

The Actual World is Abnormal: On the Semantics of the Modal Particle *Bylo* in Russian¹

Olga Kagan

Hebrew University of Jerusalem

olga.kagan@mail.huji.ac.il

1. Introduction. In this talk, I investigate the semantics of the *bylo* construction in Russian. This is a construction that involves a modal particle *bylo* that appears adjacent to a past tense verb or participle (1).

- (1) Ottuda on pošol bylo domoj, no razdumal i povorotil
from-there he started-walking *bylo* home but changed-his-mind and turned
v druguju storonu.
to another side
'From there he started walking home, but then changed his mind and turned in
a different direction.'
(Dostojevskij, *Xozyajka.*)

Isačenko (2003) states that this construction involves “modality of a rejected action”. Intuitively, *bylo* sentences mean that a certain event that took place or was taking place in the actual world was not followed by a normal, expected pattern. For instance, in the first clause in (1), the presence of *bylo* indicates that while the subject started walking home, the walking event did not proceed normally in some sense or other. The second clause specifies what went wrong: the subject changed his mind and, as a result, the event of walking home was interrupted and did not reach its normal completion.

2. The *Bylo* Construction: The Range of Usages

On the basis of the existing literature on the topic (e.g. Popova-Bottineau 2008, Timberlake 2004), we can list the following basic cases in which *bylo* sentences are appropriate:

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- An event was planned/intended but was not, in fact, instantiated (2)
- An event began but was interrupted (1)
- An event took place and reached its natural endpoint, but its result state was annulled (3)
- An event was performed with a certain goal, but the goal is not achieved (4). (probably can be unified with the first type)

- (2) a. Mendel Lubotsky sobraljsja bylo vozrazit', no peredumal...
Mendel Lubotsky gathered *bylo* object_{INF} but changed-his-mind
'Mendel Lubotsky was about to object but changed his mind.'
(National Corpus of Russian)
- b. Aleksei popytalsja bylo projti v svoj cabinet, no German pregradil emu
Aleksei tried *bylo* pass_{INF} in his office but German blocked him
dorogu.
way
'Aleksei tried to enter his office, but German stopped the way.'
(National Corpus of Russian)
- (3) Lena otkryla bylo okno, no tut že snova ego zakryla.
Lena opened *bylo* window but immediately again it closed
'Lena opened the window but closed it again at once.'
- (4) A ona brosilas' na krovat' v netoplenoj zale, plakala, metalas' golovoj po
and she flung on bed in unheated room cried tossed head on
mokroj poduške. Danya bylo prikriknul na nejo – ne pomoglo.
wet pillow Danya *bylo* shouted on her NEG helped
'And she flung herself on the bed in the unheated room, weeping, tossing
her head around on the wet pillow. Danya raised his voice at her, but it
didn't help.'
(Knjazev 2004:296)

In all these cases, the presence of *bylo* signals that the situation did not develop in a planned / normal / expected way. An event or state e_1 took place in the actual world (w_0); under a normal development of the situation (in the sense to be formalized below) it is supposed to be followed by e_2 , but e_2 did not take place.

In what follows: e_r = the event that is realized, e_u = the event that is expected but remains unrealized.

Another way to look at this state of affairs:

- A certain complex event was realized in the actual world only partially and, thus,

failed to reach completion. e_r constitutes its sub-event that was successfully realized, whereas e_u corresponds to the sub-event that was not instantiated.

Knjazev (2004): the *bylo* construction signals “a violation of “a normal course of events”...”Normal” in this case stands for such a development of a situation (more precisely, “macro-situation”), under which a wish is followed by an intention, an intention – by the beginning of actions to the effect of the fulfillment of what is desired, the performed action is completed, its result is preserved, and the final purpose of the action, for which all these efforts have been made, is achieved. The use of the constructions with the particle *bylo* signals that at some stage, such a course of events was violated.” (p.299, my translation).

One goal of this talk is to provide a formal analysis that will capture the above generalization.

Corrections:

→ A wish is not sufficient to license the construction (unlike an intention!).

- (5) Todorovsky xotel *bylo* sdelat' partnjorom Jankovskogo Andreja Panina.
Todorovsky wanted *bylo* make_{INF} partner Jankowsky_{GEN} Andrei Panin
'Todorovsky wanted to make Andrei Panin Jankowsky's partner.'
(National Corpus of Russian)

(5) entails that Todorovsky *intended* to make Panin Jankowsky's partner, not merely that he had such a wish. If the imperfective verb *xotet'* cannot be interpreted as reporting an intention state, the *bylo* construction is unacceptable (6).

