

The “Russian” attitude to time*

Valentina Apresjan

Philological Faculty, Higher School of Economics, Moscow

This chapter explores the semantics and pragmatics of the Russian temporal syntactic phraseme ‘X to X’, which expresses either the speaker’s surprise at the fact that events go as planned (surprising punctuality interpretation) or the speaker’s surprise at the fact that unplanned events go as if they had been pre-planned (surprising fateful coincidence interpretation). While the construction is not unique, and occurs in other languages, its preferred interpretations are language-specific. The chapter demonstrates differences between Russian and English outlooks on time, based on their fundamental differences in linguistic worldviews. While in Russian surprising punctuality interpretation prevails, English favours the surprising fateful coincidence interpretation of this phraseme (see also Charlier, this volume on Mongolian temporality).

Keywords: linguistic worldview, Russian, temporal syntactic phraseme

1. Introduction

1.1. Syntactic phraseme X to X ‘X to X’ in the Russian linguistic worldview

Expressions of space and time are part of the core vocabulary of any language, and, as such, have a high potential for cross-linguistic universality (consider spatial and temporal deixis, that is, in some form, present in every language). However, because different cultures’ notions of space and time allow for very different

* This work has been partly financed by the following grants: the Programme of fundamental research of the Historical and Philological Department of the Russian Academy of Sciences “Genesis and interaction of social, cultural and linguistic entities”, by the grant Scientific Schools-6577.2012.6 for the support of research conducted by the leading scientific schools of the Russian Federation, by the grant of the Russian State Humanities Fund № 10-04-00273a “Preparation of the first volume of the Active Dictionary of Russian”, and by the grant of the Scientific Fund of the Higher School of Economics.

models (e.g. linear vs cyclical time), temporal and spatial expressions are subject to considerable cross-linguistic variation.

The current chapter focuses on one Russian syntactic phraseme with the meaning of exact temporal coincidence, namely $X \vee X$ 'X to X' (*god \vee god* 'year to year', *minuta \vee minutu* 'minute to minute', *sekunda \vee sekundu* 'second to second'), that provides a glimpse into the conceptualisation of time in the Russian linguistic worldview.¹ Its approximate correlates in English are such expressions as "to the day" ("They followed the schedule to the day"); "to the minute" ("They arrived to the minute").

This construction implicitly expresses two pragmatically similar ideas: that events *do not usually happen precisely at the time they had been planned* (first meaning); that if two unrelated events happen at the same time, it is suggestive of some *fateful hidden connection* or parallelism between them (second meaning). These pragmatic ideas corroborate earlier findings in the study of Russian pragmatics. Thus, it has long been argued (Babby 1975:182; Wierzbicka 1990:23–30; Bulygina and Shmelev 1997:481–495; J. Apresjan 2006:36–39; V. Apresjan 2010) that the Russian language reflects, on different levels, a key idea that events are frequently controlled by some outside forces, rather than by the will of the agent; cf. as evidence, the Russian notions of "fate" and "not-fated" and other related concepts, as well as impersonal constructions, in particular the construction of the type *Mne ne rabotaetsja* 'To-me it doesn't work' = 'I don't feel like working'. Another important self-stereotype reflected in the Russian linguistic worldview is the lack of *akkuratnost* 'neatness' and self-control (Rakhilina and Plungian 1996:341–344). Below, I provide a detailed analysis of the semantics and pragmatics of this syntactic phraseme, as well as an account of its place in the Russian linguistic worldview. The chapter is intended to be considered in the broader context of language-culture interconnection, as are other chapters in the current volume. More specifically, it tackles the issue of how different languages conceptualize the speakers' attitude to time, in the same vein as other chapters in Part II, "Cultural perspectives on space and time", in this volume, in particular, the chapter "Universals and specifics of 'time' in Russian" by Anna Gladkova and the chapter "Two temporalities of the Mongolian wolf hunter" by Bernard Charlier.

The following subsections clarify the notion of a temporal syntactic phraseme and demonstrate how the subjective length or brevity of time periods referenced in phrasemes contributes to their interpretation. Section 2 explores the semantics of the syntactic phraseme $X \vee X$ 'X to X' and Section 3 focuses on its pragmatics. Conclusions follow in Section 4.

1. See Mel'čuk (1987:631–632), Iomdin (2003:216–217) on the notion of syntactic phraseme.

1.2 Idioms of coincidence and temporal syntactic phrasemes

The item under consideration in this chapter is a temporal syntactic phraseme. A syntactic phraseme is an idiomatic item with a fixed syntactic structure and lexical variables, usually belonging to a restricted semantic set. Size constructions, for instance, provide a clear example: their syntactic structure is fixed as Numeral–Noun–Adjective, with nouns belonging to the semantic set of measurements, and adjectives to the semantic set of parameters, e.g. 3 metres wide, 3 metres long, 3 metres tall, 3 metres deep; 10 inches wide, 10 inches long, 10 inches tall, 10 inches deep.

