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# The Role of Preverbs in Expressing Aspect Meanings in Hungarian and Russian

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1. Traditionally, aspect is considered to be a grammatical category which is based on the morphological structure of the verb. In this respect there are significant differences between Hungarian and Russian.

The Hungarian verbal system is characterized by "Aktionsarten", or aspect formations, rather than by aspect as an independent grammatical category. On the other hand, in Russian the whole verbal system is based on the opposition of imperfective and perfective verbs. However, the lexical meaning of verb stems and prefixes cannot be ignored either. In recent publications on the aspectual system in Hungarian, aspect is defined at sentence level and is attached to syntax (Kiefer 1982, 1983; Hetzron 1982; De Groot 1984). By aspect Kiefer understands the internal time structure of a situation (Kiefer 1982: 297).

In Hungarian it is usually only the context or the situation which reveals the aspectual meaning of the verb. In Russian it is generally defined by the morphological structure of the verb. For example:

- (1) a Minden nap *felkelek* hatkor  
b Каждый день я встаю в 6 часов  
'Every day I get up at 6'
- (2) a Holnap *felkelek* hatkor  
b Завтра я встану в 6 часов  
'Tomorrow I shall get up at 6'

The same Hungarian verb ("felkelek") can be used to denote two different functions. So it is not the verb which expresses aspectual meaning but the whole situation that is specified by an adverb of time. In Russian the change of the adverb of time is followed by the use of the verb which expresses the necessary aspectual meaning.

If we want to formulate a general rule to explain the above-mentioned fact for the use of the aspects in both languages, we can say that the final choice of the appropriate verb in Hungarian depends on the syntactic structure of

the utterance, especially on the word-order, but in Russian it is the morphological structure of the verb that is significant.

If the word-order is changed, the verb can be the same or replaced by a verb without a prefix in Hungarian. The meaning of the utterance will remain the same:

- (3) a Holnap hatkor *felkelek*  
b Holnap hatkor *kelek*  
c Завтра в 6 часов я встану

The Russian perfective verb cannot be changed no matter what alternations take place in the Hungarian sentence. So when a Hungarian speaker tries to express what he has in mind he concentrates first of all on the sentence-structure, which determines the choice of the appropriate verb form as well. The Russian speaker always bears in mind the imperfective-perfective dichotomy of the verbs when deciding how to form his thoughts. This does not mean of course that syntactical means should be ignored when expressing aspectual meanings in Russian, but they play a secondary role. This fully coincides with Bondarko's definition of the notion "aspectuality" (Bondarko 1971: 49-55). He defines "aspectuality" as a functional-semantic category, *the main component of which is "vid" 'aspect'*. It is important to emphasize that "vid" is a grammatical category belonging to the Russian verbal system, and "aspectuality" is the feature of the sentence.

2. There are essential differences between the Hungarian preverbs and their Russian counterparts, which can be summarized as follows.

2.1. Hungarian preverbs represent *an independent part of speech* and often become separated from their stem, which is absolutely impossible in the case of Russian verbal prefixes. For example:

- (4) a *Eladtam két könyvet*  
Я продал две книги  
'I have sold two books'
- b *Én adtam el két könyvet*  
Это я продал две книги  
'It's me who sold two books'
- c – *Eladtál két könyvet?*  
– *El*  
– Ты продал две книги?

– Да, продал

‘Have you sold two books?’

‘Yes, I have’

The independent use of Hungarian preverbs can best be illustrated by (4) c. When the action described by the prefixed verb has to be confirmed, the preverb, *el*, without its stem can be used for this purpose too.

2.2. Both the Hungarian and Russian preverbs can have lexical and grammatical functions. In this respect Russian preverbs may be classified as follows:

- a) If the verb stem is perfective the preverb has only a lexical function. For example:

дать → передать

пасть → упасть

- b) If the verb stem is imperfective the preverb may have either a *lexico-grammatical function*, e.g.

бить → разбить

строить → перестроить

or only a *grammatical function*, e.g.

писать → написать

делать → сделать

But in some cases it is only the context which determines exactly which meaning of the preverb comes to the fore. For example:

- (5) a Мама сшила мне новую рубашку.  
‘Mother has sewed me a new shirt’

- b Мама сшила два куска кожи.  
‘Mother has sewed together two pieces of leather’

In sentences (5) a and (5) b the verbs are homonyms. We have a so-called “pure aspectual pair” in the sentence: шить – сшить.

Here the preverb has only a grammatical function. As the object of the sentence “strengthens” the original lexical meaning of the preverb (‘together’),

it has a lexico-grammatical function in sentence (5) b.

