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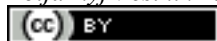
## **Figurative use of past tense in Russian: a case study**

In this study I analyze figurative use of the past tense grammeme in Russian in order to establish what meanings it can develop, how these meanings depend on the context, and how they are related to each other. By “figurative use of the past tense” I mean sentences that do not refer to the past, although they contain a verb in the past tense.

Comrie [Comrie 1985] mentions figurative uses of tense in Norwegian, German and Russian and insists on treating them as exceptions because tense grammemes do not lose their core meaning, however he admits that “it would form an interesting study to ascertain how grammatical categories and other linguistic items come to develop secondary uses in addition to their basic meaning” [Comrie 1985]. He also says that the meanings in question may form a category structured around a prototype; different members of the category inherit some of the features of the prototype, but not all of them. “In that [figurative] uses the grammatical form is not intended to express reference time (tense) but rather some other notion associated with the literal use of that form, such as certainty, imminence, remoteness or what have you”. [Kinberg 1991: 331]

In Russian, there are several well-known examples of figurative uses of tense: historical present and present for scheduled future, past for abstract present, ironical past for future, future for unreal present or emphatic future for the past [Russkaja grammatika 1980]. However, corpus data provide example types not mentioned in the Academy Grammar – some of which will be explored in the present study.

From the point of view of cognitive linguistics it is interesting to ask how new meanings develop in grammar and what the underlying cognitive mechanism of their production and perception is. There are many unsolved questions: how do figurative uses appear in context? How are they related to each other? What happens if we get a contradiction between lexical and grammatical information, for example, when tense of



the verb refers to one point on a timeline (past) and time adverbial – to another point (future) or vice versa.

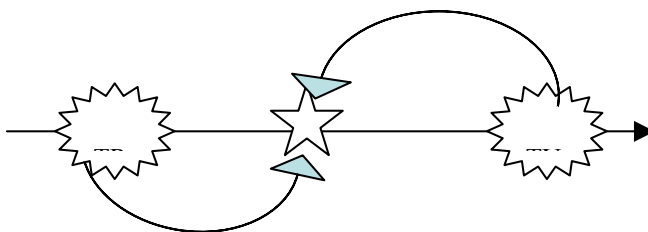
In this study I focus on one case – past tense verbs in the context of the adverbial *завтра* ‘tomorrow’. I take examples from the Russian National Corpus (RNC, [www.ruscorpora.ru](http://www.ruscorpora.ru)) as my point of departure. I searched for verbs in the past tense in the context of *завтра* and classified the contexts. However, the data elicited from the RNC turned out not to be sufficient, so I also used the Yandex search engine and searched for collocations of some frequent Russian verbs combined with *завтра*. Here I got a large set of data mostly from such sources as chats, forums and blogs, which suggests that the phenomenon under scrutiny in this study is common in informal registers.

I established several types of contextual meanings:

1. The action refers to the past, but the lexical meaning of the adverbial changes: it means the day after the time of reference, but this day is still in the past regarding the time of utterance, so we have the future adverbial combining with past tense verb.

- (1) **Завтра они уезжали** из Тегерана. [Ю. Н. Тынянов. Смерть Вазир-Мухтара (1928)]  
‘They were leaving Teheran tomorrow.’

We can illustrate it with the following diagram (TU stands for time of utterance, TR stands for time of reference, star symbolizes the event in question):



**Figure 1**

So as we see, there is a combination of two focuses here – we look at the event from both points of view simultaneously. This is not common

for a language in general and is not a usual situation for Russian either – the “proper” adverbial for the next day after the time of reference in the past would be *на следующий день* ‘next day’, and *завтра* ‘tomorrow’ appears very marked in this context. This is related to the “vividness effect” of the praesens historicum. As Dickey [2000] points out, the historical present is connected to mental transfer of the speaker and the listener to the point of reference. Haspelmath, describes the praesens historicum in terms of a moving-ego towards the situation in the past [Haspelmath 1997]). The function is similar – they are both used for narrative discourse. We can call this kind of use a shift in the lexical meaning of the adverbial.

