The Role of Constructions in Defining Prefix Polysemy: 
A Corpus Study of Russian ZA-

In describing prefix polysemy major attention was drawn to the problem of distinguishing the semantics of the prefix from the semantics of the verbal root (Gallant 1979, Flier 1984, Zaliznjak 2006). However, another important problem has mostly been neglected and still remains unsolved: how to distinguish prefix semantics from the meaning of a construction? We address this problem in the case study of the Russian verbal prefix ZA-, which is one of the most productive and semantically diverse prefixes in Russian (Čertkova 1996). We argue that construction can be an additional factor in defining prefix polysemy.

We report on the analysis of all Russian perfective verbs prefixed in ZA- that are attested in the Russian National Corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru) and are formed via prefixation from an imperfective base verb. We adopt a cognitive approach to prefix polysemy and propose a semantic model of the prefix ZA-, different from Janda (1986) and Shull (2003). As opposed to previous research, we suggest a “double” prototype for ZA-, namely COVER/BEHIND, and a different structure of the radial network. As shown in Figure 1, the network is split into 3 major blocks of submeanings. The bottom block consists of metaphorical extensions from full and partial covering (e.g. ‘metaphorical full covering’: in sound domain (zaglushit ‘snuff out, damp’), in domain of emotions (zapugat ‘daunt’)), while the upper block includes most grammaticalized submeanings of ZA- (ingressive and resultative). This talk focuses on the central block of the diagram, where different readings of the same motion verbs to a large extent depend on the construction.

We present two case studies of the motion verbs zaplyt’ ‘ZA-swim’ and zajti ‘ZA-go’. In both cases the verbs exhibit three different meanings:

(1) zaplyt’ ‘ZA-swim’: 
   a. GET INSIDE (zaplyt’ v peščeru ‘swim into the cave’) 
   b. CROSS A LIMIT/BORDER (zaplyt’ za flažki ‘swim past the flags’) 
   c. GO TOO FAR (zaplyt’ daleko ‘swim too far’)

(2) zajti ‘ZA-go’: 
   a. BEHIND (zajti za ščit ‘walk behind the board’) 
   b. GET INSIDE (zajti v dom ‘walk into the house’) 
   c. DEFLECT (zajti k drugu ‘drop by a friend’s house’) 

In both cases a question arises whether the meaning in (c) is a separate submeaning of the prefix ZA- or whether it is entailed from the construction. We argue that in (1c) it is a separate meaning of the prefix, since we find examples like zabresti ‘get too far’, where the base verb bresti ‘wander’ does not contain the component ‘too far’. By contrast, in (2c) the meaning DEFLECT comes from the construction. We suggest that the idea of deviating from the path arises if we replace the final destination by a temporary destination. For instance, in contexts like zajti v dom ‘walk inside the house’, the house is viewed as the final destination, while in zajti k drugu ‘drop by a friend’s house’, the preposition phrase k drugu ‘to a friend-DAT’ marks a temporary destination. Finally, zajti v magazin can have both readings, i.e. ‘stop by at the store’ (DEFLECT) and ‘walk inside the store (GET INSIDE)’, depending on the broader context.

Summing up, this study shows that in defining prefix semantics not only the interaction with verbal roots should be considered but also the interaction with constructions. Such three
factor interaction between the prefix, the verbal root and the construction is particularly important for polysemous lexemes like verbs of motion.


