

On the semantics
of the so-called present perfective:
what studies of the Russian language show

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The classical view

The temporal paradigm of the Russian perfective does not have the member "the present tense".

Perfectivity and the meaning of the present tense contradict each other.

Table 1.

The established view on the temporal paradigm (TP) of the Russian verb

verb	imperfective	perfective
member of the TP		
"the past tense"	√	√
"the present tense"	√	—
"the future tense"	√	√

However,
there exists the widespread belief that in numerous cases,
the contradiction is removed.

The temporal paradigm in Russian
is not structured as straightforwardly as Table 1 depicts it.

The claim of my presentation:
modern linguistics can develop conclusive arguments
to substantiate the canonical perspective.

"The essence of the Russian verb is the aspect, and we should proceed from the aspect in order to gain a real insight on the notion of tense..." (Serge Karcevski)

* * *

A (brief) introduction of the aspectual theory I work within.

It is known for corroborating ideas of the classics of aspectology about the scope of purely-aspectual pairs in Russian.

It differentiates three perfective semes:

'initial punctual bound' ●————¹ (*запрыгать*, etc.)

'final punctual bound' —————● (*отпрыгать*, etc.)

'initial-final punctual bound' ●————● (*попрыгать*, etc.;
пропрыгать час, etc.)

¹ Here and elsewhere both the absolute and the relative size of the segments and points are conventional.

Among the results of this approach:

- Two types of the meaning of beginning: **linear** and **punctual**.

Compare the visual metaphors for the synonymous constructions:

начать^{perf.} + *INF* 
стать^{perf.} + *INF* 

- The semantic description of perfectives like *прыгнуть*.
Compare the visual metaphors for the correlates:

стать^{perf.} + *прыгать* 
'process of non-standard duration'

отпрыгать 
'process of standard duration'

прыгнуть 
'process of non-standard duration'

What is the nature of temporal meaning?

Thought experiment

Material: the paradigm of concrete Russian verbs

Participants: average 6-7 year old native speakers

Equipment: linguistic intuition, rational thinking

Expected results

When merely comparing all members of the Russian verb paradigm outside any context, participants will single out

- series like *играл–играет–будет играть,*
сыграл–сыграет, etc.;

- groups like *играл–играла–играло–играли,*
сыграл–сыграла–сыграло–сыграли
играю–играем–играешь–играете–играет–играют,
сыграю–сыграем–сыграешь–сыграете–сыграет–сыграют,
etc.

Hypothesis

The participants will describe the rationale behind the series and groups as

- (1) their members inform about the time of the action in the real (physical) world;
- (2) their members are interpreted through the notions of the past, present, and future time.

I argue:

each member of the temporal paradigm possesses
a specific temporal seme.



Its defining requires the notion of the temporal reference mark
(TRM).



There are three temporal semes:
'simultaneity with the TRM' ('present tense'),
'anteriority to the TRM' ('past tense'),
'posteriority to the TRM' ('future tense').



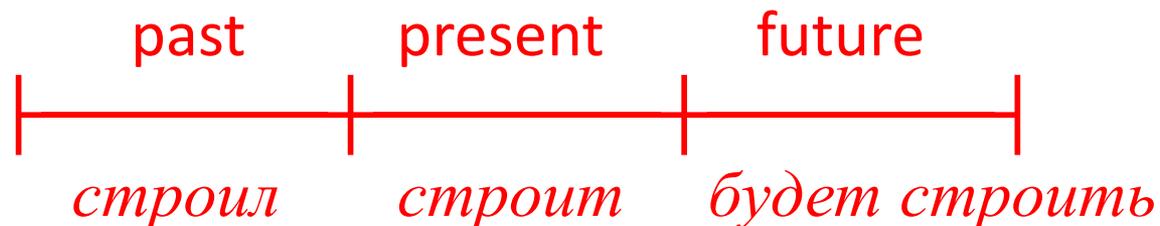
The key to the nature of the paradigmatic temporal
meaning is the notion of the TRM.

The TRM: a point or an interval?

