

Ambiguity in Russian Verbal Prefixation System: From Lexical Semantics to Probabilistic Pragmatic Modelling

Юлия Зинова (Heinrich-Heine University, Düsseldorf)

Traditionally, one of the usages of the prefix *po-* (often called delimitative or attenuative) is associated with some characteristic of an event being lower than the expected value: an event lasting for a short period of time, a small quantity of the theme consumed, etc. Although the observations about the low degree on some scale, associated with the discussed usage of the prefix *po-*, are commonly accepted and seem to be well established, numerous corpora examples do not support it, e.g. because the same verbs are modified by adverbials denoting a high degree.

In this talk I show how a combination of underspecified semantics and probabilistic pragmatic modelling can serve to explain intuitions about the delimitative nature of the prefix *po-* and at the same time account for the cases that seem exceptional from the traditional perspective. I provide formal semantic representations (in Frame Semantics as formalized by Kallmeyer and Osswald 2013) of various prefixed verbs and pass them to a three-layered Rational Speech Act model (RSA, Goodman and Frank 2016) using WebPPL. As a result, I obtain predictions that align with the traditional view (e.g., it is very likely that an event that is referred to by a *po-*prefixed verb is not a maximal event), but are more flexible, as the literal semantics remains underspecified and inferences can be cancelled or do not arise at all in certain contexts.