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**Verb classifiers –  
not so exotic after all?  
The case of Russian**

**ABRALIN AO VIVO**

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# Overview

1. How it all started
2. Russian verbal prefixes: a crash course
3. Why “numeral classifiers” are really noun classifiers
4. Why Russian prefixes are verb classifiers
5. Further typological parallels

# 1. How it all started

**ABRALIN** AO VIVO



DE GRUYTER

*William B. McGregor*

## VERB CLASSIFICATION IN AUSTRALIAN LANGUAGES



# Verb Classifier Systems

- Linguists have only recently begun to describe verb classifier systems
- Verb classifiers have been identified in Chinese and in several Australian languages (McGregor 2002, Gerner 2009)
- McGregor (2002) on verb classification:  
“[d]oubtless it is not confined to the relatively few languages in which it has been hitherto described, though the extent of its distribution across the world’s languages remains to be charted.”

## **2. Russian verbal prefixes: a crash course**

# Aspect in Russian

- All forms of all verbs express aspect
  - (residue of biaspectual verbs are syncretic)
- Perfective (marked)
- Imperfective (unmarked)

# Major Patterns of Russian aspectual morphology

- Simplex verbs
  - nearly all Imperfective (*delat'* 'do')
- Prefixed verbs (prefix + simplex)
  - nearly all Perfective (*s-delat'* 'do', *pere-delat'* 'redo')
- Prefixed and suffixed verbs (prefix + simplex + suffix)
  - secondary Imperfectives (*pere-del-yva-t'* 'redo')



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# Russian has 17 perfectivizing prefixes

Prefix	Prototypical path meaning	Related meanings
<b>do-</b>	REACH	EXCESS, ADD
<b>iz-</b>	OUT OF A CONTAINER	EMPTY A CONTAINER, EXHAUSTIVE RESULT, EXHAUST A SURFACE, NEGATIVE EXHAUSTION, MAKE OUT OF, DECLINE/DEVIATE, ACQUIRE
<b>na-</b>	SURFACE	ACCUMULATE
<b>o(b)-</b>	AROUND	PASS, OVERDO, MISTAKE, AFFECT MANY, AFFECT A SURFACE, ENVELOP, IMPOSE/ACQUIRE A NEW FEATURE
<b>ot-</b>	DEPART	BOUNCE, UNSTICK, REMOVE, MAKE NON-FUNCTIONAL, STOP AT THE ENDPOINT
<b>pere-</b>	TRANSFER	SUPERIORITY, OVERDO, REDO, DURATION/OVERCOME, BRIDGE, TURN OVER, MIX, DIVIDE, SERIATIM, THOROUGH
<b>po-</b>	SET OUT	RESULT, SOME, DISTRIBUTE
<b>pod-</b>	APPLY TO BOTTOM	HORIZONTAL APPROACH, ADJUST, INCREMENT, SECRETLY, MINIMAL
<b>pri-</b>	ARRIVE	ATTACH, ADD, ATTENUATE
<b>pro-</b>	THROUGH	THOROUGH, DURATION, DISTANCE, PASS
<b>raz-</b>	APART	CRUSH, SPREAD, SWELL, SOFTEN/DISSOLVE, EXCITEMENT, UN-
<b>s-</b>	DOWN	TOGETHER, ONCE
<b>u-</b>	MOVE AWAY	MOVE DOWNWARDS, CONTROL, REDUCE, HARM, PERCEIVE, PLACE/FIT, KEEP/SAVE, COVER COMPLETELY, DEPART FROM NORM
<b>v-</b>	INTO	
<b>v(o)z-</b>	MOVE UPWARD	AGITATE, RESIST, REBUILD
<b>vy-</b>	OUT OF A CONTAINER	EMPTY A CONTAINER, EXHAUSTIVE RESULT, EXHAUST A SURFACE, NEGATIVE EXHAUSTION, CREATE AN IMAGE ON A SURFACE, MAKE OUT OF, DECLINE/DEVIATE, ACQUIRE, ENDURE
<b>za-</b>	DEFLECT	EXCESS, BEGIN, EXCHANGE, ATTACHMENT, COVER, FILL, CHANGE TO A FIXED STATE

# Prefixed verbs (prefix + simplex)

- Natural Perfectives: have the “same” meaning as the simplex Imperfective
  - *delat* ‘do’ -> *s-delat* ‘do’
- Specialized Perfectives: change the meaning of the simplex Imperfective
  - *delat* ‘do’ -> *pere-delat* ‘redo’
- Complex Act Perfectives: indicate a certain amount of an activity
  - *čitat* ‘read’ -> *po-čitat* ‘read for a while’
- Single Act Perfectives:
  - *glupit* ‘act stupid’ -> *s-glupit* ‘do one stupid thing’

