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Structuralist Roots of the Traditional Instruction of Russian Verbs of Motion

Does the “Directionality-Based Approach” Fit to the Russian L2 Classroom?

Russian unprefixated verbs of motion (UVoMs) have been commonly recognized as one of the most challenging topics in Russian second language (L2) instruction. The traditional way of conceptualizing and teaching UVoMs, based on the rather ambiguous category "directionality" (cf. Isačenko, 1960), has recently been challenged by some linguists and Russian L2 educators proposing alternative approaches (cf. Bernitskaïa, 2017; 2019; Six, 2019; Bondarenko, 2023). From an epistemological perspective, the paper clarifies the linguistic principles underlying the traditional directionality-based approach to evaluate its potential efficiency in L2 classrooms. The paper demonstrates that the traditional approach is deeply rooted in the tenets of European structural linguistics, which a priori considers any grammatical category as a privative opposition. Searching for universal semantic invariants associated with specific morphemes, structuralist linguistics abstracts from contextual factors and fails to provide an easily applicable guide to choosing the correct UVoM. In contrast, the alternative approaches, such as *Semantic Labeling* (Bondarenko, 2023), are situation-based, item-focused, and experience-driven. Converging with the principles of cognitive linguistics, they seem to be able to make up for the shortcomings of the traditional approach and offer a more intuitive methodology for teaching UVoMs.

Keywords: Russian unprefixated verbs of motion, directionality, structural linguistics, cognitive linguistics, semantic labeling

Бесприставочные глаголы движения (БГД) являются одной из наиболее сложных тем в обучении русскому как иностранному (РКИ). Традиционный подход к концептуализации и преподаванию БГД, основанный на неоднозначной категории "направленность" (cf. Исаченко, 1960), в последние годы оспаривается некоторыми лингвистами и преподавателями РКИ, которые предлагают альтернативные методы (cf. Берницкая, 2017; 2019; Six, 2019; Bondarenko, 2023). Цель статьи – проанализировать с эпистемологической точки зрения принципы лингвистической теории, лежащие в основе традиционного подхода, чтобы оценить его потенциальную эффективность на уроках РКИ. Автор демонстрирует, что традиционный подход коренится в теоретических принципах европейской структурной лингвистики, которая априори рассматривает любую грамматическую категорию как организованную по принципу привативной бинарной оппозиции. В поисках универсального семантического инварианта структуральная лингвистика сознательно абстрагируется от контекстуальных факторов и, как следствие, не способна предоставить интуитивное и непротиворечивое правило выбора БГД во всех ситуациях использования. Между тем альтернативные подходы, такие как метод "семантических этикеток" (Bondarenko, 2023) сближаются с теоретическими принципам когнитивной лингвистики. Ориентированные на сугубо контекстуальное использование отдельных глагольных словоформ и эмпирический универсальный опыт обучающихся в плане перемещения, они могут восполнить недостатки традиционного метода и предложить более интуитивную методику обучения БГД.

Ключевые слова: русские бесприставочные глаголы движения, направленность, структуральная лингвистика, когнитивная лингвистика, метод семантических этикеток



1. The significance of epistemological reflection on linguistic theories in L2 instruction for better teaching of Russian verbs of motion.

“La grammaire est l'art de lever les difficultés d'une langue; mais il ne faut pas que le levier soit plus lourd que le fardeau” (Antoine de Rivarol, 1991/1784, 22).

[Grammar is the art of lifting the difficulties of a language; but the lever must not be heavier than the burden].

The relationship between “linguistic theories” and the way second/foreign language (L2) instructors conceptualize and teach linguistic patterns under the guise of “pedagogical grammar” and “teaching methodology” is a subject of ongoing discussion and questioning. On the one hand, contemporary L2 instruction has claimed to ground its principles in scientific knowledge. The scientific base of L2 instruction has been found, among others, in linguistic theories, which provide us with ideas on how language is structured, used, and acquired. From the Direct Method (cf. Besse, 2010, 9-11; Marchand, 1913; 1914; 1927) until the Neurolinguistic Approach (cf. Germain, 2018), all influential L2 teaching paradigms have been inspired by advances in theoretical and applied linguistics.

On the other hand, L2 pedagogy has always been guided by the grammar-as-a-tool-not-a-goal principle. The search for simple and intuitive tools to teach and process a second language makes L2 pedagogy very cautious regarding linguistic knowledge. Not all competing scientific approaches to describing linguistic phenomena meet the needs of the L2 classroom. In the preface to his famous method of French, Louis Marchand (1920) resorts to a metaphor of lever¹ to define the role of grammar in L2 classrooms:

“Like a lever we use to lift a weight should not be heavier than the weight itself, the grammar used as a tool helping L2 learners to cope with difficulties of the target language, should not be more difficult for learners and teachers than the material it helps acquire.” (cited in Puren, 1998, 5²).

This metaphor, manifesting the grammar-as-a-tool-not-a-goal claim, echoes the problem-solving principle known as Occam's razor, which recommends searching for the simplest possible explanations.

We believe that, in addition to empirical research on comparative testing of teaching methods in the L2 classroom, the epistemological analysis of the linguistic knowledge underlying L2 pedagogical grammar and teaching methods can help to evaluate whether a given teaching approach is the same awkward-to-use lever referred to by Marchand (1920). L2 teachers' education system and our professional community have traditionally paid little attention to such reflection, which leads to the fact that many L2 teachers see teaching strategies they are familiar with as the only possible and correct way of presenting linguistic information to learners. As for

¹ Louis Marchand borrowed this metaphor from De Rivarol (1991/1784).

² Hereinafter, translation, comments, and italic in quotation is mine (MB).

the inefficiency of some strategies and the difficulties in applying them, we often tend to attribute these to the complexity of linguistic structures themselves or to the lack of time allocated to instruction.