The “future for past” figurative use of future is quite the opposite: here the time adverbial refers to the past from the point of the time of the utterance, but the verb is in the future with regard to the time of reference.

- (2) Долго же я ждал! Думал, что вызовете вчера. [Липатов.1968]  
 ‘I have been waiting for a long time...I thought you would call (future) me yesterday.’

The next types of contextual meaning are associated with a particular construction: *сегодня X – завтра Y* ‘today X tomorrow Y’.

2a. The construction names a sequence of actions which refers to the past, but not exactly to the next day after the time of reference – it is important that it happens after the action which goes with *сегодня* and within a small but necessarily one day interval. So the lexical meaning of the adverbial already changed in (1), changes further inside a construction – it becomes relative, not absolute. Basically, here we have a sequence of actions that happened before the time of utterance:

- (3) Аршавин еще тот профессионал. Что он думал, когда получал деньги и подписывал контракт? Сегодня подписал – завтра передумал.  
 ‘Arshavin is not a professional. What was he thinking about when he was signing the contract? He signed it today and changed his mind tomorrow’.

The following diagram illustrates:

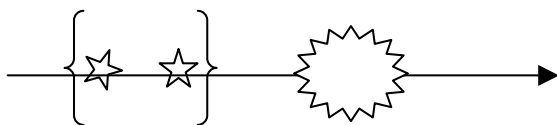


Figure 2

2b. Another subclass of this meaning is the iterative. It is used to speak about a sequence of actions that was repeated several times in the past.

- (4) Сегодня была одна линия, **завтра ее переходил** сосед, и наоборот. [Ковалевский. 1900-1910]  
 ‘There was a border today, the neighbour would cross (past) it tomorrow and vice versa.’

The schema would look like this:

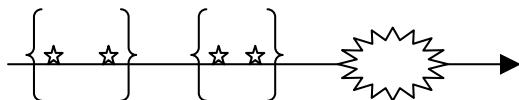


Figure 3

3. The sequence of actions repeats frequently so it becomes a specific property) of some person or situation. In a certain sense, therefore, the actions are not placed on the timeline at all; we are dealing with something that happens as a rule.

- (5) Конечно, кое-кто усматривает в купле-продаже земли хороший бизнес: сегодня купил по дешевке, а **завтра продал** втридорога. [«Аграрный журнал», 2002.02.15]  
 ‘Of course, some people consider purchase and sale of land a good business – today buy(F) it at a lower price, tomorrow sell it at a higher price.’

The type of generalization (from repeating to becoming a general characteristic) can be seen explicitly in the following example from Maxim Gorky:

- (6) А что в том хорошего — и сегодня человек поработал да поел и завтра — поработал да поел, да так все годы свои — работает и ест? [Горький 1906]  
 ‘Is it good when today one works and eats, tomorrow works and eats, and the whole life only works and eats?’

We can depict this as follows:

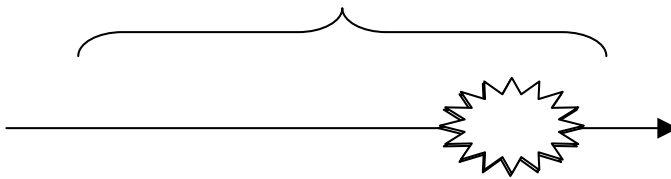


Figure 4

4a. The sequence of actions has not taken place but is very likely to happen after the time of utterance, i.e. refers **to** the future - a prediction, based on knowing the property of the subject. It is potentialis, if we characterize it in terms of modality, but it can only be placed after the time of utterance on the time line, so arguably it has future tense semantics.

- (7) В случае с завещанием исходов может быть несколько: 1) сегодня мама написала на Вас завещание, а завтра передумала и отозвала.  
 ‘There can be different variants with a testament – today your mother bequeaths you something and tomorrow she changes her mind.’

