

Metaphorical walking: Russian идти as a generalized motion verb

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Although dictionaries translate Russian идти as ‘walk’, идти is widely used metaphorically as a generalized motion verb in contexts where walking is not involved:

- (1) Трамвай **шел** по теперешней Кропоткина — по тогдашней Пречистенке. [Олеша]
- (2) Я взял билет на теплоход "Алушта", **шедший** из Одессы в Сочи. [Найман]

This paper addresses two questions concerning generalized идти. Why is идти used as the source domain in metaphorical examples like (1) and (2)? Why is generalized идти restricted to “goal-oriented” contexts, as observed by Rakhilina (2004:7)? In this study, I will argue that идти is used metaphorically because it represents a prototypical kind of motion. It will furthermore be argued that metaphorical идти is used about “goal-oriented” motion, because the unidirectionality component of the meaning of идти becomes more salient in metaphorical usage. The proposed analysis has theoretical implications in that it lends support to key concepts in cognitive linguistics, viz. prototypes, embodiment and metaphor (cf. e.g. Lakoff and Johnson 1999).

Walking represents a prototypical kind of motion. It takes place on foot with no vehicle involved (vs. ехать ‘drive’) and the motion unfolds horizontally on the ground (vs. лететь ‘fly’ and плыть ‘swim, sail’). Идти furthermore involves normal speed (vs. бежать ‘run’), a normal, erect posture for human motion (vs. ползти ‘crawl’), and no impediments (vs. лезть ‘climb’). If one accepts the prototypicality of walking, идти is expected to serve as the source domain of metaphors, because metaphors generally map from prototypical to peripheral meanings. An analysis along these lines, straightforward as it is, has implications for two important theoretical issues. First of all, it demonstrates the need to recognize categories organized around prototypes in linguistics. Secondly, metaphorical идти offers a strong argument in favor of an embodied perspective on language. Идти is only prototypical from the perspective of humans. If we adopted an objectivist position which ignores the fundamental role of humans’ experience with our bodies, the perspective of a fish or a car would be just as valid as starting points for metaphor. The fact that metaphor takes идти as its source domain demonstrates the necessity to incorporate embodiment in linguistic theory.

Rakhilina (2004) observes that generalized идти involves “goal-oriented” motion. For instance, in the goal-oriented корабль идет/??плывет в порт, Rakhilina (2004:9) finds generalized идти preferable to плыть (the meaning of which is analyzed in great detail in Rakhilina 2007). I argue that the use of идти in “goal-oriented” contexts falls out as an automatic consequence if an analysis in terms of metaphor is adopted. Simplifying somewhat, we may say that the meaning of идти consists of two components: prototypical motion on foot (as opposed to плыть, лететь etc.) and unidirectional motion towards a goal (as opposed to non-directional ходить). When идти is used metaphorically as a generalized motion verb, the former component is suppressed, i.e. not transferred to the target domain. After all, street cars and ships do not have feet. As a consequence of this, the unidirectional component becomes more salient in metaphorical usage, which leads us to expect it to be used in contexts where orientation towards a goal is emphasized. As we have seen, this prediction is indeed borne out by the facts.

The proposed analysis shows that Russian motion verbs raise important theoretical issues such as the embodied, prototypical and metaphorical nature of linguistic categories.

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