The case of *Russian verbs of motion* (VoMs) and specifically *unprefixed verbs of motion* (UVoMs) perfectly illustrates the above-described issue. The traditional approach to teaching UVoMs is based on the opposition between *unidirectional vs. nondirectional (or multidirectional) motions*. While many instructors follow this teaching tradition, others challenge it. In recent years, researchers in Russian L2 acquisition and Russian L2 instructors have reported serious difficulties that learners encounter with acquiring VoMs (including UVoMs) within the traditional teaching method and shown an emerging interest in alternative approaches (cf. Bondarenko, 2023; Elliott & Yountchi, 2009; Gagarina, 2009; Gor et al., 2009; Hasko, 2009; Israeli, 2017; Kendall, 2017; Six, 2019; Soboleva, 2023). Some linguists (cf. Bernitskaïa, 2017; 2019; Paškina, 2007; Gepner, 2016), for their part, have criticized the traditional directionality-based conception of UVoMs, actualizing long-standing controversy surrounding the category of directionality in linguistics (cf. Fontaine, 1973; 1983; Forsyth, 1970).

The present paper seeks to support this critical trend. We will undertake an epistemological analysis of the linguistic theory underlying the traditional directionality-based method of teaching Russian UVoMs in order to evaluate its potential pedagogical value in the L2 classroom.

2. Complexity of Motion Events Encoding in Russian

Motion events encoding in Russian is complex. Apart from the four universal characteristics of motion – moving object, goal/location of motion, the path followed, and manner of motion (cf. Talmy, 2000; Slobin, 2004) – some (but not all) Russian verbs encoding motion are sensitive to the lexico-grammatical subcategory as part of the general category of verbal aspect. This subcategory applies to a small group of imperfective verbs that have two distinct imperfective variations, each associated with one of two kinds of basic stems: ИДТИ-like and ХОДИТЬ-like stems. Verbs belonging to this subcategory³ and the verbs derived from them using specific prefixes (e.g., ПО-, У-, ПРИ-, В-, ВЫ-, ПЕРЕ-) are traditionally called *бесприставочные и приставочные глаголы движения* (*unprefixed and prefixed verbs of motion*) (cf. Veličko, 2018, 606).

The issue is further complicated because the Russian language requires differentiation between motion on foot and by means of transportation (cf. Gor et al., 2010; Pavlenko & Volynsky, 2015). Even though there is no generic verb of motion in Russian, ИДТИ/ХОДИТЬ can be generalized for motion that does not take place on foot if it occurs within a locality or it is a fixed-route traffic (cf. Nessel, 2010; Raxtina, 2004; Nessel & Janda, 2022; Veličko, 2018, 611), and here, ИДТИ is used much more often in a metaphorical sense (cf. Nessel & Janda, 2022).

All these complications lead to the fact that contextual meanings of different UVoMs are determined by a complex combination of grammatical, pragmatic, and situational variables difficult to encapsulate in a one single “rule” (cf. Bitextina & Judina, 1986; Kagan, 2007; 2010; Israeli, 2017; Six, 2019, 34).

³ Usually including 14 pairs but can go up to 18 pairs.

3. "Directionality" and its Terminological Inconsistency

There is no consensus regarding the conceptual tools to explain the difference between ХОДИТЬ- and ИДТИ-like verbs (see the discussion in Bernitskaïa, 2019; Gepner, 2016; Nessel, 2000; Paškina, 2007). Paškina (2007, 33-34), who has identified 11 terminological pairs employed in Russian linguistics for this purpose, concludes that all of them are not very helpful in explaining the semantics of UVoMs. The framework based on the concept *направленность движения* (*directionality of motion*) has earned a reputation for being dominant in linguistics (cf. Bernitskaïa, 2019, 76; Beuls et al., 2019, 130; Nessel, 2002, 107; Paškina, 2007, 39) and in Russian L2 instruction (cf. Hasko, 2009; Gor et al., 2010; Mahota, 1996; Nessel, 2008; Pavlenko & Volynsky, 2015; Wade, 1992). All proponents of the directionality-based approach agree that ИДТИ-like verbs are *unidirectional*. While ХОДИТЬ-like verbs have been described as *nondirectional* by some scholars and *multidirectional* by others.

It is important to point out that the term *направленность* (*directionality*) is often employed without definition and sufficient explanation, like, for example, in the Russian L2 pedagogical grammar *Книга о грамматике* (Veličko, 2018; 2009), where *направленность* (*directionality*) is defined very generally as "*пространственная характеристика движения*" (*spatial characteristic of motion*) (Veličko, 2018, 608). Some linguists (Forsyth, 1970, 319; Bernitskaïa, 2019, 79) warn against mingling *направленность* with *пункт назначения/целенаправленность* (*destination*). In a questionnaire-based study, Bondarenko (2022) shows that Russian speakers (including Russian L2 teachers) have easily confused these two notions while analyzing motion events from the perspective of directionality. Paškina (2007) and Bernitskaïa (2019) demonstrate that the directionality-based conception of UVoMs reduces the variety of factors influencing the natural human perception of motion to a single directionality without taking into account several others, such as space, time, and moving object's vs. observer's points of view. The meaning of *unidirectionality* has also not been clearly defined in the literature (see discussion in Bernitskaïa, 2019). Bernitskaïa (2019, 79, 82, 83) suggests the following – non-typical – definition with no reference to any specific goal or destination: "*прогрессивное движение, или продвижение, вперед по одной линии, наблюдаемое в конкретный момент времени*" (*progressive movement, or advancement, forward along a single line, observed at a given point in time*). However, many researchers argue that unidirectional verbs encode the motion proceeding "in/from a single direction toward a *goal*" (Nessel, 2000, 115) or "motion from point A to point B" (Veličko, 2018, 608). But simultaneously, the same authors may insist that unidirectional ИДТИ-like verbs do not encode "the vector of motion," "the goal," or "starting or finishing point" (Veličko, 2018, 608).

As for nondirectional ХОДИТЬ-like verbs, their meaning is not easy to define either. Often, they are described by the absence of the characteristic referring to unidirectionality or even directionality itself. However, they involve a variety of motion patterns regarding the number and definition of which there is no consensus (cf. Gor et al., 2010, 365; Isačenko, 1960, 312; Nessel, 2000, 115-117; Pavlenko & Volynsky, 2015, 36; Zaliznjak & Shmelev, 2000; Bitextina & Judina, 1986). Different scholars distinguish *three to six* contextual meanings of ХОДИТЬ-like verbs. The most known of them are (1) "roundtrips or movement to a certain goal and then back to the source," (2) "random motion in different directions," (3) "the ability to perform the movement

with a certain manner” (Gor et al., 2010, 365). While some scholars debate the repertoire of the meanings, others dispute the very fact of their existence. For example, Bernitskaïa (2017) argues for the invalidity of the concept of “roundtrip” applied to ХОДИТЬ-like verbs.

