

**Abstract**

This paper offers an approach for teaching verbs of motion to intermediate students of Russian that makes use of a combination of film clips and interviews with native speakers. These verbs are particularly difficult to teach, because they complicate the language's aspect system, and they express surprisingly precise ideas that English speakers often communicate with the use of phrasal verbs and adverbs. However, I aim to do more than correct students' errors in this small, albeit productive corner of the Russian language – the complexity of these verbs has much to teach students and instructors about fundamentals of the Russian aspectual system, and about how aspect and tense inform narrative choices in other languages, as well (Anstatt 2008). I envisioned that this project would promote a new form of visual thinking, but my results prompted me to re-focus my pedagogical approach towards teaching the value of storytelling for second-language acquisition. Thus, I hope that these materials and their accompanied emphasis on storytelling will make students, in particular, more broadly aware of a phenomenon that Dan Slobin has specifically called “thinking for speaking,” a relationship to language that assumes a special kind of thinking underlies the formation of an utterance (Slobin 1996).

## 1. Scope

Building on recent arguments that promote the use of film in the classroom, I suggest that film enriches the foreign language classroom not only for its use as a recording of spoken language, but because it also comes with the added benefit of introducing shared visual narrative materials to a class (Kaiser 2011, Kaiser & Shibahara 2014, Tognozzi 2010). Narrating visual material, as shown by the famous “frog stories” project, is an important skill for speakers of any language, and practicing narration is especially useful for students who are just beginning to conceptualize the use of Russian motion verbs (Berman & Slobin 1994).<sup>1</sup> By learning motion verbs traditionally, i.e. with the exclusive aid of glossed translations, students all too often pursue mimicry of these texts in their own speech and do not consider *why* an author or speaker chose a certain verb.<sup>2</sup>

I imagined that after watching short film clips in the classroom, discussing which motion verbs could adequately describe them, and checking their work against native speakers’, students would begin to forge pathways between visual and linguistic connections. The key, as I will explain, is to promote storytelling as a frame through which students can understand how motion verbs are commonly used.

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<sup>1</sup> My project is influenced by the “frog stories” project, through which linguistic researchers have attempted to determine grammatical links to narrative framing. The frog stories are a now classic collection of images first published in 1969 as a children’s book titled, *Frog, where are you?* Researchers who asked native speakers to narrate these stories claimed that a learner’s native language has a great influence on how they begin to narrate events in acquired languages (Berman & Slobin 1994) These findings have quite accurately theorized how native speakers of a particular language learn, but few offer pedagogical models for L2 learners who hope to naturalize the quality of their narratives in a target language.

<sup>2</sup> In my experience teaching the verbs of motion, students benefit the most when sharing a set of images or a storyline to describe or narrate collectively as a class. When first teaching the Russian verbs of motion, I noticed that my students benefitted most from a visit to our class by a native Russian speaker, who described his journey to the building that day using verbs of motion.

## 2. Russian Verb Aspect

A major hurdle for instructors to overcome is how to adequately communicate the complexity of motion verbs' tri-partite aspectual system, as opposed to Russian verb aspect's traditionally bi-partite structure. In Russian, infinitives nearly always come in pairs: each half correlates to the imperfective (*nesovershennyi*) and perfective (*sovershennyi*) aspects. The imperfective can be conjugated in the past, present, and future, and the perfective can be conjugated in the past and future.

Because of its association with narrative, I focused exclusively on the imperfective past tense in this project: elsewhere, the past tense has frequently been called the *anchor tense* of storytelling, and its various uses, as I will show, pose an appropriate pedagogical goal for a one-semester intermediate language course (Berman and Slobin 1994). Students quite frequently narrate past experiences in classroom warm-ups and discussions, and fostering familiarity with the imperfective past tense can help them enormously.

