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A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF THE RUSSIAN VERBAL PREFIXES za-, pere-, do-, and ot-

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Chapter I

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

1.1 ONE QUESTION UNANSWERED IN TRADITIONAL DESCRIPTIONS

Traditional[1] descriptions of Russian verbal prefixes consist of lists of the "submeanings" or "homonyms" subsumed under a given prefixal morpheme. Although they do not explicitly use set theory terminology, since such descriptions make no mention of any relations between the submeanings of a prefix, set theory provides an accurate model of this approach to prefixal semantics. Figure 1 is a schematic set theory diagram of the submeanings of any given prefix, as suggested by traditional descriptions.

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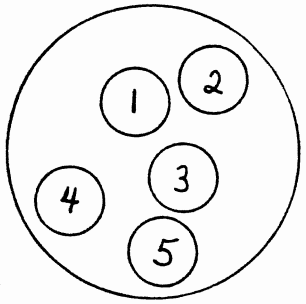
[1] For the purposes of this dissertation, "traditional" refers to the description of Russian verbal prefixes in the Academy Grammar and to works by authors whose views on prefixal semantics do not differ significantly from those presented in the Academy Grammar. Specifically, I am referring to works by Bogusławski, Isačenko, Tixonov, Bondarko and the like.

Figure 1: Set Theory Model



Each circled number represents the set of instantiations of a given submeaning and all of these sets are gathered together in the larger set which represents the prefix as a whole. This model, although elegant in its simplicity, obscures the actual semantic structure of the prefix, which is neither as loose nor as random as the set theory representation implies. The inadequacies of this approach as well as the various alternatives which have been devised by linguists to correct these shortcomings will be discussed in detail throughout this dissertation.

In addition to the Venn diagram representation, the traditional description of Russian prefixes may be portrayed as a matrix of prefixes and submeanings. This type of representation is motivated by the use of virtually identical characterizations of submeanings of different prefixes. For example, *Grammatika russkogo jazyka*, 1960

(which will henceforth be referred to as the 1960 Academy Grammar) lists for every non-foreign, non-Church Slavic prefix except *v-*, *nad-*, and *pere-* a submeaning "*dovesti do rezul'tata/konca dejstvie*" ('bring the action to a result/end'). The prefixes *do-*, *za-*, and *ot-* each have an identically characterized submeaning "*dovesti do neželatel'nogo sostojanija*" ('bring to an undesirable state') which is very similar to that of *pere-*, "*s neželatel'no bol'šoj dlitel'nost'ju i intensivnost'ju soveršit' dejstvie*" ('perform the action with undesirable duration or intensity').

In Figure 2 the columns represent the semantic make-up of given prefixes (p1, p2, ... pn) and the rows represent submeanings (s1, s2, ... sn). The presence of a plus sign signals the association of the prefix of the given column with the submeaning of the given row,

Figure 2: Matrix Representation of Submeanings

	p1	p2	p3	p4	p5 ... pn
s1	+				
s2	+	+		+	
s3				+	
s4	+	+			
s5			+		
.					
.					
sn	+	+	+	+	+

whereas the absence of a sign signals the lack of such an association.

Similar to the set theory diagram, the matrix representation suggests that the semantic content of a prefix is relatively unstructured and random. In the matrix, however, the notion that a limited set of submeanings is shared by the prefixes is more salient. This assumption has had considerable influence on aspectology (as will be seen in Chapter 11) and lexicography. Dictionaries often give similar definitions of different prefixes when they allegedly signal the same submeaning. Both *pere-* and *za-* have the <excess> submeaning, hence the definitions given by Ožegov:

> PEREKORMIT' (PERE-'feed') -- nakormit' sliškom sytno, pričiniv vred 'feed too full, causing harm'
>
> ZAKORMIT' (ZA-'feed') -- nakormit' sverx mery ili pričinit' vred izlišnim kormleniem 'feed more than normal or harm by excessive feeding'

and the Academy Dictionary:

> PERESPAT' (PERE-'sleep') -- spat' sliškom dolgo, dol'še, čem nužno 'sleep too long, longer than necessary'
>
> ZASPAT'SJA (ZA-'sleep'-reflex) -- spat' sliškom dolgo 'sleep too long'.

Not only are the definitions of verbs of a given submeaning similar, regardless of which prefix is present, but occasionally a verb with one prefix is cross-referenced to the same base verb with a

different prefix. The Academy Dictionary, for example, lists *perexvalivat' pere-*'praise' 'praise too highly' under the definition of *zaxvalivat' za-*'praise' 'praise too highly' and *perekarmlivat' pere-*'feed' 'overfeed' under the definition of *dokarmlivat' do-*'feed' 'overfeed'. All of this evidence suggests that different prefixes may share a submeaning whose value is independent. In other words, returning to Figure 2,

1) The semantic realization of a given sn is equivalent for all instantiations of all p's which include it in their semantic make-up.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to test the validity of assumption 1). This assumption is of course only one of many which might be questioned and likewise the research described in the following seciton is only one of many tests that might be applied to the traditional model. This test is not, therefore, definitive, but is rather intended as a starting point for discussion.