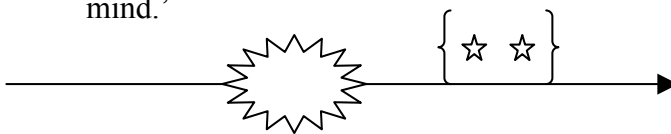


Figure 5

4b. Conditional meaning appears when a couple of actions expressed by the construction, can cause some result in future.

- (8) Сегодня вы друзья, а завтра поругались - это навредит группе, вам же потом вместе играть концерты и репетировать, а вы не хотите друг друга видеть.  
 [www.epidemia.ru/oldforum/lofiversion/index.php/]  
 ‘You are friends today and you argue tomorrow – this will do harm to the band...’

The starting point is usually the time of utterance, and further events refer to future. We can depict this on a schema like this (where “cnsq” stands for “consequence”):

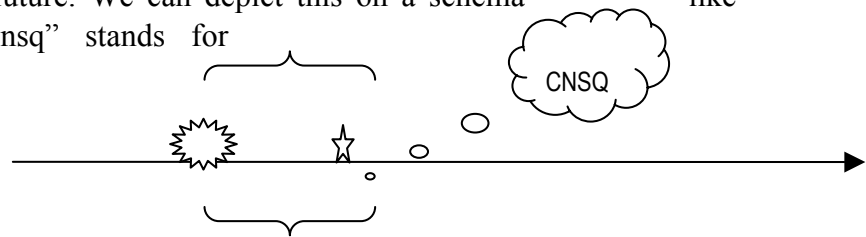


Figure 6

The overall distribution of meanings in my sample (150 sentences) is depicted in Figure 7 (shift=type 1, 1series=type 2a, iter=type 2b, habit=type 3, cond=type 4a, and hyp=type 4b):

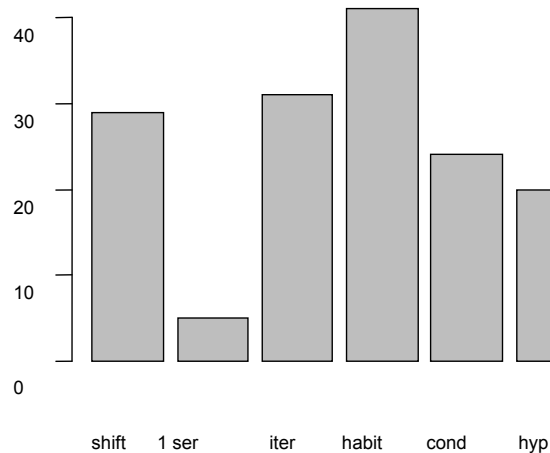


Figure 7

### Modifications of the construction

We have now considered the main types. In the following I will discuss some modifications of the constructions. They are not idiomatically fixed in the sense that words can be replaced, omitted or added.

#### 1. *Now* instead of *today*

- (9) Человеколюбия не ведал; смеялся над правилами государственного нравочения; ныне давал, завтра отнимал без вины. [Карамзин. 1809-1820]  
 ‘He did not know anything about humanity, he did not respect the state morality, he would give now and take away tomorrow.’

This happens because, as we have already mentioned, adverbials have a relative meaning in this construction, so today and now are interchangeable without any difference in meaning.

#### 2. No “today”

*Today* may be even omitted, but it is implied, because we are dealing with a sequence of two actions:

- (10) Выиграл матч в Кубке Дэвиса — зато **завтра проиграл** первый же круг турнира с призом в миллион. [Шамиль Тарпищев. Самый долгий матч (1999)]  
 ‘You win the Davis cup – but tomorrow lose the first round in a tournament with 1million prize.’

#### 3. No *today*-part of the construction

Sometimes even the whole part of the construction can be omitted if it is easy to understand the implication from the context. For example, in the sentence below the second part names some sudden bad change, so we can guess that the implication of the omitted first part was: “Every thing is OK now, but...”