Aspect expresses and contextualizes an action in time – thus, using the imperfective in the past tense usually implies habitual or repeated action, whereas using the perfective aspect refers to a completed action (Forsyth 1970, Anstatt 2008). These are often called telic and atelic verb forms: for example, using the verb “to read” in the past imperfective often implies that a book is not yet completed, whereas the perfective forms of the verb implies the completion of a certain task (Kagan 2010:143, see Fig. 1). While this should be a familiar distinction for students and speakers of Romance languages, the bi-partite system in Russian has several of its own wrinkles. In addition to complying with the logic of an action and its state of completion, a past-tense imperfective verb can imply an attempt (usually one that is failed). It can also state a fact in

<b>Imperfective</b> Читать To read	<b>Perfective</b> Прочитать To read (complete) / finish reading
Я читал книгу. “I was reading the book.” (I haven’t finished, or I haven’t yet completed the specific task)	Я прочитал книгу. “I read the book.” (I’m done with my task)

Fig. 1

response to a question – if a speaker wants to inquire whether or not the subject did *any kind* of reading the day before, they would use the imperfective form, and the affirmative answer would mimic that form in response (Timberlake 2004, Wade 2011).

Over the course of their study, students gradually witness an expansion of the set of contexts that requires them to navigate between the imperfective and perfective aspects. The most unfamiliar lesson arrives when instructors attempt to teach that verbs *create* the context in a complex relationship with experience and language. One example of this is the aspectual logic of “an action and its reversal” in past tense imperfective constructions (Padučeva 1996, Wade 2011:302-303). The following two sentences are a classic example borrowed from Terrence Wade’s *Comprehensive Russian Grammar*, a common reference book for many students of Russian (Wade 2011: 302):

<b>(1) Imperfective</b>	<b>(2) Perfective</b>
Наверно, кто-то открывал окно. <i>Naverno, kto-to otkryval okno.</i> “Someone must have <b>opened</b> the window.” (The window is now <u>closed</u> .)	Наверно, кто-то открыл окно. <i>Naverno, kto-to otkryl okno.</i> “Someone must have <b>opened</b> the window.” (The window is now <u>open</u> .)

Fig. 2

In both examples, we can imagine that a speaker tells about an episode in which he or she entered a room that felt unseasonably warm or cold. The difference between verb choice depends on whether the window is either open or closed in the story: in the imperfective example (1), the

speaker is making a comment about the room's unexpected shift in temperature despite its closed windows, but in the perfective example (2), the speaker is referring to the unexpected (perhaps frustrating) realization that the window has been left ajar and is still open. Thus, aspectual choice has a fundamental effect on the shape and meaning of narrative events.

## 2.1 Russian Motion Verb Aspect

Students usually encounter the motion verbs *after* first learning about verbal aspect.<sup>3</sup> To learners' surprise, motion verbs interact with the aspectual system quite differently than other verbs. Motion verbs seem closely modeled on the logic of "an action and its reversal," but for motion verbs, the imperfective portion of the verb is split in two. One half of this split often denotes round-trips ("reversed" trips) and is associated with the logic of "multidirectionality," (*raznopravlennoe napravlenie*); trips in a single direction belong to the realm of "unidirectionality" (*odnopravlennoe napravlenie*). Thus, verbs of motion complicate the aspectual system by introducing subtypes of the imperfective aspect in the form of multidirectionality and unidirectionality (Kagan 2010). Building on prior arguments from J. Forsyth, Olga Kagan has recently proposed a return to describing unidirectionality as a feature of "determinate" motion verbs, meaning that it can only relate to one action that took place specifically at one point in time (Forsyth 1970:319-321, Kagan 2010:145). Determinate imperfective verbs, such as the unidirectional motion verb, are able to express habitual motion, but much more commonly serve as one portion of a story, much like the English progressive (Kagan 2010:144).

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<sup>3</sup> There are, of course, a few exceptions to this practice. Recent Russian textbooks, such as deBenedette, Comer, Symyslova & Perkin's *Mezhdu Nami* now teach the motion verbs much earlier, a practice that I tentatively support given the results of this paper.