4. Traditional directionality-based approach to teaching UVoMs

The traditional directionality-based instruction of UVoMs has some typical characteristics.

- The rule, designed to help learners choose the right verb in a specific context, is based on the following mental procedure. Learners are expected to form an idea of uni- and nondirectionality (or multidirectionality), each associated with a specific verbal stem (ХОДИТЬ- or ИДТИ-like stems). Then, learners apply this category to analyze extra-linguistic motion events they want to report. They are expected to find signs of either unidirectionality or nondirectionality (or multidirectionality) in a specific event and, therefore, determine which verbal stem to use. This procedure is fraught with certain difficulties. First, as mentioned earlier, the directionality-based approach reduces real-life situations to a single and abstract feature – directionality, which is considered ambiguous in linguistics. Since learners cannot be provided with a clear and simple definition of directionality, they are encouraged, instead, to intuitively form this concept from a series of examples accompanied by static visual representation of motion that outline different vectors related to unidirectionality and nondirectionality (or multidirectionality) (Kendall, 2017, 8).
- Some additional paraphrasing-based tools are also offered to help learners identify contextual meanings. For example, methodologists (cf. Bitextina & Judina, 1986, 14; Muraviova, 1986, 55; Velicko, 2018, 611) suggest using synonyms БЫТЬ, БЫВАТЬ, ПОСЕТИТЬ for the meaning of ХОДИТЬ-like verbs which is actualized in the past tense: *Вчера я ходил в университет* can be replaced by *Вчера я был в университете*.
- Another typical characteristic pointed out by some researchers (cf. Castellví et al., 2022; Gagarina, 2009, 465; Six, 2019) is that most textbooks and curricula begin the instruction of UVoMs in the present tense and postpone the past tense. The dominating teaching strategy is to contrast UVoM pairs used in the present tense on the principle of uni- vs. multidirectionality (*Я иду – Я хожу*) and means of transportation (*Я иду – Я еду; Я хожу – Я езжу*), without questioning the frequency of contextual co-occurrence of such contrasted pairs in natural speech.
- Finally, the instruction of UVoMs is usually separated from the instruction of prefixed VoMs. The latter are conceptualized and taught through their derivational relationship with UVoMs (e.g., ИДТИ → прийти; ХОДИТЬ → приходиться) (cf. Babahanyan, 2015; Bogomolova & Petanova, 2008; Muraviova, 1975; Skvortzova & Poliakov, 2021; Stilman, 1951; Stilman et al., 1972; Wertz, 1979; Launer, 1987) and thus postponed until two or three years after the beginning of learning Russian (cf. Gagarina, 2009, 465). The dominating teaching strategy is thus training learners to contrast the meanings of prefixes by studying a list of prefixed VoMs and doing grammar-oriented exercises where different prefixed VoMs occur in minimal contexts, often little related to each other (cf. Bitextina & Judina, 1986, 46-51; Ivanova, 2010; Mahota, 1996, part II; Muraviova, 1975, 259–264; Nagajceva, 2019, 11–13; Bogomolova & Petanova, 2008; Skvortzova & Poljakov, 2021).

5. Structuralist roots of the traditional directionality-based approach

5.1 Sergej Karcevskij and Alexandr Isačenko: from two to one parameter-based conception of UVoMs

Directionality as a tool for conceptualizing UVoMs is inextricably linked to the history of European structural linguistics and specifically with the structuralist concept of *privative (asymmetrical) binary opposition*. Two Russia-born linguistics – Sergej (Serge) Karcevskij (1884-1955) and Alexandr Isačenko (1910-1978) – have credits for that.

Karcevskij, a student and then professor at the University of Geneva, an active member of the Prague Linguistic Circle and the founder of Geneva Linguistic school, pioneered modern structural linguistics based on F. de Saussure’s teaching. His reflections on directionality and asymmetrical binary opposition can be found in the book *Système du verbe russe. Essai de linguistique synchronique* (Karcevski, 1927/2004) and the article *Du dualisme asymétrique du signe linguistique* (Karcevski, 1929). Isačenko (1910-1978) studied Slavic languages at the University of Vienna in the 1920s under the direction of Nikolai Trubetzkoy (cf. Isačenko, V., 2014), a member of the Prague Linguistic Circle and pioneer of the structuralist approach in phonology. In the 1960s, Isačenko was the head of the research unit for Structural Grammar of the German Academy of Sciences in East Berlin. At this time, he developed the structuralist ideas of asymmetrical binary opposition to describe Slavic morphology, including UVoMs, in his seminal book *Грамматический строй русского языка в сопоставлении с словацким* (Isačenko, 1960) and following articles published in *Вопросы языкознания* (Isačenko, 1961, 1963). Apresjan (1966) quotes Isačenko’s works in his monography on the principles of contemporary structural linguistics.

Karcevskij⁴ was the first to suggest the category of *directionality* to describe the difference between ИДТИ- and ХОДИТЬ-like verbs: ИДТИ-like verbs always refer to an action in a single direction, while ХОДИТЬ-like verbs are nondirectional, they do not contain any specific information about the direction (cf. Karcevski, 1927/2004, 29). However, as Bernitskaïa (2019, 76) notes, Karcevskij’s conceptual framework was based on two – not one – parameters: the category of *directionality* acted along with that of *temporal actualization (временная актуализация)* which refers to the *coincidence of the moment of observation and the moment of motion*. Thus, the meaning of ИДТИ-like verbs implies a combination of two features: unidirectionality (concrete action in a single direction) and temporal actualization (cf. Karcevski, 1927/2004, 98). The two-parameter conception of UMoVs would be further developed by some linguists (cf. Forsyth 1963; 1970; Foote, 1967; Bernitskaïa, 2019), who would insist that “the criterion of directionality is not sufficient to explain the functioning and competition of motion verb forms in all contexts” (Bernitskaïa, 2019, 76). However, in Karcevskij’s book, the two-parameter conception has been only sketched but never fully applied: the author does not provide a detailed explanation of the category of *temporal actualization* and obviously gives much more attention to *directional-*

⁴ Karcevskij’s essential contribution to the conceptualization of UVoM has been recently acknowledged and analyzed by Bernitskaïa (2019).

ity (cf. Bernitskaïa, 2019, 76). The Karcevskij' follower Isačenko (1960, 311) would completely reject *temporal actualization* and focus uniquely on *directionality*, thus establishing a one-parameter conception of UVoMs.

