

Restructuring of verbal aspect in Heritage Russian: Beyond lexicalization

Oksana Laleko, SUNY New Paltz, New York, USA

The paper explores the interaction of the perfective-imperfective aspectual contrasts with the telic-atelic distinction in American Russian (AR), a reduced variety of Russian spoken in the US by bilingual immigrants who initially acquired Russian as an L1 but subsequently replaced it with English as their primary language. This work combines qualitative and quantitative methods in order to examine aspectual restructuring in spontaneous AR production data and to measure aspectual variation at the VP-level experimentally, focusing on the correlation between the occurrence of verbal aspectual morphology and the telicity of a VP. Experimental data are presented on the distribution of perfective and imperfective forms with predicates denoting activities and accomplishments, which are found to exhibit aspectual variation at the VP-level, suggesting that the interaction of (im)perfectivity and (a)telicity in AR extends beyond the level of verbal lexical aspect, or the inherent properties of verbal roots.

Keywords: Aspect; Perfective; Imperfective; Telicity; Attrition; Heritage language; Russian

1. Introduction

American Russian (AR) is a variety of Russian spoken in the U.S. by people who initially acquired Russian natively but later switched to English as their primary means of communication. As a result of a decreased contact with the L1, possibly in combination with a cross-linguistic influence from the more dominant L2, their control of Russian is more restricted than that of competent baseline speakers. Such gradual loss of L1 skills in an individual is a process known as attrition, a term strictly defined as “the non-pathological decrease in proficiency in a language that had previously been acquired by an individual” (Köpke & Schmid, 2004, p. 5). Verbal morphology has been argued to be “a prime candidate for simplification and erosion as a result of language loss” (Montrul, 2002, p. 40), making the study of verbal aspect under attrition especially interesting for a language like Russian, where there is an overt morphological distinction between perfective and imperfective aspects.

Early work on the restructuring of the aspectual system in AR pointed to the lexicalization of aspectual markers, which were argued to encode lexical properties of individual verbal roots, such as (a)telicity, rather than viewpoint aspect, or (im)perfectivity (Pereltsvaig, 2002; Polinsky, 1996). This article's main goal in exploring the aspectual system of AR is to reexamine the relationships between (im)perfectivity and (a)telicity, with a special focus on the perfective-imperfective contrasts at the verb phrase (VP) level, where predicates denoting activities and accomplishments are found to exhibit aspectual variation that extends beyond the level of verbal lexical aspect and appears to be linked to telicity in a compositional sense.

Speakers of AR interviewed in this study can be referred to as heritage speakers, a term that has recently gained wide recognition in research on linguistic varieties spoken by second- and 1.5-generation immigrants, born into households where a language other than their current dominant language was spoken (Chevalier, 2004; Laleko, 2010; Polinsky, 2009). Some research on heritage language acquisition refers to heritage speakers as 'incomplete acquirers,' rather than 'forgetters,' of the L1 (e.g., Montrul, 2002; Polinsky, 1997), suggesting that the reduced linguistic competence exhibited by heritage speakers is best viewed as a result of incomplete (interrupted) language acquisition in childhood, rather than the loss of previously acquired language skills.

At the same time, some recent findings specifically point to attrition, rather than fossilization of an incompletely acquired system, as a key source of non-target-like competence in the heritage language (Polinsky, 2011). While a detailed discussion of potential sources of heritage competence divergence is well beyond the scope of this work (but see Laleko, 2010), the data that will be discussed here seem more compatible with the attrition scenario, largely because of the participants' sociolinguistic circumstances (such as age of arrival to the US and patterns of language use at home) rather than as any kind of theoretical generalization about heritage language grammars on the whole.

The study is based on the original data from 12 college-aged speakers of AR, who came to the U.S. with their Russian-speaking families as monolingual speakers of Russian at ages 6 through 12, but for whom exposure to Russian did not stop at that age. The data were collected through a variety of techniques, including free speech elicitation (sociolinguistic interviews), story-telling (*The Three Bears* story), controlled elicitation of words and verb phrases, and sentence construction. The free speech elicitation and story-telling data are discussed in the following section, which provides some descriptive observations about the aspectual system of AR; the empirical

findings from two experimental tasks are presented in a separate section further below.

