JONAS GJERVOLD

Prefix Variation: A Comparison between Slang and Contemporary Standard Russian

Introduction

A central feature of the Russian aspectual system is the prefixation of imperfective base verbs to create perfective aspectual partners with identical lexical meaning. This type of perfective has been termed *natural perfectives* by Janda[1], which is also the term that will be used in this paper. This concurrence of semantics has given rise to a hypothesis asserting that the prefixes in these perfectives do not carry any semantic meaning themselves, but serve simply as perfective markers. The competing hypothesis asserts that this semantic emptiness is an illusion created by an overlap of the semantics of the prefix and the base verb. This hypothesis is called the *Overlap Hypothesis*. Recent research into the previously scarcely examined phenomenon of *prefix variation*, when a single imperfective base verb forms two or more natural perfectives, however, shows that prefix variation is both frequent and systematic in contemporary standard Russian (henceforth: CSR). *Марать* 'to soil', for instance, has four natural perfectives in *вымарать, замарать, измарать* and *намарать.* Such natural perfectives are often interchangeable, but the fact that there are contexts where they are not, strengthens the hypothesis that even prefixes that produce natural perfectives carry semantic meaning. Even the fact that they all exist strengthen the Overlap Hypothesis as it would make little sense to have sixteen prefixes perform the function of one.[2]

This paper will examine prefix variation in Russian occasional verbs. Occasional words are words that are produced in speech, but don't recur as consolidated units in the language.[3] The main aim will be to

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[1] Janda (2007)
[2] Janda, Lyashevskaya (2011)
[3] Sokolova (2009)

determine whether prefix variation behaves differently in occasional verbs than in standardized Russian. In particular, I address the following research questions:

- Is prefix variation more or less common in occasional verbs and why?
- Do occasional verbs take the same prefixes as their CSR counterparts? If not, why?

This paper concludes that prefix variation is more common in occasional achievement verbs, whereas verbs of activity behave similar to CSR. It argues that the reason could be that verbs that to a lesser degree appear as consolidated units in the language can be interpreted individually. In concurrence with the overlap hypothesis, the speaker opts for different prefixes depending on how he interprets the verb. Nevertheless, it seems that *za-* is much more frequent in Russian slang than in CSR verbs.

Comparing Occasional Verbs to Contemporary Standard Russian

In order to answer my research questions, I will attempt to give an overview of prefix variation in CSR as well as in occasional verbs, before comparing these. The *Exploring Emptiness* research group at the University of Tromsø has developed a database of aspectual pairs in Russian formed via prefixation. This has been done by creating an aggregate of the aspectual pairs listed in Evgen'eva's (1999) and Ožegov and Shvedova's (2001) dictionaries of Russian, as well as in Cubberly's 1982 article on 'empty prefixes'. The database contains 1,981 base imperfectives that form perfectives with one or more prefixes, and features a user friendly search function which makes analyzing prefix variation in CSR relatively quick and easy.[4] Janda and Lyashevskaya have already extracted information from this database and made an analysis on the prevalence of prefix variation, prefix distribution and prefix combinations for their 2011 article on prefix variation.[5]

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[4] http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/ (obtained 5.21.2013)
  Janda, Lyashevskaya (2011)
[5] Janda, Lyashevskaya (2011)

To compare CSR to Russian slang, I intend to make a similar analysis of occasional verbs. There obviously exists no similar database for occasional verbs, and even if creating one were possible, it would be far beyond the scope of this article. I have therefore chosen to examine the occasional verbs that appear most frequently in my friends' lingo[6], which seemingly corresponds fairly well with them being frequent occurrences on the internet. I will be examining the following verbs:

