of verb or another depending heavily on their prefixes. For instance, the Russian prefixes 'do-' and 'vy-' might appear to add telicity to verbs whenever it appears. They actually do modify verbs in a significant way as explained by Jakobson, R. (1984) in his analysis of Russian and Slavic grammar. However it is uncertain whether they can be said to affect aktionsart exclusively. The examples found in entry 14 and entry 15 showcase this conflict and allow for a deeper analysis of the issue.

These two examples are virtually the same in terms of aktionsart. For further analysis we can focus on only one the latter and its test for telicity in English.
(11) He finished the gin and water in two weeks
(12) $\quad$ He finished the gin and water for two weeks

In the original English utterance 'to finish' has the implied semantic meaning of to finish drinking. This can be proven by simply adding that implied meaning into the sentence and later observing that it remains telic:
(13) He finished drinking the gin and water in two weeks.
(14) $\quad$ He finished drinking the gin and water for two weeks.

The Russian translation presents the verb 'to drink' with the prefix 'do-'. To paraphrase an explanation provided by experts in Slavic grammar such as Wade (2002), it is possible to state that this prefix is known to adhere to verbs in order to add the semantic meaning of 'to reach completion' of a given task, or in other words, 'to finish' something. The predicate 'to finish drinking' is therefore completely independent from the predicate 'to drink'. If the utterance were to look like:
*He drank the gin and water in two weeks
(16) He drank gin and water for two weeks.

One might be tempted to argue that the prefix 'do-' adds perfectivity to the verb, as to finish an action is to make it perfect. This is however not the case as there are many ways to add perfectivity to a verb. The default Russian prefix for this job is 'po-'. And although the sentences
(17) On do-pil dzhin s vodoi
(18) On po-pil dzhin s vodoi

May allow for only one grammatical translation into English:

He drank gin and water

The semantic translation would require adding words that carry heavy lexical meaning to make the translation transmit what it really signifies to the reader. The selected translation for each of the examples would look similar to this:
(20) He finished drinking gin and water (for example 17)
(21) He drank a bit of gin and water (for example 18)

If the thesaurus of English verbs had single verbs that transmitted those same meaning, these verbs would probably be used here.

These arguments seem to allow us to safely induce that the predicate 'to drink' works as a process and is not necessarily telic, as it does not pass the full simple telicity test. This is further illustrated in entry 59.
'He kept on his course through many winding and narrow ways'

To simplify the predicate, we can agree that 'to keep on' implies the meaning of 'to keep on going/walking' and the sentence 'He went on his course through many winding and narrow ways' completely mirrors the semantic meaning of the original sentence. Thus:
(23) $\quad$ He went on his course through many winding and narrow ways in two weeks
(24) He went on his course through many winding and narrow ways for two weeks

Mirrors the Russian result of failing to test for telicity:
*On shel izvilistymi i uzkimi ulitsami za dve nedeli (He go-PAST winding and narrow streets in two weeks)

If we were to add the same prefix added earlier (that is, the prefix 'do-') to the verb 'to drink' to this verb we would end up with an utterance with a verbal predicate that tests positive for telicity:

However, to translate this predicate back into English we would have to use another verb altogether. A telic verb such as 'to arrive' or 'to reach' that will test positive for telicity and will be proven not to be a process:

He arrived through many winding and narrow ways in two weeks
*He arrived through many winding and narrow ways for two weeks

There are no grounds upon which to argue that the Russian prefix 'do-' is only responsible in for the shift in telicity. As is pointed out in Slabakova's study (2005), Slavic prefixes may work in a predictable pattern that eases the classification of verbs into the types proposed by Vendler (1967), but they do no constitute a one hundred percent efficient rule. For instance, entries 30, 46 and 47 all feature the prefix 'po-', which is usually argued to be interpreted as a marker of perfectivity, although it can also mean 'a little'. In all three cases the meaning that is actually conveyed by the prefix is that of adding a trait of 'carrying out the action for a while'. (as literally illustrated by the original utterance in entry 46 'Oliver considered a little while'). The marker of perfectivity meaning appears to be independent of its semantic meaning. This might lead to argue that the lexical content almost prevails over aktionsart, and that these morphemes create new lexical entries altogether.

On other words, the aforementioned allows us to speculate that verb predicates convey independent meaning within their context. Although it is common
knowledge that predicates, and not just verbs on their own, are the carriers of the semantic meaning of the actions, observing how a predicate might be translated into one independent verb might be an additional source of evidence for this very statement. For instance, in entry number 38 the Russian predicate 'perebezhat', is constructed upon the verb 'bezhat' plus the prefix 'pere-', that adds a meaning of crossing to all verbs (or rather the meaning of 'going over' or 'getting over to the other side', which is also very similar to the concept of crossing). This way the verbs with a new meaning stand on their own and would call for an independent dictionary entry if they were to be translated into English. In this case, 'begat' would be best translated as 'to run', while 'perebegat' would be most efficiently translated as 'to cross' or 'to run across'. The point is that this verb easily stands on its own and it conveys the predicative meaning of 'to walk/run across'. Furthermore, this verb that we can refer to as the verb 'to cross', alongside the verb 'to walk', can be classified as telic when found in structures like the following: 'he walked to the store/he crossed to the store'. So they both agree in verb type, the only function of the prefix is to add lexical information without altering grammatical proprieties.