2. Background

2.1. American Russian aspect: Some basic phenomena

Following some brief but necessary introductory remarks about the category of aspect in Russian, this section presents a general overview of the patterns in the aspectual choices that distinguish AR from the baseline in the production data. The sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with 12 speakers, lasted approximately 30 minutes per person, and involved such topics as arrival to the U.S., family, school, hobbies, patterns of language use, and cross-cultural differences. The additional story-telling task involved eight speakers from the larger pool. The speakers were given an opportunity to review the story in English prior to telling it in Russian.

The category of aspect is traditionally associated with the perfective-imperfective contrast, where, as first suggested in Comrie (1976, pp. 12-24) and now commonly assumed, the perfective aspect views the situation “in its entirety,” while the imperfective views a situation with regard to its “internal temporal consistency.” The perfective verbs tend to be used for “single, completed actions,” whereas the imperfective verbs mark “processuality” and “habituality” (Dickey, 2000, p. 12). This contrast is expressed in Russian morphologically. The perfective (PF) aspect is most typically formed from the imperfective (IMP) stem via prefixation (e.g., *pisat'*.IMP – *napisat'*.PF ‘write’), among several other strategies, such as suffixation (*prygat'*.IMP – *prygnut'*.PF ‘jump’). In addition to being the default aspectual form for many verb stems (with just a few exceptions, e.g. *dat'*.PF ‘give’), the imperfective aspect can also be formed morphologically from the perfective stem, resulting in what is often called a derived or secondary imperfective (*lit'*.IMP – *nalit'*.PF – *nalivat'*.IMP ‘pour’).

The production data revealed some interesting deviations from the baseline system with respect to verbal aspectual marking. Based on the analysis of the data (only patterns attested in the speech of every participant at least twice were taken into account), the most common characteristics can be summarized as follows: (i) use of a form with the opposite aspectual value from the one that would have occurred in its place in baseline Russian (BR), such as the imperfective in place of the perfective (ex. 1-3); (ii) use of a form with the same aspectual value as in BR but marked differently via the aspectual morphology, such as a missing, superfluous, or “wrong” prefix or suffix (4), and (iii) use of periphrastic constructions to express aspectual meanings (5,6). These patterns are illustrated below:

- (1) Ja mog na dva goda ran'she zakanchivat' shkolu
 I could on two years earlier finish.IMP school
 "I could have finished school two years earlier"; cf. BR *zakonchit'*.PF
Note: (the speaker has already graduated)
- (2) Okno tut ... malen'ka chastei ... vse vypadyvali
 window.Nom here small parts.Gen all fell-out.IMP
 "That window there... [its] small parts all fell out"; cf. BR *vypali*.PF
Note: Context: The glass shattered.
- (3) Masha prosnulas' i uvidela medvedi ... medved' ...
 Masha woke-up.PF and saw.PF bears.Nom bear.Nom
 ona krichala pomogite
 she.Nom screamed.IMP help.Imper
 "Masha woke up and saw the bears... She screamed, 'Help!'"; cf. BR *zakrichala*.PF
- (4) Esli ja pozhenjus' ...
 if I marry.PF
 "If I get married"; cf. BR *zhenjus*.PF
- (5) Ona reshila shto ona chuvstvujet sebja ustavshei
 She decided.PF that she feels.IMP self tired
 "She decided that she was tired"; cf. BR *ustala*.PF ("became tired")
- (6) Ona reshila samuju poslednuju tarelku kashy poprobovat'
 She decided.PF most last bowl porridge taste.PF
 i eto byla samaja luchshaja kasha; i
 and it was most best porridge and
 ona byla rada i vsjo skushala
 she was glad and all ate.PF
 "She decided to taste the very last bowl of porridge, and it was the best porridge, and she happily ate it all up"; cf. BR *poprobovala*.PF ("tasted"), *obradovalas'*.PF ("became glad/happy")

A substantial body of literature on language attrition has described attrition as a process of simplification and elimination of redundancy: a crucial "characteristic of the language loss situation is the collapse or simplification of certain linguistic systems" (Levin, 1996, p. 118). Note, however, that the majority of the examples shown above contain elements seemingly redundant from a morphological or syntactic standpoint. Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the use of derived imperfectives, formed with the suffix *-yva-* (*-iva-*) from the perfective stem, in place of the expected perfective forms *zakonchit'* ("finish")

and *vypali* (“fell out”), that do not have these suffixes. The verb in (4) is another example of morphological redundancy: strictly speaking, the perfectivizing prefix *po-* would be unnecessary in BR as the stem already has a perfective interpretation (the verb *zhenitsja* “marry/get married” is ambiguous between the perfective and imperfective readings). Sentences in (5) and (6) illustrate syntactic redundancies: instead of using a single verb, available in BR to synthetically express meanings equivalent to the English predicates “get tired” or “become happy,” the AR speakers opt for a seemingly less economical strategy, whereby the aspectual and lexical meanings are expressed on separate categories altogether.

