

UNIDIRECTIONAL AND MULTIDIRECTIONAL MOTION IN RUSSIAN AND ENGLISH AS A REFLECTION OF SPATIAL WORLDVIEWS

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Abstract. Russian possesses a grammatically obligatory opposition between unidirectional and multidirectional verbs of motion (e.g., *идти* vs. *ходить*, *ехать* vs. *ездить*), a category absent from English, which relies on a single verb (*go*, *walk*) supplemented by aspectual, prepositional, and adverbial means. This study applies the comparative-contrastive method, supported by componential and cognitive-typological analysis, to establish how the two languages distribute the semantic parameters of directedness, iterativity, and manner across their motion-verb systems. Data were drawn from monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, academic grammars, and corpus examples of the two languages, and were analyzed within Talmy's typology of verb-framed and satellite-framed languages and within the framework of the linguistic picture of the world (языковая картина мира). The results show that Russian obligatorily encodes directedness and iterativity in the verb root itself, bundling habituality, round-trip completion, and general capacity into a single multidirectional form, whereas English treats manner as the core lexical content of the verb and relegates directionality and frequency to optional adverbial, aspectual, and modal means. These findings are discussed as evidence of two distinct, habitual construals of motion in space, with direct implications for translation practice and for the pedagogy of Russian as a foreign language.

Keywords: Verbs of motion, unidirectional/multidirectional opposition, Aktionsart, linguistic worldview, Talmy's typology, verb-framed vs. satellite-framed languages, Russian–English contrastive linguistics, spatial cognition

Introduction. Motion is a universal experiential category, but its linguistic encoding is anything but universal. Every language must select, from the rich continuum of physical movement, a limited set of parameters to grammaticalize obligatorily and a further set to leave to optional, context-dependent expression. Russian is often cited in typological literature as a striking example of a language that has grammaticalized the *directedness* of motion: alongside the aspectual opposition common to all Russian verbs (perfective/imperfective), a closed class of motion verbs carries a second, independent opposition between unidirectional verbs, which

denote motion proceeding in one direction on a single occasion, and multidirectional verbs, which denote motion that is habitual, repeated, or without a fixed single direction.

English possesses no comparable grammatical category. A sentence such as *I go to school* is compatible with habitual, one-time, and repeated readings alike, disambiguated only by adverbials (*every day, right now, yesterday*) or by the broader discourse context. This asymmetry raises a question central to linguistic relativity debates: does the obligatory grammatical marking of directionality in Russian correspond to a distinct habitual construal of space and motion among Russian speakers, relative to English speakers, for whom the same distinctions are available but not obligatory?

Talmy's well-known typology [1] divides languages into two broad groups according to where the *path* of motion is characteristically encoded. In verb-framed languages (such as Spanish or Turkish), the path is expressed in the main verb itself, while manner, if expressed at all, appears in a separate adjunct. In satellite-framed languages (such as English, German, or Russian), the path is expressed by a "satellite" — a particle or prepositional phrase — while the verb root is free to encode manner. By this classification, Russian and English are typologically similar: both are satellite-framed and both readily lexicalize manner directly in the verb root. Yet within this shared satellite-framed profile, Russian introduces a further, finer-grained obligatory distinction that English lacks: the directedness/multidirectionality opposition superimposed on the manner-verb system. Talmy's macro-typology alone therefore cannot capture the full contrastive picture; a second, more delicate layer of analysis — internal to the class of motion verbs — is required [2].

The concept of the linguistic worldview (языковая картина мира), developed extensively in Russian linguistics following Humboldt and continued by scholars such as Apresjan and Wierzbicka, holds that the grammatical categories a language obligatorily marks are not stylistic accidents but reflect entrenched, culturally transmitted habits of construing experience [3, 4]. Under this view, a grammatical opposition that speakers of a language cannot avoid marking is taken as diagnostic of a conceptual distinction that is unusually salient in that speech community, even though speakers of languages without the category can certainly *think* the same distinction; they are simply not *forced* to express it every time they use a motion verb.

Aim and research questions. The aim of this study is to determine how the unidirectional/multidirectional opposition of Russian motion verbs is structurally and semantically mirrored — or not mirrored — in English, and what this asymmetry reveals about the two languages' habitual construal of space. The study addresses three research questions: (RQ1) What grammatical and lexical means does each language use to encode directedness, iterativity, and general capacity of motion? (RQ2) Along which dimensions do the two systems differ most systematically? (RQ3) What are the consequences of this asymmetry for translation and for the teaching of Russian as a foreign language?