Three nearly identical sentences use different forms of the verb that means “to go by foot,” and they show the range of precisely what motion verbs can signify (Fig. 3). When students express that they “went” somewhere, a common statement in English, nearly every construction contains hints of where the subject of the sentence is located *now*. In addition to this paradigmatic chart, speakers often use verbs of motion to express the following set of main ideas (Fig. 4):

<b>Ходить</b> <i>Multidirectional</i>	<b>Идти</b> <i>Unidirectional</i>	<b>Пойти</b> <i>Unidirectional</i>
<u>In the past tense:</u> Round-trip, completed journey. Repetitive or habitual motion.	<u>In the past tense:</u> Direction in a straight path or «on a track.» Less typical: Repetitive or habitual motion <i>at a precise, repeated moment in time.</i>	<u>In the past tense:</u> completed or embarked upon motion in one direction, but with indication of return.
Он <b>ходил</b> в университет. “He went to the university” (on foot; he is back now)	Он <b>шёл</b> в университет. «He was going to the university» (on foot; he had not yet reached his destination)	Он <b>пошёл</b> в университет. «He went to the university» (on foot; he has not yet returned)

Fig. 3

<b>Я ходил в университет.</b>	<b>Я шёл в университет [...]</b>
“I <b>took a trip</b> to the University.” (Implies a completed journey: I’m back now)	“I <b>was walking</b> to the University [...]” (Implies the beginning of a story or narrative, or is one portion of a longer narrative.)
“I <b>went</b> to the University.” (I travelled to the university habitually)	“I <b>walked</b> to the University [...]” (I was progressing in some way, perhaps parallel to another action.”
“I <b>was going</b> to the University” (I was enrolled at that time.”	

Fig. 4

Clearly, the relationship between motion verbs and contextual creation is quite similar to that seen in Fig. 2 – these verbs, however, create contexts that express precise details of location, time, and habitualness.

When non-native speakers reach for an imperfective past-tense verb, they can easily confuse multi-directional logic (i.e. a round trip) with unidirectional logic: when the error is made, what was at first a story about a student’s round-trip to the university accidentally becomes a narrative about what was happening while a student was *en route*. Much of students’ trouble is founded upon an unfortunate ordering of instruction in standard Russian curricula. Students learn that the perfective aspect signifies a completed action, yet when they narrate motion, it is now the multidirectional, imperfective verb that proposes an action and its reversal, and thus denotes a new kind of completed process. In fact, imperfective motion verbs are “compatible with both telic and atelic event descriptions,” which is cause for much confusion (Kagan 2010:145). It is fundamentally difficult (and tedious) to tell a student that their innocent error creates several possible contexts that, while perfectly grammatical, would sound to Russian speakers like incoherent responses to a certain question, or that would construct incoherent frames for the story they are trying to tell.

The mistakes in fig. 5, sourced from student work and responses in my prior classes, represent paradigmatic errors that learners make. In example (1), the speaker appears to narrate

<p><b>Вы куда-нибудь <b>ходили</b> вчера?</b></p> <p>Did you go anywhere yesterday?</p>	<p>The question asks for the respondent to narrate a <i>completed trip</i>.</p>
<p><b>(1) Вчера, я <b>ходил</b> в университет и пошёл на занятие.</b></p> <p>“Yesterday, I took a trip to the university and then I went to class.”</p>	<p>This sentence implies that these two trips lead to fundamentally different locations.</p>
<p><b>(2) Вчера, я <b>шёл</b> в университет [...]</b></p> <p>“Yesterday, I was going (by foot) to the university.”</p>	<p>This definite imperfective either begins a story or describes habitual motion in one direction – it does not adequately answer the question.</p>

<p><b>(3) Вчера, я ходил в университет. В-первых, я шёл на занятие, а потом я шёл домой.</b>  “Yesterday, I took a trip to the university. First, I was going (by foot) to class, and then I was going (by foot) home.”</p>	<p>The second sentence creates two parallel, indeterminate actions.</p>
<p><b>(4) Вчера, я пошёл в университет.</b>  “Yesterday, I set off for the university.”</p>	<p>The perfective past tense implies that the subject <i>has not returned yet</i>.</p>





**Fig. 5**

two different trips, although in the context of the assignment this is not their intention. In example (2), the speaker creates a story frame, but doesn't offer any statement that concludes the narrative. In example (3), the student combines three actions together, as if all three trips were happening simultaneously. And, in example (4), the subject tells the story *as if they had yet to return*.