The syntactic phraseme $X \vee X$ ‘X to X’ lies at a semantic intersection between idioms denoting exact quantitative or qualitative coincidence and temporal syntactic phrasemes.

The pragmatic function of the former group of items is to draw the speaker’s attention to the unusual fact of a complete coincidence of some parameters; cf. *tjutel’ka v tjutel’ku* ‘to a tee’, ‘accurate to a hair’s breadth’; *toč’-v-toč’*, *odin v odin* ‘right to a nicety’, as in (1)–(3).

- (1) Deneg na plat’je hvatilo *tjutel’ka v tjutel’ku*.
‘We had *just enough* money for the dress’
- (2) U nee lico *toč’-v-toč’* kak u toj aktrisy.
‘She has *exactly* the same face as that actress’
- (3) Teksty odinakovye, *odin v odin*.
‘The texts are the *same to the last letter*’

Syntactic phrasemes are a widespread and multifunctional phenomenon among temporal expressions. They are diverse syntactically but lexically are invariably filled with names of quantifiable time periods, such as second, minute, hour, day, week, month, year, century, but not the numerically indefinite *instant, *moment, *blink, *flash, *split second, etc.

On the whole, they tend to express perception of time periods as subjectively long or short. Consider, for example, syntactic phrasemes “X in, X out” and “X after X”, where X is a period of time, such as “hour”, “day”, “month”, “year”, “century”, with the meaning ‘in the speaker’s opinion, for a long time – for many Xs’:

- (4) Year in and year out they went to Florida for the winter.
- (5) Year after year they went to Florida for the winter.

Because of their meaning, there is a pragmatic restriction on what periods of time can be mentioned in these constructions. Namely, the time periods that can be used as fillers for the X variable in the “X in, X out” and “X after X” phrasemes

have to be conceived of as long. Thus, such pragmatically short periods of time as minutes or seconds would be inappropriate:

- (6) *Minute in, minute out he was smoking.
- (7) ??Second after second she was reading that boring passage.

The Russian language is also abundant in temporal syntactic phrasemes, whose lexical filling is semantically restricted primarily with respect to the subjective length of a time period. Consider two contrasting examples: *s X-a na X* 'any X', with the meaning 'Event Y is expected very soon, no later than after several short time intervals X' and *iz X-a v X* 'X after X after X' with the meaning 'Situation Y has been going on for a very long time, for many long time intervals X', as in:

- (8) On priedet so dnja na den.
'He will arrive any day now'
- (9) Vsegda odno i to že, izo dnja v den.
'Always the same, day after day after day'

The former phraseme, that points to the brevity of a time period elapsing between the time of reference and the time of event, cannot be filled with the names of "long" time periods, cf. the ungrammaticality of

- (10) *Stroitel'stvo zakončat s goda na god.
'The construction is going to be finished any year now'

The latter phraseme, with its implication of an undesirably long duration of a certain situation, cannot be filled with the names of short time periods, cf. the ungrammaticality of

- (11) *Vsegda odno i to že, iz sekundy v sekundu.
'Always the same, second after second after second'

1.3 Subjective length and brevity of time periods

Yet which time periods can be thought of as long and which can be thought of as short? Clearly, there are some that can be evaluated as either, such as *den* 'day'; cf. its opposite evaluations in Examples (8) and (9).

In themselves, none of the time intervals can be semantically construed as either long or short; minutes, hours, days, months, years are all objective temporal measurements. However, it is natural that in certain contexts some intervals can be evaluated by the speaker as long stretches of time, and some others as short ones, cf. the natural Examples (12)–(14) and the pragmatically inappropriate (15)–(16):

- (12) He’s working endless hours.
- (13) It took a whole day.
- (14) For centuries, people have fought the negative effects of aging.
- (15) ??He’s working endless minutes.
- (16) ??For seconds, they argued with each other.

Thus, centuries and years are contextually mostly evaluated as “long”, seconds and minutes as “short”, whereas hours, days, and sometimes weeks and months can take either “long” or “short” as attributes. This distribution is corroborated by corpus data. Namely, in the Russian National Corpus such collocations as *dolgie veka* ‘long centuries’, *dolgie gody* ‘long years’ significantly outnumber such collocations as *dolgie minuty* ‘long minutes’ or *dolgie sekundy* ‘long seconds’, while co-occurrence with the adjective *korotkij* ‘short’ demonstrates the opposite tendency, namely, the preference of “short minutes” and “short seconds” over “short years” and “short centuries”.

