Laura Janda
UNC-CH

The conceptualization of events and their
relationship to time in Russian*

I will suggest that two disparate phenomena that are both very characteristic of Russian (and of most Slavic languages) are actually conceptually related to each other and derive their semantic motivation from the same source. As far as I know, no one has ever suggested a conceptual link between these two phenomena before. The two phenomena are the aspectual system and the marking of points in time (hours of the day and days of the week) when something occurs with the accusative case (*v pjatnicu* 'on Friday', *v sem' časov* 'at seven o'clock'). I will suggest that both of these phenomena are motivated by the way in which Russians (and most Slavs) conceive of time. I will attempt to demonstrate that these two phenomena may be symptomatic of an overall view of time that is particularly Slavic.

This article is written in the framework of cognitive linguistics, briefly outlined here (for more detail see Janda forthcoming a). Cognitive linguistics rests on a number of theoretical assumptions concerning the nature of linguistic knowledge, the source of meaning, the role of metaphor, and the source of linguistic variation. Linguistic knowledge is not considered to be fundamentally different from other knowledge, rather it is an integral part of overall human cognition. Nor are there any autonomous modules within language; instead grammatical meaning and lexical meaning form a continuum. Embodied perceptual experience is the source of meaning. This means that the foundation of all knowledge, including linguistic knowledge, is perceptual input, itself determined by the interaction of our bodies with the world. In addition to direct experiences of our physical surroundings, we have other experiences, such as emotions, imagination, deductive reasoning, abstract thought, etc. Our understanding of concepts

that do not have concrete physical realization is based on our understanding of concepts that do have concrete physical realization (e.g. love is fire, deductive reasoning is a journey down a path). The metaphorical process of understanding concepts from one domain (non-physical, the target domain) in terms of another domain (physical, the source domain) is ubiquitous in language, used constantly but largely unconsciously by all speakers of all languages. Metaphor is both highly imperfect (because the source and target domains are not identical, causing possible mismatches) and highly efficient (because metaphor readily facilitates grasping a whole complex of relations at once). One of the most pervasive types of metaphor usually goes unnoticed. This is ontological metaphor, which is simply the understanding of abstractions as objects. For example, *ideas* are abstractions with no tangible physical realization. However, if we say things like *He can't grasp those ideas* or *Put your ideas down on paper*, we are treating ideas as if they were objects. Ontological metaphor makes manipulation, including cognitive manipulation, possible. As we will see, ontological metaphor is essential to the semantic functioning of Russian verbal aspect, and facilitates the relationship to the accusative of time that we will examine. As human beings, we are awash in perceptual input, receiving vastly more information than we can absorb, interpret, or communicate. Ultimately various people and various linguistic communities make various decisions about what input is used and what is ignored, and about how the used input is organized, leading to linguistic variation. This decision-making includes decisions about the use of source domains for the understanding of abstract concepts. And variations in the organization of knowledge teach us about the nature of human cognition, its dynamics and its limits.

Given what has been said thus far about metaphor and language, it would stand to reason that an investigation of a concept that does not have a simple concrete physical realization is likely to yield interesting cross-linguistic results, since the need to understand such concepts in terms of other concepts provides possibilities for variation. Time is an excellent example of an abstract concept.

Because the object of our investigation is the conceptualization of time in everyday language, this discussion will focus on how we understand time in our day-to-day experience. An astrophysicist's conception of the parameters of space-time is irrelevant here because it does not inform the understanding of time that drives human

experience and understanding, including linguistic expression. This is therefore not a discussion of the nature of time at all, but a discussion of how people experience time and express these experiences. We are aiming at folk theories of how time works, "the unconscious, automatically used, conventional conceptions of time that are part of our everyday conceptual systems" (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 137).

Time is perhaps the only feature of our existence which we all agree exists despite the fact that we have absolutely no direct evidence of its existence. We have no sensory perception of time whatsoever, we cannot see or hear or touch it nor measure it directly. If time exists at all, it exists purely as an epiphenomenon of effects on ourselves and the things around us. We know time only via observation of present states in comparison with memories of former states. Some of these states have predictable cycles (such as day/night and seasons of the year, as well as other natural processes), permitting us to have the illusion that we are measuring time, but time itself is elusive, more of an abstract construct than a tangible reality. Intellectually and linguistically we manage non-tangible concepts via metaphor, by treating them as if they were tangible (in other words, we understand non-physical concepts in terms of experiences of the physical world). Time is an abstract domain, and human beings tend to understand time in terms of the concrete domain with which they are most familiar: space.

