

There is no imperfective specification in Serbo-Croatian: a view from multipurpose suffixes

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The standard view is that SC verbs can be perfective, imperfective, or biaspectual (i.e. unspecified between the two values). Two Serbo-Croatian (SC) suffixes: *-a* and *-va*, typically used for secondary imperfectivization (1a), are also used for the integration of loan verbs (1b) and denominal derivation of verbs (1c).

- (1) a. na-griz(-a)-ti b. firc-a-ti (Hung fércz) c. venc-a-ti
on-bite^{IPF}-a-Inf firc-a-Inf wreath_n-θ-a-Inf
'corrode'^{PRF(IPF)} 'stitch'^{BIASP} 'crown / marry'^{BIASP}

The question emerges why the same suffixes are used for distinct purposes, and in particular how come the suffixes specialized for imperfectivization of perfective verbs derive biaspectual verbs when fed nouns or borrowed verbs.

I argue for the hypothesis in (2), which implies an analysis as in (3).

(2) SC (and probably more generally Slavic) verbs can only vary between two aspectual values: the absence of an aspectual specification (the traditional biaspectual verbs) and its presence (the traditional perfective verbs).

(3) No SC verbs which are strictly imperfective – the verbs traditionally treated as imperfective are all actually biaspectual.

The tendency for an imperfective interpretation of the traditional imperfectives is merely a conventionalized scalar implicature. All these verbs stand in aspectual opposition with at least one perfective minimal pair. As a perfective verb is a stronger expression for a perfective meaning, the implicature emerges that the unspecified verb is used when the imperfective meaning is intended. The strength of the implicature projects on a scale as in

- (4) strong implicature > medium implicature > weak implicature
1 to 1 opposition 1 to many opposition no opposition
'secondary imperfectives' 'primary imperfectives' 'biaspectuals'

I identify and test a set of predictions that distinguish this theory from the standard theories of SC aspect.

(5) Perfective verbs will pass tests of perfectivity and fail tests of imperfectivity, while all remaining verbs will pass both sets of tests – with possible pragmatic degradations.

(6) Verbs with unique minimal pairs will show stronger pragmatic degradation on tests of perfectivity than verbs with multiple perfective minimal pairs, which will show stronger degradation than verbs without perfective minimal pairs.

(7) The border between traditional biaspectuals and traditional imperfectives is vague.

(8) The imperfectivity of traditional imperfectives is cancellable.

I present tests of these predictions, which confirm them, and thus manifest the superiority of the presented theory of SC (and probably also more generally Slavic) grammatical aspect.