1.2 WHY THE SET THEORY MODEL IS INADEQUATE

In spite of the similarities noted by dictionaries and by the Academy Grammar, there is reason to question whether instantiations of a given submeaning with different prefixes are indeed synonymous.

I will use the prefixes *za-*, *pere-*, *do-*, and *ot-*, all of which have a submeaning expressing <excess>[2] to exemplify the discussion of this

[2] Cf. the Academy Grammar's characterization of this submeaning for all of these prefixes cited above. *Ob-* and *na-* also participate in expressions of excess, albeit to a lesser extent than the four

question.

If 1) is a valid assumption, we would expect base verbs to show no particularity in the selection of a prefix in <excess>, and, conversely, we would expect the four prefixes to combine with the base verbs with roughly equal frequency. The data[3] given below, however, show that this is not the case.

Table 1: Multivalence of Base Verbs

Number of prefixes base verbs can combine with	Number of base verbs	Percent
all 4	4	1%
3	23	7%
2	44	14%
Total	71	22%

prefixes I have chosen, but they have been excluded from discussion in order to keep the dissertation to a manageable size. *Pre-* also prefixes about a dozen verbs denoting <excess>, but for the purposes of this work, it will be considered a variant of *pere-*.

[3] These tables present data compiled from 421 entries in the Academy Dictionary. These are, to my knowledge, *all* of the entries of verbs prefixed in *za-*, *pere-*, *do-* and *ot-* which denote <excess>. The total number of base verbs involved, 318, was used to compute the percent of verbs which could combine with two, three, or four of the prefixes in Table 1

Table 2: Exclusivity of Base Verbs to Prefixes

	za-	pere-	do-	ot-
total # of base verbs	166	141	100	14
# of verbs exclusive to given prefix	102	94	49	3
% of base verbs	61%	67%	49%	21%

As Table 1 indicates, only 22% of the base verbs which, when prefixed, can express <excess> are capable of combining with more than one prefix in this submeaning, and only 1% can combine with all four prefixes. Table 2 shows how many of the base verbs combine exclusively with one prefix in expressions of <excess>. Approximately 50% or more of base verbs prefixed by *za-*, *pere-*, and *do-* are prefix-specific and cannot select any other prefix to express <excess>.

A close examination of the verbs which are prefix-specific reveals a tendency to pattern by semantic group. Of the ninety-four verbs specific to *pere-*, thirty-seven denote 'food preparation' (*perevarit'* *pere-*'boil' 'boil too long', *pereperčit'* *pere-*'pepper' 'over pepper'),

twelve denote 'care for cloth' (*perekraxmalit'* *pere*-'starch' 'over starch', *pereuzlt'* *pere*-'narrow' 'take in (a dress) too far'), five 'care for animals' (*peredoit'* *pere*-'milk' 'overmilk', *perepoit'* *pere*-'give to drink' 'give too much water to drink') and twenty-two 'work or engage in social activities' (*pereuserdstvovat'* *pere*-'be zealous' 'try too hard', *peremodničat'* *pere*-'be fashionable' 'be excessively fashionable'). These verbs may further be consolidated into a single group, under the heading 'activities which have a specific limit, determined by recipe, instructions, standard practice or other norm'. The four groups of verbs involved account for 80% of the verbs which combine exclusively with *pere*- in expressions of <excess>. Twenty-three, or nearly one-fourth, of the verbs specific to *za*- denote 'torture or beat' (*zapytat'* *za*-'torture' 'torment terribly much', *zaporot'* *za*-'flog' 'flog terribly much') and the majority of the remaining verbs describe an activity which, through excessive indulgence, can cause suffering (such as *zalaskat'* *za*-'caress' 'caress torturously much', *zaputešestvovat'sja* *za*-'travel'-reflex 'get worn out from traveling'). This semantic grouping of verbs suggests that each prefix has its own characteristic semantic structure which restricts its ability to combine with verbs. This inference, however, conflicts with assumption 1) and has no place in the traditional framework.

It is also important to mention that, since Tables 1 and 2 were constructed purely on the basis of the morphological cooccurrence of prefixes and verbal bases, the data represented in them are somewhat misleading. For many of the examples which are given in Table 1,

the base verb, although morphologically identical in all cases, performs distinctly different functions in sentences, depending on which prefix it is combined with. For example, there are several verbs which, when prefixed by *pere*-, can take only inanimate direct objects, but which take animate direct objects when prefixed by *za*-, as in examples 1) and 2).