These observations illustrate an important point: simplification and elimination of redundancies in the context of attrition are not by any means processes whereby some elements of the grammar simply disappear, therefore leaving the rest of the linguistic system unaffected; nor do these processes *necessarily* lead to a disappearance of linguistic elements in any given subsystem of the grammar. Rather, simplification can give rise to a partial or complete restructuring of the entire baseline system due to “the reanalysis of certain forms toward the reduction of redundancies in the system overall” (Levin, 1996, p. 118), even if this requires systematic development and addition of new elements and strategies (e.g., new ways to express aspectual meanings) not attested in the baseline.

Let us now turn to the remaining examples from the production data. Lack of the inceptive perfective prefix *za-* in (3) illustrates a more general phenomenon with respect to verbs of inception, which rarely occurred in the production data. Consider, for instance, an additional example from the storytelling task, where the correct inceptive form of the verb “sleep” was produced by an AR speaker only after several pauses, false starts, hesitations, and an attempt to replace a potentially problematic word with a periphrastic construction:

- (7) i Masha zasnu... net legla spat' ... nu ... zasnula
 and Masha ... no lied.PF sleep.Inf ... well... fell-asleep.PF
 “... and Masha fell ... no ... went to sleep ... well ... fell asleep”

It is significant that prefixes used to form inceptives in Russian (e.g., *po-*, as in *pobezhat'* “start running,” and *za-*, as in *zapat'* “start singing”) are polysemantic and often occur word-initially with various meanings: for example, *polezhat'* means “lie [e.g., on a sofa] for a little while” and not “begin lying down” (cf. *lezhat'* – “lie”). On top of this, *za-* and *po-* can also occur root-initially: for example, *zabyt'* means “forget” and not “start being” (cf. Russian verb *byt'* “be”). Overall, Russian makes use of 19-21 perfective prefixes, where “each verb selects for a number of prefixes” (Slabakova, 2005, p. 3), and some

of these prefixes often combine to create additional shades of meaning. These factors make it understandably difficult for speakers with limited exposure to Russian, such as heritage speakers and second language learners, to maintain the entire arsenal of rich but subtle morphological distinctions that extend well beyond the binary perfective-imperfective opposition. It is therefore not surprising, given the overall significant reduction of the lexicon in AR (Polinsky, 1996), that the inventory of aspectual markers in AR will also be reduced, and that items that exhibit less regularity and predictability in their distribution (such as the inceptive prefixes) will be lost, while some of the more regular markers, or those that show less semantic variation (such as the imperfective suffixes), will be retained in the grammar and even occasionally overextended.

To summarize, the patterns of aspectual marking attested in the production data – such as omission or replacement of some types of affixes, emergence or overextension of others, and a replacement of synthetic forms by analytic ones – appear to reflect a more general tendency towards reduction and simplification, resulting in a systematic restructuring of a grammar in the context of first language attrition (cf. Seliger & Vago, 1991).

2.2. On (im)perfectivity and (a)telicity in American Russian

Following some descriptive remarks about the expression of aspect in the data, this section turns to a particular linguistic hypothesis put forward in previous work on AR aspect, the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis. The hypothesis and its predictions with respect to the present data are discussed in this section; its underlying theoretical assumptions are addressed further below.

In her pioneering work on AR, Polinsky (1996, 1997, 2009) suggested that AR no longer has the perfective-imperfective contrast *per se*: “most verbs become either lexicalized perfectives or lexicalized imperfectives” (1997, p. 384). In accounting for this observation, she proposed a generalization which related the aspectual morphology in AR to telicity, or the lexical meaning of verbs. This idea was later developed in Pereltsvaig (2002, 2004) as the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis, according to which verbal aspectual morphology in AR encodes lexical, rather than grammatical aspect.