Verb type is therefore an important feature that stands on the same level of relevance as the pure lexical meaning of a verb in regards to translation. The translated text shows that preserving the verb type is a goal that is met more often than the goal of nitpicking a lexical verb that mirrors the exact semantic meaning of the original English verb. Observing how the Russian translation picks verbs to suit this condition is once again evidence for this statement. For example, entries 11, 12, 13, 17 (verbs of the type of: inquired, replied, coughed, asked) are all more or less synonymous and can work similarly to the predicate 'said'. These verbs are usually used by the narrator of a tale to mark dialogue structure. The correspondence of exact meaning between the Russian
translation and the English original almost never agrees to what a dictionary would suggest. This is due mainly to the fact that context plays an important role in establishing meaning. The translation picks verbs that suit the need for a predicate that belongs to the process type of verbs, rather than any other verb that would not fit this condition. In entry 56, for instance, the Russian translation opts to use a predicate that unites the meaning of 'to fall sluggishly'. Although the verb 'morosit' cannot be used as synonymous to fall in any other context, it is nevertheless a process. Therefore, it seems to be the case that to preserve the traits of telicity of the predicate is crucial for translation purposes.

It is important to mention that this study is limited to what evidence can be provided from Russian and English. It is impossible to state that the conclusions derived from this discussion would apply universally. One of the unexpected statements that this research seems to suggest is true that semantics is what dictates verb type classification, so it is not fair to state that prefixes themselves add the quality of telicity to the predicates. What is clear that the prefixes add semantic variation that later allows for classification into types.

This, therefore, leads to the conclusion that actually the Russian language and the English language treat aspect similarly. Because Russian as most Slavic languages is a language that heavily relies on inflection (Slabakova 2001) we might perceive that aktionsart as a trait is present morphologically in the form of the verbs, as we have seen with the prefixes 'do-' and 'po-'. This is, however, not the case. The addition or removal of a prefix appears to change the type of the verb namely because the meaning of the verbal predicate changes. It is true that in the default context for the prefix 'po-' is to mark perfectivity, there is, however, more to it. Verb type shifts due to the fact that some prefixes carry the meaning of begging of an action, end of an action
or of carrying out an action in a specific way (i.e. slowly, sideways, etc). This leads to a situation where morphologically similar verbs are no longer synonymous, yet they carry the same value of lexical aspect.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Conclusively, this builds enough evidence to state that in reality the treatment of aktionsart in both languages is more similar than different. Both languages rely heavily on lexical context, and do not use any morphological sings to indicate aktionsart features. After examining some examples where prefixes seemed to offer clues towards the classification of verbs, it is fair to state that these clues work in a similar way as that of adding an adjunct to a predicate in a sentence. It is a procedure that adds meaning, rather than grammatical content.

The final conclusion is however, that as it was expected, and in agreement with previous research, English and Russian languages treat aktionsart similarly and operate in more similar ways than can be expected without a deeper analysis.

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## ANNEX

Data gathered from Charles Dickens 'Oliver Twist', first published 1838, ed Penguin Classics, London 2003; Translation to Russian by A. V. Krivtsova, Ed. Vishaya Shkola, Moscow 1984.




| 61 | prosnuvshis utrom (Oliver) | prosunvshis' | Telic | awoke | when Oliver awoke in the morning |
| :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: | :---: |
| 62 | s bol'shym udivleniem uvidel | uvidel | Process | was surprised to find | he was a good deal surprised to find |
| 63 | po golumu polu bystro zashliopali stopannye tufli | zashliopali | Process | shuffled | A pair of slipshod feet shuffled hastly across the are floor of the room |
| 64 | Saiks tolknul Olivera | tolknul | Telic | pushed | Sikes pushed Oliver |
| 65 | ioni ochutilis v nikoj tiomnoi komnate | ochutilis' | Telic | entered | and they entered a low dark room |
| 66 | vo ves'rost lezhal muzchina | lezhal | Process | was reposing | a man was reposing at full lenght |
| 67 | On byl odet v syuirtuik | bylodet | Process | was dressed | He was dressed in a coat |
| 68 | oni bystro zashagali po glavniy ulitse goroda | zashagali | Telic | hurried | and they hurried through the main street of the little town |
| 69 | predvoritel'no zaglyanuv vokno | zaglyanuv | Telic | peeping | after peeping in |
| 70 | U stola za ego spinoi sideli Lovkiy Plut | sideli | Telic | sat | At a table behind him sat the Artful Dodger, etc |
| 71 | rugaya yego za medlennost' | rugaya | Telic | muttering a curse (cursing) | muttering a curse upon his tardiness |
| 72 | slyshish ty ili net | slyshish | Telic | hear | do you hear? |
| 73 | Mnogiye smikayut glaza | smykayut | Telic | close | Many hunger-worn outcasts close their eyes in our bare streets at such times |
| 74 | vryatly onie otkroyut ij | otrkroyut | Process | open | can hardly open then in a more bitter world |
| 75 | nadziratilnitsa upala v kreslo | upala | Telic | dropped into | the matron dropped into her chair |
| 76 | zadumalas' ob odinokoi svoiei sudbe | zadumalas' | Telic | thought | thought of her solitary fate |
| 77 | chainik i chaska probudili pechal'nye vosponinanie o misteri Korni | probudili | Telic | awakened | the single cup had awakened in her mind sad recollections of mister Corney |
| 78 | eto podeisvavolo na neio ugnetajushi | podeistvavolo | Process | was overpowered | she was overpowered |
| 79 | k komu otnosilis' eti zamechanie bylo ne izvestno | otnosilas' | State | bore reference | wether this remearks bore reference to the husband or the teapot was unknown |
| 80 | ona tol'ko otvedala pervuyu chashku | otvedola | Process | tasted | she just tasted her first cup |