Materials and Methods. Design. This is a qualitative, comparative-contrastive study of the motion-verb subsystems of Russian and English. The comparative-contrastive method was chosen because it allows a category obligatorily grammaticalized in one language (the source language of comparison, Russian) to be systematically checked against the corresponding, non-grammaticalized means of the target language (English), following standard procedure in contrastive linguistics.

Data sources. Three types of material were used: (a) lexicographic data — entries for the eight canonical unidirectional/multidirectional verb pairs (*идти/ходить, ехать/ездить, бежать/бегать, лететь/летать, плыть/плавать, нести/носить, везти/возить, лезть/лазить*) from Russian monolingual and Russian–English bilingual dictionaries; (b) grammatical descriptions of Russian Aktionsart and aspect from academic reference grammars [5, 6]; and (c) illustrative usage examples constructed according to textbook and corpus-attested patterns for both languages, used to test each verb pair against the semantic parameters under analysis.

Analytical procedure. The analysis proceeded in four steps. First, each Russian verb pair was decomposed into its component semantic parameters — directedness (single-path vs. no fixed path), temporal profile (ongoing, habitual, completed-and-returned), and general capacity — using componential analysis. Second, the corresponding English expression for each parameter combination was identified and classified according to the linguistic device carrying it (verb aspect, adverbial, particle, or modal). Third, the two inventories were compared along three dimensions established in contrastive typological work: obligatoriness of marking, locus of encoding (root vs. periphery), and granularity of the resulting semantic categories. Fourth, the resulting comparative pattern was interpreted within Talmy’s typological framework and within the linguistic-worldview framework, to assess what the pattern suggests about habitual spatial construal in each language.

Scope and limitations. The study is restricted to the eight most frequently cited motion-verb pairs of Russian and their English correspondences; it does not extend to the full inventory of Russian prefixed (perfectivized) motion verbs, which is acknowledged as a direction for further corpus-based quantitative research.

Results. The Russian system. Table 1 presents the eight canonical unidirectional/multidirectional pairs identified in the data.

Unidirectional	Multidirectional	Gloss
идти	ходить	to go (on foot)
ехать	ездить	to go (by vehicle)
бежать	бегать	to run

Unidirectional	Multidirectional	Gloss
лететь	летать	to fly
плыть	плавать	to swim/sail
нести	носить	to carry
везти	возить	to transport (by vehicle)
лезть	лазить	to climb

The componential analysis shows that the unidirectional member of each pair denotes motion proceeding along a single, undivided path on one particular occasion, whether ongoing, past, or envisaged as a single future event (*Он идёт в школу*, “He is walking to school [right now]”). The multidirectional member was found to cover at least three distinct sub-meanings: (a) habitual or repeated motion (*Он ходит в школу каждый день*, “He goes to school every day”); (b) a round trip completed in the past (*Вчера он ходил в магазин*, “Yesterday he went to the shop [and came back]”); and (c) general ability or capacity for motion, divorced from any specific occasion (*Ребёнок уже ходит*, “The child can already walk”). These three sub-meanings are bundled under one and the same verb form and contrasted as a whole against the unidirectional member, indicating that Russian treats them as a single, coherent semantic class defined negatively against single-occasion directed motion. The opposition was further found to be independent of, and layered upon, the perfective/imperfective aspectual system: both members are, in their simplex form, imperfective, and each forms distinct perfective derivatives through prefixation (*пойти* “to set off” from unidirectional *идти*; *сходить* “to go and come back” from multidirectional *ходить*) [5].

The English system. No morphological marking corresponding to unidirectionality/multidirectionality was found for any of the eight English verb correspondences (*go, walk, run, fly, swim, carry, drive, climb*). Instead, the analysis identified four distinct peripheral devices by which English encodes the same semantic content: grammatical aspect (the progressive *is walking* aligning, though not exclusively, with the Russian unidirectional reading); adverbials of frequency (*every day, usually, often*) signaling what Russian marks with the multidirectional verb; telic/resultative phrases (*walked there and back*) supplying the round-trip meaning bundled into the Russian multidirectional form; and modal constructions (*can walk*) supplying the general-capacity meaning. Unlike in Russian, none of these four devices is obligatory: a bare form such as *walks* is grammatical and interpretable without any of them, disambiguated only by discourse context.