### **3. How Verbs of Motion are Often Taught**

Some textbooks have attempted to teach motion verbs through visual priming – often, they teach by using direction as a frame, and offer static examples that outline different vectors that are related to multi- and unidirectionality (See Fig. 6). Many of these materials teach with a classic “fill in the blanks” approach, which encourages students to finish other speakers' stories rather than consider their own. As my results will show, teaching these verbs in terms of *direction* and *directionality* may not be the most productive paradigm. These approaches result in a non-heuristic, somewhat schematic method to teaching motion verbs that divorces them from real-life application (particularly from narratives), and which don't offer students examples of how these verbs are used primarily to create contexts, not simply to complete them.




на север.	на юг.		
			
г. Посмотри, вон плывёт большой пароход! Интересно, куда он плывёт?	Такие пароходы обычно плавают на север.		
			
д. Посмотри, вон бежит большая собака!	Не волнуйся, это Дружок. Он иногда бегает в парк сам.		

Б. Скажите, какого типа  $\longrightarrow$  или  $\longleftarrow$  глаголы в левой колонке? Дайте их инфинитивы: а. \_\_\_\_\_, б. \_\_\_\_\_, в. \_\_\_\_\_, г. \_\_\_\_\_.


Скажите, какого типа  $\longrightarrow$  или  $\longleftarrow$  глаголы в правой колонке? Дайте их инфинитивы: а. \_\_\_\_\_, б. \_\_\_\_\_, в. \_\_\_\_\_, г. \_\_\_\_\_, д. \_\_\_\_\_. Какое действие обозначают эти глаголы? Почему вы так думаете?

**Multidirectional**



motion with more than one destination; random motion

**Unidirectional**



motion from point A to point B; can be repeated

Fig. 64

### 3.1 Film as an Alternative Pedagogical Tool

In the spirit of these observations, and in an attempt to remedy the unfortunate lack of dynamic materials, I created a teachable corpus of silent film clips accompanied by recordings of native Russian speakers who responded to what they saw on screen.<sup>5</sup> Initially, I envisioned that this project would promote a new form of visual thinking that would allow students to link their observations of motion to certain motion verbs.

<sup>4</sup> Images from Martin & Dolgova (2004) and Mahota (1996)

<sup>5</sup> A compilation of completed clips is available [at this link](#). Each of the film's four sections corresponds to a single clip. Sections are divided into the responses of two separate interviewees, both of whom watched the same clip and answered a set of three questions. The questions and their responses are paired with a clip in three distinct ways: in the first portion of each clip, viewers will hear only the audio of the interview. In the second portion, viewers will hear the audio paired with video. In the third portion, viewers will see only video.

I curated my clips from the Lumière brothers' actualities films, and from some British actuality films. These quasi-documentary works, among the first films ever produced, are mostly under a minute in length, and they don't feature any narrative distractions such as cuts, pans, a soundtrack, or any alternative shots that come into conflict with the originally framed image. When the silent cinema first transitioned to sound, French director René Clair noted that some viewers mistakenly remembered silent films as sound films – he further argued that movement and image are the most impressive aspects of any film, and I imagined that students would respond this way as well (Kracauer 1960: 103). Moreover, unlike the frog stories, these images would give students recognizable forms of motion that they would likely respond to and recall in their future use of Russian. An arriving train, for example, is a narrative event that students are likely to witness again.

Beyond their clear showcasing of the new technology of the camera, actuality films present a dynamic action and what appears to be its completion. Instead of giving students an encyclopedia of visual examples for various forms of motion, however, I wanted the clips to present some visual situations that were challenging for the verbal tools of the Russian language. In addition to finding clips that seemed to offer standard paradigms of motion verbs, I included a few films that might blur the lines between other forms of movement, as I will discuss below.