Verb	Gloss	Verb	Gloss
арбайтать	'work'	*баксить*	'pay (in foreign currency)'
банить	'ban'	*гаматься*	'play'
гуглить	'google'	*джоиниться*	'join'
донатить	'put real money into a game'	*зиповать*	'pack (usually computer files)'
квотить	'quote'	*кентовать*	'befriend'
комментить	'comment'	*коннектиться*	'onnect'
кнокать	'know, knock'	*лайкать*	'"like" on facebook'
логиниться	'log in'	*логоффиться*	'log off'
постить	'publish on an online forum'	*спамить*	'spam'
твитить	'publish on twitter'	*фейсить*	'hit in the face, spend time on facebook'
флудить	'write a lot, comment excessively'	*фолловить*	'"follow" somebody on twitter'
форвардить	'forward a message'	*шпрехать*	'say, speak'

These are words that produce next to no hits in the Russian National Corpus, so I have used the Yandex search engine in order to check the frequency with which they occur online, as well as how frequently each

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6 Arkhangelsk and Murmansk, Northwestern Russia

verb occurs in combination with each of the following sixteen prefixes: *в-, вз-/воз-, вы-, за-, из-, на-, о-/об-/обо-, от-, пере-, по-, под-, при-, про-, раз-, с-, у-*, which are the prefixes that in Russian produce natural perfectives.[7] The problem with search engines, however, as opposed to the corpus, is that the same hit often shows up several times. This in turn leads to it being counted as several hits. It is important to keep this in mind when looking at the frequency statistics presented in this analysis. Nevertheless, it seems safe to assume that a form, which yields millions of hits, like *залогиниться,* occurs much more frequently than one like *слогиниться*, which merely yields a few tens of hits.

Whenever you examine a relatively small group of words like this, the question of representativity will always be lurking in the background. These verbs, however, in addition to being frequent occurrences, are heterogeneous both in the actions they describe and in how similar they are to verbs that exist in CSR. Words such as *арбайтать* and *шпрехать* describe actions without a natural result, whereas others do not. Furthermore, some verbs have obvious semantic counterparts in CSR, like *квотить* (cf. *цитировать*), while others, like *гуглить*, do not. They are all fairly recent introductions to the Russian language as well, which means they will be reflective of contemporary processes occurring in the language. It therefore stands to reason that any prominent and consistent patterns we might observe as a result of this analysis will be indicative.

To analyze prefix variation in these verbs, one must first establish which prefixes they take to produce aspectual pairs. There are a few strategies one can employ when identifying aspectual pairs. The most popular criterion was introduced by Maslov in 1953, who observed that the so-called historical present requires the imperfective aspect. Thus, the aspectual pair открывать – открыть can be established the following way:

(1)   Придя вчера домой, я открыл окно.
(2)   Прихожу я вчера домой, открываю окно.

Later, several other criteria have been introduced. Zaliznjak and Šmelev, for instance, pointed out that the habitual also offers a criterion

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[7] Janda, Lyashevskaya (2011)

for determining aspectual pairs.[8] On the basis of such criteria, I have examined examples for each prefix-verb combination together with seven native speakers: Dr. Sokolova of the University of Tromsø and Ekaterina Il'ina, Vladimir Ivoninskiy, Nelli Khabarova, Kristina Korotaeva, Viktoria Alfer'eva, Maksim Sadykov – the latter six all being philology students at NArFU University in Arkhangelsk. For each specific example, they were asked to identify whether, in their opinion, the prefix changes the meaning of the verb at all, and what verb they would use when putting the sentence in the imperfective aspect. In cases where the responses were contradictory, and such cases were numerous, I have defined a prefixed verb as a natural perfective whenever a majority has indicated that it was.

**Distribution of Prefix Variation: Prefix Variation in CSR Verbs**

Any language has tens of thousands of verbs. As mentioned above, in Russian 1,981 of these form natural perfectives via prefixation. The data from the Exploring Emptiness database shows that 1,039 verbs (52%) form natural perfectives with only one prefix; i.e. they display no prefix variation. Of the 48% that do display prefix variation, those with only two or three natural perfectives are by far the most frequent.[9] This is further visualized in Figure 1.