This general tendency is not without certain exceptions. First of all, *nedelja* ‘week’ and *mesjac* ‘month’, due to their overall smaller frequency as compared to *minuta* ‘minute’, *čas* ‘hour’, *den* ‘day’, and *god* ‘year’, behave somewhat out of line. Namely, *korotkie mesjacy* ‘short months’ and *korotkie nedeli* ‘short weeks’ are outnumbered by *korotkie gody* ‘short years’, while *dolgie mesjacy* ‘long months’ and *dolgie nedeli* ‘long weeks’ are outnumbered by *dolgie dni* ‘long days’ and *dolgie časy* ‘long hours’, although the scale of actual temporal duration would provide the opposite expectations.

Besides, the Russian National Corpus data does contain a certain number of *korotkie gody* ‘short years’ and *dolgie minuty* ‘long minutes’ collocations, which seems to contradict the subjective evaluation of these time intervals as long and short, respectively.² In fact, however, it only confirms the tendency, as all such collocations imply that the situation is somehow out of the ordinary and therefore worthy of special attention.

The co-occurrence data is also affected by the fact that speakers are prone to drawing attention to the abnormally long rather than abnormally short duration of situations, therefore collocations with the word “long” are overall more frequent than collocations with the word “short”.

2. The Russian National Corpus is an online corpus of the Russian language. The biggest part of the corpus, that has been used in this study, contains about 150 million words and is called “the Main Corpus”. It includes texts representing standard Russian, and consists of modern written texts (from the 1950s to the present day), a subcorpus of real-life Russian speech (recordings of oral speech from the same period), and early texts (from the middle of the 18th to the middle of the 20th centuries).

Table 1. Co-occurrence of ‘long’ and ‘short’ with different time intervals

Long intervals	Short intervals
‘long year’ <i>dolgij god</i> 2036	‘short second’ <i>korotkaja sekunda</i> 12
‘long month’ <i>dolgij mesjac</i> 135	‘short minute’ <i>korotkaja minuta</i> 58
‘long week’ <i>dolgaja nedelja</i> 29	‘short hour’ <i>korotkij čas</i> 35
‘long day’ <i>dolgij den’</i> 160	‘short day’ <i>korotkij den’</i> 105
‘long hour’ <i>dolgij čas</i> 196	‘short week’ <i>korotkaja nedelja</i> 2
‘long minutes’ <i>dolgie minuti</i> 17	‘short month’ <i>korotkij mesjac</i> 4
‘long seconds’ <i>dolgie sekundy</i> 4	‘short year’ <i>korotkij god</i> 20

The actual co-occurrence data is given in Table 1. The numbers in the table refer to the number of occurrences of every given collocation in the 150 000 000 million word corpus.

The data suggests that years, months, and weeks are more often evaluated as subjectively long time periods, seconds and minutes as subjectively short, whereas days and hours are more or less neutral with respect to the length of their duration and can be evaluated either way. In addition, weeks are generally “underprivileged” as they are less frequently used in free collocations and, consequently, as lexical fillers in syntactic phrasemes. This may be due to the fact that in Russian, exact time is usually measured in hours, minutes, and sometimes seconds, dates are measured in days, months, and years, whereas weeks fall out of this scheme. Seconds, minutes, hours, and years all have a numerical expression, months and days have both a number and a name, whereas weeks have neither, except in certain special contexts, such as *vos’maja nedelja beremennosti* ‘the eighth week of pregnancy’. All of these factors play a role in the functioning of the syntactic phraseme $X \nu X$, ‘X to X’, that is, its lexical filling is sensitive both to the subjective evaluation of the time period as long, short, or neutral, and to the objective frequency factor.

2. Semantics of the syntactic phraseme $X \nu X$ ‘X to X’

2.1 Three interpretations of the phraseme $X \nu X$

The syntactic phraseme that is considered in this chapter is a Russian construction $X \nu X$, with its syntactic structure fixed as ‘X-nom in X-acc’, and names of quantitatively definite time periods as lexical fillers, e.g. *minuta \nu minutu* ‘minute to minute’, *čas \nu čas* ‘hour to hour’, etc. While the temporal variable X in this construction can be filled by the name of *any* exact time period, except “century” (i.e. “second”, “minute”, “hour”, “day”, “week”, “month”, and “year”), this item is

not recognised or appropriately described as a syntactic phraseme in the Russian lexicographic and grammatical tradition.

In fact, dictionaries reflect only up to four possible realisations of this phraseme, namely, *sekunda v sekundu* ‘second to second’, *minuta v minutu* ‘minute to minute’, *čas v čas* ‘hour to hour’ and *den’ v den’* ‘day to day’, cf. data in the Small Academic dictionary of the Russian Language, and Sonya Lubensky’s *Russian–English Dictionary of Idioms*. Besides, while the phraseme is three-ways polysemous, dictionaries mention no more than two or even one possible interpretation for each realisation.