- (6) #Lena xotela *bylo*, čtoby Dima pozvonil, no potom rasxotela.
Lena wanted *bylo* that Dima phoned but them stopped-wanting
'Lena wanted for Dima to call, but then she changed her mind.'

→ While an annulled result state may license the *bylo* construction, it does not always do so. Compare the acceptable (3) to the unacceptable (7):

- (7) #Lena otkryla *bylo* okno, no čerez neskol'ko časov snova ego zakryla.
Lena opened *bylo* window but in several hours again it closed
'Lena opened the window but closed it again several hours later.'

Both (3) and (7) report an event whose result state is annulled, but, intuitively, it is only in (3) that the result state is annulled *within too short an interval*, and this factor seems to be responsible for the contrast in acceptability.

An additional example:

(8) Oni *bylo* poženilis', no čerez neskol'ko dnejj / čerez neskol'ko mesjacev / #čerez 10 let razvelis'.

They *bylo* got married, but got divorced after several days / several months / ten years.

The case is similar with inchoative verbs that denote a beginning of a process:

(9) a. On *bylo* zapel, no tut že snova zamolčal.

he *bylo* started-singing but at-once again fell-silent.

'He started to sing but fell silent again at once.'

b. # On *bylo* zapel, no čerez čas snova zamolčal.

he *bylo* started-singing but in hour again fell-silent

'He started to sing but fell silent again in an hour.'

In (7)-(9), an unbounded eventuality (state or process) is entailed to begin. *Bylo* is licensed if, intuitively, the eventuality stops within too short an interval.

- An expectation that has not been fulfilled is insufficient to license the construction.

(10) a. #On *bylo* utonul, no ego žena ne ogorčilas'.

he *bylo* drowned but his wife NEG felt-aggrieved

'He had been drowned, but his wife didn't feel aggrieved.'

b. #Petja prišol *bylo* na den' roždenija, no podarka Maše ne podaril.

Petja came *bylo* on day birth but present Masha_{DAT} NEG gave

'Petja came to the birthday party but didn't give a present to Masha.'

3. Verbal Aspect and VP Denotation

Bylo clauses tend to contain verbs that are (and have to be) perfective.

(11) Lena otkryla / *otkryvala *bylo* okno, no tut že snova ego zakryla.

Lena opened_{PERF/IMP} *bylo* window but immediately again it closed

'Lena opened the window but closed it again at once.'

(12) Ottuda on pošol / *šol *bylo* domoj, no peredumal.

from-there he started-walking_{PERF} walked_{IMP} *bylo* home but changed-his-mind

'From there he started walking home, but then changed his mind.'

Imperfective aspect is possible under certain conditions, mainly in clauses that denote a state of intention or an attempt (e.g. 5 above), and also in those cases

when an imperfective clause is essentially synonymous with a perfective one (Knjazev 2004:297-8).

- What is the relation between the VP denotation and the semantics of the *bylo* construction?

A *bylo* clause can be conceived of as involving an assertion about three eventualities: e_r , e_u and a complex event or situation which consists of (at least) e_r followed by e_u , namely, a situation that was only partially realized in reality. Which of these three events falls under the denotation of the VP predicate?

- Typically, the VP corresponds to e_r . Namely, an event that falls under the denotation of the predicate *is entailed to have taken place in reality*.
- Exceptional cases: the event that falls under the denotation of the VP is about to happen but fails to be realized (13). Rare; not acceptable for all speakers.

(13) I ja bylo zasnul, no oni zagovorili snova.
and I *bylo* fell-asleep but they started-talking again
And I almost fell asleep, but they started talking again. (Knjazev 2004:300)

4. Inertia Worlds: An Intensional Approach to the English Progressive

The analysis of the *bylo* construction that will be proposed in this paper is based to a large degree on the intensional approach to the progressive aspect in English (cf. Dowty 1979, Landman 1992, Portner 1994).

Imperfective paradox: (14a) does not entail (14b). However, under the normal course of events, if (14a) holds, (14b) is expected to come to be true.

- (14) a. Mary was crossing the street.
b. Mary crossed the street.

Dowty (1979) introduces the notion of *inertia worlds*.

- (15) For any interval i and worlds w and w' ,
 w' is an inertia world with respect to $\langle i, w \rangle$ iff everything which is going on in w during i reaches its normal completion in w' .

