

Abstract

The category of motion verbs in Russian is puzzling in that the verbs come in pairs. For instance, both *begat'* and *bežat'* translate as 'run'. No wonder, verbs of this type pose problems for students of Russian as a foreign language, because it is difficult to know when to use which member of each pair. Accordingly, in the literature much energy has been invested in explaining the often subtle differences in meaning. In this paper I change the perspective from meaning alone to the relationship between meaning and form. I argue that although the Russian motion verbs on the face of it may look like an unordered list of verbs, they do in fact constitute a well-defined semiotic system where the notions of "prototype" and "iconicity" are pivotal. More specifically, my central claims are:

- A 'non-directional' motion verb (e.g. *begat'*) evinces a more prototypical morphological *form* than its 'unidirectional' partner (*bežat'*).
- A 'non-directional' motion verb evinces a more prototypical *meaning* than its 'unidirectional' partner.
- Hence, form and meaning are related in terms of iconicity in that prototypical form corresponds to prototypical meaning and non-prototypical form to non-prototypical meaning.