

Aspect and Case in Interlanguage Grammars: The Case of English Learners of Russian

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The issue: The study investigates the relationship between aspect and case in the interlanguage grammars (IL) of English-speaking learners of Russian (L2 Russian). Richardson (2007) argues that in Russian, structural Accusative case is aspectually relevant and that it is linked to the compositional event structure of the base form of the verb. The base form of a verb is compositionally determined when addition of a lexical or telic prefix changes the grammatical aspect of a verb from imperfective to perfective and lexical aspect from atelic to telic (see (1)). I refer to these verbs as Condition 1 verbs. Alternatively, the base form of a verb is not compositionally determined when it merges with a superlexical prefix that changes the grammatical aspect of a verb from imperfective to perfective but does not change the telicity of inherently atelic verbs (see (2)). I refer to these verbs as Condition 2 verbs. Direct objects of Condition 1 verbs are marked with structural Accusative case, as in (1), whereas direct objects of inherently atelic verbs are assigned lexical case, as in (2).

- (1) a. Futbolisty igrali igr-u dva časa/ *za dva časa.
soccer.players played.IMPF game-ACC two hours/ *in two hours
'The soccer players were playing the game for two hours/ *in two hours.'
- b. Futbolisty vy-igrali igr-u za dva časa/ * dva časa.
soccer.players PF-won game-ACC in two hours/* two hours
'The soccer players won the game in two hours/ *for two hours.'
- (2) a. Žukov komandoval polk-om dva goda/ *za dva goda
Žukov commanded.IMPF division-INSTR two years/ *in two years
'Žukov was in command of the division for two years/ * in two years.'
- b. Žukov *po*-komandoval polk-om dva goda/ *za dva goda
Žukov PF-commanded division-INSTR two years/ *in two years
'Žukov was in command of the division for two years/ * in two years.'

The question that is investigated in the study is whether the knowledge of Condition 1 and Condition 2 verbs is part of the IL grammars of L2 learners of Russian. Specifically, do the IL grammars of L2 learners show that in Russian, (i) telicity is not always equal to perfectivity, and (ii) the base forms of verbs whose event structure is (not) compositionally determined have different case assigning mechanisms.

The experiment: 6 native speakers of Russian and 29 L1-English learners of L2 Russian performed the following experimental tasks: a Logical Entailment task, a Grammaticality Judgement task, and an Elicited Production task. Each task included sentences with Condition 1 and Condition 2 verbs. The tasks included 55 experimental sentences.

The results: A repeated measures ANOVA, where Condition 1 and Condition 2 verbs were used as a within subject factor and the proficiency group as a between subject factor showed a significant effect for Condition 1 or Condition 2 verbs with the participants performing better on Condition 1 verbs across the three tasks. The superior performance on Condition 1 verbs is explained by the accessibility of the universal semantic feature [telic], the less marked cluster of features [+telic, +perfective] and the availability of structural Accusative case in English. A decline in performance on Condition 2 verbs is explained by the difficulties in acquiring a more marked cluster of features [-telic, +perfective], and the idiosyncrasy of lexical case.

The conclusion: The results of the study contribute to the debate on the difference in feature accessibility (see e.g., Hawkins et al. 2008, White 2008, Lardiere 2009), and shed light on the

acquisition of case, which is an underinvestigated area of research in generative second language acquisition.

References

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