(Portner 1994:508)

The analysis of progressive aspect which is based on the notion of inertia worlds is provided in (16):

- (16) [PROG ϕ] is true at $\langle i, w \rangle$ iff for some interval i' such that $i \subset i'$ and i is not a final subinterval for i' , and for all w' such that $w' \in \text{Inr}(\langle i, w \rangle)$, ϕ is true at

$\langle i', w' \rangle$.

(Dowty 1979:149)

A progressive sentence entails that the event reaches its normal completion in inertia worlds, although it may but need not reach one in the actual world.

Landman (1992): a normal development of one event may interfere with a normal development of another event. Two events that unfold during the same temporal interval in w_0 may impose opposite requirements on the state of affairs in inertia worlds.

This problem is solved under those intensional analyses of the progressive that define inertia version of reality or a similar notion *relative to a given event* (e.g. *the set of reasonable options for an event e* in Landman (1992:25) and *an inertia event* in Portner (1994:508)).

One possible definition of an inertia world relative to an event e (based on the definitions that Portner provides for inertia worlds and inertia events):

- (17) For any event e and worlds w and w' ,
- w' is an inertia world with respect to $\langle e, w \rangle$ ($w' \in \text{Inr}(\langle e, w \rangle)$) iff everything which is going on in e in w reaches its normal completion in w' .

5. *Bylo* Construction: An Intensional Analysis

5.1 The Proposal

A certain eventuality (e_r) is asserted to have been instantiated in w_0 . What kinds of predictions can we make about its inertia worlds on the basis of such an assertion?

- If e_r is conceptualized as an autonomous, self-sufficient, completed event, then no continuation in inertia worlds is required.
- If e_r is described / conceived of as a part or stage of a larger eventuality (or a *macro-situation* in Knjazev's terms), then this larger eventuality would continue without interruption and reach its normal completion in the corresponding inertia worlds. e_r will thus be followed by other stage(s) of the "macro-situation".

A proposal: The particle *bylo* is acceptable under the following conditions: an event e_r takes place in the actual world, such that in every inertia world relative to e_r , it is followed by another event e_u - and, crucially, e_u does not take place in w_0 .

- (18) $\lambda P. \lambda e \lambda Q \lambda t [P(e, w_0) \wedge \tau(e) < t_0 \wedge \lambda w [w \in \text{Inr}(\langle e, w_0 \rangle) \rightarrow \lambda e' [Q(e', w') \wedge \tau(e) < \text{BEG}(e') < t_0 \wedge \tau(e') \wedge t \wedge \text{CON}(e, e', w)]] \wedge \neg \lambda e' [Q(e', w_0) \wedge \tau(e) < \text{BEG}(e') < t_0 \wedge \tau(e') \wedge t \wedge \text{CON}(e, e', w_0)]]]$

where w_0 = the actual world, t_0 = the speech time, and BEG is the function from events to times that returns an event's beginning point

According to (18):

- A P-event e takes place in w_0 before the speech time.
- There is an event property Q such that e is followed by a Q-event (e') in all of its inertia worlds during a temporal interval t .
- e is not followed by a Q-event in w_0 (at least not at t).
- In the inertia worlds, the Q-event begins before the speech time (it may but need not reach completion before the speech time).
- e and e' are not unrelated; rather, e' is a continuation of e , in the sense specified below:

(19) An event e' is a *continuation* of an event e in world w ($\text{CON}(e, e', w)$) iff e' temporally follows e ($\tau(e) < \tau(e')$) and there is an event e'' in w such that both e and e' constitute parts of e'' ($e \sqsubset e'' \sqsubset e' \sqsubset e''$)²

5.2 Back to *Bylo* Sentences

Let us now reconsider *bylo* sentences of the types discussed above.

5.2.1 Beginning / Partial Realization of an Event

(1) Ottuda on pošol bylo domoj, no razdumal i povorotil
 from-there he started-walking *bylo* home but changed-his-mind and turned
 v druguju storonu.
 to another side

'From there he started walking home, but then changed his mind and turned in a different direction.'

- The first clause in (1) entails that the subject started walking home (the P-event).
- The clause contains an inchoative V, and the reported event is conceptualized as a stage of a larger event of the subject walking home (an accomplishment).
- In all the corresponding inertia worlds, this accomplishment will develop normally and reach its normal completion, but in the actual world this does not happen.
- The Q-event in this case is an event of (keeping) walking home which contains its natural endpoint (arriving home). Such an event takes place in inertia worlds but not in w_0 . Thus, (18) is satisfied.