The reason why the possibility of conceptualizing the meaning of UVoMs based on more than one parameter was abandoned by structuralist linguistics lies in the theoretical tenets of this approach. We can distinguish at least three fundamental principles of structuralist linguistic theory that had an impact on the directionality-based conception of UVoMs:

- *privative (asymmetrical) nature of binary oppositions* as organizing principles of grammatical categories;
- the existence of a *universal semantic invariant* for all contextual meanings of a linguistic sign;
- and the distinction between *strong vs. weak speech positions*, involving a *neutralization* of language entities in weak positions.

In the next sections, we will address each of these principles in detail.

5.2 Privative (asymmetrical) opposition

One of the fundamental ideas of structuralist linguistics is that *binary opposition* is an organizing principle of linguistic signs within a language system. Danesi (2009, 11) argues that, originally proposed by Saussure (1916), the concept of opposition has been given its scientific articulation in the works of the Prague School linguists and several Gestalt psychologists, especially Charles Ogden (1932).

Thus, Trubetzkoy (1936; 1939), who applied the concept of binary opposition to the phonological system, and Charles Ogden (1932, 47), who studied oppositions as a theory of mind, have distinguished a specific type of binary opposition: *privative (or asymmetrical) opposition*. It refers to a relationship between two linguistic entities that differ in *one single feature*. Only one member of such opposition is an explicit exponent of the distinctive feature. This number is called *marked*. The second — *unmarked* — member does not contain any explicit indications of the presence of a semantic feature opposite to that contained in the semantics of the marked member (Ogden, 1932, 47; cited in Isačenko, 1961, 35).

Karcevskij (2027; 1929/1956), Jakobson (1932/1971, 79) and later Isačenko (1960, 1961) contributed to further developing the concept of privative opposition by applying it to morphology. They argue that grammatical information is organized as privative oppositions too. Drawing on the ideas of his predecessors, Isačenko defines the grammatical category as “единство двух (и не более!) взаимоисключающих друг друга по значению рядов форм” [the unity of two (and no more!) mutually exclusive in meaning series of forms] (Isačenko, 1961, 30, 35) distinguished by *one feature*. In the spirit of this teaching, Isačenko (1960, 1961) explains the category of UVoMs. The opposition of ИДТИ- vs. ХОДИТЬ-like verbs is privative. It is based on the distinctive feature *unidirectionality*. In the privative opposition *unidirectional vs. nondirectional verbs*, the unidirectional meaning encoded by ИДТИ-verbs is *marked*, while the nondirectional meaning encoded by ХОДИТЬ-like verbs is *unmarked*.

It is important to emphasize that, according to Isačenko and his predecessors, the “unmarked” member of the privative opposition “does not signal the absence of the attribute [expressed by the distinctive feature], but leaves this attribute unexpressed” (Isačenko, 1961, 36; cf. Ogden, 1932, 47, cited in Isačenko, 1961, 35). Hence, Isačenko's choice of terminology: *unidirectional*

verbs are opposed not to *nonunidirectional* or *multidirectional*, but to *nondirectional verbs*. That means that nondirectional ХОДИТЬ-like verbs *do not signal directionality*. With respect to directionality, their meaning is fuzzy; therefore, they *can*, Isačenko argues, *express either directional or nondirectional motion in different contexts* (cf. Isačenko, 1960, 311-312). We could wonder to what extent the theory that openly admits that both members of the grammatical opposition ИДТИ- vs. ХОДИТЬ-like verbs occasionally express the same meaning (unidirectionality) can provide a reliable guide to choosing between these verbs if the single feature which differentiates them is the unidirectionality.

5.3 Semantic invariant and its relationship with contextual meanings and extra-linguistic reality

Another fundamental concept of structuralist linguistics is *invariant meaning*. It helps to understand how the meaning of a grammatical category is related to its multiple variations occurred in different speech contexts and to the extra-linguistic reality. To clarify his position, Isačenko (1961) resorts to the contemporary sign theories, among others, to the then-popular *Triangle of References* (Ogden & Richards, 1923). In keeping with this model, any sign has three essential elements: *designator*, *significator*, and *denotatum*. The *designator* is a physical expression. The *denotatum* is the extra-linguistic reality to which the sign refers. The *significator* is the general meaning of the sign; it is universal for all possible cases of use of the sign applied to different fragments of the extra-linguistic reality.

According to Isačenko, the meaning (*significator*) of a grammatical category is a *semantic invariant embracing all varieties of its possible contextual realizations* (cf. Isačenko, 1961, 32-35). Isačenko illustrates his conception of semantic invariant with the example of the ХОДИТЬ- vs. ИДТИ-like verbs to conclude the following:

“The invariant grammatical meaning of the verbs of motion such as бежать, идти, нести [ИДТИ-like variation for run, walk, carry] is [...] “unidirectionality,” contrasted with the “nondirectionality” of such verbs as бегать, ходить, носить [ХОДИТЬ-like variation for run, walk, carry]. All other “meanings” (including “multiplicity”/“not multiplicity,” “usually,” “performing an action in one go,” etc.) are just different instances of the invariant.” (Isačenko, 1961, 34; Cf. Isačenko, 1960, 300-305).

The concept of *unidirectionality* as *invariant meaning* of ИДТИ-like (vs. ХОДИТЬ-like) verbs was for Isačenko a smart solution for the logical puzzle, that is, the existence of a variety of contextual meanings associated to a variety of extra-linguistic motion events which, however, are expressed in Russian by the same word (the same verbal stem). Introducing a superior level of meaning (*significator*) above individual contextual meanings allowed him to abstract from the latter and avoid than the “traditional confusion” between the extra-linguistic reality (*gegenständliche Beziehung*) and semantic reality of the sign (*Bedeutung*) (Isačenko, 1961, 34). We can however ask to what extent this solution is suitable for L2 classroom. Can the invariant meaning (*directionality*) that is a product of abstraction from contextual meanings be a good tool for the practical choice of the right UVoM in a specific empirical context?