Lexical aspect, also called Aktionsart (“kinds of action” in German), or situation aspect (Smith, 1991), is a semantic property of a predicate. Unlike grammatical aspect, or viewpoint aspect (Smith, 1991), which is expressed through inflectional morphology on the verb, lexical aspect depends on the verb’s meaning. Telic predicates describe events with inherent endpoints (e.g., *bring*) whereas atelic predicates describe events that do not have such endpoints (e.g., *sleep*). The telic/atelic distinction is essentially based on Vendler’s (1967) traditional verb classification into the following lexical

classes: states (e.g., *know, love*), activities (e.g., *drink coffee, run*), accomplishments (e.g., *drink a cup of coffee, run a mile*), and achievements (e.g., *realize, die*), where states and activities form a class of atelic predicates, and accomplishments and achievements are grouped together as telic predicates. Thus, only accomplishments and achievements have an inherent culmination point. The difference between the two classes is in the way in which the culmination point is reached: accomplishments involve a process going on in time and leading to the culmination point, whereas for achievements the process leading to the culmination point is instantaneous (Verkuyl, 1993).

The Lexical Aspect Hypothesis predicts that verbs denoting states and activities (atelic verbs) will be retained in AR in the imperfective forms, and accomplishments and achievements (telic verbs), correspondingly, in the perfective forms. This prediction is corroborated by the data from the vocabulary experiment described in Polinsky (1996). In this experiment, the subjects were asked to translate 100 words of the basic vocabulary list (the Swadesh list) from English into Russian. The experiment revealed a strong preference for the telic verbs to occur in the perfective aspectual forms, whereas the citation forms for the atelic verbs were primarily imperfective (see also Laleko, 2007).

These results were tested and largely confirmed with the participants of the present study. Overall, verbs with an inherent endpoint, or telos, occurred predominantly with the perfective aspectual morphology (e.g. *bite, bring, buy, come, die, give, forget, kill, make, say, see, sell, sneeze, take, win*), in contrast to verbs without an inherent limit (e.g. *eat, drink, draw, hear, know, lie, live, love, play, sing, sleep, write*), which occurred predominantly in the imperfective. However, the data also revealed some aspectual variation beyond the binary telic-atelic distinction. The aspectual forms of verbs denoting states, on the one hand, and achievements, on the other hand, were found to be more consistent with the predictions of the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis than activities and accomplishments: Only verbs denoting achievements and states invariably occurred either as perfectives, for the former class, or as imperfectives, for the latter. For the remaining two classes, the Lexical Aspect Hypothesis turned out to be considerably less reliable in predicting the aspectual form of a verb. Both perfective and imperfective forms were attested for activities and accomplishments, with a preference for the imperfective forms with most, but not all, activities, and a perfective bias with most, but not all, accomplishments. The following section builds on this observation and provides some theoretical discussion of the phenomenon of ambiguous or variable telicity, observed for English and other languages with respect to predicates denoting activities and accomplishments.

2.3. Variable telicity with activities and accomplishments

2.3.1. Compositional theories of aspect

A rich body of literature on aspect has shown that the aspectual meanings of a large set of verbs are not inherent to the verb, but are rather determined compositionally (Dowty, 1991; Kratzer, 2004; Ramchand, 1997; Verkuyl, 1993, *inter alia*). Compositional theories of aspect focus not on the inherent qualities of the verbal roots, but on the interactions between verbs and their arguments. These theories have received much empirical support from the English verbal predicates denoting activities and accomplishments, which show variable telicity in different contexts: in the words of Dowty (1979, p. 61), “I have not been able to find a single activity verb which cannot have an accomplishment sense in at least some special context.” This variable telicity effect has been observed with a classic *in an hour/ for an hour* diagnostic test commonly used for determining telicity (i.e., telic predicates take an *in*-PP as a temporal modifier, whereas atelic predicates are modified with a *for*-PP). For example, *to eat a sandwich* has a telic interpretation in *to eat a sandwich in an hour*, but atelic interpretation in *to eat a sandwich for an hour*.