² The necessary relation may be closer to the stage-of relation (in the sense of Landman 1992); see Section 8 for details.

5.2.2 Intention / Planning

(2) Mendel Lubotsky sobraljsja bylo vozrazit', no peredumal...

Mendel Lubotsky gathered *bylo* object_{INF} but changed-his-mind

'Mendel Lubotsky was about to object but changed his mind.'

- The progressive aspect in English (as well as the progressive usage of imperfective aspect in Russian) may, too, be licensed in such a context (although with a restricted group of predicates):

(20) I am going to the cinema tonight.

- Landman (1992): an event may include a *planning stage*. The eventuality of planning / intention to perform e can be viewed as a part of e (or a slightly extended version of e) (see also Padučeva 1996).
- Under this view, (2) reports that a stage of an event takes place in w_0 which is not followed by the next stage (the actual objecting). (18) is satisfied, and the use of *bylo* is appropriate.

□ Why does an intention impose a restriction that the intended event be performed in its inertia worlds?

An intention constitutes a preparatory stage of an agentive action. Its special nature is such that in case of no interference, it will eventually develop into, or bring about, an action (a performance of the intended event). In some cases, interference may be totally natural and expected, and, therefore, intention does not always result in performance. But in the corresponding inertia worlds, interference, however natural in reality, is impossible by definition.

□ A wish is different from an intention!

A wish may be instantiated without interruption or interference and still never bring about performance. I may wish for an eventuality e to be instantiated even if I am aware of the fact that the performance of e is not under my control, or even that e can never take place (e.g. *I wish it were Sunday*). A wish may, of course, bring about an action, but this is not necessary under its natural development; moreover, the relation between a wish and an action is normally not direct but rather mediated by intention. Therefore, an instantiation of a wish is not sufficient to make the *bylo* construction appropriate (6).

5.2.3 An Unachieved Goal

(4) A ona brosilas' na krovat' v netoplenoj zale, plakala, metalas' golovoj po
and she flung on bed in unheated room cried tossed head on
mokroj poduške. Danya bylo prikriknul na nejo – ne pomoglo.

wet pillow Danya *bylo* shouted on her NEG helped
 ‘And she flung herself on the bed in the unheated room, weeping, tossing her head around on the wet pillow. Danya raised his voice at her, but it didn’t help.’

- Danya attempts to realize a complex event whereby he would cause the woman to recover self-possession.
- An attempt involves intention. If intention is assumed to constitute a stage of the intended event, then (4) reports that a stage of a complex event of causation takes place in reality.
- In all the worlds that are inertia relative to Danya’s intention/attempt, this event of causation takes place successfully. In these worlds, in contrast to w_0 , Danya’s behavior causes the woman to recover self-possession.

5.2.4 Annulled Result

(3) Lena otkryla *bylo* okno, no tut že snova ego zakryla.
 Lena opened *bylo* window but immediately again it closed
 ‘Lena opened the window but closed it again at once.’

(7) #Lena otkryla *bylo* okno, no čerez neskol’ko časov snova ego zakryla.
 Lena opened *bylo* window but in several hours again it closed
 ‘Lena opened the window but closed it again several hours later.’

- The state of a window being open is stage-level, and so it is absolutely normal for it to be annulled at some point. Thus, it may be annulled even in an inertia world, and the unacceptability of (7) is non-surprising: the sentence does not report any violation of a normal pattern.
- But why is (3) acceptable? This seems to be related to the intuition that the window has been closed “too quickly”. Intuitively, it is normal for a state of a window being open to last longer than several seconds. If a window is closed so quickly, this is perceived as a violation that interferes with the opening event, even though, once other facts about the world are considered, such a closing event may appear to be completely normal and predictable. Analogously, if a couple gets married, there is something abnormal in their getting divorced within several days or even several months after the wedding (8).
- “Normal”, or inertia, worlds are worlds in which:
 - Events associated with a natural endpoint reach their normal completion.
 - For P-events that are not associated with a natural endpoint, it holds that: $P(e) \square \tau(e) \geq r_p$, where r_p is an expectation value that corresponds to a minimum standard/normal duration of a P-event.
 In other words, the duration of the events is not shorter than some minimal temporal interval for which it is judged as normal for P-events to last.