# Prefixed verbs

Prefixes on  
Natural  
Perfectives  
termed “empty”

Complex)

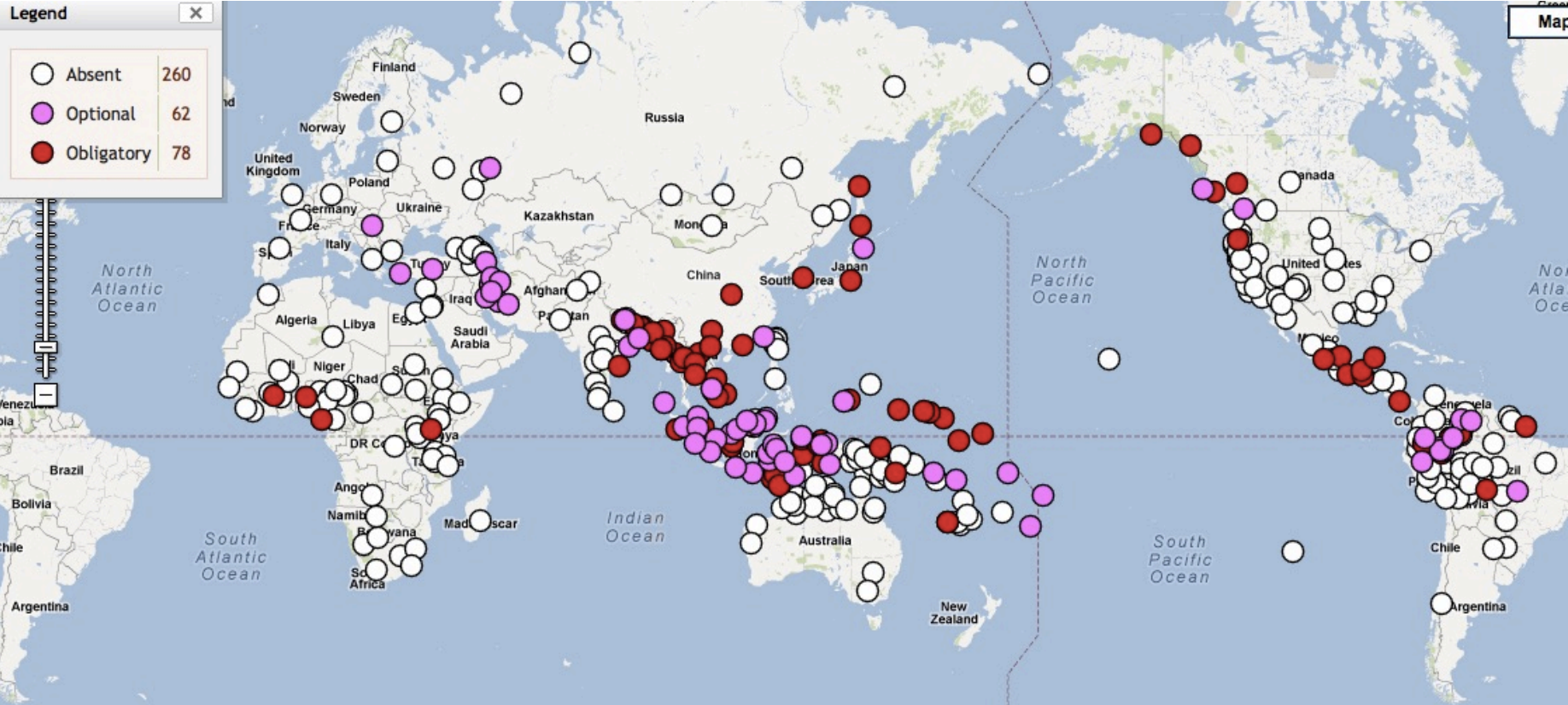
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Resultative uses  
are  
SORTAL  
classifiers

Procedural uses  
are  
MENSURAL  
classifiers

# **3. Why “numeral classifiers” are nominal classifiers**

# Numeral Classifier Systems Worldwide



Source: The World Atlas of Language Structures Online, [wals.info](http://wals.info)

# Functions of numeral classifiers

- Numeral classifiers are **noun classifiers**
- Numeral classifiers are “unitizers” that construe the referents of mass nouns as countable units, i.e., count nouns.
- **Sortal** classifiers “sort” the nouns of the language into groups according to the units that the substances typically form, often according to their shape: long objects, flat objects, round objects, etc.
- **Mensural** classifiers create non-inherent units of mass nouns by using measures: a bit, a cup, etc.

