

Latvian aspect

In Latvian (< Baltic), like in Slavic languages, most verbs are inherently atelic, and telicizing prefixes are used for culminating events. The viewpoint aspect also depends on the presence of such prefix.

- (1) a. Katru dienu **sūtī-ju** viņam vēstules.
every day send-PST him letters
'I used to send him letters every day.' (habitual)
b. Vakar **no-sūtī-ju** viņam vēstuli.
yesterday PFV-send-PST him letter
'I sent him a letter yesterday.' (episodic)

Same opposition applies in Russian:

- (2) a. Každý den' **sla-l** jemu pis'ma
every day send-PST him letter
'I used to send him letters every day.'
b. Včera **po-sla-l** jemu pis'mo
yesterday PFV-send-PST him letter
'I sent him a letter yesterday.'

However, Latvian distribution of aspect "is viewed more as a tendency" (Holvoet et al. 2022)

Prefixes

Prefixes can be aspectual and lexical.

- aspectual only add telicity:
rakstīt 'write (atelic)' → *uzrakstīt* 'write (telic)'
- lexical additionally induce meaning change:
rakstīt 'write (atelic)' → *pārrakstīt* 'rewrite (telic)'

Perfective

Perfective interpretation requires a prefix on the verb (except for several inherently "perfective" verbs). When perfective interpretation of an atelic event is needed, the special perdurative prefix *pa-* (cf. Russian *po-*) is used.

- (3) Edgars **at-nāca** mājās, ***(pa)-vand-tjās** pa istabu un devās gul-ēt.
Edgar PFV-COME.PST home PA-walk-PST across room and go.PST sleep-INF
'Edgars came home, walked around the room [for some time] and went to sleep.'

Imperfective

Imperfective is used for progressive, habitual, and *praesens historicum*. Aspectual prefixes are incompatible with the IPFV viewpoint aspect. I.e. when an event is describable by both a prefixed and an unprefixed verb, the unprefixed one is used.

- (4) a. **Rakst-tju** vēstuli divos un trijos
write-PST letter at_two and at_three
'I wrote a letter at two and at three (same or different events)'
b. **Uz-rakst-tju** vēstuli divos un trijos
PFV-write-PST letter at_two and at_three
'I wrote a letter at two and at three (different events only)'

Neutralization #1: lexical prefixes

Lexically prefixed verbs can be interpreted both as PFV and as IPFV.

- (5) **Pār-rakst-tju** vēstuli divos un trijos
re-write-PST letter at_two and at_three
'I rewrote a letter at two and at three (same or different events)'

Neutralization #2: perfective present

So-called perfective present is allowed with habituals and *praesens historicum* (Horiguchi 2014, Holvoet et al. 2022). These contexts allow both unprefixed, lexically prefixed and aspectually prefixed verbs.

- (6) a. Katru dienu **ēdu** kūciņas.
every day eat.PRS cakes
'I eat cakes regularly'
b. Katru dienu **ap-ēdu** kūciņu.
every day PFV-eat.PRS cake
'I eat a cake every day'
(7) Aktieris ņem cirvi un **(ie)-cērt** koku
actor take.PRS axe and PFV-hit.PRS tree
'{By the scenario} the actor takes an axe and hits the tree.'

Generalization

Any verb can be used in IPFV except for the progressive reading, where aspectual prefixes are unavailable as the culmination is not reached in TT.

The Slavic contrast

Slavic verbs require "imperfective" forms in such contexts. If a telic interpretation is needed, the conflict is resolved by an imperfectivizing suffix (Russian *-(y)α-*). There is no such suffix in Latvian.

- (8) Každý den' ja **s-jed-a-ju** pirožnoje
every day I [PFVZ-eat]-IPFVZ-PRS cake
'I eat a cake every day' [Russian]

The external aspect theory

Tatevosov (2023) suggests that in Slavic, aspect is external to the verb.

- verbs themselves are aspectless, independently of the presence of aspectual affixes
- aspect (PFV or IPFV) is introduced at AspP
- IPFV and PFV have limited compatibility: IPFV can only combine with unprefixed and imperfectivized verbs, PFV – only with prefixed verbs.

- (9) a. [CP...[F_{i+1}P...[F_iP...[F_{i-1}P...[VP...[V **PFV** na-pisa]]]]] – internal
b. [CP...[F_{i+1}P...[F_iP...**PFV** [F_{i-1}P...[VP...[V na-pisa]]]]]] – external

(Tatevosov 2023)

⇒ The aspectual interpretation depends strictly on the morphological form of the verb.

The proposal

Latvian aspect is external, but the rules of aspectual composition differ.

- PFV requires a prefix, like in Slavic.
- IPFV has free compatibility, unlike in Slavic.

The unavailability of IPFV's progressive interpretation with aspectual prefixes likely stems from pragmatic economy: the culmination part of the event is not picked up by the aspect, hence redundant.

Note. The restriction on Perfective cannot be explained in terms of telicity: *pa-* verbs are atelic. Thus, *pa-* is a vacuous suffix that only serves to license PFV.

- (10) **#Pa-vand-tjos** pa istabu divās stundās
PA-walk-PST across room in_two hours
'I walked around the room in two hours.'

Additional evidence: the Perfect

Latvian has Perfect ('to be' + PTCP). It is compatible both with bare and prefixed verbs:

- (11) Esmu (iz)-las-tjusi šo grāmatu.
am (PFVZ)-read-PTCP this book
'I have read this book.'

Unlike English (Kamp et al. 2015), Latvian does not stack perfect over (im)perfective: the interpretation of bare verbs in Perfect is not the same as the interpretation of Perfect Progressive in English. The only difference between prefixed and bare verbs is telicity of the action. That means the absence of the prefix does not assert an imperfective aspect, but only atelicity. In that sense, Latvian is similar to Bulgarian (Tatevosov 2023).

Conclusion

The Latvian system is extremely similar to the Slavic one. It differs by broader availability of the imperfective aspect.

The system can be elegantly analyzed using Tatevosov's (2023) external aspect theory.

The Slavic system shows aspectual invariance: aspect necessarily correlates with morphology, so it might seem counterintuitive to separate the two. By demonstrating that similar systems are not obligatorily aspectually invariant, Latvian further proves the strength of the theory.

References:

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