#### **4. Interviews**

In separate interviews, I showed each clip separately to two native speakers of Russian, who responded to a set of questions in a brief interview after they viewed the film. Their answers were recorded as an audio file. Each interviewee had some exposure to and experience with the English language and had spent some time in the US, ranging from an interviewee who was visiting the states for the first time to a native speaker who had spent most their life in America.

My questions were as straightforward as possible without using a verb of motion: imagine you are a subject moving in this clip: what are you doing? (*Chto vy delaete?*) Imagine this took place yesterday: what did you do? (*Chto vy delali?*) Now, use the present tense again, and imagine you are witnessing this scene: what are they doing? (*Chto oni delaiut?*)

#### 4.1 Results, and the Importance of Storytelling

One clip became central to the category that “blurred the lines”: a rollercoaster that followed a circular track with two stops (the ride is called the “switchback railway,” to accentuate its trip to one point and back). While watching the rollercoaster clip, I wondered if students would be more inclined to choose the multidirectional motion verb to describe the train’s motion. This kind of phrase and the logic behind it are taught early on – “to travel around the city” (“*khodit’/ezdit’ po gorodu*”) is a common phrase that uses a multidirectional motion verb, which would mean that multidirectionality can include stops if the route is ultimately a complete circuit.

When I first showed this clip to a pilot class, 11 out of 12 non-native speaking students chose the multidirectional motion verb. On the contrary, both native speakers used the unidirectional verb in the past tense to narrate the scene. As it turned out, symmetrical motion, circular motion, or motion in a particular direction are less important to verb choice than the situation in which one *is asked to tell a story*. Emphasizing one’s ride that took place on a trip to a locale, such as an amusement park, is possible with a unidirectional verb of motion because the ride itself becomes one determinate facet of a bigger story frame that both respondents imagined when narrating the clip. It was clear that native speakers tried to craft their answers as a plausible narrative of determinate events that featured several internally agreeing components, which altered their verb choice more than what they saw in the clip.

These initial results prompted a change in the scope and aims of the project. Yet it wasn't just the rollercoaster clip that caused unexpected results. In a clip depicting a young girl learning to walk (which seemed to me like an easy case of unidirectionality) one respondent used a multidirectional verb when responding to the question "what did they do yesterday?", but quickly corrected himself after doing so. This small correction, itself on a micro-level, belies the macro-level revelation that accompanied these interviews – the narrative mode does not search for a certain kind of motion embedded within the clip that it must anchor itself to, but it instead weaves its own story according to aspectual logic. Because the respondent realized that they did not want to end their story, the narrative called for an alternate aspectual choice. I concluded from the variety of answers that the images themselves do not have an innate connection to language – it is language that attaches re-narrates the image of motion. As Slobin has written: "The world does not present 'events' and 'situations' to be encoded in language. Rather, experiences are filtered through language into verbalized events." (Slobin 1996:75)

Another clip unquestionably caused the greatest amount of controversy, and was thus excluded from the final pedagogical materials: the clip depicted a man riding a bicycle in circles with no particular destination.<sup>6</sup> Because these conversations became quite lengthy, I chose not to attach them to certain clips in the final materials. Two respondents insisted that the lack of a destination meant that the bicyclist's movement could only be described using a multidirectional verb; the other claimed that his motion belonged to one portion of a longer chain. Clearly, when they changed their thoughts, they produced different results, and thus different stories.

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<sup>6</sup> The clip can be viewed at [this link](#).

## 5. Lesson Planning

In the classroom, I avoided explanatory presentation and instead planned to actively shift how students focus their attention when using motion verbs. I realized, however, that by incorporating the clips into a series of exercises where students are asked to identify the verb that is “more correct,” that I was re-branding materials quite similar to those that students had seen in textbooks, and to which my project was supposed to oppose: guess the correct verb, move on. The proper approach would incorporate and teach the inherent modality that the storyteller’s choices, position, and frame activate in their use of motion verbs.

This required that students mirror the respondent’s position, but with some missing information so as to slightly defamiliarize their position.<sup>7</sup> So, I deprived students of a sense: I separated the audio and video tracks to design materials that lacked one or the other. In a pilot class, twelve students watched the switchback railway clip with no audio commentary. They were then asked to pretend that they were writing a short travelogue reflecting on what they saw in the film for the first time – this required them to think about retelling a past action alongside others, which would make them consider aspectual choices carefully. As noted above, 11 out of 12 students chose the multidirectional motion verb, something both native speakers did not do.