By extracting the corresponding data for our occasional verbs, we see that prefix variation is decisively more frequent there than in the CSR verbs with prefixed natural perfectives, as shown in Figure 1. All but one of our occasional verbs have prefixed natural perfectives, and almost all of our occasional verbs display prefix variation.

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[8] Kuznetsova (2012

[9] http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/ (Obtained 5.22.2013)
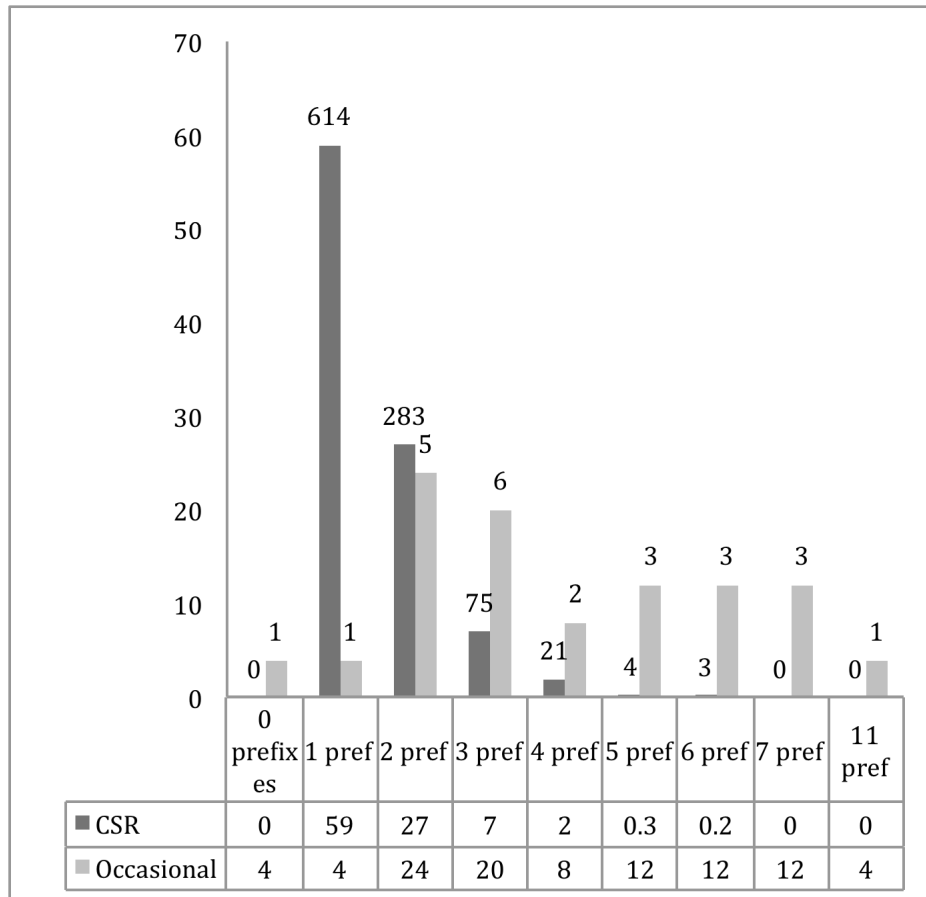
Figure 1: Comparison of CSR and occasional verbs' prefix variation in percent (Raw numbers are provided on top of each column)

More General Semantics in Occasional Verbs?

Figure 1 clearly indicates that prefixed natural perfectives are more common in occasional verbs compared to CSR verbs. A plausible explanation for why prefix variation appears to be more prevalent in occasional verbs could be found by looking to the Overlap Hypothesis, mentioned in the introduction. According to this hypothesis, prefixes carry semantic meaning and can produce natural perfectives only with those verbs whose meaning concurs with that of the prefix.[10] As occasional verbs have yet to be consolidated in the language, these verbs

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[10] Janda, Endresen, Kuznetsova, Lyashevskaya, Makarova, Nesset, Sokolova (2013)

seem to be used to refer to a variety of different, though metonymically related, actions. They will therefore combine with different prefixes, depending on how they've been interpreted in each individual occurrence. Different speakers might also draw comparisons to different verbs in CSR that are similar, thereby opting for different prefixes.