5.4 Unmarked member of the privative opposition does not have a direct contact to the extra-linguistic reality

It is also interesting how Isačenko describes the relationships between the members of privative oppositions and the extra-linguistic reality. Each member – marked and unmarked – is characterized by a specific relationship with denotatum. Isačenko calls it “dialectics of linguistic sign” (Isačenko, 1961, 36). The dialectics are that only the general grammatical meaning (invariant) expressed by the marked member “is directly related to some entities of extra-linguistic reality” (Ibid, 35). In this sense, the grammatical meaning of the marked member is “*motivated*.” While the meaning of the unmarked member is non-motivated since it has no direct connection to reality:

“The general grammatical meaning expressed by the forms of the unmarked member of the privative opposition ignores this extra-linguistic essence (real connection or relation), leaving it unexpressed [...] The grammatical value of a weak [= unmarked] member of an opposition should be recognized as “purely relational” or “intralinguistic.” The grammatical significance (value) of a weak member of the opposition is determined solely by the place of this member of the opposition in the system.” (Isačenko, 1961, 35, 40).

Thus, the meaning of nondirectional ХОДИТЬ-like verbs are not supposed to be directly connected to specific motion events we observe or are involved in a real world. How useful can a conceptual tool based on the assumption that the meaning of ХОДИТЬ-like verbs is detached from the reality be for learners of Russian who are constantly faced with the task of attributing either a ХОДИТЬ- or ИДТИ-like verb to specific motion events that they need to report?

5.5 Strong vs. weak speech positions and neutralization

The structuralist hypothesis of *semantic invariant* implies that not all contextual meanings (*variants*) are equal regarding their capacity to embody the universal meaning (*invariant*). This “invariant issue” was explained by Padučeva (2004) in her study on the semantic invariant of aspectual meaning in Russian. Among others, Padučeva clarifies the mental procedure to determine the semantic invariant of a grammatical category.

For example, to define the semantic invariant for each member – perfective and imperfective – of a typical Russian aspectual pair, the author suggests first revealing “the most natural speech context” for the specific grammatical meaning as opposite to less natural contexts (Padučeva, 2004, 7). She compares the distinction between more vs. less natural contexts to the distinction between “strong” vs. “weak” speech positions used in contemporary phonology (Ibid., 7). “To identify the lexical invariant of the aspectual variation, we must put aspectual form variation in its ‘strong position’” (Ibid., 8), expecting that in such position, the invariant meaning of aspect will be manifest in the clearest way. Thus, the most natural (strong) context for the Russian perfective verb is the position of retrospection (that of past tense), while for imperfective verbs, it is a synchronic perspective (position of presence).

Indeed, Padučeva's explanation could be found somewhat controversial in terms of procedure and conclusion: it is not clear on what basis one position is recognized as more “natural” than

the other. Nevertheless, it helps to understand the methodological approach behind Isačenko's effort to determine the semantic invariant of UVoMs. Structuralist approach assumes that there are "strong" speech positions in which the variant fully represents the invariant's features, and "weak" positions, a kind of gray semantic zones. Variants used in weak positions are distanced from the invariant to the extent that they can be confused (*neutralized*) with speech realizations of other linguistic signs. In phonology, the phenomenon of conditioned limitation on the capacity to distinguish linguistic signs is called "neutralization."⁵ The idea that grammatical forms may not differ in certain contexts was expressed by Karcevskij in his reflections on the asymmetry of the linguistic sign in connection with verbal aspects:

"We know that, in certain concrete situations, values as different as perfective and imperfective can cease to be opposites. In syntax, therefore, we need to study [...] in what concrete situations and according to what notions the value of a sign leads to its opposite." (Karcevskij, 1929/1956, 23-24; cf. Karcevskij, 1927, 118-119).

In the Prague manifesto, B. Trnka and his colleagues openly state that the "tasks of structural morphology" include the description of "morphological oppositions" and "their neutralization" (Trnka, 1957, 45).

Applying this structuralist principle to UVoMs, we must consider the usage of ИДТИ-like verbs in a speech context actualizing the contextual meaning "я в пути/я на пути в" [*I am on my way (to)*] as fully demonstrating the idea of unidirectional motion associated with ИДТИ-like stems, that is *progressive movement forward along a single line, observed at a given point in time*.

Example: Я сейчас еду в офис. Перезвоню, когда приеду. [I am on my way to the office. I will call you back when I arrive].

However, the same verb used in a speech context actualizing the contextual meaning "я собираюсь/я планирую" [*I am planning*] – does not express the invariant meaning with the same clarity.

Example: Я еду в Штутгарт на два дня. Вернусь в субботу, и мы сразу встретимся. [I am going to Stuttgart for two days. I will be back on Saturday, and we will meet right away].

This context is "weak" for ИДТИ-like verbs. Used in it, a ИДТИ-like verb encodes a "there and back/round trip motion" as part of "nondirectionality" associated with ХОДИТЬ-like verbs.

The same can be said about the context actualizing the meaning "регулярно я отправляюсь/направляюсь в" [*Regularly, I make a way to*]; it is a "однократное повторяющееся движение" in terms of Veličko (2018, 608). This context is also "weak" for ИДТИ-like verbs. It allows a neutralization (a confusion) with the meaning of ХОДИТЬ-like verbs.

Example: Каждое утро я еду в офис. [Every morning, I head/make a way to the office].
= Каждое утро я ежжу в офис [Every morning, I go to the office].

⁵ The phenomenon of *neutralization* of invariants in weak positions was described as a property of privative (or asymmetrical) oppositions by Trubetzkoy (1939). In *neutralizable phonological oppositions*, there are speech positions where no opposition exists between two members; two phonemes are realized in the same speech variation (allophone). For example, the phonemes <t> and <d> are neutralized in the position of the absolute end of the word in Russian (кот = код). This position is "weak" for all paired voiced-voiceless consonants.

To what extent can the instructional approach based on a linguistic theory claiming that linguistic entities become undistinguishable in some contexts be suitable for teaching how to distinguish the contextual meanings of these entities to learners who do not have a native-speaker's linguistic intuition in the target language?

