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On Verbs with a Completely Affected Goal: An Attempt at Explicating a Semantic Class.

Abstract

The pattern of regular polysemy ‘action – state – process’ and peculiar surface behaviour characteristic of Russian verbs corresponding to concepts ‘to cover’, ‘to fill’ are related to a number of components of their meaning. It is suggested that they are a class of verbs similar to verbs of movement in that they refer to movement and have an identical set of actants, yet differing by the unspecificity of movement referred to, the visibility of its result and the totality of Place (Goal) affectedness, the latter component being responsible for their shifted communicative perspective.

Verbs corresponding to the concepts ‘to cover’, ‘to fill’, such as, for example, Russ. *napolniat* ‘fill [a container]’, *pokryvat* ‘cover [the surface of smth]’, or *stiaivat* ‘tighten’, as well as Engl. *smear*, *spray*, *fill* and *load* have repeatedly attracted attention of a number of linguists (cf. Fillmore 1977:179; Apresjan 1978:279–280; Wierzbicka 1980:70–82; Glovinskaja 1982:94; Paducheva 1989:29), the most detailed description given in Gavrilova 1973). The characteristics these verbs have in common include the ability for regular polysemy after the pattern ‘action – process – state’ (about other characteristics see Paducheva & Rozina 1993), cf.:

Ja *pokryl* stol skatertju. (action)
Sneg *pokryvajet* pole [gradually].(process)
Snow *is covering* the field.
Sneg *pokryvajet* vsjo pole. (state)
Snow *covers* all the field.

In what follows it’ll be shown what semantic components are common to the meanings of all the verbs in question and an attempt will be made to pinpoint those components that may be considered responsible for the ability to have polysemy of a given type. All data cited in the present text were acquired within the frame of the project ‘Lexicograf’, which is being carried out in Moscow by an interinstitutional research group including the present author, supervised by Elena V. Paducheva.¹

1. The action all verbs under consideration refer to is, in fact, movement of a certain kind: the Agent moves the Patient towards the object. In this, these verbs are similar to verbs of movement. However, the reference to

movement is mostly not explicit, as in Russ. *pokryvat'* ('cover') and *zakryvat'* ('close'), and therefore the nature of movement implied is not specified.

If specified, the movement of the Patient caused by the Agent is confined to those types of movement that are characteristic of natural substances, e.g. *usypat'* ('stud', 'scatter'), or *zalivat'* ('pour', 'flow'), kinds of movement typical, respectively, for small particles falling down from above and simultaneously spreading on the surface, like snowflakes or sand; and for water and other liquid substances either, too, falling down from above and spreading on the surface, like rain, or just spreading on the surface, like spring waters.

2. The Agent brings the Patient into contact with the Object. The Object is not altered by its contact with the Patient in any relevant way. The influence exerted by the contact upon the Object is presented by verbs of the semantic class under consideration as confined to the Object's surface. As their arguments, these verbs tend to take names of substances that are capable of forming a layer on the surface of the Object without affecting the latter, or present them as such, cf. *pokryt' shkatulku lakom/ tolstym sloem laka/ kraski* 'to cover the casket with varnish/ with a thick layer of varnish/ paint'; *usypat' pol opilkami* 'to strew the floor with sawdust', *to sprinkle the bread with salt*, etc. At its maximum, it amounts to pressure (cf. *stianut'* 'to bind', *zatianut'* 'to tighten'); however even then neither the size, nor the form of the Object are changed crucially and irreversibly. If the contact of the substance with the Object alters the latter in some relevant way (e.g. affects its molecular structure, i.e. its shape, colour etc.) or is presented as such, the action causing this contact is described by verbs of other semantic classes, not capable of syntactic transformations typical for the class under consideration, cf. *pokryt' shkatulku kraskoj – pokrasit' shkatulku* 'to cover the casket with paint – to paint the casket; *to sprinkle the bread with salt – to salt the soup*, etc.

In fact, the Object of the verbs in question denotes nothing but the point of destination of the Patient, and its semantic role is, therefore, not Object but Place. This is consistent with what has just been said about the Object being not changed relevantly by the action of the Agent: indeed, Place being a peripheral actant is out of the scope of the action (cf. Fillmore 1977).