Languages of the world provide rich data on the use of spatial metaphors to understand time (Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 139-144; Arutjunova 1997; Gak 1997; Janda forthcoming b). This is true despite obvious shortcomings in the parallelism between the source and target domains of this metaphor (for example, space is three dimensional, but time is merely a line, and a defective one at that, since we can only see one point, the present, at a time, and can only reconstruct the past through memory, whereas the future has no substantial existence at all; all points in space are equally accessible, but time is accessible only at the unique point of the present moment; we can move around in space, thus mastering it, but we are trapped in time and it masters us; etc.). There are many ways to perform the space => time mapping, as can be seen by comparing languages, or even by comparing time expressions within a single language. Time can be understood in terms of points, lines, paths, spaces, and objects, and that our orientation with respect to time can differ, pointing either to the past (where later actions follow prior actions in a

march toward the past) or to the future (where prior actions are before later ones in a march toward the future), or having no particular orientation.

It is crucial to recognize that although all human beings seem to use experiences of space to understand time we do not all do this in precisely the same way. This can be seen even within a single language. For example, in English we can imagine ourselves as stationary objects with events moving toward us (*Spring is creeping up on us*), or we can imagine ourselves as moving along the timeline toward events that are fixed (*I don't know if I can make it until Friday*). With a bit of playful imagination, we can even access conceptualizations of time that are considerably more exotic, and not conventionalized in English at all. Here is a rather extended example, from *Borgel*, a children's novel by Daniel Pinkwater. In this excerpt, Borgel, who has introduced himself as a long-lost uncle, is telling a story to the narrator, a young boy:

"Okay, so here goes. Long ago in the future, in the galaxy of Witzbilb, near Terraxstein--"

"Long ago in the future?"

"Who's telling this story? Be quiet and pay attention."

"Sorry."

"Long ago in the future, in the galaxy of Witzbilb, near Terraxstein, a planet with five moons, on a little planetoid no bigger than a gob of spit in this vast and expanding universe, there was a moment."

"A moment?"

"That's right."

"This story is about a moment?"

"Absotivlutely."

"A moment, like a moment in time, right?"

"Right. Now to continue, this was a happy little moment that had never done anybody the least harm. This moment, whose name was Dennis, played with the other little moments, romping and gamboling with never a care in the world. Little Dennis never suspected that he would become a moment in history -- of course he already had, because this is a story of the future told in the tense of the past."

"Would you mind if I went to sleep now?"

"This isn't holding your interest, is it?"

This text presents moments in time as self-contained entities, existing free of the timeline, and entering it only later, when their time comes. This conceptualization of time is not sanctioned by any conventional features of English. I would like to suggest, however, that this fictional representation of time is perhaps not too far removed from the Slavic folk theory of time, an understanding of how events behave that motivates both the aspectual system and the use of the accusative of time to designate when events take place.

The two phenomena that I am trying to link here (aspect and the accusative of time) have been received very differently by the scholarly community. The aspectual question commands a huge amount of semantic analysis, whereas the accusative of time is generally not given any attention at all.

Because Slavic aspect is the subject of a vast literature, there is no hope or intention of doing it justice here. Instead, we will note just a few prominent features relevant to this discussion:

- Aspect is for most verbs an obligatory morphological feature in Slavic languages, whereas in English it is non-obligatory and generally more lexical than grammatical. For Slavs, there is no abstract notion of a pure, undifferentiated activity; all activities come with an aspectual designation.
- Slavic aspect captures distinctions involving the temporal contours of an event, in other words, how an event occupies time. The basic distinction is between perfective events that are conceived of as definite objects, similar to concrete count nouns, as opposed to imperfective events that are conceived of as unbounded substances, similar to mass nouns (cf. Dickey 2000).
- For Slavs, aspect is the primary distinction, and tense is secondary, whereas for English tense is primary and aspect is secondary, if expressed at all.
- Abstractly, in terms of a timeline, this means that speakers of English are primarily concerned with where an event is located in a timeline, not what it looks like (what kind of an event it is). Slavic speakers on the other hand, are

primarily interested in the contours of an event; its precise temporal location is a secondary consideration.

