A Constructional Approach to Slavic Verbal Prefixes: Locative Alternation and the Prefix ZA-

In 1968 Fillmore raised the issue of verbs exhibiting different argument realization patterns, which became known as the ‘locative alternation’: *I loaded the truck with hay/the hay onto the truck*. There has been a long discussion about which verbs can alternate and why. Syntactic and lexical-semantic studies basically treat the semantic classes of verbs as the main criterion for licensing alternations, emphasizing that only manner verbs (*smear*) alternate as opposed to result verbs (*pour*) (Levin 2003). On the other hand, Goldberg marks the role of independently existing meaningful constructions, although a more elaborate information in a verb’s lexical entry is also required, as shown in (Boas 2003).

In this work we provide the analysis of the Slavic data. Due to the fact that Slavic languages have a set of verbal prefixes the difference between “placing” and “filling” oriented verbs becomes rather vague, since they can often be reversed by the prefix. For instance, in Russian the ‘load/spray’ verbs can be represented by: verbs that are used in different constructions with different prefixes *velat* ‘hang’, *povesit*’ (placing), *obvelat*’ (filling); verbs that are used in both constructions with a certain prefix, *lit* ‘pour’ (placing), *zalit*’ (both); verbs that can alternate both prefixed and unprefixed, *gruzit* ‘load’—*nagruzit*, *zagruzit*’ (both). This research offers a comparative study of the prefix *za-* with alternating verbs in Russian and Polish, languages of relatively similar aspectual types (Dickey 2000). We claim that it is possible to deduce certain semantic properties of *za-* by looking at its ‘constructional profile’, i.e. relative frequency distribution of filling/placing constructions that a given *za-* verb appears in (Janda&Solovyev subm.). The examples are taken from the Russian National Corpus and the National Corpus of Polish.

As our analysis shows (Fig.1 and 2), although the systems are quite similar there are some important differences between the usage of *za-* in Russian and Polish. On the one hand, in both languages the filling frame seems to be more productive for *za-*; the obvious MANNER verbs like Russian *mazat* ‘smear’ and Polish *smarowac* consistently prefer the filling frame. On the other hand, in Polish, *za-* seems to favor one of the frames, while in Russian there is a whole group of verbs that can be used in both frames (*zavelat*, *zalit*, *zasypat*, *zagruzit*); in Russian the original PATH verbs with *za-* are more easily placed into the filling frame than their Polish correspondences. Thus, prefixes can modify the properties of the verb and put it into another frame.

It is also true that certain Polish *za-*verbs more consistently appear in the placing frame than the Russian *za-*verbs, which makes Polish *za-* more productive in forming natural perfectives: in the filling frame *za-* tends to gain an additional meaning of ‘complete covering or filling’, so it is in the placing frame that it is closer to expressing neutral resultativity. This way, our analysis also sheds light on the higher productivity of *za-* in Polish.
Fig. 1. Constructional Profile of ZA-verbs in Russian

Fig. 2. Constructional Profile of ZA-verbs in Polish