

HABITUAL, GENERAL ACTIONS AND THE IMPERFECTIVE ASPECT

Miyahara, Fumio

English Language, College of General Education, Kyushu University : Assistant Professor

<https://doi.org/10.15017/6795106>

出版情報 : 言語科学. 7, pp.17-23, 1971-03-29. The Group of Linguistic Studies College of General Education, Kyushu University

バージョン :

権利関係 :



HABITUAL, GENERAL ACTIONS AND THE IMPERFECTIVE ASPECT

Fumio Miyahara

O. INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM. In our attempt to decide whether it is justified to introduce the category of aspect into the English verb system, we have worked out a tentative definition of the primary function of the Russian aspect. We formulated:

The aspect indicates the speaker's manner of grasping the action expressed by the verb. The imperfective aspect indicates that the speaker grasps the action as in process toward its end...; the perfective aspect indicates that the speaker grasps the action otherwise, as it occurs as a whole, as it begins and reaches its end, with the process disregarded.¹⁾

Also we have claimed that the English imperfective aspect form is the expanded form: BE -ING, while the perfective form is the simple form: —. ²⁾ In other words, we assume that the function of the expanded form in English corresponds to that of the Russian imperfective verb, while the function of the simple form in English corresponds to that of the Russian perfective verb.

But people may like to point out that there is an important divergence between the uses of the Russian imperfective aspect and those of the expanded form in English. They differ in particular in the following important point: habitual actions and general actions are usually expressed by the imperfective verb in Russian while the same are usually expressed by the simple form in English; the expanded form does not usually express habitual and general actions. For instance, a habitual playing of the piano is expressed in Russian by the imperfective verb *играть* (=play) as,

Она́ ча́сто игра́ет на ро́йле.

The same kind of statement is regularly given in English by the simple form, not by the expanded form,

She often *plays* the piano.

¹⁾ Fumio Miyahara, "On the Meaning of Aspect," *Linguistic Science*, 6 (Kyushu University, 1970), p. 8.

²⁾ Cp. Fumio Miyahara, "Max Deutschbein's Aspect Theory," *Literature and Thought*, 29 (Fukuoka Women's College, 1966), pp. 1-26; "The Imperfective Aspect of the Expanded Form," *Ibid.*, 31 (1968), pp. 55-74; "The Expanded-Non-Expanded Contrast in the English Verb System," *Linguistic Science*, 5 (1969), pp. 7-16.

And it is the same with general actions. A scientific truth that water boils at 100°C is usually expressed by the imperfective verb кипѣть (=boil) in Russian as,

Водá кипѣт при 100°C.

This is regularly expressed by the simple form in English:

Water *boils* at 100°C.

This divergence seems to be one of the main reasons why many of those who know Slavic languages object to our attempt to introduce the category of aspect into English. This is the case with objections voiced by Slavic Anglicists like Josef Vachek and Bohumil Trnka.³⁾

But when we examine closely why habitual actions and general actions are expressed by the imperfective verb in Russian, we believe, in spite of this apparent divergence, we can still claim that the English aspectual forms are the expanded form and the simple form, which respectively correspond to the Russian imperfective verb and the perfective verb.

What we are concerned with in this paper is to make clear how and why habitual actions and general actions are expressed in the imperfective aspect in Russian.

1. HABITUAL AND GENERAL ACTIONS AS IMPERFECTIVE VARIANTS. Any Russian grammar book will say that habitual actions and general actions are regularly expressed by the imperfective verbs. B.O. Unbegaun's *Russian Grammar*, for instance, gives them as imperfective variants, saying:

"The contrast between uncompleted and completed action is expressed most frequently in the difference between the action itself (imperfective verbs) and the result of the action (perfective verbs). But it may appear in other variants, such as the difference between action attempted and action performed, habitual action and single action, action in general and action in particular."⁴⁾

We would do well to arrange the variants in a table and give examples.

Variants	Imperfective	Perfective
1.	the action itself in its development	the result of action
2.	action attempted	action performed
3.	habitual action	single action
4.	action in general	action in particular

³⁾ See their letters to R. W. Zandvoort, quoted in his "Is 'Aspect' an English Verbal Category?", *Gothenburg Studies in English*, 14 (1962), pp. 14-5.

⁴⁾ B. O. Unbegaun, *Russian Grammar* (Oxford, 1957), p. 206.

The following are the examples with their English translation given by Unbegaun.

1. The imperfective: action itself in its development: открывáл:

The perfective: the result of action: откры́л:

Колумб был счастлив не тогда, когда открывáл Америку, а когда откры́л её.

"Columbus was happy, not when he *had discovered* America, but when he *was in the course of discovering* it."