Two verbs that stand out in this regard are *флудить* and *гуглить*. These combine with all sixteen prefixes to create perfectives of different sorts, something which usually is characteristic only of verbs of motion. This can be explained by the fact that metonymy seems to be widely present in both of these verbs. Examples 3-7 demonstrate this in the case of *флудить*.

(3)   Водку пьём, главное не **перефлудить**
[Vodka-ACC we drink main not to over-*флудить-PFV*]
Vodka we drink! The most important thing is not overdoing it.

(4)   **Зафлудили** сайт всякими рецептами
[flooded-PFV site-ACC all kinds recopies-INSTR]
They've flooded the site with all kinds of recipes.

(5)   Когда вы успели **нафлудить** столько сообщений
[when you managed to *write*-PFV that many messages-GEN]
How did you manage to write that many messages?

(6)   Народ, а сколько надо **отфлудить**, чтобы войти в группу лучшие игроки???
[people how much necessary to *play*-PFV in order to enter-PFV to group-ACC best players]
Guys, how much do you have to play in order to be included as one of the best players?

(7)   обязательно **расфлудить** ее по всем Черным Спискам
[without fail *disseminate* her along all blacklists-DAT]
We definitely have to place her on all the blacklists.

All these usages seem to be metonymically or metaphorically related to the English verb 'flood'. *Флудить* appears to be associated with doing something in abundance, whether it's drinking vodka or playing a computer game.

With *гуглить,* the most frequent prefix is *по-*, which often produces a complex act perfective. *Погуглить* seems to draw clear analogies to *поискать* 'to search (for a while)' and used in the sense 'to search on Google for a while'. The most striking, however, is how *гуглить* combines with a whopping 11 prefixes to make natural perfectives. Of these, the most frequent is *нагуглить*, which clearly focuses on finding information, thereby seemingly drawing analogies to *найти* 'to find'. This difference is clearly shown in examples 8-9:

(8)   Я **нагуглил** о нем любопытную статью на сайте
      [I googled-PFV about him-LOC interesting article-ACC]
      I found an interesting article on him on Google.

(9)   Я вчера немножко **поглулил** фильмов, потом лёг спать
      [I yesterday a little googled-PFV films-GEN then lay-PFV to sleep]
      Yesterday I googled movies for a while, and then I went to sleep.

A natural perfective like *вгуглить* might be the result of interpreting *гуглить* as the process of typing your search into the search field. *в-* carries the meaning 'into'.[11] Different speakers interpret the base imperfective differently; they opt for the prefixes that are most compatible with their interpretation. As a result, occasional verbs combine with a greater variety of prefixes.

Analogies to Lexical Equivalents in CSR

Further support for the hypothesis that we see more prefix variation in occasional verbs because of their extended semantics can be found by breaking our verbs up into two groups. There are a few among our occasional verbs that appear to have one, and only one, obvious semantic counterpart in CSR that forms natural perfectives by prefixation and to which the speaker can make analogies. If we extract data on these verbs from the Exploring Emptiness database and Appendix A, and compare the two, we get a diagram as in Figure 2.

Note that although, according to the Exploring Emptiness database, *работать* 'to work' only has one natural prefix in *сработать*, all native

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[11] http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/v_eng.htm (obtained 6.1.2013)

speakers identified constructions as given in Examples 10 and 11 as natural perfectives.

