Viewing the Verb Classifier Hypothesis from a noun classifier language: a contrastive analysis of verbal aspects in Russian and Japanese

Key words: Russian; Japanese; aspect; noun classifiers; verb classifiers

Japanese belongs to the numeral classifier type of languages (Aikhenvald 2019), in which default bare nouns cannot directly combine with number words, similar to mass nouns in languages with grammatical number. To enumerate noun referents, they must be individualized and thus made countable by adding a numeral classifier (Bisang 1993, Downing 1996). From the perspective of speakers of grammatical number languages, this situation is described as "all nouns are like our mass nouns" (Lucy 1992: 83).

The study of numeral classifiers has contributed to exploring verbal classification systems and verb classifiers (McGregor 2002). The Verb Classifier Hypothesis in Slavic languages represents an attempt to apply the idea of nominal classifier system into the Slavic verbal aspectual category (Janda et al. 2013, Dicky & Janda 2015). The Hypothesis posits that perfectivizing aspectual prefixes in Slavic function as verb classifiers, added onto bare imperfective verbs in a manner analogous to numeral classifiers attaching to bare nouns. It is grounded in the noun-verb analogy that PERFECTIVE IS A DISCRETE SOLID OBJECT AND IMPERFECTIVE IS A FLUID SUBSTANCE (Janda 2004). Given this, our question is: what can be said about the verbal aspectual category in Japanese, as a classifier language, from the perspective of the Hypothesis, which is built on a grammatical number language such as Russian? The question concerns the conceptual integrity of the linguistic phenomena observed in the different parts of one language (Ikegami 1993). In this regard, we can presume that the motivational concept underlying the representation of noun referents should repeat itself in that of verb referents in each different type of language. Our study aims to examine how similar and/or different Russian imperfectives are to/from Japanese bare verbs in search of answers to the above-mentioned

question. At this stage, we focus only on imperfectives that pair with the so-called “purely aspectual perfectives”, or “Natural Perfectives” (Janda’s terminology) and their correspondences in Japanese.

Based on our observations, we came to the following conclusions. Perfectivizing an imperfective verb in Russian entails counting all the internal temporal phases of the action, which deductively imposes a heterogeneous reading on a preceding process denoted by the corresponding imperfective verb. The grammatical system of pairing imperfective and perfective verbs enables them to function in a built-in mode (cf. the property of objects – Quine 1960). In Japanese, bare verbs express the generic concept of action without specifically singling out any of its internal parts (cf. a part-whole structure of substances – Bunt 1985), thereby allowing for multiple aspectual readings depending on lexical, contextual, and other factors. The weak notion of decomposing a process into distinct phases prevents it from being perceived as a heterogeneous contour. As a result, the range of aspectual meanings conveyed by Japanese bare verbs is broader than that of Russian imperfectives and extends into the semantic domain of Russian perfectives.

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