2. The imperfective: action attempted: дéлал:

The perfective: action performed: сдéлал:

Что же дéлал Бельтов в продолжение этих десяти лет? Всё или почти всё. Что он сдéлал? Ничего, или почти ничего.

"What *did* Beltov *do* during these ten years? Everything, or almost everything. What *did* he *achieve*? Nothing, or almost nothing."

3. The imperfective: habitual action: употребля́л:

The perfective: single action: употреби́л:

С сыном однако он употреби́л ту дипломатию, которую употребля́л в важных случаях.

"With his son, however, he *resorted* to the diplomacy to which he *used to resort* in important cases."

As for the fourth variant Unbegaun gives no examples here. Elsewhere in the same book, we find the following imperfective example:

4. The imperfective: action in general:

Волга впада́ет в Каспийское море.

"the Volga *flows* into the Caspian Sea" ⁵⁾

Thus, with Unbegaun, habitual actions and general actions are given as fourth and fifth variants respectively.

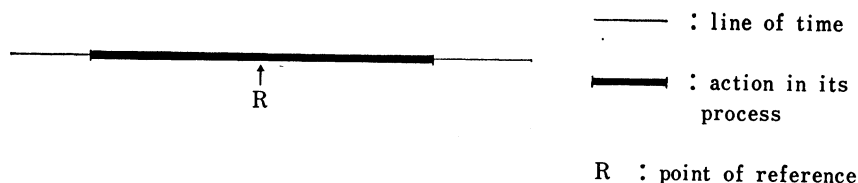
2. HABITUALNESS OR GENERALITY IS NOT IN ITSELF IMPERFECTIVE.

Now we must ask why habitual and general actions are usually expressed in the imperfective aspect. Why do they belong to the imperfective aspect together with other variants like "the action itself in its development"? On the whole what are habitual and general actions?

Expression of "action itself in its development" is probably the most typical variant of the imperfective aspect. And this is quite understandable. In this case the action is grasped in its full process and development. It perfectly fits to the

⁵⁾ Unbegaun, *Ibid.*, p. 230.

notion of the primary function of the imperfective aspect. This variant may be shown by the following diagram:



But habitual actions and general actions are not grasped in the same way. The actions are not grasped in their actual and solid process. For instance, when we speak of a habit of playing the piano as in “she often plays the piano,” it does not matter whether or not she is actually playing the piano at the time of speaking. How does this variant fit into the primary function of the imperfective aspect? There seems to be no reason why “habitualness” or “generality” should by itself make imperfectivity. Moreover, when we closely examine the use of both aspects, we find that “inevitable or habitual” actions or “potential” actions can equally be expressed in the perfective aspect, in such statements as: не обмáнешь, не продáшь, “if you don’t cheat you *won’t sell*,” or даже ребёнок поймёт это, “even a child *could understand* this.”⁶⁾

On the whole, aspect is, in principle, not a matter of kind of action—either habitual, general or particular, static or dynamic, or long-during or momentaneous. It is, as Unbegaun says and we also say, “the manner of considering the action expressed by the verb.”⁷⁾ Essentially, any kind of action should be compatible with the imperfective and the perfective aspect. An action which is habitually done—such as ‘eating breakfast’ or ‘keeping a diary’ or ‘playing the piano in the evening’—could equally be said in the perfective as well as in the imperfective. Habitualness or generality does not in itself qualify or necessitate an action to be in the imperfective.

3. HABITUAL AND GENERAL ACTIONS ARE REPEATED ACTIONS. A clue to a correct understanding of this problem is found, for instance, as early as in André Mazon. He explains the function of the present tense imperfective as follows:

“Le présent imparfaitif ou présent proprement dit exprime l’action verbale *dans son développement actuel*.

Cette action peut être:

1° Une *action unique qui se développe*;

⁶⁾ Unbegaun, *Ibid.*, p. 230-1.

⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

2° Une action *réitérée*, et notamment une action *habituelle* ou une action *générale*;”⁸⁾

And also elsewhere, under the heading ‘action *réitérée*,’ he says:

“A) *Action réitérée proprement dite*.—Le présent imparfait exprime une action particulière réitérée, et notamment une action habituelle:

Il peut exprimer aussi un fait général et permanent:”⁹⁾

An example of a habitual action given by him is:

Теперь онъ мнѣ сто цѣлковыхъ оброка платить.

(Now he *pays* me a rent of a hundred rouble.)

And an example of a general and permanent action is:

Ужъ разъ проникнувъ въ душу, страхъ не скоро уступаетъ мѣсто другому чувству.

(Once it gets into the soul, fright does not *give* place to friendly feelings.)

Here, habitual actions and general actions are classified under the heading of “repeated actions.” And they are said to be “*dans son développement actuel*.”