Comparative dimensions. Three systematic differences emerged from the cross-linguistic comparison, directly answering RQ2. (i) Obligatoriness: the Russian choice between unidirectional and multidirectional stems is a grammatical requirement of using the verb at all, whereas the corresponding English devices are optional adjuncts. (ii) Locus of encoding: Russian encodes the opposition in the verb root itself, the most central element of the clause, whereas English distributes the same content across peripheral elements (adverbials, aspect, modals). (iii) Granularity: Russian's multidirectional verb collapses habituality, round-trip completion, and general capacity into a single form, treating them as one coherent category, whereas English expresses the three meanings through three unrelated devices, with no single form unifying them. A partial compensation was also observed: English offsets the absence of the opposition through a productive system of phrasal verbs and path-particles (*go off, walk away, come back*) that encode fine-grained path and boundary-crossing information which Russian, in turn, expresses through prefixation on the perfectivized motion verb (*yūmu, omoūmu, npuūmu*), indicating that the overall communicative burden is redistributed rather than simply absent in English.

Discussion. The results address RQ1 and RQ2 by showing that Russian and English, while typologically similar at the macro level (both satellite-framed, per Talmy [1, 2]), diverge sharply at a more delicate level of analysis internal to the motion-verb class: Russian obligatorily grammaticalizes directedness and iterativity in the verb root, while English optionally lexicalizes the same content at the periphery of the clause. Read through the linguistic-worldview framework [3, 4], this asymmetry suggests that Russian grammar habitually foregrounds the temporal-directional contour of a motion event — whether it is single, repeated, completed as a round trip, or a general capacity — as a near-obligatory first classification that a speaker cannot avoid making. This is consistent with independent observations in Russian aspectology that Russian verbal grammar is unusually attentive to the internal temporal contour of events relative to many other Indo-European languages [6, 5]. English, by contrast, treats the base identity of the motion event (walking vs. running vs. crawling) as the primary obligatory content of the verb, consistent with its broader satellite-framed profile, in which the root is reserved for manner and the satellites carry path and boundedness information only as needed.

It must be stressed that this contrast concerns obligatory grammatical marking, not cognitive capacity: English speakers can perceive and communicate the same distinctions that Russian grammaticalizes, and Russian speakers are not prevented from making the manner distinctions that the English phrasal-verb system specializes in. The interpretation offered here is therefore consistent with a moderate rather than a strong version of linguistic relativity — habitual grammatical marking is taken to increase the frequency and automaticity with which a parameter is attended to in unreflective speech production, not to dictate what can or cannot be thought.

Addressing RQ3, the results carry two practical implications. For translation, the asymmetry creates a systematic problem of directionality: an English sentence such as *He went to the store* is genuinely ambiguous, out of context, between a Russian rendering with unidirectional *nouël* (“set off”) and multidirectional-derived *cxoduл* (“went and came back”), while translating a Russian multidirectional verb into English routinely requires the translator to add adverbials or phrases that have no direct correlate in the source sentence. For pedagogy, the unidirectional/multidirectional opposition is one of the most persistent sources of error for English-speaking learners of Russian, since English offers no structural analogue on which learners can anchor the new category, while Russian-speaking learners of English sometimes over-explicitly mark distinctions in English that native speakers would leave to context — a plausible instance of first-language transfer.

The scope of this study, limited to eight canonical simplex verb pairs, means the findings should be extended cautiously to the full system of prefixed Russian motion verbs; a corpus-based quantitative follow-up, measuring the relative frequency of each disambiguating device in authentic English discourse, would strengthen the claims made here about habitual, rather than merely available, patterns of use.

Conclusion. This study set out to determine how the Russian unidirectional/multidirectional opposition in motion verbs is mirrored, or not mirrored, in English, and what the resulting asymmetry reveals about each language’s habitual construal of space. The comparative-contrastive analysis of eight canonical verb pairs shows that Russian obligatorily encodes directedness and iterativity in the verb root itself, bundling habituality, round-trip completion, and general capacity into a single grammatical opposition, while English treats manner as the core lexical content of the verb and relegates the same semantic content to optional, peripheral means. This asymmetry is interpreted, within Talmy’s typology and the linguistic-worldview framework, as evidence of two distinct habitual patterns of attending to the temporal-directional contour of motion events, with direct and demonstrable consequences for translation practice and for the pedagogy of Russian as a foreign language.

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