“Numeral” classifiers: obligatory in constructions with numerals, but used in other constructions too

1. *liang tiao she*  
two **CL** snake  
'two snakes'

2. *zhe tiao she*  
this **CL** snake  
'this snake'

3. *zhe tiao*  
this **CL**  
'this'



Example from Xueyi Yao



# Yucatec Maya numeral classifiers

(Lucy 2000: 329)

<i>'un-tz'íit kib'</i>	[one <b>long-thin</b> wax]	'one candle'
<i>'un-tz'íit che'</i>	[one <b>long-thin</b> wood]	'one stick'
<i>'un-tz'íit nal</i>	[one <b>long-thin</b> corn]	'one ear of corn'
<i>'un-tz'íit há'as</i>	[one <b>long-thin</b> banana]	'one fruit of the banana'
<i>'un-wáal há'as</i>	[one <b>flat</b> banana]	'one banana leaf'
<i>'un-kúul há'as</i>	[one <b>planted</b> banana]	'one banana tree'
<i>'um-p'íit há'as</i>	[one <b>bit</b> banana]	'a little bit of banana'

SORTAL  
classifiers

MENSURAL  
classifier

# One noun may combine with various classifiers

## Burmese *myi?* 'river' (Becker 1975)

a.      *myi?*    *tə*      *myi?*  
river    one      cl:river  
'a river [default case]'

b.      *myi?*    *tə*      *ya?*  
river    one      cl:place  
'a river as site [for a picnic, etc.]'

c.      *myi?*    *tə*      *tan*  
river    one      cl:line  
'a river [on a map]'

d.      *myi?*    *tə*      *hmwa*  
river    one      cl:section  
'a river section [for fishing, etc.]'

e.      *myi?*    *tə*      *'sin*  
river    one      cl:distant arc  
'a river as path to the sea'

f.      *myi?*    *tə*      *θwe*  
river    one      cl:connection  
'a river as a connection [linking villages]'

g.      *myi?*    *tə*      *'pa*  
river    one      cl:sacred object  
'a river [in mythology]'

h.      *myi?*    *tə*      *khu'*  
river    one      cl:conceptual unit  
'a river [in a discussion of rivers in general]'



# One classifier may have various functions

- **HIGH** semantic overlap between classifier and noun => default classifier
- **LOW** semantic overlap between classifier and noun => other classifier

Mandarin Chinese classifier *pian* expresses flatness (Zhang 2013: 42):

- san pian shuye* (sortal classifier)  
three cl:slice leaf  
'three leaves'
- yi pian qiche* (mensural classifier)  
one cl:slice car  
'one group of cars'
- san pian mutou* (mensural classifier)  
three cl:slice wood  
'three pieces of wood'
- she pian luobo* (mensural classifier)  
ten cl:slice carrot  
'ten slices of carrot'

# **4. Why Russian prefixes are verb classifiers**

# Russian Prefixes are Verb Classifiers

- **Russian prefixes** -- “unitizers”, designate discrete events
- **Russian prefixes** -- quantification by perfective aspect
- **Resultative uses** “sort” the verbs, **classification by outcome**:
  - SWELL with *raz-* as in *puxnut'* > *ras-puxnut'* ‘swell’
  - MOVE AWAY with *u-* as in *krast'* > *u-krast'* ‘steal’
  - ATTACH with *pri-* as in *lipnut'* > *pri-lipnut'* ‘get stuck to’
- **Procedural uses** create non-inherent units:
  - SOME with *po-* as in *sideť* > *po-sideť* ‘sit for a while’
  - THROUGH with *pro-* as in *plakat'* > *pro-plakat'* (*vsju noč'*) ‘cry all through the night’

SORTAL  
classifiers

MENSURAL  
classifiers



Distribution of prefixes in Russian Natural Perfectives

# Noun Classifiers vs. Aspectual Prefixes

	<b>Nouns</b>	<b>Verbs</b>
<b>Unitizer Type:</b>	Numeral Classifier	Aspectual Prefix
<b>Quantification:</b>	Associated with numerals	Associated with Perfective Aspect
<b>Spatial Profile:</b>	Bounded/shaped region in space	Trajector-Landmark relation
<b>Etymological Source:</b>	Stem from nouns	Stem from prepositions/particles

# One verb may combine with various prefixes

Russian:

*pisat'* 'write'

- > *na-pisat'* 'write' **Natural Perfective**
- >> *v-pisat'* 'write in, insert' **Specialized Perfective**
- >> *za-pisat'* 'record, register' **Specialized Perfective**

Czech:

*psát*

- > *na-psat*
- >> *ve-psat*
- >> *za-psat*

Polish:

*писаć*

- > *na-pisać*
- >> *w-pisać*
- >> *za-pisać*

BCS:

*pisati*

- > *na-pisati*
- >> *u-pisati*
- >> *za-pisati*

Bulgarian:

*пиша*

- > *na-piša*
- >> *v-piša*
- >> *za-piša*

Late Common Slavic:

*рѣсати*

- > *na-рѣсати*
- >> *vь-рѣсати*
- >> *za-рѣсати*







## Russian *gruzit'* 'load': 3 Natural Perfectives

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- ***na-gruzit'*** 'SURFACE-load' focuses on accumulation of loaded objects, e.g., *na-gruzit' sumku arbatskim porodistym tovarom* 'load a bag with fine goods from the Arbat'
- ***po-gruzit'*** 'RESULT-load' most neutral, can be used for things that don't ordinarily get loaded, e.g., *po-gruzit' ranennyx v furgon* 'load the wounded into a van'.
- ***za-gruzit'*** 'FILL-load' focuses on states resulting from loading, e.g. *za-gruzit' paroxod proviziej* 'load a steamship with provisions'; default in professional contexts.

# One prefix may have various functions

## Natural Perfectives

*puxnut* 'swell' > ***ras-puxnut*** 'swell'

*krast* 'steal' > ***u-krast*** 'steal'

*lipnut* 'stick' > ***pri-lipnut*** 'stick'

*nočevat* 'spend the night' > ***pere-nočevat*** 'spend the night'

## HIGH DEGREE OF OVERLAP:

**Natural Perfectives** only change the aspect

## Specialized Perfectives

*dut* 'blow' >> ***raz-dut*** 'inflate'

*bežat* 'run' >> ***u-bežat*** 'run away'

*vjazat* 'tie' >> ***pri-vjazat*** 'tie onto'

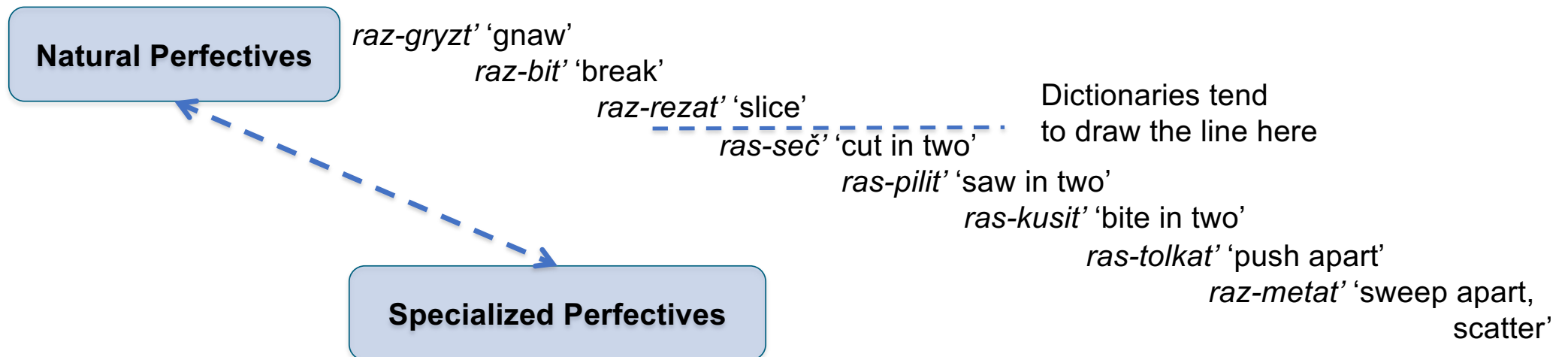
*ždat* 'wait' >> ***pere-ždat*** 'wait through something'

## LOW DEGREE OF OVERLAP:

**Specialized Perfectives** change the aspect and the meaning

# Natural vs. Specialized Perfectives

- There is no crisp division between Natural Perfectives and Specialized Perfectives
- Natural Perfectives are the perfectives for which the meaning of the base verb and the meaning of the prefix overlap most -- the combinations that are the “best match”
- Natural Perfectives are also the most frequent -- on average 10x more frequent than Specialized Perfectives