Perfective tends to describe single, definite, delimited, discrete, completed, sequenced events. These events occupy time the way a concrete object occupies space. Imperfective tends to describe events that are ongoing, unbounded, simultaneous, or intermittent. These events occupy time the way a substance occupies space. In a Slavic language one cannot talk just about singing or smiling; one always has to decide whether a given event is perfective or imperfective.

The accusative of time does not generally receive any semantic explanation at all. It is a phrase that we throw at students like a band-aid, without really justifying it. This phrase covers a multitude of uses, some of which overlap with English, and some of which do not, but we will focus here on one very important and ubiquitous use, the one that is used to say on what day or at what time of day something happens, which involves the preposition *v* 'into' and the accusative case. Aside from this use in the domain of time, the preposition *v* 'into' plus the accusative is one of the most common ways Slavs have of describing how an object moves to a destination. It seems that no one has ever offered an explanation as to why the accusative case is used in these time expressions rather than the locative case. The use of the accusative in Russian (and nearly all other Slavic languages) strongly suggests motion toward a destination, and the motive for this is not intuitively obvious. After all, in English, the equivalent time expressions are locational (*on Friday*, *at seven o'clock*); they do not suggest direction or movement. In two recent books on the semantics of case in Russian and Czech (Janda and Clancy forthcoming a and Janda and Clancy forthcoming b), there is a brief description of these time expressions as metaphorical extensions of expressions denoting physical movement through space consisting of motion verbs in constructions with *v* + accusative, where the latter denotes the destination of the path of motion. The logic of this metaphor is as follows. In the source domain of space, *v* + accusative marks the point where an object arrives in space. In the target domain of time, *v* + accusative marks the point where an event arrives in the timeline, where it makes its mark in history. This may not be an entirely satisfactory explanation, but it points in the right direction. Recall Dennis the disembodied moment of Pinkwater's fantasy. In that fictional description of time,

moments already exist and roll about in the universe until it is time for them to arrive in the sequence of history. It appears that for Russian (and Czech, and most other Slaavic languages), there is a similar sense that all events, past, present, and future, have an existence external to the timeline of history where they ultimately arrive. The conceptualization of an event as an object is an example of the pervasive metaphorical process known as ontological metaphor that allows us to understand all kinds of abstract non-entities as if they were objects and mentally manipulate them. As noted above, ontological metaphor occurs in phrases like *grasping ideas* or *picking out the features of a pattern* or *being filled with grief.* In fact, the timeline itself is an ontological metaphor. Once an event becomes an object it gains the rights to all kinds of behavior in our imagination that it would not otherwise have. Aspect helps to perform the transformation of ontological metaphor on verbal action in a way that is more fundamental and prior than that available to languages where aspect is not obligatory.

I would like to suggest that it is the very facts of aspect that make it possible for events to move into their destinations on the timeline, and it is the lack of aspect as an obligatory feature of English verbs that prevents us from saying things like **I'll get home into 7 o'clock* or **I'll be working all day to Friday* (note that Lakoff & Johnson 1999: 153 consider English phrases like *at 7 o'clock* or *on Friday* to be locations, not destinations). In order for an object to move at all, it must exist as an object of some sort. Things that do not exist cannot move. In Slavic languages, verbal actions come pre-formed, pre-packaged as events, be they perfective or imperfective. In a metaphorical sense, this means that all verbal actions in Slavic already have some identity as events beyond and prior to the timeline. They have already been given their contours, and are thus objects, objects that can arrive at destinations. In English, events take shape in the timeline, they are not pre-fab objects, which means that they cannot move into their slots. The shapes of events in English are not prior givens, but often interpretable only upon reflection, as a result of factors beyond the verb itself. The aspectual system of Russian plays an important role in facilitating the use of the accusative of time.

