Nominalization and aspectual morphology

Sergei Tatevosov
Moscow State University

The problem. Are nominalizations specified for grammatical aspect? In the current perspective on nominalization (Abney 1987, Alexiadou 2001, 2007, 2009, 2010, Alexiadou et al. 2010, Fu et al. 2001, van Hout, Roep 1998, Roep 1987, 2004, Harley 2009), the answer to this question depends, for a given language and a given nominalization, on whether the constituent embedded under a nominal head contains an aspectual operator, (1). For the languages like Slavic, where aspect is assumed to be a lexical category, aspectual operators are supposed to be merged early, as soon as the verb stem with all its aspectual morphology appears in the derivation. The prediction, then, is that in such languages nominalizations should be aspectually identical to fully inflected clauses, since however small structure a nominalization embeds, aspectual operators must be there. The goal of this paper is to show that this prediction is wrong and to argue that verbs stems in languages like Russian are aspectless no matter if aspectual morphology is there. Accordingly, what is traditionally assumed to be morphological exponents of (im)perfectivity is to be substantially re-analyzed.

Data and generalizations. According to the standard view, (2), in Russian and many other Slavic languages, aspectual morphology appears in two varieties: the imperfective suffix -yva- that creates imperfective verbs, (3a), and various prefixes that derive perfective verbs, (3b). (Prefixation can have further effects on the lexical meaning and argument structure of the verb stem, irrelevant for our discussion.) Two crucial generalizations I want to establish are: (A) event-denoting / argument supporting deverbal nominals (ASNs) derived from verb stems with “aspectual” morphology are aspectually neutral; (B) ASNs minimally include vP. From A and B, it follows that aspectual operators are not part of vP and originate in the functional domain of the clause, exactly as in languages like English.

A. To see that nominalizations are aspectually neutral, we look at systematic contrasts between fully inflected clauses and ASNs. First, consider verbs and deverbal nouns in -nie containing the “imperfective” -yva- suffix. In the fully inflected in (4), the imperfective verb ‘open’ produces the progressive interpretation, and the time of coming must be included in the time of opening, cf. (4.1) and (4.2). In contrast, the ASN in (6) licenses the reading in (6.2), where the time of opening (immediately) follows the time of coming, exactly as in the perfective fully inflected clause in (5).

The same aspectual indeterminacy is characteristic of ASNs based on prefixed perfective stems like napisa ‘write’ in (7). Further evidence supporting the generalization about aspectual neutrality of stems like napisa comes from aspectual composition (Krifka 1998, Verkuyl 1999, Pinon 2008). Perfectivity restricts interpretation of an undetermined plural (or mass) incremental argument. It must have what Filip (2005 and elsewhere) calls the unique maximal (= definite) interpretation whereby the object DP refers to a maximal individual consisting of all entities of a particular type available at the universe of discourse. (8) is thus a logical contradiction. In contrast, for (9) the indefinite interpretation is available (cf. the bare plural letters in write letters in English). On this interpretation, (9) only indicates that there are letters that undergo writing, and this makes ‘but there are a few more letters to write’ a felicitous continuation of the discourse.

More generally, whatever aspectual diagnostics we take, we see no effects associated with (im)perfectivity in nie-ASNs. Aspectual operators are thus not part of their semantic structure.

B. The above evidence does not show how much of the structure ASNs and fully inflected clauses share. Standard diagnostics (Alexiadou 2001 and much further work) suggests that Russian nie-ASNs (Babby 1997, a.m.o.) contain at least a vP. Specifically, for nie-ASNs the internal argument is obligatory to the same extent as for a fully inflected clause (okryvanie *(okna), napisanie *(pisma)); nie-ASNs license VP-level temporal adverbials, (10), and purpose adjuncts, (11).