The current chapter proposes a systematic analysis of the phraseme *X v X* in all its realisations and interpretations. As is demonstrated, each realisation allows for all *three* interpretations, one of which, however, is more preferable and frequent in each case, depending on the lexical filling of the *X* variable, that is, on the subjective length or brevity of the time period. This asymmetry might explain the existing lexicographic approach, where the preferred interpretation is reflected as the only one possible.

The idiomatic meaning of this Russian construction is quite complicated and can be described as ‘(a) The time of some event *Y* coincides with the time of some event *Z* within the precision of a time interval *X*; (b) the speaker thinks that this is unusual’.

There are two parts in this definition – semantic (a) and pragmatic (b).

The semantic part (a) is further divided into (1) presupposition ‘the time of some event *Y* coincides with the time of some event *Z*’ and (2) assertion ‘within the precision of a time interval *X*’; cf. *Oni prišli vovremja, no ne minuta v minutu* ‘They came on time, but not to the minute’, where the timely coming is not denied, while the exact coincidence to the minute is.

The first, semantic part of the definition allows for three possible interpretations of actual phrases. These interpretations are:

- A. “*Planned coincidence*”, or “*punctuality*”: ‘the time of event *Y* coincides with the time *Z* pre-arranged for *X* according to a plan, schedule, estimation or prediction, within the precision of a time interval *X*’, e.g.

- (17) On prišel minuta v minutu.
‘He arrived on the dot’

- B. “*Full unplanned coincidence*”, or “*simultaneity*”: ‘the times of two unrelated events *Y* and *Z* coincide within the precision of a time interval *X*’, e.g.

- (18) On rodilsja god v god s načalom vojny.
‘He was born in the same year as the war started’

C. “*Partial unplanned coincidence*”, or “*succession*”: ‘the time of event Y and the time of an unrelated later event Z partly coincide within the precision of a time interval X’, e.g.

- (19) On polučil diplom rovno čerez god posle ih prvoj vstreči, den’ v den’.
 ‘He received his diploma one year after their first meeting on the same day of the same month’

Each of the lexical realisations of the phraseme allows for all three interpretations, some of which are, however, more preferable than others, while some others are merely potential and rarely found in actual usage, though definitely not ungrammatical. And in each of these cases, the speaker qualifies the coincidence as surprising.

The choice of the preferred interpretation is determined by pragmatic factors to be discussed below. Overall, some realisations are more typical than others (*minuta v minutu* ‘minute to minute’, *den’ v den’* ‘day to day’), some are less typical (*sekunda v sekundu* ‘second to second’, *čas v čas* ‘hour to hour’, *mesjac v mesjac* ‘month to month’, *god v god* ‘year to year’), whereas some others are only natural in a very limited number of contexts (*nedelja v nedelju* ‘week to week’), in accordance with both frequency factors (“month”, “week” are overall less frequent) and pragmatic factors (exact coincidence is more noteworthy for short time intervals than for long ones). Though there are internet examples for all realisations, the Russian National Corpus returns the following hierarchy of frequencies:

minuta v minutu ‘minute to minute’ – 84 occurrences
den’ v den’ ‘day to day’ – 79 occurrences
sekunda v sekundu ‘second to second’ – 26 occurrences
čas v čas ‘hour to hour’ – 12 occurrences
god v god ‘year to year’ – 4 occurrences
mesjac v mesjac ‘month to month’, *nedelja v nedelju* ‘week to week’ – 0 occurrences

Realisations with the word *vek* ‘century’ are pragmatically impossible for the phraseme *X v X*, since its function is to draw the addressee’s attention to the fact of a very *exact* temporal coincidence, and coincidence within the precision of one century cannot by any means be considered exact, especially within one human life. And when speaking of historical events, the ‘century to century’ realisation of the phraseme would require too extended a timeframe, namely, one century for the interpretation of full coincidence, and one millennium for the interpretation of partial coincidence; cf. the following pragmatically inappropriate phrases:

- (20) ??Eti izobretenija pojavilis’ praktičeski odnovenno – vek v vek.
‘These inventions occurred practically simultaneously – in exactly the same century’
- (21) ??Ravno čerez tysjaču let posle padenija Rima, vek v vek, Kolumb otkryl Ameriku.
‘Exactly a millennium after the fall of Rome, century to century, Columbus discovered America’

2.2 Actual realisations of the phraseme $X \vee X$ in the Russian National Corpus

Table 2 summarises the data concerning the frequencies for each lexical realisation of the phraseme and the frequencies for each interpretation of the phraseme, along with illustrative examples for each of the realisations.

We see, thus, that although for each lexical realisation of the phraseme, all three interpretations are possible, some are statistically highly more preferable than others.