6. Discussion

6.1 Structuralist approach to UVoMs in the Russian L2 classroom

Danesi (2009) argues that

“the Prague School, adopted opposition theory as the basis of their approach to the study of language structure [...], thus establishing structuralism broadly as the primary modus operandi in linguistics and semiotics. [...] Indeed, no distinction was made between the term ‘structuralism’ and linguistics for several decades.” (Danesi, 2009, 13).

It was in the era dominated by structural linguistics that the approach to categorizing UVoMs based on the principle of privative binary opposition emerged in linguistics and was borrowed by the methodologists of Russian L2 instruction. The structuralist approach to UVoMs should be recognized as a consistent and innovative linguistic hypothesis per se. Many – yet not all – linguists still consider it quite appropriate for a scientific description of the meaning of UvoMs. Thus, Nessel (2000) argues that “it seems reasonable to assume a privative opposition in Trubetzkoy's (1939) sense, where unidirectional verbs are specified for directionality, while non-directional are not” (116). However, it seems also reasonable to question the value of pedagogical tools based on such linguistic hypothesis. There seems to be a gap between the goal and deep reasoning procedures underlying structuralist linguistic methodology, on the one hand, and L2 teaching and learning process, on the other hand.

6.1.1 The incompatibilities of mental procedures and goals

The reality that structural linguistics is interested in and deals with is the reality of the linguistic system (*the realm of signifier*). The mental procedure structural linguistics follows is interpreting the extra-linguistic reality (e.g., the reality of motion events) as it is reflected in an ensemble of utterances possible in the Russian language, in terms of the a priori preestablished category of privative binary opposition where only one member is granted with a clear reality-connected meaning. Despite the claim that this meaning is motivated by extra-linguistic reality, it is also an *invariant*, i.e., a product of abstraction from multiple contextual meanings. It manifests only in some contexts recognized as strong and becomes undistinguishable in others recognized as weak. The search for the invariant meaning – the ultimate goal of structuralist methodology – is motivated by the epistemological premises that linguistic information is organized as privative binary oppositions not only in linguistic theories but also in human minds and that all contextual usages of the same grammatical entity (a word or a verbal stem) must absolutely have a common grammatical meaning at a higher level of abstraction.

The mental procedures underlying teaching and learning an L2 (including how to report motion events) seem to be quite the opposite. The departure point is always the extra-linguistic reality (*the realm of denotatum*) and learners' personal experience of motion. The "reality" is understood as *empirical experience embodied in language and perceived from a human point of view*. Moreover, this experience is considered cross-national: it is common for all humans independently of the language they speak and therefore it can play an important instructional part in the L2 learning process⁶. Based on their experience, learners distinguish salient and intuitively perceivable features of motion events and use them as a 'hint' associated – not with a stem (!) – but with a specific *verbal form*, interacting with other elements of the utterance and expressing a specific contextual meaning: e.g., (*когда я*) *шёл в*, (*я уже*) *ездил в*, (*завтра я*) *иду в*, (*сейчас я*) *иду в*, (*я часто*) *хожу в*, (*я часто*) *езжу в*, (*я регулярно*) *еду в*. From this empirical perspective, it is pedagogically unprofitable that one motion experience (cf. *Я иду по улице. Завтра я иду в кино*) can be viewed as having a more pronounced connection to reality than other (cf. *Я часто хожу в рестораны. Вчера я ходил на концерт*) and one motion event can be confused with another.

The teacher must use a lot of virtuosity to convince learners that the ИДТИ-like verb used in the utterance A expresses a motion in one direction and not the same round-trip (just placed in the future) like the utterance B:

- A. Мы летим в Париж на все выходные. Мне удалось купить очень дешевые билеты в оба конца. Расскажу подробности в понедельник, когда вернусь [We are going to Paris for the whole weekend. I managed to buy very cheap round-trip tickets. I'll give you the details on Monday when I get back].
- B. В прошлом месяце я летал в Париж на выходные. Мне удалось купить очень дешёвый билет в оба конца. [Last month, we went to Paris for the whole weekend. I managed to buy very cheap round-trip tickets].

The teacher's attempt is doomed to failure not only because it conflicts with the "common sense" based on cross-national human perception of motion experience but also because of the methodology itself. It is grounded in the theory, which inherently implies the existence of contexts where opposed meanings (and therefore different motion events) are considered as linguistically non-differentiable.

Thus, rooted in the structuralist linguistics' methodology, the traditional directionality-based approach suggests a *deductive path*: it leads learners from the abstract category (invariant) of directionality associated with a verbal stem toward a concrete situation of motion in which the invariant must be identified, sometimes against the opposite evidence of contextual meaning. While L2 learners' natural cognitive path is rather *inductive*: it goes from a concrete situation, the learner needs to report, toward a specific verbal form expressing a specific meaning referring to this situation. Going abstract invariant is not at all necessary for successful verb selection.

⁶ In the understanding of the primordial role of the across-national extra-linguistic reality and experience as a point of departure in L2 learning, the Soviet Communication & Activity-based approach (коммуникативно-деятельностный подход; cf. Passov & Kuzovleva, 2010) fully coincides with the principles of the modern European action-based paradigm (cf. Pluskwa et al., 2009), as well as its predecessors and derivatives, such as the TPR approach (Asher, 1969), task- and project-based language teaching and learning transformational pedagogy (cf. Leaver & Campbell, 2022).

6.1.2 Compensatory strategies: less accurate although more intuitive terminology and paraphrasing

Since the 1970s, many Russian L2 methodologists have followed Isačenko's (1960) conception of directionality. Some of them (cf. Veličko, 2009; 2018) have used the original Isačenko's terminology *unidirectional vs. nondirectional verbs*. Others, most influential ones (cf. Muravyova, 1975; 1986; Bitextina & Judina, 1986; Bitextina et al., 1995), have favored the term *multidirectionality*, instead of *nondirectinality*, for the unmarked member (ХОДИТЬ-like verbs). The methodologists do not explain why deviating from the original – scientific – terminology.

In light of our study, we may see this deviation as a spontaneous response prompted by an intuitive acknowledgement that the structuralist directionality-based conception of UVoMs is not entirely compatible with the way L2 learners of Russian process motion events. Thus, the term *nondirectional motion* is more scientifically accurate, since it fits to the structural linguistic principle implying that only one member of the privative binary opposition is marked. However, the term *multidirectional motion* is more reality-driven and, therefore, more intuitive, and understandable for both L2 teachers and learners: from a simple (intuitive) human perspective, we cannot move without direction, whatever the latter means.

