

Slavic-type aspect in the Caucasus

Typologically oriented studies have shown that the expression of the aspectual opposition ‘perfective-imperfective’ by means of preverbs is a quite rare phenomenon (Dahl 1985, Bybee, Dahl 1989). The label ‘Slavic-type aspect’ proposed for this derivational category reflects the fact that the Slavic language family (Russian above all) has, until recently, been the primary source of assumptions and data about aspect; however, similar systems are to be found also in other languages and language families, which can be compared and arranged along a scale according to their degree of grammaticalization (Comrie 1976: 93-94).

In this paper I attempt a typological comparison of aspect as a grammatical category in three languages spoken in the Caucasus region: Russian, Ossetic and Georgian. Starting from the formal side, we find there a set of productive preverbs fulfilling lexical as well as grammatical functions: they can change the meaning and/or the grammatical status of the verbal lexeme to which they are attached in very different ways. Indeed, a number of idiosyncrasies and semantic restrictions within the Slavic-type aspect depend on its derivational character (Dahl 1984: 4, 1985: 27, 2000: 17-18; Breu 2000: 22; Lehmann 2004: 169).

Russian, Ossetic and Georgian share common traits but present at the same time significant differences:

1. in Georgian and Russian, but not in Ossetic, prefixed present forms express future time reference;
2. in Georgian and Ossetic, but not in Russian, prefixes, when combined with a motion verb, do not perfectivize the verbal lexeme;
3. in Georgian, but not in Russian and Ossetic, the derivational aspect shows a semantic-categorial restriction to the telic verbs of the first and second conjugations.

In order to properly understand these differences, precedence will be given to question of meanings over question of morphological form; the scope of the analysis will therefore extend from the domain of word morphology to the sentential and discourse domains. All the aspectual features will be investigated within the TAM-systems of each language not only in synchronic terms, but also from a diachronic perspective.

A serious difficulty in reconstructing the development of the aspect category is represented by the fact that the grammaticalization process (from verbal prefixes having spatial meaning to pure grammatical markers through the stage of telicizing bounders) cannot be captured by looking only at the form of the stem (Wiemer, Bisang 2004). The recent work by Bermel 1997, however, has demonstrated that a detailed examination of the written documentation, possible only in the case of Russian and Georgian, if combined with the study of the synchronic aspectual patterns, can shed light on the grammaticalization path of the aspect category.

Typological and genetic questions are tightly connected with the areal interpretation (Levitskaja 2004); the various interpretations of Sprachbund-phenomena proposed in the scientific literature will be illustrated and discussed.

As information sources extant descriptions of the languages in question, in the form of grammars and/or scientific articles devoted to aspect, have been consulted, along with data elicited from native speakers and text reading.

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