A similar treatment is also found in the grammatical introduction to *Dictionary of Spoken Russian*.¹⁰⁾ In this book the imperfective aspect is called “durative aspect,” and this is divided into two:

durative	{	actual durative
		iterative durative

And it says:

“The iterative durative means a repeated, habitual, or general action or a complex action. . . .”¹¹⁾

In the above two treatments, habitual and general actions are regarded as repeated or iterative actions. Indeed they are repeated actions. We call them habitual and general because they are more or less regularly repeated. It will be easier to see this with habitual actions. Habitual actions are those which are repeated daily or at some more or less definite intervals by one particular person. General actions are those which are repeated generally, by the general public, or for that matter, often quite independently of the will of human beings. Extreme cases are those which are called “eternal truths.” There seems to be no sharp line between the habitual and the general, though. The difference is a matter of degree—degree of generality or universality of occurrence. Repetition of habitual actions are dependent on the person. That of general actions depends on the laws

⁸⁾ André Mazon, *Emplois des aspects du verbe russe* (Paris, 1914), p. 117.

⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁰⁾ *Dictionary of Spoken Russian* (Dover, 1958), pp. 215-34.

¹¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 233.

of nature, so to speak. These actions are supposed to occur repeatedly whenever certain conditions are satisfied. To sum up, habitual and general actions, including permanent, are repeated actions.

4. THEIR REPETITION IS GRASPED IN ITS PROCESS. Now why is it that habitual and general actions are grasped in the imperfective aspect? Either Mazon or the *Dictionary* does not explain this in particular. But in my opinion, this is not simply because they are repeated actions, for repeated actions can be in the perfective aspect as well, as we have seen in the above.¹²⁾ When a repeated action is grasped in the imperfective, this is solely because its repetition over a certain stretch of time is viewed as a kind of continuance and development and this is grasped in its process. The action is grasped *in its process of repetition*, or so to speak, *in its repetitive process, continuance, or development*. And this manner of grasping the action expressed by the verb perfectly fits into the primary function of the imperfective aspect. This type of variant may be illustrated by the following diagram:

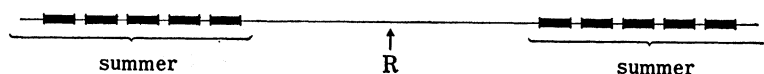


To give some more examples:

Habitual action:

Дети всегда спят летом при открытых окнах.¹³⁾

"The children always *sleep* in summer with the windows open."



Here the children's repeated action of sleeping with the windows open probably stretches over years—summers. And this stretch is grasped in its long continuance. The point of reference for this grasp is the point of speaking, but it does not have to be in summer; the statement can be made in winter, too.

General action:

Писать по-ру́сски не легко.¹⁴⁾

"It is not easy *to write* in Russian."

Here the action 'to write' is in the infinitive. The action of writing in Russian

¹²⁾ See note 6).

¹³⁾ M. Ganshina and N. Vasilevskaya, *English Grammar* (Moscow, 1953), p. 103.

¹⁴⁾ Igeta, S., Грамматика Русского Языка, (Tokyo, 1961), p. 137.

has been occurring for many centuries, and will occur in the future, too. This is a kind of repetitive action and it is grasped in its repetitive process.

General, permanent truth:

Вода кипит при 100° Цельсия.¹⁵⁾

"Water *boils* at 100° Celsius."

This action takes place whenever it is heated under normal conditions. It has been occurring from time immemorial and will continue to occur for ever. This is an everlasting repetition of the same kind of action. And this repetition is grasped in its process.

General, permanent truth:

Земля вращается вокруг своей оси.¹⁶⁾

"The earth *goes round* on its axis."

5. CONCLUSION. We have seen in the above that habitual actions and general actions are repeated actions in essence, and as such they are grasped in their repetitive process. The same kind of action can equally be grasped in the perfective aspect if they are grasped as a whole, as one composite action consisting of a number of repetitions. But this seems to be less common than the other manner. Why it is so is not a matter which needs to worry us here. We have only to say that Russian people prefer to do so.

On the other hand, the English speaking people seem to prefer to grasp habitual and general actions otherwise. Habitual and general actions are not felt as repeated actions. People seem to grasp this kind of action in its single occurrence as a whole whenever it takes place, and so in its perfective aspect. That is why they use the simple form for it, as we have seen in the English translation of the above examples.

We would like to say that this divergence between the Russian aspect and the English aspect is not that of primary function. The difference lies not in the function of the forms, but in the employment of the functions for particular occasions. This matter shall be discussed later in another paper. So far we satisfy ourselves by showing that habitual actions and general actions are usually grasped in their repetitive process in Russian, and that, therefore, they are usually expressed in the imperfective aspect.

January, 1971.

¹⁵⁾ Ganshina and Vasilevskaya, *Ibid.*, p. 103.

¹⁶⁾ Igeta, *Ibid.*, p. 187.