If it is an interval (i.e. a segment), then

- it has clear, definite boundaries (limits);
- the time scale consists of three such segments;
- these segments are equal to each other (otherwise, the temporal planes of one and the same verb differ in their length);
- the limits of these segments are rigid;
- these limits are perceived by the linguistic intuition (in the same way as any Russian speaker intuits the seme 'punctual bound' in perfectives);
- but at the same time, those limits are distinct from the perfective seme in their cognitive nature. See the figure:

Fig. 1.



However,

this model of the category of tense is in conflict with the facts:

- verbs differ as regards the duration of the seme 'process';
- the future tense of imperfectives is analytic;
- the meaning of perfectives contains the seme 'punctual bound'.

In other words, Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 are incompatible:

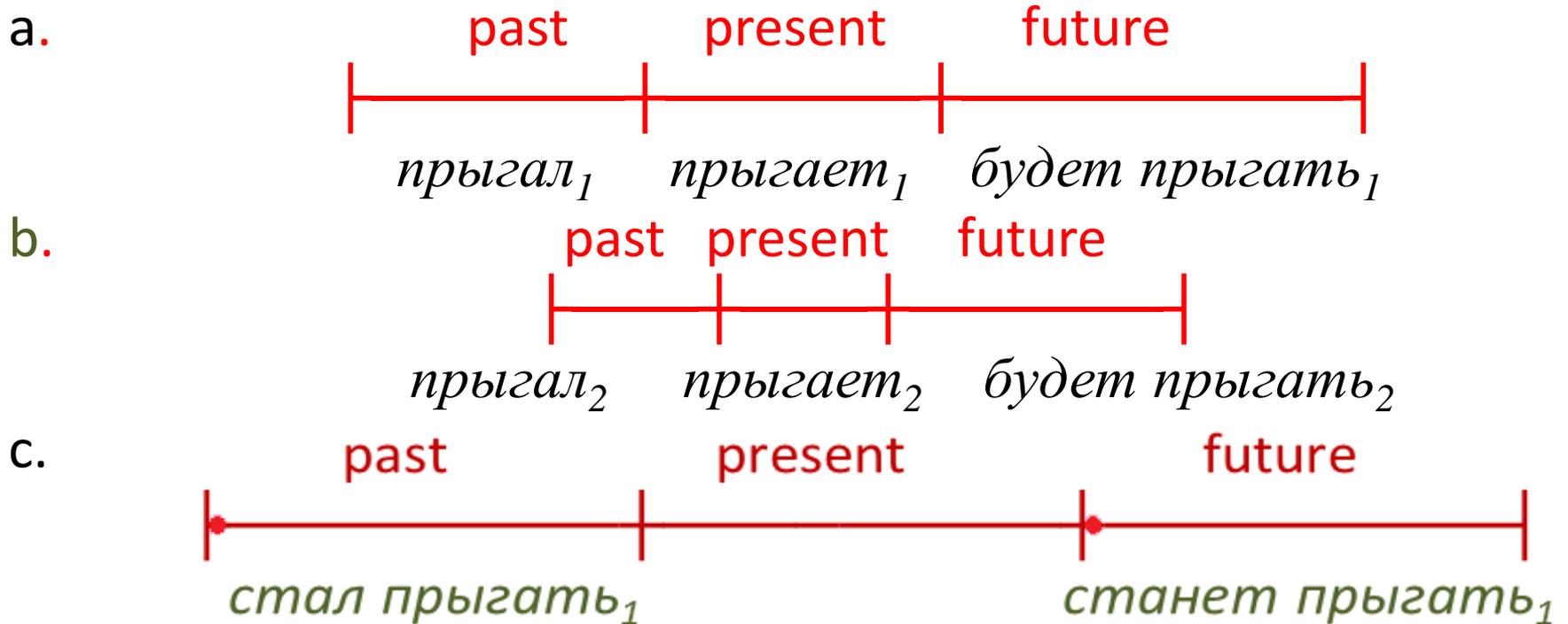


Fig. 1 represents the incorrect model of the category of tense.

Fig. 2 visualizes not just a cumbersome model. It is inconsistent. This model portrays the native speaker who puts up with the both counterintuitive and contradictory features of the category of tense in their language.