# Sortal vs. Mensural Classifiers

## The Numeral Classifier Construction in Mandarin Chinese

Classifier Type	Numeral	Classifier	Noun
Sortal	<i>yi</i> 'one'	<i>tiao</i> cl: long-thin	<i>shengzi</i> rope
Mensural	<i>yi</i> 'one'	<i>bei</i> cl: glass	<i>pijiu</i> beer

(Gao & Malt 2009)

- Morpho-syntactic behavior is identical
- Both types signal units
  - **Sortal**: refer to inherent units
  - **Mensural**: create units, individuate in terms of quantity
- A single classifier can serve both sortal and mensural functions
- General classifiers often serve both functions



# Sortal & Mensural Classifiers for Nouns and Verbs

Unitizer Type:	NOUNS Numeral Classifier	VERBS Aspectual Prefix
Reference to <b>inherent</b> boundaries:	Sortal Classifiers	Lexical + purely perfectivizing prefixes (Natural Perfectives and Specialized Perfectives)
Imposition of <b>external</b> boundaries:	Mensural Classifiers	Procedural prefixes, a.k.a. Superlexical, Aktionsart prefixes (Complex Act Perfectives and Single Act Perfectives)

# Procedural Prefixes as Mensural Classifiers

(1) a. *yi bei pijiu* (Mandarin Chinese: Gao and Malt 2009: 1129)  
one cl:glass beer  
'a glass of beer'

(1) b. *'um- p'it há'as* (Yucatec Maya; Lucy 1992: 74)  
a cl:little-bit/some banana  
'a little bit of/some banana'



(2) a. *po- sidet'* (Russian)  
SOME sit  
'sit for a while'



# Russian Examples of Sortal and Mensural Classifiers

Type of Classifier	Russian Perfectivizing Prefixes	Russian Examples
(1) Individual Classifiers (Sortal)	Natural <i>po-</i> , <i>s-</i> , <i>za-</i> , etc. Specialized <i>do-</i> , <i>s-</i> , <i>za-</i> , etc.	<i>po-stroit</i> 'build', <i>s-varit</i> 'cook', <i>za-krepit</i> 'fasten' <i>do-pisat</i> 'finish writing', <i>so-brat</i> 'collect', <i>za-pisat</i> 'register'
(2) Collective Classifiers (Mensural)	Distributive <i>pere-</i> , <i>po-</i> Cumulative <i>na-</i>	<i>pere-probovat</i> 'try a series of things', <i>po-brosat</i> 'throw a lot of things' <i>na-grešit</i> 'commit a lot of sins'
(3) Individuating Classifiers (Mensural)	Delimitative <i>po-</i> Perdurative <i>pro-</i> Attenuative <i>pri-</i> , <i>pod-</i> Ingressive <i>za-</i> Finitive <i>ot-</i> Intensive-Resultative <i>do-...-sja</i> , <i>za-...-sja</i> , etc.	<i>po-sidet</i> 'sit for a while' <i>pro-plakat</i> 'cry all through a period of time' <i>pri-tormozit</i> 'tap the brake', <i>pod-soxnut</i> 'dry a little' <i>za-govorit</i> 'start to talk' <i>ot-služit</i> 'complete a tour of duty' <i>do-pljasat'sja</i> 'dance one's feet off', <i>za-rabotat'sja</i> 'get lost in one's work'
(4) Partitive Classifiers (Mensural)	Semelfactive <i>s-</i> , <i>-nu-</i>	<i>s-glupit</i> 'do one stupid thing', <i>čix-nut</i> 'sneeze once'

