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Cross-linguistic differences in the representations of events: Verb aspect and completion in English and Russian

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Does the language you speak shape the way you attend to, encode and represent your experiences in the world? Further, do bilinguals think differently when speaking their different languages or do habits of thought carry over from one language to another? This poster investigated a cross-linguistic difference in verb morphology (Russian perfective aspect) and its possible effects on speakers' encoding and representation of action events.

Suppose a friend tells you "Yesterday morning I read the newspaper", or "John went to the store." Did your friend read the whole paper or only some of it? Did John ever make it to the store? Did he ever come back? In English these aspects of meaning remain ambiguous and the same English forms can be used for both complete and incomplete versions of the events (e.g., having read the whole paper versus only some of it). Russian verbs, on the other hand take an obligatory perfective marking in the past and future tenses, that require Russian speakers to mark whether the event being described is a completed or an in-progress event. For example, if telling a student "I will read your paper tomorrow" a Russian speaker must specify whether they will read the paper completely "prochitayu" or just read some of it "pochitayu" or "budu chitat."

However, English is not without mechanisms for marking completion. For example, to signify completion one might say "I have read the whole book," and to imply incompleteness one might say "I was reading the book" or "I have read some of the book." Although these ways of marking completion are not obligatory in English, they are very common. It is possible then, that what looks at first glance like a grammatical difference between Russian and English doesn't actually translate into an interesting cross-linguistic difference in terms of the type of information that is typically encoded by speakers of the two languages.

Hence, we set out to answer two questions. First, do Russian and English speakers actually include different amounts of completion information when describing events? Second, does having to mark the completion of events in order to speak Russian grammatically lead Russian speakers to notice completion more even when they're not describing an event in Russian? For example, do Russian speakers encode more information about completion even when describing an event in English or performing some completely non-linguistic task?

To answer the first question, we asked Russian and English speakers to describe scenarios that may have included complete or incomplete actions (see an example in Figure 1). We found that Russian speakers produced different descriptions for the complete and incomplete variants of actions much more so than English speakers. Further, we found that Russian speakers tested in English continued to distinguish between complete and incomplete scenes almost as much as Russians tested in Russian. We found the same pattern in a non-linguistic reaction-time task: Russian speakers noticed completion differences more than English speakers regardless of whether they were tested in English or in Russian. It appears that people who speak different languages do develop different habits in encoding and representing events, and these habits can carry over to other languages as well as to non-linguistic tasks.

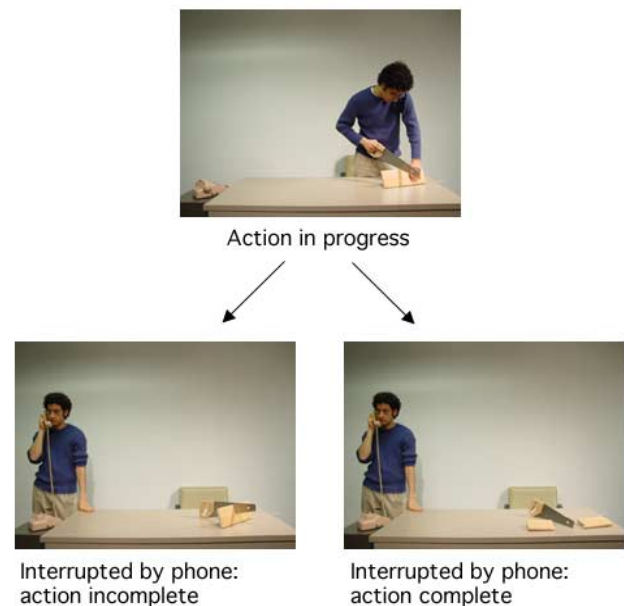


Figure 1: An example of in progress actions along with the complete and incomplete variants shown to subjects.

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