How defective are Russian defective verbs?

This study addresses the issue of the well-known phenomenon of defective verbs in Russian. The most cited example is the verb *pobedit'* 'to win', the 1sg. non-past of which is systematically replaced by a paraphrase *oderžu pobedu* 'I will obtain a victory'. Such verbs have received much attention in recent work (e.g., Baerman 2008; Albright 2009; Pertsova 2016; Sims 2017; Yang 2016, Gorman & Yang 2019, etc.). Many approaches were proposed in order to account for their defectivity, which seems to be a well-established fact. We observe, however, that Russian defective verbs are not always defective. In some situations, Russian speakers do produce the 1sg. non-past of verbs such as *pobedit'* 'to win', *ubedit'* 'to persuade', *učudit'* 'to behave oddly', etc. This work aims to study contexts in which verbs traditionally described as defective in standard Russian do not pose a problem for speakers. In particular, I will take a closer look at data from non-standard varieties of the Russian language, i.e. dialects and web texts.

Most of Russian defective verbs belong to 2nd conjugation class and share some phonological resemblance: their stems end in a dental consonant /t/, /d/, /s/ or /z/, all of which normally undergo a consonant alternation in the 1 sg. non-past resulting in *[tʃ]*, *[ʒ]*,*[ʃ]* and *[ʒ]* respectively. According to Baerman (2008) and Daland, Sims and Pierrehumbert (2007), these alternations are automatic and exceptionless in standard Russian, and verbs missing the 1 sg. non-past form are lexicalized. As for non-standard Russian, consonant alternations do not always apply in the 1 sg. non-past. In many dialects of the Russian language forms without alternation are widely attested: *hod'u* ' I am walking'; *let'u* ' I am flying'; *vid'u* ' I see' (e.g., Obnorskij 1953). Similar forms can be found in a corpus of web texts: *pobed'u* ' I will win', *apgrejd'u* ' I upgrade', *ubed'u* 'I will persuade'. The question arises whether the usage of non-alternation leads to absence of defective verbs in non-standard varieties of Russian or, on the contrary, Russian speakers experience more difficulties in producing the 1 sg. non-past form of 2nd conjugation verbs.

In order to discuss this question, I am addressing the formal competition-based model of productivity advanced by Yang (2016). The defectivity of Russian verbs lacking the 1 sg. non-past form, according to Yang, can be explained by the Tolerance principle. In line with this principle, productivity of a rule depends on the number of exceptions to this rule. In particular, the number of exceptions must not exceed a critical number, which Yang calls the threshold of productivity ($=\theta_N$). The Tolerance principle applied to a group of Russian 2nd conjugation verbs with stems ending in a dental consonant predicts defectivity of Russian verbs. According to this calculus the consonant alternation rule *[t]>[tʃ]* cannot reliably apply in *t* stems because there are too many exceptions: for 66 roots there are 22 exceptions (with *[t]>[ʃtʃ]* alternation) while the productivity threshold is 16 (θ_{66} = 16). As the number of exceptions exceeds the critical number, the *[t]-[tʃ]* alternation is considered unproductive and this leads to paradigm gaps. The problem, however, is that verbs with *t* stems in Russian are rarely defective and the number of exceptions to this consonant alternation rule does not seem to contribute to defectivity. It seems that the same situation is possible in non-standard Russian where the number of exceptions to consonant alternation rules increases because of a non-alternation option. For some verbs there are even more than two possibilities for the 1 sg. non-past form production (see Tables 1, 2). I propose that rule competition does not necessarily leads to defectivity. In Russian, more crucial for paradigm defectivity is probably a situation when there is an option grammatically available to speakers but prohibited by standard language norms.

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Table 1. Results of Google search for the 1 sg. non-past of some new verbs, borrowings from English, with *d* stems.

Verbs	d	ž	žd	dž
frendit' 'to befriend'	4 690	119 000	3	2520
zafrendit' 'to become friends'	6 480	16 300	0	649
fludit' 'to flood'	33 200	97 500	7	328
apgrejdit' 'to upgrade'	3860	525 000	0	811

Table 2. Results of Google search for the 1sg. non-past form of traditionally defective verbs with the root *-bed-'*.

Verbs	d	ž	žd
pobedit' 'to win'	353 000	60 800	65 400
ubedit' 'to persuade'	11 200	16 600	17 200
ubedit'sa 'to make sure'	13 500	46 900	5 120
razubedit' 'to dissuade'	317	2 730	139
pereubedit' 'to convince'	2 000	10 500	590