Although the cognitive link between Russian aspect and the accusative of time suggested here is novel, it is not incompatible with other semantic analyses of Russian grammar. Seliverstova (1982: 14-22) identifies a fundamental distinction between

qualities and phenomena. The former, qualities, present themselves as non-verbal predicates in Russian, whereas the latter, phenomena, present themselves as verbal predicates (corresponding to what we have termed "events" above). Phenomena (= events) can be both perfective and imperfective, and their distinguishing feature is the fact that they are localizable in time. I would argue that it is precisely this localizability, in other words, the ability to be placed in time, that motivates the use of the accusative of time with verbal predicates. Seliverstova happens to present a few examples that bear this out, such as the contrast between the acceptable use of the verbal predicate and accusative of time in *Ty ne dralsja v vyxodnoj* 'You didn't fight on the day off'as opposed to the unacceptable combination of a non-verbal predicate with the accusative of time in **Ty ne byl dračunom v vyxodnoj* 'You weren't a fighter on the day off'. Seliverstova also notes that whereas localizability (an event's ability to be placed in time) is an essential feature of Russian grammar, the same is not true of English.

The suggested relationship between the Russian accusative of time and aspect is also in keeping with the spirit of van Schooneveld's work on the semiotics of Russian, in particular his work on the extension feature, which is the sole marking of the accusative case (van Schooneveld 1982, 1986). "The extension feature states that its referent has been looked at in a narrated situation, where it stood in a relationship to another component of that narrated situation, and states that this referent has retained its identity after the original narrated situation has terminated" (van Schooneveld 1986). Here the referent of the extension feature is the day or hour when an event takes place, and the other component of the narrated situation is the event itself. Events must have an existence separate from the times when they take place in order to enter into the relationship of the extension feature with points in time. What we are adding to the picture here is the fact that aspect creates events that can enter into this relationship with the times when they take place. This notion of semiotic unity, and of deictic relationships among grammatical features, is a hallmark of van Schooneveld's approach, and the type of interrelationship between aspect and case presented here is a confirmation of just such an approach.

To conclude: the Russian aspectual system assumes the existence of events, conceiving of them as metaphorically manipulable objects that move into their slots in

the timeline much as physical objects move toward their destinations. Thus aspect motivates the use of the accusative of time.

*Note: The author would like to thank Edna Andrews, Ron Feldstein, and Stephen Dickey for their comments and suggestions on earlier presentations of these ideas. Errors and shortcomings are of course attributable to the author alone.

WORKS CITED

Arutjunova, Nina D. 1997. "Vremja: modeli i metafory", in *Logičeskij analiz jazyka. Jazyk i vremja*, ed. by N. D. Arutjunova and T. E. Janko. Moscow: Indrik, 51-61.

Dickey, Stephen M. 2000. *Parameters of Slavic Aspect: A Cognitive Approach.* Stanford: CSLI Publications.

Gak, V. G. 1997. "Prostranstvo vremeni", in *Logičeskij analiz jazyka. Jazyk i vremja*, ed. by N. D. Arutjunova and T. E. Janko. Moscow: Indrik, 122-130.

Janda, Laura A. forthcoming a. "Cognitive Linguistics", to appear in a volume entitled *Slavic Linguistics 2000*, ed. by George Fowler. Bloomington, IN: Slavica. Preliminary version available at http://www.indiana.edu/~slavconf/SLING2K.

Janda, Laura A. forthcoming b. "The Case of Time in Czech, Russian, and Polish" , to be pubished by the Polish Academy of Sciences.

Janda, Laura A. 2000. "A Cognitive Model of the Russian Accusative Case", in *Trudy meždunarodnoj konferencii Kognitivnoe modelirovanie*, No. 4, part I, ed. by R. K. Potapova, V. D. Solov'ev, and V. N. Poljakov. Moscow: MISIS, 20-43.

Janda, Laura A. and Steven J. Clancy. forthcoming a. *The Case Book for Russian.*

Janda, Laura A. and Steven J. Clancy. forthcoming b. *The Case Book for Czech.*

Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh.* New York: Basic Books.

Seliverstova, O. N., ed. 1982. *Semantičeskie tipy predikatov.* Moscow: Nauka.

van Schooneveld, Cornelius H. 1982. "The Extension Feature in Russian." *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* XXV *Festschrift for Edward Stankiewicz*, 445-58.

van Schooneveld, Cornelius H. 1986. "Jakobson's Case System and Syntax." In *Case in Slavic*, ed. by R. D. Brecht and J. S. Levine, 373-85. Columbus, OH: Slavica.