Apparently, for the same reason, all methodologists tend to compensate for the abstract rule based on directionality with elements of the situational approach. For example, Muravyova (1986) notes that

“the past tense forms ХОДИТЬ, ЕЗДИТЬ, ЛЕТАТЬ, etc. can convey the agent's movement in two directions, there and back, in which case their meaning is synonymous with that of the forms БЫТЬ, ПОБЫВАТЬ, ПОСЕТИТЬ, e.g., *Утром отец ездил на завод – Утром отец был на заводе*” (Muravyova, 1986, 55; cf. the same observations in Bitextina & Judina, 1986, 12-15; Veličko, 2018, 611).

Within the traditional directionality-based instruction of UVoMs, this paraphrasing technique is not applied systematically to all repertoire of contextual meanings and does not challenge the directionality-based rule. Paraphrasing is used to double-check learners' judgment about directionality. However, it provides insight into a possible alternative approach to teaching/learning UVoM, which we will briefly discuss in the next section.

6.2 Searching for an alternative - non-structuralist - approach to teaching VoMs

As mentioned above, in recent years, we have observed a growing number of attempts to propose alternative approaches to teaching VoMs grounded in an alternative – non-structuralist – linguistic conceptualization.

6.2.1 Context-oriented, item-based and experience-driven approaches to teaching VoMs

All alternative methodological approaches we could identify (see Bondarenko, in preparation) have the following common features:

- They all could be described as *context-* and *item-based*: they focus not on stems and their invariant meaning but on specific verbal forms with their specific contextual meanings manifest in specific communicative contexts.

- They avoid the category of *directionality* and propose sequences for introducing VoMs based on a combination of specific verbal forms involved into a typical narrative about a specific motion event instead of contrasting members of on binary oppositions (*Я иду – Я хожу*). Paying particular attention to the actual usage of language, they do not hesitate to introduce together prefixed and unprefixes VoMs in different tenses at the low-proficiency level if the communication reality requires that (Bondarenko, 2019; Castellví et al., 2022; Six, 2019; Soboleva, 2023).
- They rely on learners' *empirical experience of motion* and privilege teaching techniques that capitalize on and promote this experience, such as Total Physical Response (TPR), task-based language teaching (TBLT), game playing (Bondarenko, 2023), and learners' own storytelling, instead of "fill in the blanks" exercises encouraging students to finish other speakers' stories" (cf. Kendall, 2017, 8).

For example, Six (2019) suggests a storytelling-based method to introduce prefixed and prefixed VoMs within "a narrative about a completed round trip within the sequence of events with parallel drawing of pictograms" (Six, 2019, 215): ХОДИЛ = ПОШЁЛ-ШЁЛ-ПРИШЁЛ and ЕЗДИЛ = ПОЕХАЛ-ЕХАЛ-ПРИЕХАЛ. Approaching VoMs instruction from a lexical (cf. Lewis, 1993) and task-based pedagogy's perspective, Castellví and colleagues (2022; Castellví & Markina, 2022; Markina, 2018) suggest the first systematic instruction on VoMs within a real-world related task of requesting/providing street directions (e.g., НАДО ИДТИ/ПОЙТИ/ПЕРЕЙТИ) and narration about the route taken. Some instructors (cf. Elliott & Yountchi, 2009; Weygandt, 2023) rediscover the TPR approach (cf. Asher, 1969, 16) to apply it to teaching VoMs.

6.2.2 A paraphrasing-based approach: *Semantic Labeling*

It is worth mentioning separately the efforts to build a teaching method based on paraphrasing, which we mentioned above as a compensatory strategy within the traditional directionality-based approach. Bondarenko (2019; 2023) suggests a method based on *Semantic Labeling* integrated into *Narrative-communicative Frames*. *Semantic labeling* is a paraphrasing, in the target language (Russian), the contextual meanings of a UVoM encoding a specific motion event by considering the essential features (descriptors) of the event, which allows one to differentiate it from others. Visualized as "verbal labels" with pictographic support, the descriptors fall into two series (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Two series of descriptors used in the *Semantic Labeling* approach (Bondarenko, 2023, 115).

The first series refer to the manner of motion: 1) ПЕШКОМ или НЕВАЖНО КАК, ПОТОМУ ЧТО МЫ В ГОРОДЕ, 2) НА ТРАНСПОРТЕ В ГОРОДЕ или ПОЕЗДКА В ДРУГОЙ ГОРОД, В ДРУГУЮ СТРАНУ. The second series includes descriptors combining temporal, aspectual, pragmatic and real-world features: 1) Я БЫЛ там/Я ПОСЕТИЛ это место; 2) Я БЫВАЮ/БЫВАЛ/БУДУ БЫВАТЬ там периодически; 3) Я ПЛАНИРУЮ ПОСЕТИТЬ это место/Я СОБИРАЮСЬ туда; 4) Я НА ПУТИ В...⁷. Combinations of labels from both series provide instructional tools that connect a specific form of a UVoM and the context in which the form occurs, thereby suggesting a path for developing desired mental constrictions (Figure 2).

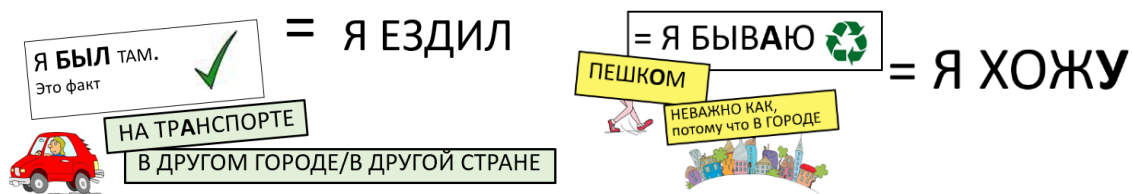


Figure 2: Examples of combining semantic labels to define contextual meanings of a UVoM (Bondarenko, 2023, 115).