Next, after narrating their travelogues to their partners, students listened to both interviews. Students were surprised that the multidirectional verb was not chosen, which prompted a discussion (in Russian) about why this may have happened. They theorized what had happened in the interviews with partners, and then discussed as a class – they decided that motion “on a track” had much in common with unidirectionality, even if that track was not entirely linear in direction. Their explanations pushed them beyond memorizing conjugation

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<sup>7</sup> In a similar study, Von Stutterheim & Nüse (2003), the researchers abruptly ended film clips to provoke a response from viewers.

paradigms to get at the heart of why they chose a particular verb – debate and conversation amongst students in the classroom ensued.

In the next exercise, students listened to audio from a separate set of interviews with no visual component. I then asked them to imagine what the interviewees were watching, and to draw it on a sheet of paper. My suppositions that the direction-centric textbooks had influenced students were confirmed when a student, asked to draw a narrative of what the interviewed subject said, left behind two competing diagrams of arrow-like vectors (see Fig. 6). After being primed by the first clip, the students fared better in this exercise. They were pleased when they recognized that their visual imaginations, for the most part, corresponded with the different stories that the interviewees told.

According to a set of response surveys that the class filled out, students were enthusiastic about the lesson, mostly for its refreshing distance from the methods they had been exposed to prior. Each student who filled out a survey said they felt the exercise helped them better understand verbs of motion, and, most importantly, that they had thought of them in that way before. Several mentioned that they appreciated materials that were not static. One student noted: “it was really interesting to recognize what I didn’t know, and what I couldn’t yet conceptualize with the motion verbs.”

The class’s regular instructor offered a response that framed my results much more eloquently than I could: “the narration of two different native speakers was helpful in conveying the complexities of Russians' own intuitive relationships to these verbs. As a whole, the exercise did a good job of supplementing the "unidirectional"/"multidirectional" model with a more accurate paradigm, which prioritizes abstraction vs. concreteness rather than a typology of different types of motion.” Moreover, according to the instructor, the frequency of detailed and

grammatically correct narratives that included motion verbs increased after the pilot class. A full semester has yet to be observed, but these materials offer promising potential in the classroom.

## 6. Conclusions

Clearly, motivating students to narrate their observations of motion is central to successful motion verb pedagogy. Shared film materials with multiple recorded interviews from native speakers can serve examples that students can “check” alongside their own interpretations. Moreover, the variety of native speaker stories helps students recognize that the decisions for lexical modality belong solely to the storyteller, as long as they are made possible by language. A grammatical lesson on aspect agreement is thus a sub-topic of the exercise.

It is also imperative to discuss what these findings do not demonstrate: I do not see these interviews as evidence for a culturally-determined linguistic consciousness – disagreement amongst Russian respondents is enough evidence for variations in storytelling behavior (claims regarding culturally-bound narrative techniques first appeared in Omotoso & Lamme in 1979, and have been slightly re-framed by Slobin), My goal is to work parallel to the implications that these results have had for the fields of neuro- and sociolinguistics, and to use documentation of native speaker narrative strategies as models for L2 students to contemplate from their own standpoint as *students*. For them, it is less important to identify and model a specific kind of thinking than it is to understand the *conditions for the possibility* of “thinking for speaking” in a certain way.

Ideally, these clips and interviews will follow students through multiple units on verbs of motion, and their efficacy can be better measured after students’ extensive exposure to them: a class could return to them and explore different aspects of motion present in the very same clip (for example, entering and exiting the trains in “A Switchback Railway”). Because the clips and

interviews will be hosted online, I hope that these materials will remain relevant and available for future Intermediate Russian instructors. Moreover, these interviews should not be limited to only Russian speakers – comparing stories from other languages, and how other speakers narrate these clips, could shed fascinating insight on narrativity, and how language interacts with dynamic visual materials.



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