How long it is judged normal for an eventuality instantiating an event property P to last is vague, and depends on numerous extra-linguistic factors, including:

- the average length of P-events that have been observed by the speakers (a statistical factor)
 - the speakers' conception of a prototypical P-event
 - social conventions
- The notion of normality is similarly vague in the context of generic sentences:

- (21) a. Children like ice-cream.
 b. Boys don't cry.

- Generic sentences involve statements about *normal individuals* or about *normal worlds*, in which individuals bearing the relevant property (e.g. children) behave normally (e.g. Asher and Morreau 1995). The notion of *normality* is *vague*. What counts as *normal* may depend on such notions as prototype, social conventions and average real-world observations.

Let us introduce the notion of an *inertia interval*. If an unbounded event is initiated in w_0 , then in all the corresponding inertia worlds, its temporal duration is at least as long as its inertia interval.

- (22) Let e^{inch} be an event of change which involves the beginning of a process / result state e^{unb} . Then i is an inertia interval for e^{unb} iff:
 For every w such that $w \in \text{Inr}(\langle e^{\text{inch}}, w_0 \rangle)$, it holds that $\tau(e^{\text{unb}}) \geq i$ in w , and i is the maximal temporal interval that satisfies this condition.

(3) is acceptable because the result state fails to hold for its inertia interval in w_0 . There is a temporal interval at which the state of the window being open (the Q-event) holds in all the inertia worlds but not in w_0 .

5.2.5 Expectation

If e_1 is followed by e_2 in all of its inertia worlds, the realization of e_1 typically leads to an expectation that e_2 would take place. Therefore, *bylo* sentences are associated with disappointed expectations. However, an expectation on its own is not sufficient to license this construction (10). If some individual expects that e_1 would be followed by e_2 , this does not yet mean that e_1 is followed by e_2 in all of its inertia worlds. Namely, this does not mean that it is an inherent part of the nature of e_1 to be followed by e_2 under normal circumstances.

6. The *Bylo* Construction and the Progressive Aspect

Shared properties:

- Both phenomena involve a statement about reality as well as about inertia worlds.
- Both phenomena set the actual world against inertia worlds.

Differences:

- In the progressive, the VP specifies the property of the complete potential event which is fully realized in inertia worlds but not necessarily in w_0 . In the *bylo* construction, the VP normally corresponds to the part of such an event which does take place in reality.
- The progressive is compatible with the possibility that w_0 is an inertia world with respect to the relevant event. The *bylo* construction entails that in w_0 , the normal development of the event is interfered with. In other words, it entails that the actual world is abnormal.

7. The History of the *Bylo* Construction

Etymologically, the *bylo* construction is derived from the Pluperfect aspect in Old Russian, which was used to report a past event which preceded another past event. While the semantics of the construction (as well as its syntax) has undergone a substantial change, the reflex of its original meaning can still be perceived. Part of the original semantic contribution of *bylo* can be represented as in (23):

$$(23) \lambda P. \exists e \exists e' [P(e) \wedge \tau(e) < \tau(e') < t_0]$$

Both the modern *bylo* construction and its Old Russian ancestor report an event that took place in w_0 before the speech time and was (in some world(s)) followed by another past event. However, in Modern Russian, the construction has developed an intensional interpretation, which imposes substantial constraints on the distribution of *bylo*.

8. Parts or Stages?

According to the analysis formulated above, *bylo* sentences require that e_r and e_u be parts of the same “macro-event”. But this relation seems to be too permissive. For instance, (10b) is not licensed even though both e_r and e_u can be conceived of as parts of the same event – a birthday party.

(10) b. #Petja prišol bylo na den' roždenija, no podarka Maše ne podaril.
Petja came *bylo* on day birth but present Masha_{DAT} NEG gave
'Petja came to the birthday party but didn't give a present to Masha.'

Hypothesis: The construction is licensed only if e_r and e_u constitute *stages* of the "macro-event".

Landman (1992:23): "An event is a stage of another event if the second can be regarded as a more developed version of the first, that is, if we can point at it and say, "It's the same event in a further stage of development." Thus, not every part of e at an interval is a stage of e ; to be a stage, a part has to be big enough and share enough with e so that we can call it a less developed version of e ."

A problem: States do not have stages. But *bylo* is licensed if a state is annulled within too short an interval (3). Here, e_u is a state, and it cannot constitute a *stage* of the "macro-event".

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