(10) работать две недели   отработать две недели
      [to work-IMPFV two weeks]   [to work-PFV two weeks]
(11) работать долго   проработать долго[12]
      [to work-IMPFV long]   [to work-PFV long]

The same is true in the case of *говорить-проговорить,* analogous to Example 9. These constructions are therefore included in the diagram shown in Figure 2.
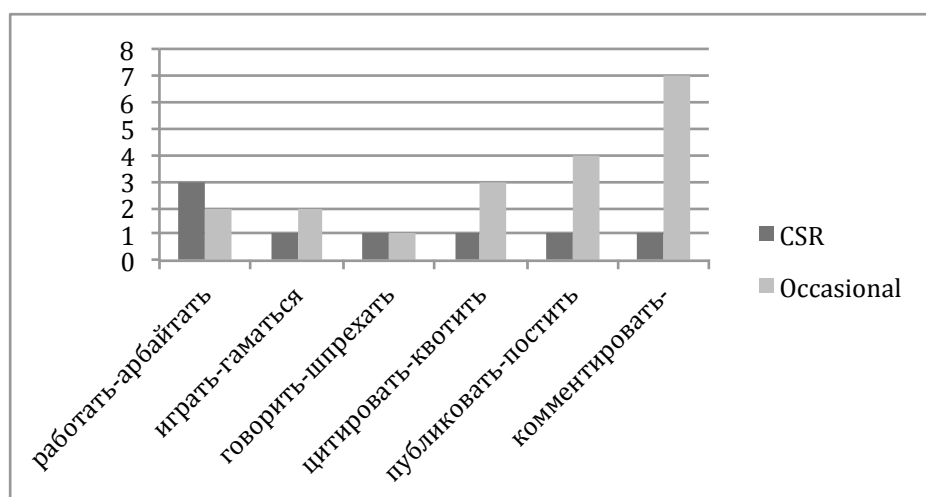

Figure 2: Prefix Variation in Verb Equivalents

The first three of these verbs describe activities, they have no natural result. An observation that can be made straight away is that for these verbs, we see near-full concordance between prefix variation in slang and CSR (cf. Figure 2.).[13] There are very few contexts where these would logically need a natural perfective.

The latter three of the verbs included in Figure 2 are achievement verbs. They do display more prefix variation than their CSR counterparts.

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[12] This verb might also be interpreted as perdurative aktionsart, an action that lasts a certain amount of time before being concluded.

[13] The only difference seems to be that *прогаматься* is interpreted more along the lines of *проработать* and *прошпрехать*, and not like *проиграть* 'to lose'.

Nevertheless, even these verbs appear to display less prefix variation than our remaining occasional verbs. We see that only one verb included in Figure 2 is among the 40% that produce natural perfectives with five or more prefixes; cf. Figure 1. This might be because when the speaker has an analogy to a CSR verb readily available, s/he is less likely to come up with an individual interpretation of the verb. This further strengthens our observation that the greater the opportunity there is for individual interpretation, the greater the likelihood of prefix variation.

The glaring exception here is the prefix variation in *комментить*. The verb is not only identical in meaning to *комментировать,* it is also very similar in form. Of all the verbs examined in this paper, one would assume *комментить* to be among those in which the availability of analogy is the greatest. Still it combines with seven prefixes to yield natural perfectives. Furthermore, *комментировать* forms an aspectual pair with the prefix *про-,* whereas with *комментить от-* occurs five times more frequently than *про-*.[14] At face value this looks like a blatant contradiction of our suppositions.

Upon closer inspection, however, we can observe clear signs of individual interpretation even in a word like *комментить*. When *за-* is chosen, for instance, the verb might have been interpreted as an 'impact verb', whereas *про-* and *под-* suggest that it has been interpreted as verbs of speech. The Russian National Corpus classifies verbs that have a physical impact on something as impact verbs.

Choice of Prefixes: Occasional Verbs vs. Standardized Russian

As we have seen, prefix variation seems to be more frequent the more opportunity the speaker has to individually interpret the verb. As for the question of which specific prefixes are more likely to get chosen, we see that occasional verbs behave differently than their CSR counterparts.