The aspectual pair will be: сшивать – сшить.

In Hungarian there are no perfective verbs without prefixes (J. Soltész 1959: 157; Pete 1983: 142). That is why the preverbs always have either a lexico-grammatical function if they stand before the verb,

megy → kimegy

vet → bevet

fordít → felfordít

or a grammatical function when they make the verb stem perfective:

csinál → megcsinál

fehéredik → elfehéredik

sötétedik → besötétedik

If the preverb has a grammatical function only, inversion is not used to form the imperative pair as usual because the non-prefixed verb represents this function. For example:

csinál → megcsinál – \*csinál meg

sötétedik → besötétedik – \*sötétedik be

When inversion is used with this type of verb the subject or the object of the sentence gets special emphasis:

(6) *Én* csinálom meg  
'It's *me* who will do it'

(7) *A biciklidet* csinálom meg  
'It's *your bicycle* that I shall repair'

Both in Russian and Hungarian there exist verbs which are *perfectiva tantum*, e.g.

Russian очутиться 'find one's self', понадобится 'need', грянуть 'strike up', заблудиться 'lose the way', стать 'begin', and Hungarian *levet* 'take off', *kiábrándul* 'get disappointed', *befejez* 'finish', *kivégez* 'execute'.

All the Hungarian verbs of this type have the same morphological structure, prefix + stem, and none of the stems can be used without the prefix. But even in this case inversion is possible for the same purpose as mentioned above. For example:

(8) *Én fejezem be a levelet*  
'It's me who will finish the letter'

(9) *Két embert végeztek ki*  
'Two men were executed'

The same consistency of structure and use cannot be observed in the Russian examples.

3. There is a very important rule in Hungarian, which applies to the whole system of the language: *if some grammatical meaning has already been marked it is not necessary to mark it again* (Pete 1983: 145).

This means that Hungarian verbs can get a perfective meaning from their objects which may be either stressed or unstressed. For example:

(10) a *Vera este egy levelet írt*  
'In the evening Vera wrote a letter'

(11) *Elővette a tollát és írt egy levelet*  
'He took his pen and wrote a letter'

If we say

(10) b *Vera este megírt egy levelet*  
'In the evening Vera wrote a letter'

the role of the prefix *meg* is only emphatic because the meaning of the verb is perfective without the preverb too.

The same can be observed when there are numeral objects in the sentence. They refer to the totality and completion of the action, so imperfective verbs can be used with them to express perfection. For example:

(12) a *Este ettem három szelet kenyeret és ittam két pohár teát*  
'In the evening I ate three slices of bread and drank two cups of tea'

In the Russian translation only perfective verbs with prefixes can be used:

(12) b Вечером я съел три ломтика хлеба и выпил два стакана чая.

4. Perfective verbs with prefixes usually express future tense in Russian. Their Hungarian counterparts can refer either to the future or the present, depending on the context. For example:

- (13) a Я прочитаю газету  
 b *Elolvasom* az ujságot  
 'I shall read the newspaper'

If the Hungarian sentence stands without context we cannot be sure that it refers to the future because the same perfective verb can be used in present tense too:

- (14) Minden nap *elolvasom* az ujságot  
 'I read the newspapers every day'

But Hungarian preverbs can also refer to the future in sentences without any adverb of time if they are used in aspect formations which resemble Russian purely aspectual pairs. For example:

- (15) a *Megcsinálom* a feladatot  
 'I shall do the exercise'  
 (16) a Péter *elolvassa* az ujságot  
 'Peter will read the newspaper'

This function remains with the verb even if inversion takes place when the emphatic focal position is filled.

- (15) b Én *csinálom meg* a feladatot  
 'It is me who will do the exercise'  
 (16) b Péter az ujságot *olvassa el*  
 'It is the newspaper that Peter will read'

As far as *Aktionsarten* are concerned they can refer to either the present or the future in the abovementioned type of sentences. This always depends on the context or the adverb of time:

- (17) Most a lakást *festik ki*  
 'Now the flat is being painted'  
 (18) Holnap a lakást *festik ki*  
 'Tomorrow the flat will be painted'  
 (19) A te szobádba *mennek be* a fiúk  
 'The boys are going into your room'



- (20) Este a te szobádba *mennek be* a fiúk  
'In the evening the boys will go into your room'

5. The present paper has attempted to shed some light on the basic differences which exist between Hungarian and Russian preverbs. The contrastive study of this question is very important from a practical point of view. The teaching of Russian aspect could be improved by drawing simple parallels between the Russian and Hungarian verb system, so that the students approach the question of verbal aspect with a basic feeling of familiarity.

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