# 5. Further typological parallels

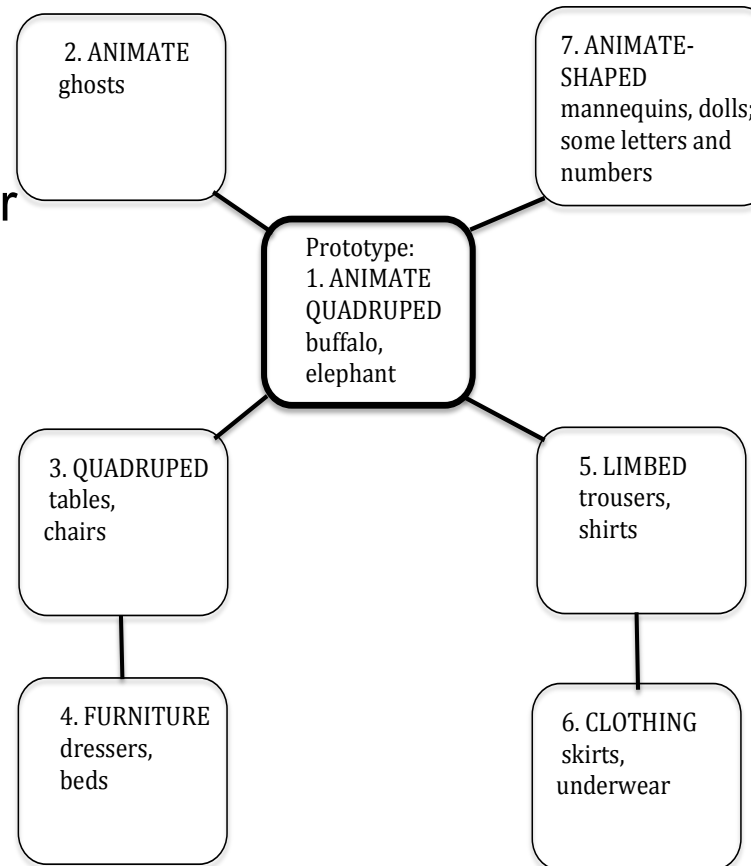
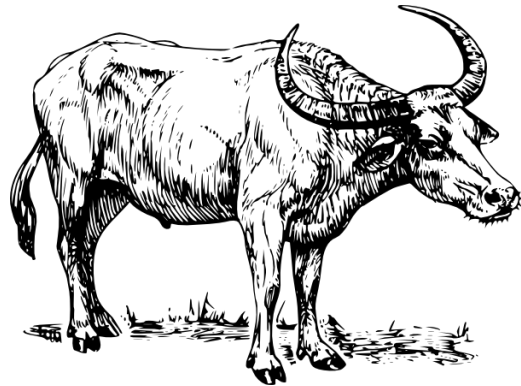


# Further typological parallels between noun classifiers and Russian prefixes

- Structured polysemy
- Foregrounding
- Definiteness

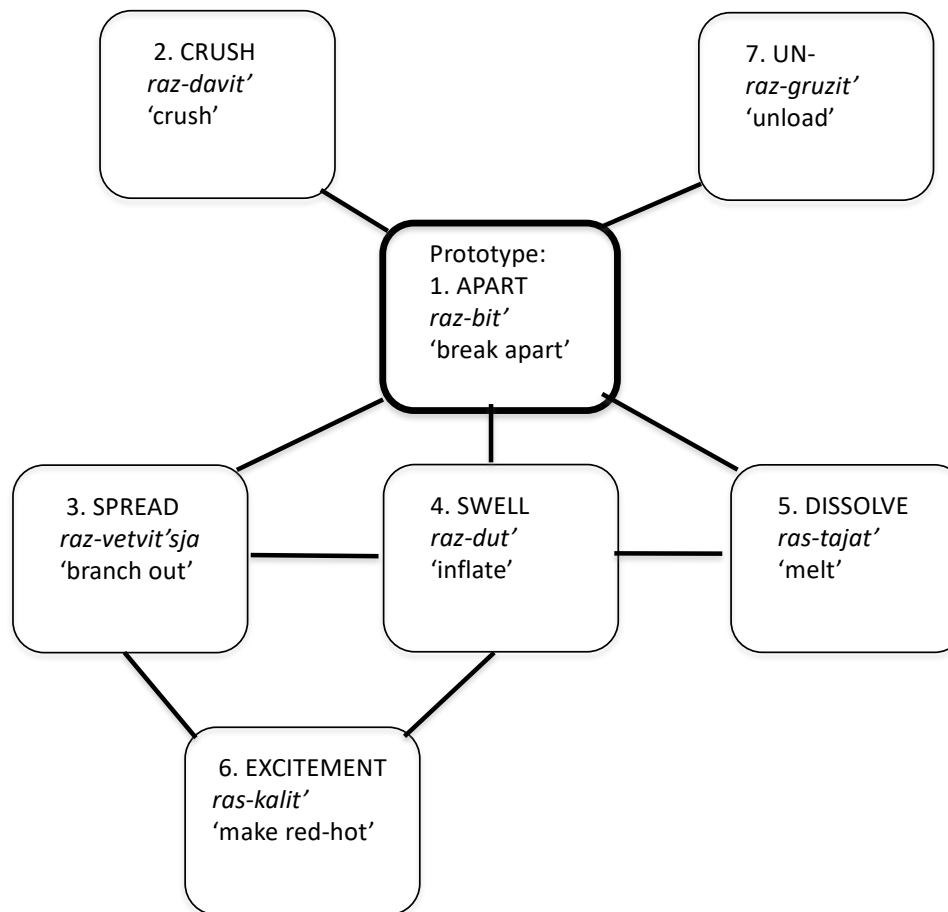
# Structured polysemy of numeral classifiers