Further, telicity in English has been shown to depend not just on the context in general, but particularly on the nature of the verb’s internal argument. For instance, Slabakova (1999, p. 3) writes that “[for many verbs] in English the verbal form itself does not indicate whether the event is telic or atelic, it is ... the cardinality of the nominal arguments that determines the interpretation.” The contrasts in (8) below demonstrate that the nature of the direct object influences the interpretation of the verbs *drink* and *eat* as atelic (8a) or telic (8b): plural and mass nouns in the direct object position contribute to the atelic interpretation of the predicate, whereas VPs with objects that denote some specified quantity (often also associated with definiteness) are interpreted as telic.

- (8) a. John drank wine/ate apples.
 b. John drank a glass of wine/ate two apples/ate the apples.

Similar observations have been made in the literature on Slavic aspect: “the bulk of Slavic roots are neutral with respect to telicity in the lexicon” (Slabakova, 2005, p. 333). In Russian, which does not have articles, the interpretation of the predicate as telic or atelic depends on the perfective prefix on the verb, as illustrated in example (9) below, from Filip (2004, p. 1). As Filip explains, the direct object does not matter for aspectual interpretation in Russian; it is “the perfective/imperfective morphology of the main lexical verb that fully determines the telicity of the VP ... [and] induces the countable specific interpretation of the mass direct object” (2004, p. 2):

- (9) a. Ivan jel sup *za desjat' minut /desjat' minut
 Ivan ate.IMP soup.Acc in ten minutes.Acc / ten minutes.Acc
 "Ivan was eating soup *in ten minutes/ for ten minutes"
- b. Ivan sjel sup za desjat' minut /*desjat' minut
 Ivan ate.PF soup.Acc in ten minutes.Acc / ten minutes.Acc
 "Ivan ate up (all) the soup in ten minutes/*for ten minutes"

Under the compositional view of telicity as a property of a VP rather than a verb root, and given the different strategies used in English and Russian in assigning (a)telic interpretations to VPs, some variability of aspectual marking with activities and accomplishments in AR, as observed on the single-word translation task (the Swadesh list experiment), is not surprising: an aspectually ambiguous English verb such as *write* can in principle be conceived of as denoting an activity, in which case the imperfective aspectual marking will be more appropriate in Russian (*pisat'.IMP*), or an accomplishment, marked via a perfective prefix in Russian (*napisat'.PF*).

2.3.2. Beyond lexicalization

If not all verbs are taken to be always inherently marked for (a)telicity, and if for certain types of verbs, (a)telicity is determined compositionally rather than lexically specified on the verb root, then the occurrence of the aspectual morphology in AR with predicates of variable telicity can show systematic contextual variation. Because the speakers of AR are also competent speakers of English, and because in English the (a)telic interpretations of VPs crucially depend on the presence and nature of the direct object, the aspectual marking with these predicates in AR could be susceptible to contextual factors relevant for English.

It has been argued that interference from the ambient language is not a factor in the AR aspectual restructuring, because the attrition of aspect does not reduce "to grammatical borrowing of constructions and phenomena found in the speakers' L2" in a sense that AR speakers do not "assimilate perfective morphology to English perfect and imperfective morphology to English progressive" (Pereltsvaig, 2004, p. 9). While the latter observation holds true in the production data cited above, influence from the dominant language may in principle manifest itself in ways other than total or partial assimilation of the aspectual morphology to the English perfect and progressive. Given the "structural parametric distinction between English and Slavic" with respect to telicity marking in the verbal phrase (Slabakova, 1999, p. 2), the occurrence of aspectual markers in AR could be sensitive to a cross-linguistic influence, comparable in some ways to the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition of aspect observed in Slabakova (1999) for Bulgarian-speaking learners of English.

3. METHOD

This section describes an experiment designed to test the following hypothesis: in AR, verbs whose objects denote some specified quantity (*a book, two letters, a glass of wine*), thus forming compositionally telic VPs, will occur predominantly with the perfective aspectual marking, whereas plural and mass nouns in the object position (*books, letters, milk*) will instead be associated with the imperfective verb forms.

3.1. Subjects

Six heritage speakers of Russian from the larger pool participated in the experiment (mean age = 21; mean age of arrival to the US = 7.5). All speakers reported using English as their primary language of communication. Russian was reported to be used in more limited contexts, mainly for communicating with family members (especially, grandparents). The following discussion focuses exclusively on the group of heritage speakers; however, parallels with the baseline speakers of Russian are addressed elsewhere (see Laleko, 2008).