In their choice of prefix, our occasional verbs that have unique CSR counterparts do to a large degree show conformity to these. But they differ in one regard; *za-* is overwhelmingly more frequent in almost all of

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[14] Ožegova and Švedova (1993), http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/result_eng.php?verbbox=on&verb=комментировать&aspect=%25&prefixbox=on&prefix=%25&variation=0&mclass=&sclass=%25&freq=&meaning=&source=%25 (Obtained 6.2.2013).

them. There are verbs other than those included in Figure 2, however, that are defined by referring to a CSR verb. Some have CSR equivalent base imperfectives that already include a prefix, but that form aspectual pairs by processes other than prefixation. A good example of this is *форвардить* with its CSR equivalent *пересылать*.

Another group is those that are defined by pointing to a verb in CSR, but the results yielded by Yandex show obvious analogies to other verbs. *Зиповать* is one such instance. It is usually defined through *паковать* 'to pack', which takes prefixes *у-* and *за-*. But the fact that *зиповать* predominantly refers to the process of compressing computer files means one could easily draw analogies to other CSR verbs such as *сжимать* 'compress'/ 'squeeze' (both imperfective and perfective already contain *с-*) or *прессовать* (takes prefixes *с-* and *от-*).[15] This might explain why *зиповать* also combines with these prefixes in forming natural perfectives. It could, therefore, be argued that this verb does take the same prefixes as the several analogous verbs in CSR. In much the same way, a word like *логиниться* can be compared both to *входить* '*to enter*' and to *подключаться* 'to connect', and so on.

Prefix Productivity

Even if we factor this in, though, we see that the most frequent prefix in natural perfectives is, as often as not, different than the prefix in their semantic counterpart(s) (see Figure 3). In order to understand the reasons for this, we must look at the productivity of our prefixes. In contemporary Russian, *по-, с-* and *за-* are considered the most productive.[16] These three prefixes are also the most frequent prefixes in the Exploring Emptiness database, which makes sense, considering productivity in linguistics has often been a term interchangeable with high type frequency. It could, however, be argued that extensibility is more indicative of productivity. To see which prefix, or prefixes, exhibits the most extensibility, examining recent borrowings such as the verbs I examine in this paper is useful because these demonstrate which prefixes contemporary speakers are most likely to opt for, and not which prefixes they have inherited.

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[15] Compare English: 'to zip a computer file', 'to compress a computer file' and 'to pack a computer file'.
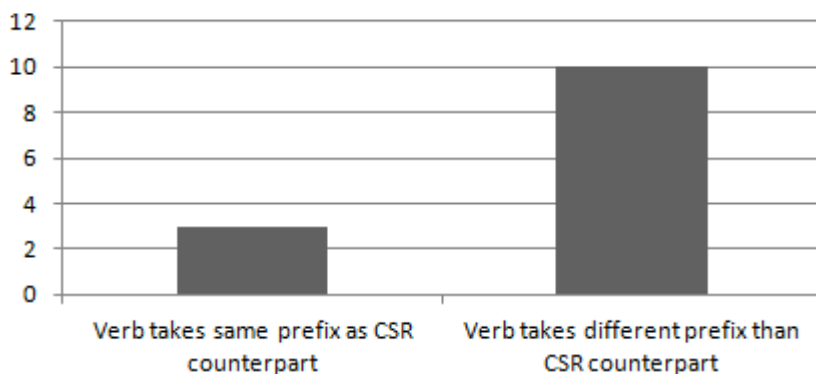[16] Sokolova (2009)

Figure 3: Choice of Prefixes

Amongst our verbs, we see that *za-* is the only prefix present in all our verbs. Furthermore, if we disregard *шпрехать, гаматься,* and *арбайтать,* which are somewhat different for reasons discussed above, we see that *za-* produces natural perfectives in all but one verb, *баксить,* and that online slang dictionaries define it as a natural perfective even in that last verb. Of the 21 verbs with which it produces natural perfectives, it is the most frequent prefix in 16 and the second most frequent in the remaining five. We can conclude that *за-* dominates completely in occasional verbs, as visualized in Figure 4.