Radial category structure for Thai Classifier *tua* (Deepadung 1997)



# Structured polysemy of Russian prefixes

Russian *raz-*



# Foregrounding of numeral classifiers

Statistics from Mandarin Chinese (Sun 1988)

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In narratives

- **80% of nouns** referring to entities **thematically important** to narratives (subsequently mentioned) are **introduced with a numeral classifier**
- 18% of nouns referring to entities **not** thematically important to narratives (not subsequently mentioned) are introduced with a numeral classifier

See examples from myth about the giant Kuafu on next slides...



# The giant Kuafu

Example from Mandarin Chinese (Li 2000: 1121-1122)

<i>Chuan</i>	<i>shuo</i>	<i>zai</i>	<i>hen</i>	<i>gu</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>shihou,</i>	<i>you</i>	<b><i>yi-ge</i></b>	<b><i>jiao</i></b>	<b><i>Youdu</i></b>
Legend	say	be	very	old	MOD	time,	there-be	one-CL	called	Youdu
<b><i>de</i></b>	<b><i>defang</i></b>	<i>zhongnian</i>	<i>bu</i>	<i>jian</i>	<i>taiyang,</i>	<i>dao</i>	<i>yipian</i>	<i>qihei.</i>		
MOD	place	all year	not	see	sun,	everywhere		all	pitch dark	
<i>Zai</i>	<i>nar</i>	<i>you</i>	<b><i>yi-zuo</i></b>	<b><i>da</i></b>	<b><i>hei</i></b>	<b><i>shan,</i></b>	<i>shan</i>	<i>shang</i>	<i>zhu</i>	
In	there	there-be	one- CL	big	dark	mountain	mountain	top	live	
<i>zhe</i>	<i>xuduo</i>	<i>kepa</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>guaishou.</i>	<i>Neixie</i>	<i>guaishou</i>	<i>jingchang</i>	<i>xia</i>		
PF	many	scary	MOD	monster.	Those	monsters	often	descend		
<i>shan</i>	<i>weihai</i>	<i>renmen.</i>	<i>You</i>	<b><i>yi-ge</i></b>	<b><i>juren</i></b>	<b><i>jiao</i></b>	<b><i>Kuafu,</i></b>	<i>ta</i>		
mountain	endanger	people	there-be	one-CL	giant	named	Kuafu,	he		
<i>yong</i>	<i>guaizhang</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>guaishou</i>	<i>bodou</i>	<i>le</i>	<i>jiu</i>	<i>tian</i>	<i>jiu</i>	<i>yie</i>	<i>zhongyu</i>
use	cane	with	monster	fight	PF	9	day	9	night	finally
<i>ba</i>	<i>ta</i>		<i>da</i>	<i>si</i>	<i>le.</i>					
BA	them	beat	dead	PF						

‘Once upon a time, in **a place called Youdu**, people lived in darkness all year round. There was **a big black mountain** where many terrible beasts lived. The beasts often went out to harm people. There was **a giant called Kuafu**. He fought with the beasts with a stick for nine days and nine nights. Finally, he killed them all...’

## Foregrounding vs. backgrounding

More Examples from Mandarin Chinese (Li 2000: 1122)

- a.        *Kuafu*   *si*        *le.*        *Tade*   *guanzhang*        *dunshi*        *bian*   *cheng*   *le*  
         Kuafu   die        PF        His       walking stick       immediately       change   into       PF  
         ***yi-ke***   ***xianhua***        ***shenghai***        ***de***        ***da***        ***taoshu.***  
         one-CL   flowers        blooming        MOD       big       peach tree  
'Kuafu died. His walking stick immediately changed into a [CL] large peach tree with blooming flowers.'

- b.        *Pangu*   *si*        *hou,*        *tade*        *zhiti*        *bian*        *cheng*        *le*        ***shan.***  
         Pangu   die        after       his       body       change   into       PF       mountain  
'After Pangu died, his body changed into a [Ø] mountain.'

Li: Mandarin Chinese **numeral classifiers** are employed to mark noun phrases as **salient** for the purpose of “vivifying or intensifying the description without [an] implication of significance in the thematic development of the narrative.” Example (a) with a numeral classifier presents a relatively vivid image; example (b) presents a rather flat image.