Table 2. Statistics for the lexical filling and different interpretations of the phraseme ‘X to X’

Lexical filling	Total number of occurrences in the Corpus	Numbers of each interpretation and examples
‘Second to second’	26 occurrences	<p><i>A. Planned coincidence</i> ‘the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within a second’ – 23 occurrences On prišel vovremja, sekunda v sekundu. ‘He came right on time, to the second’</p> <p><i>B. Unplanned full coincidence</i> ‘the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within a second’ – 0 occurrences My prišli odnovenno, sekunda v sekundu. ‘We arrived at the same time, to the second’</p> <p><i>C. Unplanned partial coincidence</i> ‘the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by a minute, coincide to within a second’ – 3 occurrences On prišel rovno čerez pjat’ minut, sekunda v sekundu. ‘He came exactly five minutes later, to the second’</p>

Table 2. (continued)

'Minute to minute'	84 occurrences	<p>A. <i>Planned coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within a minute' – 77 occurrences On prišel vovremnja, minuta v minutu. 'He came right on time, to the minute'</p> <p>B. <i>Unplanned full coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within a minute' – 3 occurrences My prihali odnovenno, minuta v minutu. 'We arrived at the same time, to the minute'</p> <p>C. <i>Unplanned partial coincidence</i> 'the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by an hour, coincide to within a minute' – 4 occurrences On prišel rovno čerez pjat' časov, minuta v minutu. 'He came exactly five hours later, to the minute'</p>
'Hour to hour'	12 occurrences	<p>A. <i>Planned coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within an hour' – 6 occurrences Prihodi čas v čas, ne ranše, ne pozže. 'Come at the very hour, not earlier, not later'</p> <p>B. <i>Unplanned full coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within an hour' – 1 occurrence On rodilsja 12 aprlja, čas v čas s Mašej. 'He was born on April 12, at the very same hour with Masha'</p> <p>C. <i>Unplanned partial coincidence</i> 'the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by a day, coincide to within an hour' – 5 occurrences Ona vspominala, kak oni vstretilis' rovno mesjac nazad, čas v čas. 'She was remembering how they met, exactly a month before, to the hour'</p>
'Day to day'	79 occurrences	<p>A. <i>Planned coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within a day' – 46 occurrences On vozvraščat den'gi akkuratno, den' v den'. 'He pays back accurately to the day'</p> <p>B. <i>Unplanned full coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within a day' – 11 occurrences On rodilsja den' v den' s načalom vojny. 'He was born on the very same day as the start of the war'</p> <p>C. <i>Unplanned partial coincidence</i> 'the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by a month, coincide to within a day' – 22 occurrences On vernulsja rovno čerez mesjac, den' v den'. 'He returned exactly a month later, to the day'</p>

Table 2. (continued)

'Week to week'	0 occurrences	<p>A. <i>Planned coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within a week' Stroitel'stvo idjot po planu, nedelja v nedelju. 'The construction goes according to the plan, to the very week'</p> <p>B. <i>Unplanned full coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within a week' Oni vernulis' iz armii odnovenno, nedelja v nedelju. 'They got demobilised at the same time, to the week'</p> <p>C. <i>Unplanned partial coincidence</i> 'the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by a month or year, coincide to within a day' Rovno čerez tri mesjaca, nedelja v nedelju, ja polučil ot nego pišmo. 'Exactly three months later, to the week, I got a letter from him'</p>
'Month to month'	0 occurrences	<p>A. <i>Planned coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within a month' Nado platit' za kvartiru akkuratno, mesjac v mesjac. 'You have to pay rent accurately, to the month' (May rent paid in May, January rent in January, etc.)</p> <p>B. <i>Unplanned full coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within a month' Ih proizveli v generaly odnovenno, mesjac v mesjac. 'They were made generals almost simultaneously, month to month' (They were made generals in the same month)</p> <p>C. <i>Unplanned partial coincidence</i> 'the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by a year, coincide to within a month' Čerez dvadcat' let, mesjac v mesjac, on vernul'sja domoj. 'Twenty years later, to the month, he returned home'</p>
'Year to year'	4 occurrences	<p>A. <i>Planned coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the pre-arranged time Z for it to within a year' – 1 occurrence On byl v tjur'me sem' let, god v god. 'He stayed in prison for exactly seven years'</p> <p>B. <i>Unplanned full coincidence</i> 'the time of event Y coincides with the time of event Z to within a year' – 3 occurrences Demosfen rodilsja i umr god v god s Aristotelem. 'Demosthenes was born and died year to year with Aristotle' (in the same years – 384 BC–322 BC)</p> <p>C. <i>Unplanned partial coincidence</i> 'the times of two events Y and Z, that come one after another at an interval divisible by a century, coincide to within a year' – 0 occurrences Ubijca Kennedi Osvald rodilsja rovno čerez sto let posle ubijcy Linkol'na Buta, god v god. 'Kennedy's assassin Oswald was born exactly a century after Lincoln's assassin Booth, to the year' (a hundred years later)</p>

Table 3. Statistics of different interpretations for different time periods in Russian

Interval	Planned coincidence, or “punctuality”	Unplanned full coincidence, or “simultaneity”	Unplanned partial coincidence, or “succession”
‘second’	23 (88.4%)	0	3 (11.6%)
‘minute’	77 (92%)	3 (3.5%)	4 (4.5%)
‘hour’	6 (50%)	1 (8%)	5 (42%)
‘day’	46 (58%)	11 (14%)	22 (28%)
‘week’, ‘month’	0	0	0
‘year’	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	0

2.3 Factors triggering the choice of interpretation

The choice of preferred interpretation is triggered by pragmatic factors, namely, by the subjective length or brevity of the time period filling the lexical variable in the phraseme. Table 3 summarises the statistical data for each time period.

