Annual report 2016 of ACLC research group: Comparative (Slavic) verbal Aspect & Related Issues

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Description of the research group:
Verbal aspect is one of the most specific features of the Slavic languages. Almost all Slavic verbs are either perfective or imperfective and a considerable number are organised into "pure aspectual pairs" in which the two members present lexically identical events from a different perspective. On the whole, a speaker of a Slavic language has to make an aspectual choice in each and every sentential utterance, which sometimes results in quite subtle semantic/pragmatic effects. The aspectual dichotomy runs throughout the entire paradigm of verbal forms, temporal and non-temporal alike.

Previous research
The study of verbal aspect has long been dominated by research on Russian and this has resulted in a very extensive literature. It was generally assumed that the concepts developed in this area also applied to the other Slavic languages; however, detailed comparison of aspect in Russian and Czech, performed in the 1990s by the Moscow linguist Elena Petruxina and the Amsterdam linguist Anna Stunová (dissertation in 1993), showed considerable aspectual differences between the two languages. In more recent work by Stephen Dickey, these languages are considered to be typical examples of a global East -

West aspectual distinction, whereas some languages, like Polish and Serbian/Croatian, represent a transitional zone.

Research group aims
The programme intends on developing this type of research and aims at getting a better understanding of both the similarities and the variations in the functioning of aspect in the various Slavic languages through means of detailed synchronic and diachronic comparative study of the use of the aspectual forms in a number of typical cases (various types of repetition, temporal relations between events ('taxis'), pragmatic effects of aspect choice in directive utterances etc.). This research is guided by the hypothesis that similarities may be explained by the fact that the feature 'terminativity' plays a central role in all Slavic languages, whereas the differences might be connected with the way in which in a given language a complete terminative event is embedded in the context (cf. Barentsen's 'sequential connection' and Dickey's 'temporal definiteness').

The research group has drawn much of its data from the Amsterdam Slavic Parallel Aligned Corpus (ASPAC) and future work will continue to draw on this corpus.

Research highlights in 2016:
Our research has had four distinct but interrelated branches:

1. An in-depth comparison of the usage-based aspectual theories by Barentsen and Dickey respectively have been reviewed in such a way as to postulate a new "synthesised" format. This brings together the two approaches, one of which is rooted in more structuralist accounts whilst the other is cognitivist linguistic. The crucial question is of course what this yields in terms of the semantics of especially imperfective aspect, for which we now have a model to work with.

2. Our diachronic typological studies of the genesis and early development of Slavic verbal aspect, have shed light and new insights into the functioning and meaning of verbal prefixes within the framework of terminativity and grammatical semantics. More importantly though, a cognitivist account of the stage of development / grammaticalisation of verbal aspect in Old Church Slavonic has produced clear grounds to speak in terms of a binary opposition perfective : imperfective for terminative predicates as opposed to "anaspectuality" for non-terminative predicates.

3. The most constant strain in our activities concerns the grammatical semantics, syntax and pragmatics of verbal aspect (especially in Slavic languages). Our core research into the variation of the choice of aspect between the individual Slavic languages in taxis-relationships with conjunctions of anteriority has now almost been completed. Ultimately this research has provided definitive insights into the respective underlying aspect systems, which underpins and predicts these choices. We have started to extend this research into

conjunctions with a basic meaning "since", also on a comparative basis. So far the conjunctions in question have been listed and described for Russian, Czech, Polish and Croatian. Comparative corpus research is on the way to gather material for analysis. For Czech especially we have had to classify the various conjunctions and their use and diachronic variation. Preliminary studies were presented at the Nederlandse Slavistendagen, Leiden 2017.

4. Slavic verbal aspect is a notorious pitfall for machine translation. An important study by one of our BA-students has laid bare some of the particular problems encountered in the statistical approach. This has proved the need to tackle these issues with a rule-based approach, such as recent research has also comfirmed. This line of research will not be pursued by CSVA&RI.

Societal relevance:
Improvements to didactic material for language teaching.
Theoretical grounds to reach for rule-based machine translation for Slavic verbal aspect.