Therefore, if ASNs contain vP but are aspectually neutral, this means that aspectual operators merge outside vP. When a clause is build, at some point the projection of a functional category Asp that hosts the aspectual operator appears in the derivation, (12), and it is at this point that the aspectual effects come in. But ASNs involve a smaller fragment of structure, (13): vP merges with nominal heads before AspP is projected. At this stage, aspect is not yet there. This provides a principled explanation for why nie-ASNs do not exhibit aspectual effects.

Therefore, “aspectual morphology” does not render aspectual operators at the position where it appears. However, one has to account for the fact that yva-verb stems create imperfective clauses obligatorily, and stems where the last step of morphological derivation is prefixation come out perfective. I propose that aspectual operators form a denotation of a phonologically null Asp that bears an unvalued interpretable feature iAsp acting as a probe (in the spirit of Pesetsky, Torrego 2007), while (yva) and prefixes contain its uninterpretable valued counterparts. After agreement takes place, Asp acquires a value for iAsp, (14). If this analysis is correct, the peculiarity of Russian-type aspectual systems is not that aspect is lexical, but that the agreement is a substantial part of the mechanism determining an aspectual construal of a clause.
Examples and references

(1) Perfective or imperfective nominalization
\[ \text{NP} \ldots [ \ldots \text{PFV/IPFV} \ldots ] \]


(3) a. otkry-va-t’  
   [open-YVA]_{IPFV-INF}  
   ‘open, IPFV’

(4) Vasja otkryval dver’ v moment moego prihoda
\( V. \text{open-YVA-PST door.ACC in moment my.GEN coming.GEN} \)
‘V. was opening the door at the moment of my coming.’
1. \( \tau(\text{coming}) \subset \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)
2. \( \tau(\text{coming}) \prec \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)

(5) Vasja otkryl dver’ v moment moego prihoda
\( V. \text{open-PST.M door.ACC in moment my.GEN coming.GEN} \)
‘V. opened the door at the moment of my coming.’
1. \( \tau(\text{coming}) \subset \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)
2. \( \tau(\text{coming}) \prec \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)

(6) otkryvanie dveri v moment moego prihoda
\( \text{open-YVA-NMN-NOM door.GEN in moment my.GEN coming.GEN} \)
‘opening of the door at the moment of my coming’
1. \( \text{OK} \tau(\text{coming}) \subset \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)
2. \( \text{OK} \tau(\text{coming}) \prec \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)

(7) napisanie zapiski v moment moego prihoda
\( \text{PRF-write-NMN-NOM note.GEN in moment my.GEN coming.GEN} \)
‘writing of a note at the moment of my coming’
1. \( \text{OK} \tau(\text{coming}) \subset \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)
2. \( \text{OK} \tau(\text{coming}) \prec \tau(\text{opening of the door}) \)

(8) Vasja napisal pis’ma… *no ostalos’ ešče neskol’ko.
\( V. \text{PRF-write-PST letter-ACC.PL but remain-PST-N-REFL more a.few} \)
‘Vasja wrote [(all) the letters] / [\*∅ letters]… *but there are a few more (letters to write).’

(9) Napisanie pis’ma prodolžalos’ ves’ den’ …
\( \text{PRF-write-NMN-NOM letter.GEN.PL last-PST-N-REFL whole day} \)
‘Writing letters lasted for the whole day long…’
… \( \text{OK} \text{no ostalos’ ešče neskol’ko.} \)
but remain-PST-N-REFL more a.few ‘but there are a few more (letters to write).’

(10) napisanie pis’ma nemedlenno
\( \text{PRF-write-NMN-NOM letter-GEN immediately} \)
‘writing a letter immediately’

(11) otkryvanie okna, čtoby vpustit’ svežij vozdux
\( \text{open-YVA-NMN-NOM winsow-GEN so.that let.in-INF fresh-ACC air.ACC} \)
‘opening the window to let fresh air in’

(12) [CP … [Asp … PFV/IPFV … [vP … napis-a-otkryva- … ] ] ]


(14) [ … [Asp Asp … [vP … [ … (yv)a … ] ] ] ]
iAsp [1]  
iAsp ipfv[1]