The narrative-communicative frame is a combination of thematic features, communicative functions, and pragmatic intentions in which a narration about a specific motion event typically occurs. The narrative-communicative frame and the learner's needs and proficiency level govern a combination of contextual meanings (semantic labels) that we can address in one learning session. For example, the meanings Я РЕГУЛЯРНО ЕЗЖУ combined with ПОСЛЕДНИЙ РАЗ Я ЕЗДИЛ (labels: Я БЫВАЮ + Я БЫЛ + ПОЕЗДКА В ДРУГУЮ СТРАНУ ИЛИ ДРУГОЙ ГОРОД) and Я ЕДУ/ПОЕДУ (label: Я СОБИРАЮСЬ) can be introduced as part of the topic МОИ ПУТЕШЕСТВИЯ taught at a low proficiency level, such as A.1. To be successfully acquired, these contextual meanings do not have to be contrasted with others, such as Я ХОЖУ or Я ИДУ belonging to different communicative-narrative frames.

6.2.3 Cognitive linguistics as the foundation for alternative approaches

Some may confuse the rejection of the category of directionality with a rejection of the principle of scientificity. The traditional directionality-based approach is rooted in a although controversial but well-known and respected linguistic theory. What do the Semantic Labeling and other alternative approaches rely on? We argue (Bondarenko, 2023) that the alternative approaches converge with the principles of cognitive linguistics, that has inspired L2 pedagogy since several

⁷ The repertoire of descriptors varies according to contextual meanings the teacher deems important for the curriculum. For example, we can add the semantic label СПОСОБНОСТЬ. Я МОГУ/Я УМЕЮ to convey the meaning of ХОДИТЬ-like verbs referring to the ability to perform movement in a certain manner (e.g., Я плаваю хорошо. Ребёнок ещё не ходит). The semantic label Я РЕГУЛЯРНО ОТПРАВЛЯЮСЬ (туда) и Я РЕГУЛЯРНО ВОЗВРАЩАЮСЬ (оттуда) could be used to clarify the meaning of ИДТИ-like verbs referring to “однократное повторяющееся движение” (Veličko, 2018, 608) (e.g., Каждый день я еду в офис). The semantic label ДВИГАЮСЬ БЕЗ ЦЕЛИ/Я ГУЛЯЮ ПО/Я ПУТЕШЕСТВУЮ ПО could clarify the meaning of ХОДИТЬ-like verbs referring to “random motion in different directions” (Gor et al., 2010, 365).

decades (cf. Littlemore, 2009). Cognitive linguistics' views language as a product of physical interaction with the world (cf. Littlemore, 2009, 1; Fisher, 2010, 45) and language acquisition as "use-based". That means that "a language is learned 'bottom-up' through exposure to usage events," grounded into "a fine-grained, context-dependent conceptualization" (Taylor, 2006, 574). Focused on how extra-linguistic experience gradually becomes conceptualized in the human mind, cognitive linguistics reviews traditional linguistic notions. Thus, it favors the notion of *construction* over *grammatical category* and *grammar rules*. Unlike a grammar rule, *construction* assumes that grammatical information is organized and stored in the human mind in the form of embodied prelinguistic structures of experience ("image schemata") and linguistic "prototypes" (cf. Goldberg, 2006, 5) rather than in the form of abstract invariant. Thus, cognitive linguistics can provide a theoretical linguistic foundation for alternative teaching Russian VoMs.

6.3 Reconsidering the relationship between 'scientific grammar', 'pedagogical grammar' and 'teaching methodology'

The epistemological analysis of the scientific roots underlying the traditional methodological approach to teaching UVoMs shows the path toward re-examining our understanding of the relationship between three connected areas, such as 'scientific grammar' (linguistic theories), 'pedagogical grammar,' and 'teaching methodology.' Traditionally, we tend to consider linguistic aspects of L2 instruction presented in pedagogical grammar as a field of knowledge separated from and independent of teaching methodologies. Within this - rather essentialist - view, the linguistic aspects of L2 learning refer to scientifically proven knowledge about language structures. This knowledge is 'objective' and unchangeable. In contrast, the teaching methodology refers to how the given linguistic information is delivered in the L2 classroom. This part of L2 instruction is 'subjective' and can vary depending on methodological trends and individual teaching styles. The example of URoM demonstrates that the linguistic and methodological aspects of L2 learning are more deeply connected than one might think. The preference granted to one linguistic theory over another to conceptualize the verbs influences the methodological solutions. The structuralist philosophy of privative opposition inspires and supports the traditional teaching approach based on deductive mental path and focused on contrasting members of binary oppositions: unidirectional vs. nondirectional pairs. An alternative view on the semantics of UVoM from the cognitive linguistics perspective supports alternative item-based and context-related and experience-driven teaching approaches.

7. Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that the traditional directionality-based approach to teaching UVoMs is deeply rooted in the methodological tenets of European post-Saussurean structural linguistics and specifically related to the concept of *privative (asymmetrical) opposition*. The structuralist way of conceptualizing UVoMs, being a legitimate linguistic hypothesis, is not, however, the best tool for teaching and learning UVoMs in the L2 classroom because of deep epis-

temological incompatibilities between structuralist methodology and L2 teaching and processing at the mental procedures level. Searching for universal semantic invariants associated with specific morphemes, structuralist linguistics abstracts from contextual factors and fails to provide an easily applicable guide to choosing the correct UVoM. Metaphorically speaking, the linguistic category of directionality brought to the L2 classroom turns out to be, in many senses, a lever that is heavier than the weight it is supposed to help lift.

In response to dissatisfaction with the traditional approach, more conservative Russian L2 educators have introduced some compensatory strategies (such as simplified terminology and paraphrasing) within the directionality-based approach, while more radical ones have proposed alternative methods (such as *Semantic Labeling*), which are situation-based, item-focused, and experience-driven, and avoid the concept of directionality. Converging with the principles of cognitive linguistics, the alternative approach seems to be able to make up for the shortcomings of the traditional approach and offer a more intuitive methodology for teaching UVoMs.

The study has also demonstrated the benefit of epistemological reflection on the linguistic background of the pedagogical grammar we use in L2 classrooms. Contrasting these two connected, although distinct fields of knowledge can help evaluate the pedagogical values of our methods and validate our methodological insights and innovations. Further exploring linguistic theoretical foundations for alternative teaching Russian VoMs is the next stage of the study presented.

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