Conclusion

The tradition rightfully treats TRM as a point. Importantly, the temporal reference point is the moment of observation and it is static.

(The motion discerned by the linguistic intuition is the same 'process'.)

So, what is the temporal paradigm of the Russian perfective like?

The semantic summary

1. The seme 'punctual bound' as dominant for any perfective is inseparable from the seme 'process' and they combine into the complex semantic component:

'punctual bound + process'.

2. This complex is freely compatible with the semes 'past tense' ('anteriority to the TRP') and 'future tense' ('posteriority to the TRP').

3. The case of the seme 'present tense' is paradoxical.

Neither the punctual nature of perfectivity nor the linear essence of the seme 'process' are obstacles for their compatibility with the seme 'simultaneity with the temporal reference point'.

However, these two semes
cannot be "simultaneously simultaneous" ¹
with the temporal reference moment.

4. The complex 'punctual bound + process'
"repels" the seme 'present tense'.

One cannot even imagine their approaching each other.
For any perfective verb, it would mean unavoidable disappearance.

The seme 'present tense' would destroy the verb:
the verb would split, it would fall into pieces.

Hence the fundamental incompatibility
of the perfectives with the seme 'present tense'.

¹ The apt formula by И.Б. Шатуновский [Проблемы русского вида. 2009: 195]

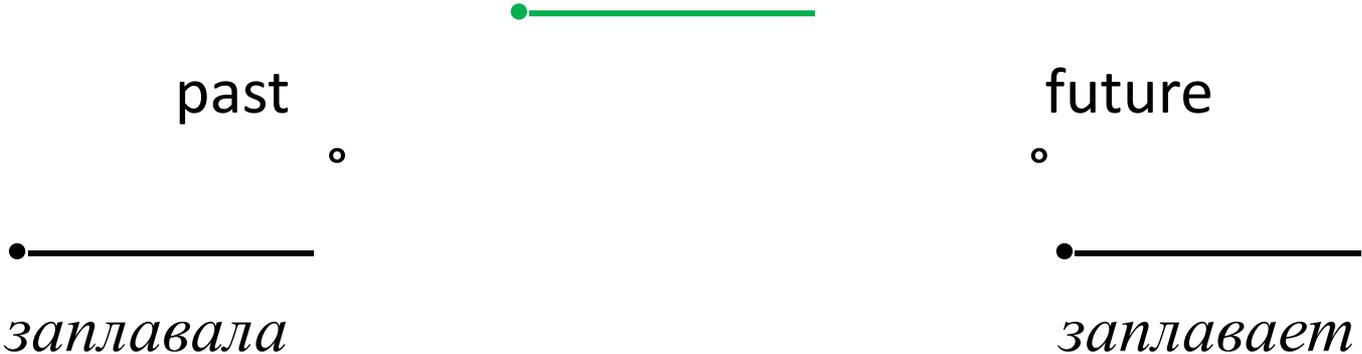
So, what does the temporal paradigm of the Russian perfective look like?

The visual summary

1. The gold standard of the temporal paradigm:

past ◦ <i>'process'</i>	present ◦ <i>'process'</i>	future ◦ <i>'process'</i>
past ◦	E.g.: present ◦	future ◦
<hr/>	<hr/>	<hr/>
<i>плавала</i>	<i>плавает</i>	<i>будет плавать</i>