1) On el xolodnuju, bezvkusnuju teljatinu, pil *pereparennyj* (*pere*-'steam'), gor'kovatyj čaj.

He ate cold, tasteless veal and drank *overbrewed*, bitter tea.

2) Anfisa deda v bane *zaparila* (*za*-'steam'), a to i ešče godov pjat' prožil by.

If Anfisa *had*n't *steamed* Grandpa in the bathhouse *too much*, he might have lived another five years or so.

The verb *est'* 'eat' undergoes little change in the formation of *pereest'* *pere*-'eat' 'overeat', but acquires a very specific connotation in *zaest'sja* *za*-'eat'-reflex 'by overindulging in delicacies, become a fussy eater'. Similarly, *pljasat'* 'dance' goes through a series of transformations with *za*-, *do*-, and *ot*-: *zapljasat'* *za*-'dance' 'dance (someone) silly', is transitive and its direct object is a person, *dopljasat'sja* *do*-'dance'-reflex 'dance one's way to trouble' is intransitive, *otpljasat'* *ot*-'dance' 'dance one's (legs, arms, etc.) off' is transitive and its direct object is always a body part.

Among verbs which combine with more than one prefix in <excess>, those which make a functional and/or semantic distinction (as described above) constitute the majority. For this reason, the degree of prefix-specificity of verbs is considerably greater than Tables 1 and 2 indicate.

On the basis of morphological compatibility alone, prefix interchangeability is demonstrably limited and a brief survey of the functional and semantic shifts associated with given prefixes suggests even stronger prefix-specificity. The question arises, given a full context, what is the actual interchangeability of prefixes in expressions of <excess>? In an attempt to answer this question, I constructed a questionnaire from forty-seven texts of varying lengths containing expressions of <excess> in the form of verbs prefixed in *za-*, *pere-*, *do-*, and *ot-* (see the reprinted questionnaire in the Appendix). Half of the texts were selected from books and articles published within the past twenty years, and the remainder were quoted from Russian literature cited by the Academy Dictionary. In none of the texts did the prefixed verb appear as part of an idiomatic or frozen expression. In the questionnaire itself, the verb in question (henceforth, "the target form") was removed from each text and placed below it alongside forms of the same verb combined with the remaining three prefixes. Respondents were asked to read each text and to state which of the four forms appearing below it was most appropriate, and whether or not any variants were possible.

Table 3 summarizes the morphological compatibility of verbs in the questionnaire examples with the four prefixes *za-*, *pere-*, *do-*, and *ot-* in expressions of <excess>.

Thirteen of the examples were morphologically prefix-specific and served as controls. All respondents consistently selected only target forms for the control examples, and therefore data from these examples are *not* included in the tables and discussion that follow. It is important to keep in mind that all of the data discussed below were gathered exclusively from base verbs which are morphologically compatible with more than one prefix in <excess>, and that these verbs comprise only 22% of the total number of base verbs which have prefixed forms in <excess> (see Table 1). The experiment was thus designed to test the interchangeability of prefixes specifically with those base verbs with which it is theoretically (morphologically) possible for more than one prefix to appear.

Table 3: Morphological Compatibility of Verbs and Prefixes in Questionnaire

# of examples containing verbs compatible with X prefixes, where X =	
1 (controls)	13 examples
2	7
3	20
4	7
total	47

Five adult native speakers of Russian from Moscow and Leningrad participated in this experiment, the results of which are summarized in Table 4. Whenever a consultant responded that only one prefix could be used, I asked again whether other prefixes might be acceptable in the given context in order to gather as much data as possible on variation.

Table 4: Results of the Questionnaire

	target form selected exclusively		target form preferred; variation		other form preferred; variation	
controls	65/65	100%				
verbs compatible with:						
2 prefixes	25/35	71%	8/35	23%	2/35	6%
3 prefixes	82/100	82%	8/100	8%	10/100	10%
4 prefixes	22/35	76%	12/35	34%	1/35	3%
totals (excluding controls)	129/170	76%	28/170	16%	13/170	8%

The resposes to the questionnaire were highly consistent and revealed a definite trend. As expected, no variation was allowed for verbs which are morphologically specific to a given prefix; the target form was always selected exclusively in response to the control examples. Verbs which could combine with two or more prefixes demonstrated a high degree of exclusivity in context, admitting only one prefix in 76% of all cases. When variation was allowed (only 24% of responses), the target form was usually preferred (16% out of 24%).