A corpus study on verbal aspect in Czech, Polish and Russian imperatives

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The category of verbal aspect permeates almost the entire Slavic verb paradigm, including the imperative, meaning all Slavic languages can form both an imperfective (ipfv) and a perfective (pfv) imperative, e.g. Pl *pisz*IPFV*!* 'write!' vs. *napisz*PFV*!* 'write!'.

It can be said that aspect usage in the imperative generally follows canonic Slavic aspect functions (as described among others in AG-80 and Lehmann 2009 for Russian and in Dickey 2000 for Slavic languages in general): the ipfv is used for states and activities (cf. Pl *mów*IPFV *głośniej!* 'speak louder!') whereas accomplishments and achievements require the pfv (cf. Pl *otwórz*PFV *okno!* 'open the window!'). There are two more areas where the use of the ipfv is not surprising: negated imperatives (cf. *nie otwieraj*IPFV *drzwi!* 'don't open the door!') and iterations of events (cf. Pl *kupuj*IPFV *zawsze u mnie!* 'buy always from me!').

A well-known "deviation" from expected aspect usage can be found in the ipfv Russian imperative for events that are neither negated nor iterated, e.g. *otkryvaj*IPFV *okno!* instead of *otkroj*PFV *okno!* (both 'open the window!'). The effect of this ipfv imperative has been previously described contradictorily as either rude or polite, or confusingly as both; for a more detailed account see Benacchio (2002: 150), who in a later monography (2010) compares Russian data to data from twelve other Slavic languages, arriving at the conclusion that this special use of the ipfv imperative is mostly exclusive to the East Slavic languages, except for some instances in other languages where the ipfv can convey a strong rudeness, but never politeness.

I use the Czech National Corpus (ČNK) and the Araneum web corpora in Russian and Polish to compare the frequency of (non-negated) imperatives of perfective verbs to the frequency of their imperfective partner verbs (in the singular, the plural, and the Polish third-person polite forms with *niech pan/pani/państwo* and *proszę + inf*). Accomplishment and achievement verbs are of main interest here because they are expected to show only a very low frequency of ipfv imperatives in Polish and Czech due to the absence of the "pragmatic" ipfv imperative described above. This frequency-based approach is complemented by checking common collocations of the imperative tokens, giving a clearer picture of the tokens. One example to illustrate this: Czech *dávat*IPFV 'to give' is an event verb and thus a possibly candidate for pragmatic ipfv imperative. It occurs 1,025 times in the imperative, but 72% of these tokens cooccur with *pozor*, forming the phraseme *dávat pozor* 'to give attention = to be careful', which denotes not an event at all, but a state. Overall, this corpus approach provides new insights into the topic of aspect in Slavic imperatives compared to Benacchio's data, which is based on informants and a rather small number of sentence items. Questions addressed include: Do Polish and Czech pattern in the same way, and differ only from Russian, or are there differences between them? Is there a pragmatic ipfv imperative outside of East Slavic languages (i.e. tokens of ipfv event imperatives that are not iterated or negated)? Do some event verbs allow more ipfv imperatives than others, possibly hinting at formularization? More generally speaking, I wish to show that corpus linguistics can provide valuable additional insights into the study of pragmatically motivated grammatical variation.

References

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