# Foregrounding of Russian prefixes

- Foregrounding is understood in terms of narrative sequencing via main plotline events
- Prefixes are associated with perfective aspect, which tends to mark sequenced plotline events

*Kogda **na-čalas'** pervaja mirovaja vojna, vsja sem'ja **u-exala** v derevnju Pominovo v Tverskoj oblasti, na rodinu babuški. Dom, gde oni žili, **stoit, kstati, do six por.** Tam že, v Pominove, otec **po-znakomilsja** s moej mamoj. Oni **po-ženilis'**, kogda im bylo po 17 let.*

‘When WWI **began**, the whole family **went** to the village of Pominovo in the Tver’ region, where my grandmother comes from. The house where they lived is still standing, by the way. It was there in Pominovo where my father **met** my mother. They **got married** when they were 17 years old.’

# Definiteness of numeral classifiers

- Bare classifier constructions (lacking numerals) signal specific or definite reference

## Hmong example (Li & Bisang 2012: 353)

<i>Thaum ub muaj</i>	<i>ob</i>	<i>tug</i>	<i>niam</i>	<i>txiv.</i>	<b><i>Tus</i></b>	<b><i>txiv</i></b>	<i>tuag</i>	<i>lawm.</i>	
Long.ago	there.are	two	cl	wife	husband	cl	husband	die	
<b><i>Tus</i></b>	<b><i>niam</i></b>	<i>quaj</i>	<i>quaj</i>	<i>nrhiav</i>	<i>nrhiav</i>	<i>tsis</i>	<i>tau</i>	<b><i>tus</i></b>	<b><i>txiv.</i></b>
cl	wife	cry	cry	look.for	look.for	neg	get	cl	husband

'Long ago there was a wife and a husband. **The husband** died.

**The wife** kept crying but no matter how she looked, she couldn't find **the/her husband**.'

## Vietnamese example (Simpson et al. 2011: 185-186)

<i>Thư viện</i>	<i>vừa</i>	<i>có</i>	<i>thêm</i>	<i>một</i>	<i>kế toán</i>	<i>và</i>	<i>một</i>	<i>luật sư.</i>
library	just	have	add	one	accountant	and	one	lawyer
<b><i>Ngòi</i></b>	<b><i>kế toán</i></b>	<i>rất</i>	<i>chăm chỉ,</i>	<i>nhưng</i>	<b><i>ngòi</i></b>	<b><i>luật sư</i></b>	<i>rất</i>	<i>lười.</i>
cl	accountant	very	diligent	but	cl	lawyer	very	lazy.

'The library has a new accountant and a new lawyer. **The accountant** is hard-working, but **the lawyer** is quite lazy.'



# Definiteness of Russian prefixes

(Leinonen 1982, Dickey 2000)

a. *Kto **pro-čital** *Vojnu i mir*?* (Perfective, presumes an expectation)

b. *Kto čital *Vojnu i mir*?* (Imperfective)

'Who read *War and Peace*?'



a. *Ty **pro-čital** moju knihu?* (Perfective)

b. *Ty čital moju knihu?* (Imperfective, follow up: *Ty ne videl tam zapisku?*)

'Did you read my book? (You didn't see a note there?)'

Perfective sentences reflect shared information, focus on specific event.

Imperfective sentences lack this implication.

# Conclusions

## Verb Classifier Hypothesis

- Prefixes that form Natural and Specialized Perfectives in Slavic languages parallel sortal numeral classifiers
- Prefixes that form Procedural Perfectives in Slavic languages (mainly East Slavic and Bulgarian) parallel mensural numeral classifiers
- Shared traits of numeral classifiers and Slavic aspectual prefixes
  - One noun/verb may combine with various classifiers
  - One classifier may have various functions combined with various nouns/verbs
  - Structured polysemy of classifiers
  - Foregrounding of classifiers
  - Definiteness of classifiers
- Recognition of Slavic aspectual prefixes as verb classifiers facilitates typological comparison

## For references, see:

- Dickey, Stephen M., Laura A. Janda. 2015. “Slavic Aspectual Prefixes and Numeral Classifiers: Two Kinds of Lexico-Grammatical Unitizers”. *Lingua* 168, 57-84. [DOI: 10.1016/j.lingua.2015.09.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2015.09.005)
- Janda, Laura A., Anna Endresen, Julia Kuznetsova, Olga Lyashevskaya, Anastasia Makarova, Tore Nessel, Svetlana Sokolova. 2013. *Why Russian aspectual prefixes aren't empty: prefixes as verb classifiers*. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers

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