As can be clearly seen from the table, for *short* time intervals (second, minute), the interpretation of choice is “planned coincidence” or “punctuality”. For ‘second’, its share is 88.4%, for ‘minute’ 92%. This is sensible from the point of view of our knowledge about the world – for modern society, the degree of punctuality that can be evaluated as high and therefore be considered as noteworthy, is measured within one minute or even one second (especially for certain scheduled events, such as surgeries, satellite-launchings, TV programmes etc.). On the other hand, unplanned coincidences with such a high degree of precision would be extremely rare.

In the case of the “planned coincidence” interpretation, the surprise of the speaker is directed at the degree of punctuality, at the exact correspondence to the plans or schedules, as in:

- (22) Stancija byla zapuščena točno po planu, minuta v minutu.
‘The station was brought into operation precisely as had been planned, to the minute’

For *long* time intervals the interpretation of choice is “unplanned coincidence”. For ‘year’, 3 out of 4 interpretations are of “unplanned coincidence”, all three of them of complete coincidence, or “simultaneity”. This is also natural, because for the “punctuality” interpretation, ‘year’ is hardly precise enough, whereas for unplanned coincidence, it is sufficiently precise to be noteworthy. In this case, the surprise of the speaker is directed at the fact that two unrelated events happen either in exactly the same time period, or after a certain notable interval, such as exactly after one month, or exactly after one year:

- (23) Sverhčelovek Nietzsche byl rozen v god s velikodušnym i vseproščajushchim vse-čelovekom Dostoevskogo.
 ‘Nietzsche’s ruthless superman (*Übermensch*) was born in the very same year as the magnanimous and all-forgiving all-man of Dostoevsky’

For *neutral* time intervals, both interpretations are possible and natural. Thus, ‘hour’ is equally divided between “planned” and “unplanned coincidence”, whereas ‘day’ is divided into 46 “planned coincidence” interpretations and 33 “unplanned coincidence” interpretations, which is not a very significant difference (58% vs 42%). Cf. the equally natural (24) and (25):

- (24) Raboty idut po grafiku, den’ v den’
 ‘Work is proceeding according to the plan, to the very day’
- (25) Petja rodilsja den’ v den’ s Mocartom
 ‘Peter was born on the very same day as Mozart’

There is one more statistical observation that can be made, concerning the two types of unplanned coincidence. Namely, the longer a time interval, the likelier is the interpretation of complete unplanned coincidence, or “simultaneity”, and the less likely that of partial coincidence, or “succession”. Respectively, the opposite is also true – the shorter a time interval, the likelier the interpretation of partial coincidence and the less likely that of complete coincidence. Thus, partial unplanned coincidence (‘Two days later, to the hour’) is five times more frequent for ‘hour’ than complete unplanned coincidence (‘They returned at the same time to the hour’), while with ‘year’ the proportion of complete unplanned coincidence (‘They were born in the very same year’ is the opposite – three times higher than partial (‘A hundred years later, to the year’). This is natural, because the longer a time interval, the likelier complete coincidence, and the less noteworthy a partial coincidence, whereas for shorter time intervals even a partial unplanned coincidence is sufficiently noteworthy, while a complete one is more rare.

3. Pragmatics of the syntactic phraseme $X \vee X$ ‘X to X’

3.1 “Non-punctuality” and “the finger of fate”

As suggested in Section 2 of this chapter, the meaning of the phraseme $X \vee X$ ‘X to X’ is ‘(a) the time of some event Y coincides with the time of some event Z to within the precision of a time interval X; (b) the speaker thinks that this is unusual’. The semantic part (a) of this definition, that gives rise to the distinct interpretations of planned and unplanned coincidence, is analysed in the previous section.

Part (b), that constitutes the pragmatic content of the meaning, is the subject of analysis in the current section. As briefly mentioned in the previous section, since the phraseme $X \vee X$ has two distinct interpretations – “planned coincidence” and “unplanned coincidence” – the pragmatic content of the modal frame “the speaker thinks it is noteworthy” turns out to be completely different for these two interpretations.