2.1. The temporal paradigm of the Russian perfectives:



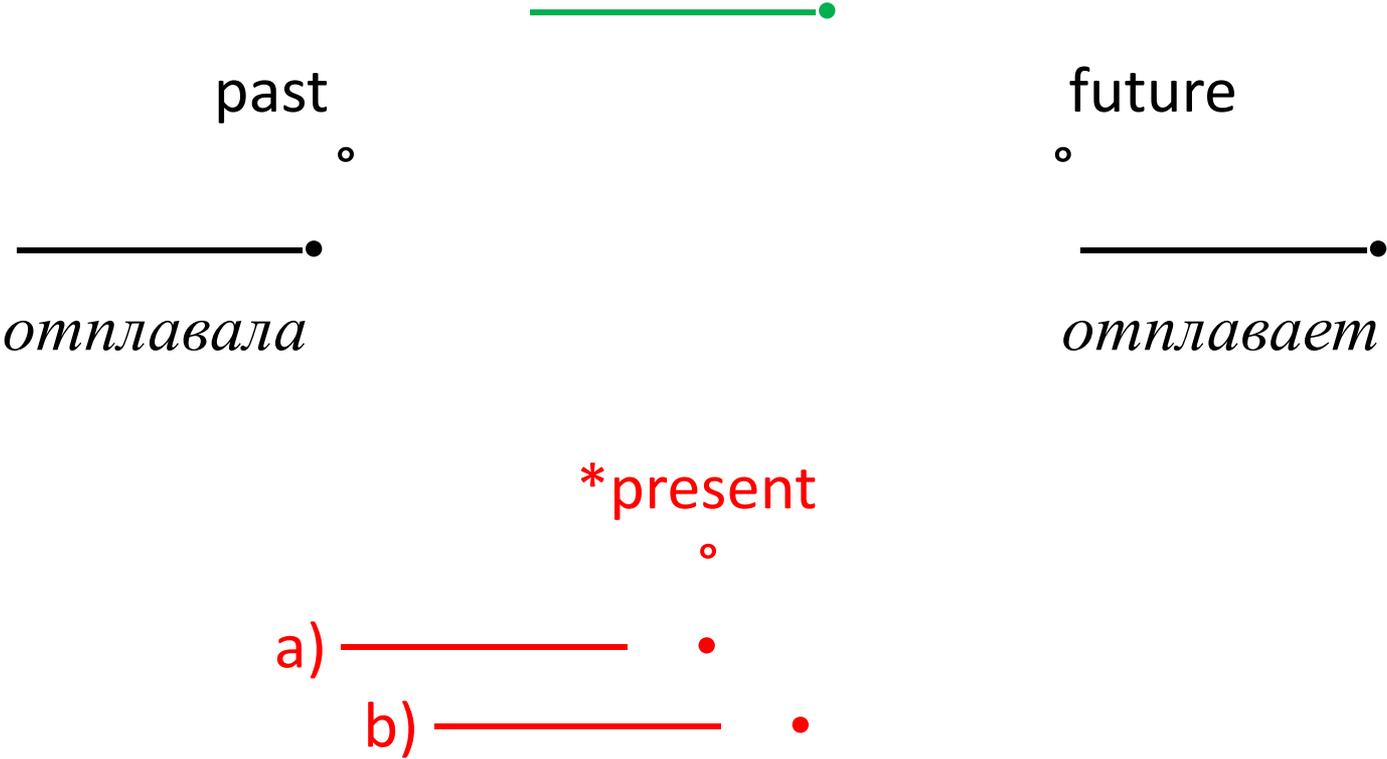
*present

○

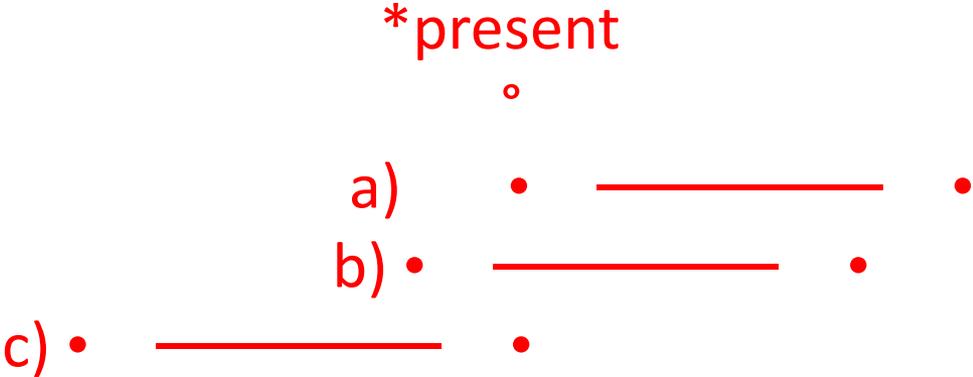
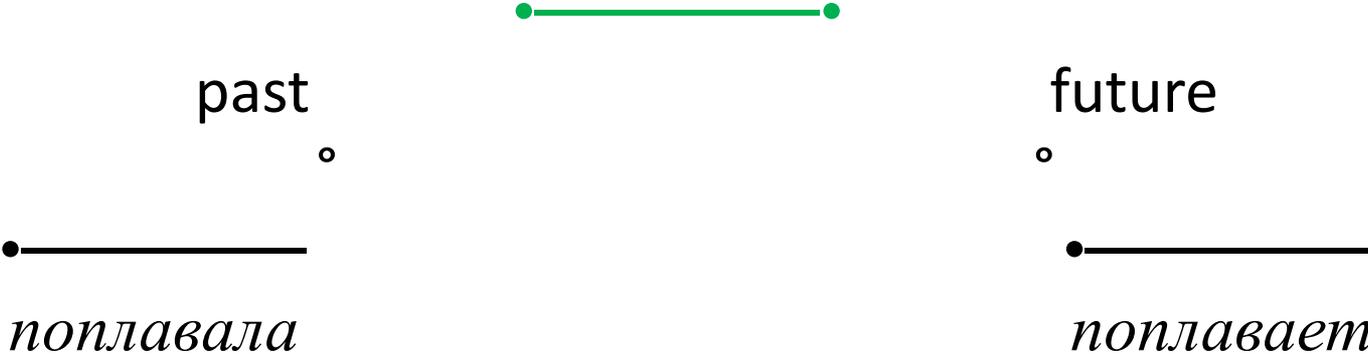
a) ●—————

b) ●—————

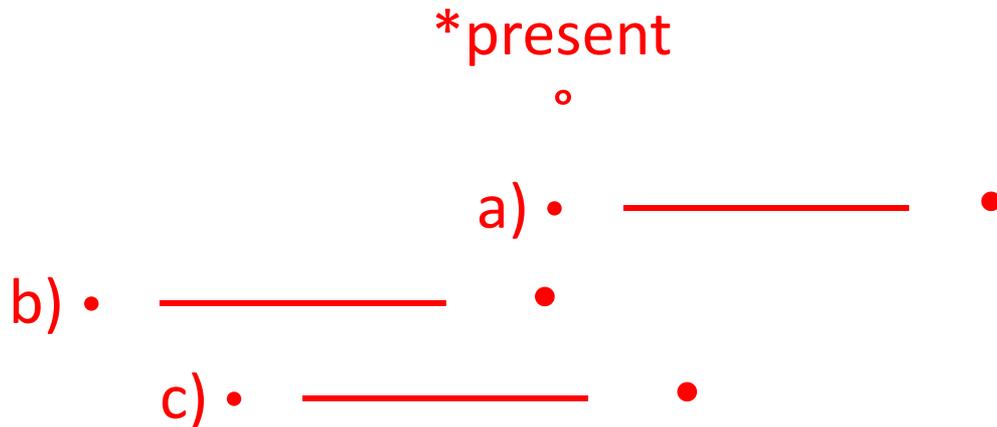
2.2. The temporal paradigm of the Russian perfectives:



2.3. The temporal paradigm of the Russian perfectives:



2.4. The temporal paradigm of the Russian perfectives:



The alternative explanation

The perfective stays "intact"
and embraces two or even all three temporal planes:

*past present

o



заплавала

*present future

o



отплавала

*past present future

o



поплавала

*past present future

o



проплавала час

This hypothesis questions
the very presence of the category of tense in Russian.

CONCLUSION

In Russian, there is no perfective verb the meaning of which can contain the seme 'simultaneity with the temporal reference point'. The temporal paradigm of the Russian perfective is defective: it does not include the member "the present tense".

One can assume that in a certain context, member "the future tense" of the temporal paradigm could express the same syntagmatic temporal meaning as the member "the present tense" of the temporal paradigm of imperfectives.

However, the claim requires an extensive investigation.

When ascertained, such a meaning should be qualified as syntagmatic.

The explanation proposed is expected to be advantageous not only for Russian.

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