

A Discourse Analysis of *sobirat'sja/sobrat'sja uxodit'* vs. *sobirat'sja/sobrat'sja ujtj*

This paper is intended to be part of a larger study of aspectual usage in the infinitive in Russian, which has escaped detailed discourse analysis (for some insightful descriptive commentary, see Forsyth 1970: 227–298). Russian texts and conversational discourse, combinations of *sobirat'sja/sobrat'sja* ‘get ready’ with the perfective *ujtj* ‘leave’ and imperfective *uxodit'* ‘idem’ alternate frequently. Representative examples are given in (1a–b):

- (1) a. Stepan Fëdorovič obnjal za pleči lejtenanta, slovno **sobratsja ujtj**^{PF} vmeste s nim.
‘Stepan Fëdorovič embraced the lieutenant, as if he were ready to leave together with him.’
- b. On zašel v komnatu k Prjaxinu, kotoryj v ètot moment nadeval plašč, **sobirajas' uxodit'**^{MPF}, i gromko skazal:
— Privetstvujju, tovarišč Prjaxin, pozdravljaju s perexodom na rabotu v oblastnoj komitet.
‘He stopped into Prjaxin’s office, who at that moment was putting on his raincoat, getting ready to leave.
“Greetings Comrade Prjaxin, congratulations on your new position in the regional committee.”’

The difference between perfective *ujtj* and imperfective *uxodit'* in such examples cannot be swept under the threadbare rug of the distinction between completed events (perfective) and events in progress (imperfective). In the context of a simple physical departure, imperfective *uxodit'* does not easily allow a processual or a conative interpretation (in contrast to more figurative contexts such as the departure of a lover as the end of a relationship, etc.)

Assuming that *sobirat'sja/sobrat'sja* refers to pre-event preparations (and not in the least mental preparations, as observed by Šmelev 2002: 145–146), and in view of the inaccessibility of a process interpretation of imperfective *uxodit'* ‘leave’, it seems that *sobirat'sja/sobrat'sja* + *uxodit'*^{MPF}/*ujtj*^{PF} means ‘get ready to leave’, whereby the departure is construed as a completed event in either aspect. In view of this, this paper argues that the difference between imperfective *uxodit'* and perfective *ujtj* is dependent on the knowledge/focus of the narrator/observer: if the narrator/observer has knowledge of/is interested in the purpose of the departure and *ipso facto* the consequences of the departure, then the perfective is used; if not, the imperfective is used.

Applying this hypothesis to (1a–b) above, we can explain the use of perfective *ujtj* with the fact that in the novel Stepan Fëdorovič is a main character through whose perspective is important for the unfolding story, and hence the scenario in which he leaves with the lieutenant and fights in the war with the possible attendant consequences, even if hypothetical, is one to which the narrator directs the reader’s attention. In contrast, when Stepan Fëdorovič goes to visit Prjaxin, he has no information on where Prjaxin is preparing to depart for—he merely infers that he is going to depart somewhere. Indeed in the narrative, Prjaxin's destination and his plans for it are irrelevant for Stepan Fëdorovič and the larger story.

Thus, the choice between the perfective and the imperfective in this construction is not about completion, but about whether the causal chain of events involving the departure is known to the narrator/observer and a matter of focus or concern. On a general level we can connect knowledge of and focus on such a causal chain of events with Dickey’s (2000, 2018) theory of temporal definiteness as the meaning of the Russian perfective. For example, when there is explicit mention

of situations in some causal/temporal relationship with the departure, the perfective is regularly used, as in (2):

- (2) Aleksej **sobiraetsja ujtj**^{PF} iz sem'i, kogda dočeri ispolnitsja vosemnadcat'.
'Aleksej is preparing to leave the family when his daughter turns 18.'

Here there is a causal/temporal sequence of events: first the daughter turns 18, then Aleksej leaves. And in contrast, we find the imperfective in contexts where there is no causal/temporal sequence, as in (3), in which the speaker has no idea what such a causal/temporal sequence might be:

- (3) Vy, kažetsja, **sobiraetes' uxodit**^{IMP?}

In this example the speaker has just come to an apartment after a long absence and cannot know where the interlocutor is going.

In some contexts the point of the departure is only to get away, not to go away somewhere to do something, and the focus on the result of getting away is enough to render the perfective felicitous, as in (4).

- (4) Podtalkivaja drug druga i krivo usmexajas', oni uže **sobiralis' ujtj**^{PF}, kogda k nim ustremilsja usatj krasavec-xozjain s rasprospertymi ob''jatijami.
'Pushing each other and smiling wryly, they were already getting ready to leave when the handsome, mustached owner came straight at them with his arms wide open.'

Here what is relevant is that the soldiers feel awkward in the bar and simply want to be gone, which would be achieved by their departure.

While the overall connection to temporal definiteness as a causal/temporal sequence of events seems to be accurate where perfective usage is concerned, a more nuanced proposal has been put forth by Popov (2020), who argues that the perfective in this construction creates a mental space of a departure event and its consequences. If that mental space can be coherently included in the textual/discourse context, the perfective is felicitous. If not, then the imperfective is the only felicitous option, referring to a completed event but without the scenario of its own mental space.

The paper considers this analysis in more detail.

References

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