Namely, in the interpretation of “planned coincidence”, the surprise of the speaker is directed at the fact that an event is taking place according to the plan, namely, at the punctuality. Phrases like ‘He always comes to the minute’ imply that such a high degree of punctuality is not typical of the majority of people.

In the interpretation of “unplanned coincidence”, the surprise of the speaker is directed at the fact that unplanned events are taking place as if they had been scheduled to occur at the same time. This is not universally true, though, since there are millions of events in the world that occur simultaneously and that nobody would think of juxtaposing; therefore, in order for a complete or partial temporal coincidence to be judged noteworthy, the speaker should consider them within the same frame as well as draw parallels between these seemingly unrelated events. Thus, when the speaker points to this coincidence, he implies that there must be some kind of parallelism or momentous connection between the two events.

Given the pragmatic overtones the construction $X \vee X$ expresses, and the degree of its grammaticalisation in the Russian language, one can make the following assumptions on how time is conceptualised in the Russian linguistic worldview:

1. It is unusual and therefore noteworthy when something happens exactly at the time previously set in schedules, plans, or expectations; in other words, Russian contains a presumption “Things usually do not happen as planned”, or of *non-punctuality*. Thus, when we say

- (26) On prišel v četyre časa, minuta v minutu.
‘He came at four on the dot’

rather than

- (27) On prišel v četyre časa.
‘He came at four’

we are drawing the addressee’s attention to the degree of the agent’s precision, due to the fundamental assumption that punctuality is generally not a common occurrence.

2. It is unusual and therefore noteworthy when two unrelated events occur at the same time; the fact that they occur at the same time reveals a hidden

momentous connection that exists between them; in other words, Russian contains a presumption “Coincidence in time means the presence of some parallelism between the events or their participants, a kind of a pre-destined connection”, or *Unplanned coincidences are the finger of fate*. Thus, when we say

- (28) Petja rodilsja den' v den' s Mocartom.
'Peter was born on the very same day as Mozart',

rather than

- (29) Petja rodilsja v tot ž den', čto i Mocart.
'Peter was born on the same day as Mozart',

we imply that this seemingly accidental coincidence points, in fact, to a deeper parallelism between Peter and Mozart, e.g. Peter might also have the makings of a great composer.

In the case of “unplanned coincidence”, there are two possible strategies of juxtaposing the two simultaneous or successive events. The first strategy is when the more important event is considered the landmark, e.g.

- (30) rodit'sja den' v den' s Einštejnom
'to be born in the very same year as with Einstein'
(31) ženit'sja den' v den' s načalom vojny
'to marry on the very same day as the beginning of the war'

Syntactically, this strategy corresponds to the structure

- (32) X v X s Y-om
X-nom in X-acc with Y-instr ,

where Y is the name of the landmark event or person.

The second strategy is when the two events are equally important and it is their connection or contrast that is noteworthy, as in

- (33) Ego pervaja kniga i ejo pervyj al'bom vyšli
His first book-nom and her first album-nom went out
den' v den'.
day-nom in day-acc
'His first book and her first album were released on the same day'

While the second strategy can also use the syntactic structure with the instrumental, it can, as in (33), employ a symmetric construction with two nominatives, thus stressing the equal status of the two events.

3.2 English: Different pragmatic expectations?

To test the validity of claims about the pragmatic ideas of “non-punctuality” and “the finger of fate” inherent in the Russian linguistic worldview, it is worthwhile to make a cross-linguistic comparison, at least on a small scale. While English dictionaries provide no evidence of the existence of an equivalent syntactic phraseme in English, and Lubensky’s *Russian–English Dictionary of Idioms* suggests various other idioms as correlates for the Russian construction (sharp, on the dot, right on time, on the nose, exactly the same time), corpus data tells otherwise.

Expressions of the type to the minute, to the hour, to the day etc., that are all different instantiations of the “to the X” syntactic phraseme, are reasonably frequent and, apparently, have the same interpretations as in Russian, namely, those of planned and unplanned temporal coincidence; cf. the following slightly simplified examples from the Corpus of Contemporary American (COCA):

- (34) You have to be on time to the second.
- (35) They came in, prompt to the minute.
- (36) He returned one month later, almost to the hour.

Semantically, thus, English has a very similar linguistic item. Yet it would be incorrect to presume that we can draw the same pragmatic conclusions from the existence of this syntactic phraseme in English as we did for Russian. If we look at the statistics of its preferred interpretations in English, we would discover a drastically different distribution from the one found in the Russian language and, hence, a different linguistic worldview. Table 4 shows the statistics of realisations and interpretations of the “to the X” syntactic phraseme in English, according to the COCA corpus data.