It should be noted here that the syntactic and the semantic role of this actant clash: normally Place is assigned a peripheral syntactic role, whereas with verbs meaning 'to cover', 'to fill' it acquires a syntactic role of one of the central actants, namely Object.

3. The Agent brings the Patient into contact with ALL <the surface> of Place (ALL Place is in contact with the Patient). Verbs under consideration present the contact of the Patient with the Object as complete. Even when in the real world the Patient is brought into contact with only some part of the Object, the verbs in question see it as the contact with all the Object. This results in the systematic metonymic shift of actants: part is substituted for the

whole, and it is the whole that is the argument of the verb in the surface structure as, for example, *palto* 'overcoat' in *zatianut' pal'to pojasom* 'to tighten the overcoat with the belt', or *butylka* 'bottle' in *zatknut' butylku probkoj* 'to cork the bottle', though the contact takes place, in fact, only at the waist or at the opening of the bottle, respectively.

This semantic component is, again, consistent with what was said earlier about the peripheral actant Place being assigned the central role Object and, one might say, explains this phenomenon. According to Fillmore, if in the situation of bringing one physical entity into contact with another the latter is affected in some complete way, its new status is sufficient to include it in the clause's perspective; thus *I smeared the wall with mud* means 'all the wall is smeared with mud', while *I smeared mud on the wall* means 'not all the wall is smeared with mud' (Fillmore 1977:79).

4. When the action is completed, the Patient is not eliminated, as for example, in *myt' okna teploj vodoj* 'to wash the windows with warm water' or *stirat' beljo mylom* 'to wash underwear with soap', but stays in its place. What is more, in contrast to *myt'*, *stirat'* and many other verbs referring to actions where bringing the Patient into contact with the Object is just the means to reach some other goal (e.g., to make the Object cleaner), the verbs meaning 'to cover', 'to fill' refer to actions whose very goal is to bring the Patient into contact with the Object/Place.

To sum up, a group of verbs corresponding to concepts 'to cover', 'to fill' are similar to the verbs of movement in the sense that they refer to movement (or at least imply it) and have an identical set of actants. The difference between two groups of verbs is determined by the semantic component 'all' ('The Agent brings the Patient into contact with all the Place). This component causes the change in the surface behaviour of these verbs: the peripheral actant Place acquires the role of the central actant Object.

One might make a very tentative suggestion that verbs implying contact have the component 'degree of Goal affectedness' in their meaning and are capable of expressing its variable values by shifting communicative perspective, as *smear* in Fillmore's example as well as Russ. *namazat'*. With some verbs this component takes a constant value 'complete Goal (Place) affectedness', so that they are unable of shifting the perspective, e.g.

To *cover* the table with the table-cloth.

*To *cover* the table-cloth on the table.

To use Fillmore's terms, such verbs may be called 'verbs with completely affected Goal (Place).'

Now to turn to the pattern of polysemy characteristic of these verbs. First, the pattern 'action – process'. The action referred to by the verbs in question is, as it has been shown, either an unspecified movement or some kind of movement typical of natural substances. The same movement may take place

without an Agent if the Patient is able of autonomous movement, like sand, water and other natural substances; and the verb takes the meaning of process:

Ja *zalivaju* katok vodoj.

[lit.] I *am covering* the skating-rink with water.

Voda *zalivajet* lug.

[lit.] Water *is covering* the meadow.

If the action is of a more intricate character requiring skills possessed by human beings only, verbs do not acquire the meaning of the process, cf.:

On *obil* mebel barxatom.

He *upholstered* the furniture with velvet.

*Barxat *obil* mebel'.

*Velvet *upholstered* the furniture.

Now about the pattern 'process – state'. Processes and states are related: processes (limited) result in states, states imply processes. The components of semantic explications of processes and states are the same but differ in communicative status: for processes, the process itself constitutes the assertion, whereas the resulting state is an implication; for states, vice versa. The ability to take the meaning of state by a verb of process seems to depend on two factors. First, the visibility of the resulting state which is due to the fact that the Patient is not eliminated from the Place when the action is completed. Second, the unspecified nature of movement. The process of unspecified movement easily goes to the background to give place to a more definite resulting state. This might be the reason why in Russian which does not possess markers for the Progressive sentences like *Sneg pokryvajet pole* (corresponding out of context both to Engl. *Snow is covering the ground* and *Snow covers the ground*) are not only ambiguous but tend to be interpreted as states.

Notes

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