3.2. Instruments and procedures

In the first part of the experiment, the participants were presented with cards with a total of 20 target VPs: 10 VPs consisting of an activity verb plus a direct object of some specified quantity and 10 VPs with the same verb plus a plural or mass noun object. The subjects were asked to produce each VP in Russian. In the second part of the experiment, the participants were presented with the same cards used in the previous task, but this time they were instructed to construct one original Russian sentence for each given VP. In total, there were 40 experimental items: 20 phrases and 20 sentences.

4. Results and discussion

Overall, the results were as predicted: 89% of verbs whose complement was a direct object of specified quantity, henceforth [+Q], occurred as perfectives, whereas the same verbs with an unspecified quantity direct object, [-Q] occurred as imperfectives 90% of the time. The experiment also revealed that the degree of correlation between the aspectual verbal form and the [Q] property of the argument, already established in bare VPs, increased considerably for the same VPs when elicited within sentences. The relevant percentages are as follows: for VPs with [+Q], bare VPs contained 83% perfective forms, while sentences contained 95% perfective forms. This pattern was mirrored for VPs with [-Q], this time in favor of the imperfective: 84% in bare VPs and 97% in sentences. The results are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1
Variable Telicity Effects with Activities and Accomplishments

Verb	Specified Quantity Object	VP				Sentence				Unspecified Quantity Object				
		IMP		PF		IMP		PF		VP		Sentence		
		IMP	PF	IMP	PF	IMP	PF	IMP	PF	IMP	PF	IMP	PF	
draw	a circle	1	5	0	5					circles	5	1	6	0
bake	a cake	1	5	0	6					cakes	4	0	6	0
sing	one song	1	5	0	6					songs	5	0	6	0
write	two letters	0	6	0	6					books	5	1	6	0
eat	a sandwich	1	5	0	6					popcorn	6	0	6	0
drink	a glass of wine	1	5	0	6					milk	6	0	6	0
buy	a car	0	6	0	6					cars	4	2	4	2
read	War and Peace	3	3	2	4					books	6	0	6	0
paint	the house	2	4	1	5					houses	5	1	5	0
make	a big mistake	0	6	0	5					lots of mistakes	2	4	6	0
Total:		10	50	3	55						48	9	57	2

The numbers in each column indicate how many times the verb was used in the relevant aspectual form in each experimental context; the bottom row lists the total number of the imperfective and perfective verbs, respectively, for each context. Note that six mistranslated forms occurred in the data that had to be excluded from the analysis. For example, the VP 'bake cakes' was translated twice with the singular marking on the noun instead of the plural, and the object in 'draw a circle' once occurred with the plural marking instead of the singular. Because exact correspondences with respect to number are crucial for the purposes of this experiment, these forms were not taken into account.

5. Conclusion

In exploring the aspectual distinctions in AR, this paper combined qualitative and quantitative methods in order to reach its two main goals: first, to trace and capture, via a set of descriptive generalizations, some consistent patterns of aspectual marking in AR in the original spoken data, with a hope that someday enough descriptive work on aspect in immigrant and heritage languages will be done to better our understanding of the acquisition and maintenance of the aspectual system in the context of intergenerational language shift. The second related goal of this work was to obtain quantitative experimental data on the distribution of perfective and imperfective forms with predicates denoting activities and accomplishments in order to examine aspectual variation at the VP-level. In doing so, the paper advanced the idea that aspect in AR interacts in intricate ways with telicity and provided evidence to suggest that this interaction extends beyond the lexical properties of verbal roots and into larger linguistic units.

Acknowledgements

I express my deep gratitude to the speakers of Russian who participated in this study. I also thank the audiences of the 2008 LSA Summer Meeting and the 2008 Meeting of the Michigan Linguistics Society for valuable questions and comments on earlier stages of this work. I am grateful to my research assistants, Juan Canales and Pamela Ousley, for their help preparing the manuscript for publication. All remaining shortcomings, should any be apparent, are my responsibility.

The Author

Oksana Laleko (lalekoo@newpaltz.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and Director of the Linguistics Program at the State University of New York at New Paltz. Dr. Laleko's research interests focus on the interface between syntax and discourse-pragmatics, the encoding of information structure, and the expression of temporality cross-linguistically. Her recent work examines overt grammatical reorganization and covert restructuring of linguistic systems in the context of heritage language acquisition and first language attrition.

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