

When You Cannot Win: defective verbs in Russian

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Certain verbs in Russian (e.g. the verb *podebit'* “to win”) are famously defective. That is, they have a *paradigm gap* in the 1p.sg. present tense forms because none of the possibilities are acceptable to the speakers (e.g., *pobežu?* *pobed'u?* *pobežd'u?*). Understanding causes of defectiveness/gaps is important for understanding the nature of productivity, the constraints on morphological rules and representations, and the question of how morphological structure is learned.

The specific questions addressed in this talk are (i) do the verbal gaps in Russian have a synchronic explanation? and (ii) if so, what is it? Unlike most previous studies (Graudina et al., 1976; Sims, 2006; Baerman, 2008), my answer to the first question above is affirmative. I maintain that 1st person singular gaps are connected to the currently opaque morpho-phonological alternations that affect 1p.sg. forms of stems ending in dental consonants. One type of evidence for this conclusion is the behavior of novel borrowings from English: only borrowings which are subject to the dental alternations (e.g., *frendit'* “to friend”, *frilansiť* “to freelance”) behave like defective verbs by showing low inter-speaker agreement in the choice of 1p. sg. forms (unlike other types of borrowings). Secondly, I identify a new empirical observation that is crucial in explaining the otherwise difficult to explain *lexical selectivity* of gaps: the defective verbs are just those in which the dental alternations are unattested anywhere else in their morphological family. Verbs which have other related forms with the same alternation as the 1p.sg. form (most notably, in past passive participles and secondary imperfectives) are protected from gaps.

I then consider two possible ways to model these facts. The first model essentially assumes a filter-like component of grammar (a set of inviolable constraints) that apply post phonology (Orgun and Sprouse, 1999). I assume that this set of constraints includes LEXP constraints (Steriade, 1999, 2008), which require that every segment in the output form has a correspondent in at least one other *listed* output form. A similar explanation applies to another set of paradigm gaps in Russian – the gaps in the genitive plural of some nouns (Pertsova, 2005).

The second model attempts to implement the idea that gaps are due to a close competition of opposing forces, some favoring alternation, and others favoring non-alternation. Such competition can lead either to gaps or to variation depending on the probability that the grammar assigns to each variant. Crucially, competition and optimality in this model are conceived of differently than in standard phonological models like OT or Harmonic Grammar (although somewhat similar to certain bidirectional versions OT such as Deemter (2004)). I compare these two models and discuss their implications for other similar cases of defectiveness.

References

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