- (11) Это предусмотрительность. **Завтра заболела** она, работу потеряла (тт) или еще чего. У ребенка хоть 2000 будет. [<http://www.krasotulya.ru>]  
 ‘It is prudence. Should she fall ill or lose a job tomorrow – the child would have at least 2000 [roubles per month].’

#### 4. Verb ellipsis

Sometimes the verb can be omitted if we have enough context:

- (12) Право, было в этом что-то от спортивных поединков: сегодня ты победил, а завтра я... [Парнов. 1985]  
 ‘It really looked like a competition – you win today and I <win> tomorrow.’

5. Extension for 3 actions and 3 adverbials: today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow:

- (13) Ныне поползнулся, **завтра не встал**, после-завтра не исправился; и так сей узол отчасу больше запутывается; а наконец порок свергает с престола добродетель, и садится на месте ея. [архиепископ Платон (Левшин). 1764]  
 ‘Today you fall, tomorrow don’t stand up the day after tomorrow don’t correct yourself, so the knot becomes tighter and sin takes place of virtue.’

This shows that the construction is a good environment for semantic changes, but it does not bear iterative, potential, habitual or conditional meaning itself as there are uses – though not frequent – where the same meaning occurs without a construction. For this reason, these are figurative uses of the past tense grammeme, not the construction.

#### **Discussion: lexical support**

The meanings of the constructions are often supported by words with appropriate semantics in the context. This I will refer to as “lexical support”. For the iterative meaning we often have lexical contexts involving repetition or intensity: *напрочь* ‘at all’ (intensity), *столько* ‘so much’ (intensity), *наоборот* ‘vice versa’ (repetition), *с новой надеждой* ‘with new hope’ (repetition), *всегда* ‘always’ (repetition), *снова и снова*



‘again and again’ (repetition).

- (14) Я не мог его выучить напрочь. Сегодня вызубрил — завтра забыл. [Курбатов. 1999]  
 ‘I could not learn at all. I would memorize it today and forget again tomorrow.’

For the habitual meaning we often find words denoting permanent states or habituality in the lexical context: всегда ‘always’, обычно ‘usually’:

- (15) Обычно не бывает так, чтобы больной с фобией сегодня боялся широких улиц, завтра перестал их бояться и начал испытывать страх острых предметов, а послезавтра вместо этого появилась боязнь заражения. [www.syntone.ru]  
 ‘Usually it never happens like that: today the patient with phobia is afraid of broad streets and next day he stops being afraid of them and starts to be afraid of sharp objects.’

The hypothetical contextual meaning receives lexical support from words indicating uncertainty or probability – *допустим* ‘suppose’, *представь себе* ‘imagine’, *примерно* ‘something like that’, *может быть* ‘maybe’:

- (16) Допустим, сегодня это хороший сайт, а завтра испортился, или наоборот, может такое быть? [forum.sape.ru/printthread.php]  
 ‘Suppose it is a good site today and it becomes bad tomorrow, is that possible?’

However, it is important to bear in mind that lexical support is not obligatory; it is found in some examples, but far from all. In the following section we turn to the grammatical context, which is more regular than the lexical features explored above.

### **Discussion: Grammatical context**

The grammatical context consists of the grammatical features of a verb outside the construction (or outside the collocation with adverbial in case of shift). In the present tense, the grammatical context may involve a zero copula verb. The main question is this: how does the grammatical context

contribute to the meaning of the construction?

For uses involving a shift in the lexical meaning of the adverbial or iterative in the past we mostly have verbs in the past in the context. This indicates that the whole situation is located in the past.

(17) **Завтра приехали** родители, и встреча не состоялась.  
[Макаревич. 1990]

‘Tomorrow the parents came and there was no meeting.’

For the construction “сегодня X – завтра Y”, the grammatical context usually contains a present tense verb. This supports a non-past interpretation. Notice that present tense is the most prototypical way to express habitual meaning.

(18) На одно платье уходит пару дней, в смысле – сегодня начала – **завтра закончила**. [selenik.livejournal.com/85429.html 25 апреля 2007]

‘It takes a couple of days to make a dress. I mean, I start today and finish tomorrow.’

