

## A POverful Preverb: PO- and the Russian Verbs of Communication

The existence of a structural difference between ‘lexical’ and ‘superlexical’ preverbs in Slavic languages, although widely recognized since the early ‘60s (ISAČENKO 1960: 148-159), has prompted a great deal of work only in the last decades, with a preminent focus on Russian (ARSENIJEVIĆ 2007, RAMCHAND 2004, ROMANOVA 2004, SVENONIUS 2004, TATEVOSOV 2015, TOLSKAYA 2018 et al.). It is no coincidence that scholars have been devoting special attention to *po-*, which is by far one of the most polysemous preverbs in Russian, both functioning as a purely abstract (i.e. semantically empty) perfectivizing marker (e.g. *posmotret*<sup>PF</sup> ‘to look at’) and realizing several different types of *Aktionsarten*, from the inchoative (e.g. *pojti*<sup>PF</sup> ‘to go’) to the delimitative (e.g. *poguljat*<sup>PF</sup> ‘to take a stroll’) and the distributive (e.g. *poumirat*<sup>PF</sup> ‘to die one by one’) (see the full list in ZALIZNJAK, MIKAELJAN, ŠMELEV 2015: 110-135).

As such, *po-* has been analyzed with particular reference to its interplay with the verbal predicate at the syntax-semantics interface (e.g. the semantic interpretation the preverb receives according to the scale the event denoted by the predicate is measured out), the peculiar temporal characteristics it exhibits in certain Slavic languages (see BISKUP 2019: 127-157 for Czech), and the pivotal role it has played in diachrony towards the grammaticalization of the aspectual category, e.g. in East Slavic languages (DICKEY, HUTCHESON 2003, DICKEY 2005: 45-48, DICKEY 2007, DICKEY 2011, SIGALOV 1975 et al.).

In this respect, it is interesting to note that in Contemporary Russian most unprefixated verbs of communication (henceforth VOCs, as intended, for instance, in ISRAELI 2001), including many explicit performatives, take *po-* (henceforth PERFPO-) to form their perfective partner. It is commonly assumed in the literature that PERFPO- does not contribute substantially to the semantics of the resulting verbal forms, thus behaving more like a neutral perfectivizing marker. As a matter of fact, in the following examples (1)-(3), which feature a performative context, the aspectual oscillation between IPF and PF does not trigger a shift in the lexical meaning of the verb. The choice of (PERFPO-) PF over IPF, however, seems to be regulated by mechanisms of (predominantly) pragmatic nature, such as (positive or negative) politeness, interpersonal distance between interlocutors, and the presence of a feature of authority of the speaker over their interlocutor(s) (BIASIO 2019):

- (1) *Prošu*<sup>IPF</sup>/*Poprošu*<sup>PF</sup> *Vaši bilety, požalujsta.*  
‘Tickets, please’ (lit. ‘I ask for your tickets’)
- (2) *Sovetuju*<sup>IPF</sup>/*Posovetuju*<sup>PF</sup> *posmotret’ poslednij fil’m Zvjaginceva.*  
‘I suggest you watch Zvjagincev’s last movie’
- (3) *Ja ot tebjja trebuju*<sup>IPF</sup>/*potrebuju*<sup>PF</sup>, *čtoby ty prekratil izdevatel’stvo nado mnoj.*  
‘All I demand from you is that you stop laughing at me’

In this contribution it is taken a step further and it is claimed that the very choice of PERFPO- for Russian VOCs (including performative verbs) is not casual, for in this context the preverb can be seen as a specific token of the more general type SUPERLEXICAL PO-.

Three main theoretical issues are being investigated in this presentation:

1) From a morphological point of view, it is proposed that PERFPO- be interpreted not as a (semantically empty) perfectivizing marker, but rather as a morphological element whose primary function is to formalize a pragmatic parameter of *authority* on behalf of the speaker.

It is thus proposed that this parameter is derived via metaphorical extension of the delimitative reading, which, differently from VOCs, typically does obtain for perfective atelic predicates (e.g. *pozanimat'sja* <matematikoј> 'to study <mathematics> for a while', *porabotat'* 'to work for a while' etc.);

2) From a syntactic point of view, it is proposed that PERFPO- moves higher than "empty" *po-*, i.e. it does not stop at the AspP/TP head but goes up to the CP domain, presumably moving at the ForceP level (on the fine-grained structure of CP see BENINCÀ, POLETTI 2004);

3) From a pragmatic point of view, it is argued that the correct interpretation of the form is context-dependent (in the dynamic and ever-changing sense of STALNAKER 2014) and is granted by the specification of a series of pragmatic and conversational variables (the role of the speaker towards their interlocutor, the epistemic evaluation of the event etc.) which are constantly being determined and reshaped on a case-by-case basis in the speech act event.

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