As can clearly be seen from this table, the distribution of interpretations is totally different from that found in Russian. While in Russian, for short time

Table 4. Statistics of different interpretations for different time periods in English

Interval	Planned coincidence, or “punctuality”	Unplanned full coincidence, or “simultaneity”	Unplanned partial coincidence, or “succession”
Second	2 (100%)	0	0
Minute	7 (35%)	0	13 (65%)
Hour	0	0	7 (100%)
Day	0	51 (16.6%)	255 (83.4 %)
week	0	0	2 (100%)
Month	0	0	6 (100%)
year	0	0	0

periods (“second”, “minute”), the interpretation of choice was that of punctuality, and for long ones (namely, “year”) that of unplanned coincidence. With neutral time periods (“day”, “hour”) demonstrating an approximate balance between the two, the English language shows a very different tendency. The only time interval for which punctuality interpretation is the preferred one, is second. Its two occurrences in COCA both yield the planned temporal coincidence interpretation. However, minute, unlike its Russian correlate *minuta*, shows a 65 per cent to 35 per cent prevalence of unplanned coincidence interpretations over interpretations of punctuality, that is, Examples like (37) greatly outnumber Examples like (38):

(37) I can't help remarking that it was a week ago to the minute.

(38) Our lavish breakfast arrived to the minute.

Note that for the Russian *minuta*, punctuality interpretations overwhelmingly (by 91 per cent) outnumbered those of unplanned coincidence, so the distribution was the opposite.

For neutral time periods, Russian showed either an equal distribution of punctuality and unplanned coincidence interpretations (*čas* ‘hour’) or, actually, a slight prevalence of punctuality interpretations, as in 58 per cent for *den* ‘day’. In English, starting with hour, punctuality interpretation does not occur in COCA even once, although it is, in principle, possible:

(39) They finished construction, prompt to the day.

(40) He returned money as promised, exactly one month later to the hour.

However, in actual usage such examples are apparently extremely rare. Pragmatically, this means that, unlike Russian, the idea of inherent “non-punctuality” is either not present or not sufficiently relevant for the English language to merit grammaticalisation in a special syntactic item. On the other hand, fatefulness of unplanned temporal coincidences seems to be an important pragmatic notion in both languages.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the Russian temporal phraseme ‘X to X’ and its English correlates reveals two important tendencies concerning conceptualization of time that might have relevance outside of the scope of these two languages. The first tendency concerns the correlation between semantics and pragmatics. While semantics is frequently language-specific, there are numerous semantic universals in

the sphere of temporality, as well. Pragmatics, on the other hand, tends to be to a greater extent language-specific, and it often provides clues to culturally specific context-dependent readings of semantically universal linguistic items. This tendency ties up with Carol Priestley's (this volume) findings about Koromu, a Papuan language, in her chapter on "Koromu temporal expressions: Semantic and cultural perspectives". The second tendency concerns additional semantic and pragmatic components that build up on the idea of temporality. While some of these additional components are well-known due to their grammaticalized and lexicalized status (such as temporality vs. probability, temporality vs. desire), others are less obvious. The analysis undertaken in this chapter reveals that the idea of event timing correlates with the idea of fateful driving forces behind these events. This tendency, again, might not be limited to the Russian language, as Charlier (this volume) suggests.

References

- Apresjan, J. 2006. Osnovaniya sistemnoj leksikografii. In *Jazykovaja kartina mira i sistemnaja leksikografija*, ed., Ju. Apresjan, 33–162. Moscow: Jazyki slavianskoj kul'tury.
- Apresjan, V. 2010. The pragmatics of destiny in Russian and English (towards a description of fundamental cultural concepts). In *Contrasting Meaning in Languages of the East and West*, eds., Dingfang Shu & Ken Turner, 477–491. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Babby, L. 1975. Impersonal verbs and their lexical specification. *Slavic and East European Journal* 19: 182–187.
- Bulygina, T., and A. Shmelev. 1997. *Language Conceptualization of the World on the Basis of Russian Grammar*. Moscow: Jazyki russkoj kul'tury.
- Iomdin, L. 2003. Bolšie problemy malogo sintaksisa. *Trudy meždunarodnoj konferencii po kompjuternoj lingvistike i intellektualnym tehnologijam Dialog '2003*: 216–222.
- Lubensky, S. 1995. *Russian–English Dictionary of Idioms*. New York: Random House.
- Melčuk, I. 1987. Un axe derivationnel et un phraseme syntaxique du russe moderne: Essai de description formelle. *Revue des études slaves* 59: 631–648.
- Plungian, V., and E. Rakhilina. 1996. S chisto russkoj akkuratnostju...: (k voprosu ob otrazhenii nekotoryx stereotipov v jazyke). *Moskovskij lingvističeskij žurnal* 2: 340–351.
- Wierzbicka, A. 1990. Duša 'soul', toska 'yearning', sud'ba 'fate': Three key concepts in the Russian language and Russian culture. In *Metody formalne v opisje jazykow słowiańskich*, ed., Zygmunt Saloni, 13–32. Białystok: Dział Wydawnictw Filii UW w Białymstoku.