When the “сегодня X – завтра Y” construction refers to the future, there is normally a future tense verb outside the construction:

(19) Завидовать, что у подруги состоятельный муж, я считаю, глупо. Сегодня он богатый, а завтра разорился и чему тогда Вы будете завидовать?! [www.psynavigator.ru/forum/viewtopic.php]

‘I think it is stupid to envy your friend because her husband is rich: today he is rich and tomorrow he is bankrupt and what will you envy then?’

The correlation between the type of meaning and grammatical context turned out to be statistically significant. Table 1 presents raw and relative frequencies of each type of context:

	present		past		future		no context	
Shift	0	0%	16	55%	0	0%	13	49%
Iterative	0	0%	20	64.5%	0	0%	11	35.5%
Habitual	22	54%	2	5%	5	12%	12	29%
Cond./hypo.	13	29%	6	14%	14	32%	11	25%

Table 1

Statistical analysis carried out in “R” shows high significance, so the distribution is not random and certain kinds of meanings attract certain grammatical contexts: X-squared = 245.6251, df = 9, p-value < 2.2e-16. The correlation between the type of meaning and grammatical context is shown in Figure 8:

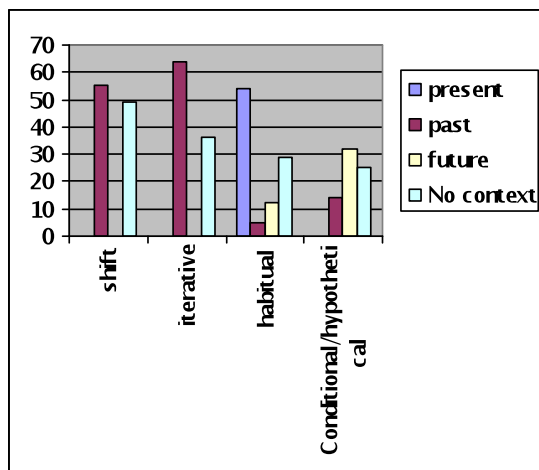


Figure 8

### Discussion: correlation with aspect

It turned out that there is a strong correlation between the type of contextual figurative meaning and the aspect of the verb. The data in Table 2 shows this; the “shift” and “iterative” types prefer the imperfective aspect, while the perfective is dominant for the “habitual” and “conditional/ hypothetical” types.

	perfective	imperfective
Shift	7	22
Iterative	4	27
Habitual	40	1
Conditional/hypothetical	43	1

**Table 2**

The correlation between the type of the contextual meaning and the aspect turned out to be statistically significant, as the Fisher exact test gave a p-value < 2.2e-16. Figures 9 and 10 provide illustrations; we can

see that the first two types prefer imperfective aspect while the last two types almost always attract perfective aspect:

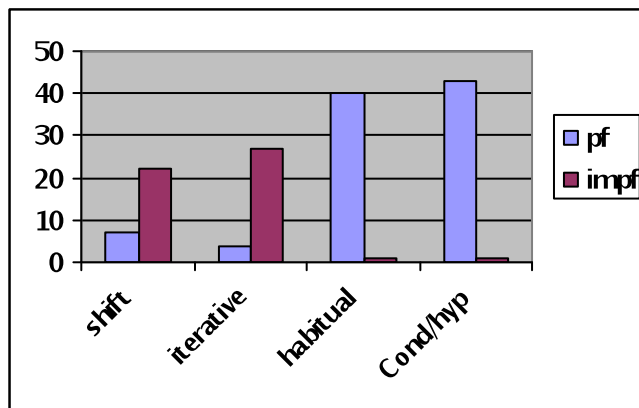


Figure 9

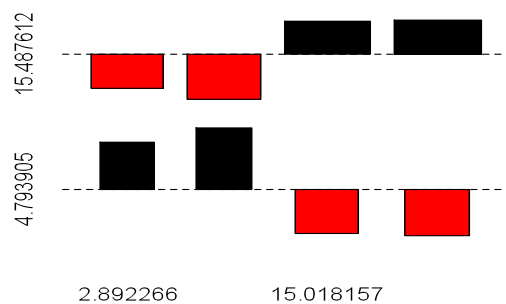


Figure 10

As pointed out by Dickey [2000], perfective aspect is never used in the historical present in East Slavic languages. It may therefore not be surprising that contextual type 1 (“shift”), which is similar to the historical present, also disprefers the perfective aspect. The preference of imperfective for the iterative type is also hardly surprising, since the imperfective aspect is the unmarked choice for repeated actions.

The relationship between habitual, conditional and hypothetical meanings on the one hand and perfective aspect on the other may be less obvious. However, recall that the relevant constructions involve sequences of actions. The perfective aspect is used because conjoined perfectives can form temporal sequences, which can be located in different places on the timeline [Dickey 2000]. It is also worth mentioning that there are other constructions in Russian where the perfective aspect conveys habitual or hypothetical meanings [Nesset 2009].

All in all, while the correlations between aspect and construction type appears to have semantic motivation, the semantics of Russian aspect and its contribution to the meaning of the constructions under scrutiny in the present study need to be investigated further.

### **Discussion: relationships**

So far we have seen that there are 6 different types of contextual meanings of the past tense grammeme. Are they related to each other? What factors provoke semantic changes and what factors contribute to contextual interpretation?

Lexical meaning is more vulnerable, so it undergoes a semantic change as in type 1. This is an example of mental transfer from the time of utterance to the time of reference, or moving ego in Haspelmath's terminology [Haspelmath 1997]. It is associated with narration – which makes it related to the historical present; in both cases the transfer creates a “vividness effect”.

The second step is the appearance of a construction. The meanings of the words inside a construction are very likely to change. It happens to adverbials here. They lose their core meaning and only relative meaning remains – the idea that today comes before tomorrow and the interval between them is short. Now we get an idea of a series of actions in the past. The next stage of the meaning derivation is the iteration of series in the past. It might be considered as a modification of meaning 1, which now becomes “multiplied” due to aspectual semantics. The following stage is the development of figurative use from literal use of past tense (i.e. past tense with reference to past) – i.e. past tense with reference to another point on a timeline. Arguably, this is an example of metonymical

transfer: generalization from a part to the whole timeline. If we know that a series of actions happened repeatedly, there is only a small step to assuming that the relevant actions represent a habit.

Another step is done when the future meaning appears. It might also be considered a metonymical transfer from whole to part – if carrying out a series of action can be a property of the subject/situation – that it can be supposed that such sequence might happen in a particular time in future. Again, the adverbial does not have its dictionary meaning here – it is a part of the construction and marks short interval between the first and the second action. In other words, we proceed from something spread on the whole timeline to the part that represents the future.

So, we see that the set of meanings is structured like a family resemblance chain that is linked by metonymy. The first step involves a change in the lexical meaning of the adverbial, the second one is caused by the construction, and then metonymical transfers take place:

- 1 → 2: from single verb to a construction
- 2a → 2b: from 1 series to many series of actions
- 2b → 3: from repeating to a general property in present
- 3 → 4a: from general property – to a prediction for future
- 4a → 4b: from prediction a situation to predicting consequences of the situation

### **Concluding remarks**

In this study, I have discussed verbs in the past tense in collocations with future tense adverbials. I have shown that the past tense grammeme is capable of expressing figurative contextual meanings when the past tense form appears in a particular construction. The relevant meanings are habitual, hypothetical and conditional. They are connected metonymically with each other and with non-figurative contextual meanings of the past tense grammeme. In some cases ellipsis can occur in such constructions. Lexical and grammatical contexts, as well as aspectual semantics contribute to the figurative interpretation.

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## Summary

This article discusses past tense verbs in collocations with the future tense adverbial завтра 'tomorrow'. It is shown that the past tense grammeme can express habitual, hypothetical and conditional meanings that are related through metonymy.

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