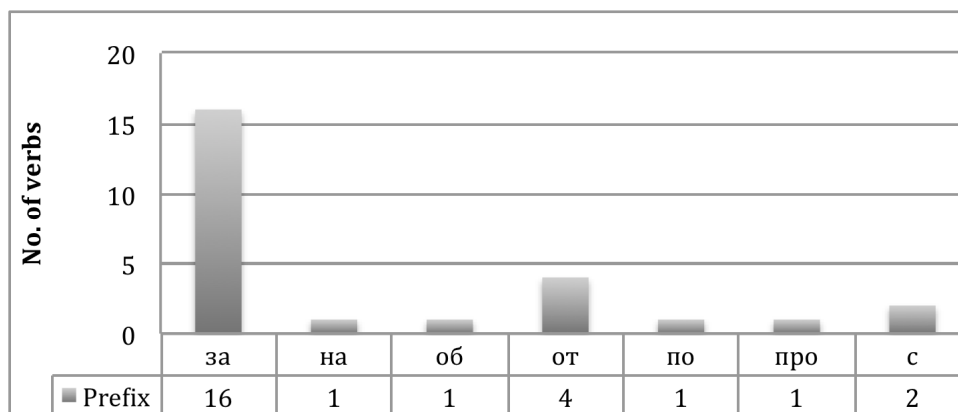|	за	на	об	от	по	про	с
■ Prefix	16	1	1	4	1	1	2

Figure 4: Most Frequent Prefixes

What might the reasons for this be? The special meaning of *za-* merges with the idea of crossing a boundary. *Za-* also carries the meaning of fixation; it indicates that a process is over quickly.[17] Both concepts harmonize well with the completeness encoded in the perfective aspect.

Conclusions

This paper has aimed to elucidate whether prefix variation behaves differently in occasional verbs compared to verbs in standardized Russian. More specifically, I have tried to answer the questions of whether prefix variation is more or less common in occasional verbs, and whether the prefixes they combine with are different. I have done this by comparing data extracted from the Exploring Emptiness database and my own examination of 25 occasional verbs.

The results show that all but two of the verbs I have examined display prefix variation, and that prefix variation occurs much more frequently in occasional verbs. Activity verbs, verbs with no logical result, behave like their CSR counterparts, but in general, occasional verbs display more prefix variation than CSR verbs. Occasional verbs appear to have more general semantics. A verb like *флудить*, for instance, can be used to refer to writing, drinking, playing, spamming etc., all excessively. These are all metonymically related actions, even though they are very different. As proponents of the Overlap Hypthesis point out, prefixes can combine with verbs to yield natural perfectives in cases where the semantics of the two elements overlap. It therefore makes sense that a verb like *флудить* combines with several prefixes, considering *флудить* carries a wide range of semantic meanings.

In verbs that have clear lexical counterparts in CSR, we see that the dissimilarity in the prevalence of prefix variation is much less radical. The speaker has an analogy readily available when he uses these verbs and as a result and these verbs have meanings which seem less general and more similar to those of their counterparts. Prefix variation is therefore less prevalent in such verbs.

My data also shows that although the prefixes of the natural perfective of the CSR counterparts is always among those prefixes used

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[17] Sokolova (2012)

to yield natural perfectives in these occasional verbs, they are often not the most frequent prefix-verb combinations. In fact, there is a general tendency among all my verbs, both with and without lexical equivalents in CSR, that *за-* by far is the most popular prefix in prefixed natural perfectives. Perhaps one of the several semantic meanings of *за-* that harmonize well with the perfective aspect has been expanded upon to render *за-* the default prefix in prefixed aspectual pairs.

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Online resources

Exploring Emptiness: Database of imperfectives that form aspectual pairs via prefixation: http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/.

Национальный корпус русского языка: http://www.ruscorpora.ru/.

E-mail: jongje@yandex.com