

How Can Cognitive Linguistics Help us with Language Learning?

—A Case Study of the Russian Motion Verb *idti*

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Abstract

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the polysemy phenomenon is the greatest human endowment since its presence is what distinguishes a natural language from a compiler language. (Ikehara 2002). From a second language learner's point of view, however, polysemy may come as one of the most intimidating obstacles that hinder him/her from acquiring an excellent command of another language. To reduce the dullness of memorization of all the meanings of a polysemous word, linguistics is expected to be of some help since it is an enterprise dedicated to the understanding of language. As a case study, this paper attempts to investigate the multiple meanings of the Russian motion verb *idti* 'to go, to walk' by means of the concepts developed by cognitive linguists (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, Fillmore 1982, 1985, Langacker 1987, 1991), who deals with linguistic phenomena by probing into human cognition.

Although human cognition might be universal, it does not follow that all the meanings of a linguistic item can be predictable once examined in terms of cognition (otherwise language varieties would be a mere fiction). As a result, with linguistic arbitrariness and cultural differences recognized our goal here is not to predict the meanings of *idti* but to interpret, from the benefit of hindsight, the meanings ascribed to it in a unified manner, thus helping the language learners to construe the word and its multiple uses in a reasonable way.

The Russian verb *idti* has probably much more meanings than one can imagine its English equivalent (or strictly speaking, approximation) "to go, to walk" would have. In order to find out the most frequently used meanings of *idit*, three dictionaries are cross-referenced, including Russian-English Dictionary, Happer Collins (1994, HC), New Russian-Chinese Dictionary (1992, NRC), and Central Russian-Chinese Dictionary (1995, CRC). Excluding idiomatic expressions, twelve senses are identified (which are by no means exhaustive).

Idti is an intransitive verb with one core argument which is normally a Trajector that moves with respect to some Landmark, which may be explicit or implicit in the linguistic expressions. We rearrange the twelve senses of *idti* into three groups, taking into consideration image schemata, core-periphery prototype, and semantic profile.

In this case study of the Russian motion verb *idti*, we witness how the same conceptual base (i.e. a Trajector changes its position in the spatial domain in a way that can be seen) can evolve into different semantic profiles (IDTI-1~12). Particularly, the linguistic structure provides language users with an imagery

which they may construe in a variety of conventionalized ways, some of which is attested crosslinguistically while some others are language-specific. As is expressively characterized by Langacker (1987:99), “Meaning equals conceptualization tailored to the specifications of linguistic convention.”

Russian Data

Group One

IDTI-1 “to walk, to go”:

- (1) Natasha toroplivo idet k stoly.
Natasha hastily 3rd.sg.pr.IDTI toward table.
‘Natasha is hastily walking toward the table.’ (CRC: 373)

IDTI-2 “to come, to approach”:

- (2) Poezd idet
train 3rd.sg.pr.IDIT
‘Here comes the train.’ (HC: 143)

IDTI-3 “to fall”:

- (3) Idet sneg/dozhd’
3rd.sg.pr.IDIT snow/rain
‘It is snowing/raining.’ (HC:143)

IDTI-4 “to be delivered, transferred”:

- (4) Dokumenty idut na podpis’ k direktoru
documents 3rd.pl.pr.IDTI for signature to director
‘Documents are delivered to the director for [his] signature.’ (NRC: 302)

Group Two

IDTI-5 “to range, to exist within a range”:

- (5) Ulitsa idet cherez ves’ gorod
street 3rd.sg.pr.IDIT through all city
‘The street runs through all cities.’ (NRC: 302)

IDTI-6 “to be necessary for sth., to be used for sth.”:

- (6) Na kostium idet tri metra tkani
into costume 3rd.sg.pr.IDIT three three fabric
‘It requires three meters of cloth to make a costume.’ (NRC: 302)

IDTI-7 “to suit, to be appropriate”:

- (7) Vam idet eta shliapa
to_you 3rd.sg.pr.IDIT this hat
‘The hat suits you.’ (HC: 143)

IDTI-8 “to carry out, to perfume some action”:

- (8) Idti na ubyl’ ‘To go into a loss, i.e. to decrease’ (NRC: 302)

Group Three

IDTI-9 “to sell”:

- (9) Plat’ia ustarelykh fasonov idut po snizhennym tsenam
dresses outdated styles 3rd.pl.pr.IDIT at reduced prices
‘Dresses of outdated styles are sold at reduced prices.’ (NRC: 302)

IDTI-10 “to play”:

- (10) Idit korolem ‘To play the king. (lit. to go by use of the king in chess)’

IDTI-11 “to operate”:

- (11) Motor idet
engine 3rd.sg.pr.IDIT
‘The engine is running.’ (CRC: 373)

IDTI-12 “to be in progress”:

- (12) Chto seichas idet v kino
what now 3rd.sg.pr.IDIT in cinema
‘What’s on at the cinema just now?’ (HC: 143)