

Neutralization in the System of Verb Forms in English and Russian

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the phenomenon of neutralization in the system of English and Russian verbal forms. It analyzes cases of the loss or weakening of grammatical oppositions within various morphological categories of the verb, including tense, aspect, mood, person, number, voice, and non-finite forms. Particular attention is paid to context-dependent neutralization, in which formally distinct grammatical meanings acquire the same functional interpretation, or a single grammatical form realizes the meanings of several grammatical categories.

Keywords: Neutralization, verbal forms, morphological neutralization, grammatical category, functional grammar, grammatical homonymy, context, contrastive linguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Neutralization, as one of the fundamental properties of the language system, manifests itself in the weakening, elimination, or functional leveling of oppositions between linguistic units under particular conditions of their use. It is a cross-level phenomenon that reflects the general principles governing language as a dynamic semiotic system.

The manifestation of neutralization in the system of verbal forms is of particular interest. English primarily employs analytical means to express grammatical meanings, whereas Russian preserves a highly developed inflectional system. These typological differences determine the specific mechanisms of

neutralization operating in the verbal systems of the two languages while simultaneously revealing universal principles underlying the interaction between morphological forms and their functional realization.

The verb carries the greatest concentration of grammatical categories in both languages. Person and number, tense and taxis, aspect, mood, and voice converge within a single word form or analytical construction. Consequently, the verbal system provides particularly favorable conditions for neutralization: the greater the number of oppositions concentrated within a single grammatical form, the greater the likelihood that one of them may become neutralized under specific communicative conditions.

The present study focuses on “functional neutralization,” understood as the contextual suspension of oppositional grammatical meanings while the formal grammatical distinctions remain intact. This type of neutralization corresponds to the phenomenon described in Russian linguistic scholarship through the theory of categorical situations. The contrastive perspective is motivated by the asymmetry of the dominant grammatical categories in the two languages. Russian is predominantly “aspect-oriented,” whereas English is primarily “tense- and taxis-oriented.” The study therefore seeks to determine how each language accommodates the dominant category of the other, whether it distinguishes grammatical meanings that are systematically differentiated in the other language, and how its own grammatical oppositions behave in contexts that weaken or neutralize their semantic contrast.

The aim of this article is to identify and systematize the principal manifestations of neutralization in the systems of English and Russian verbal forms, to determine the conditions under which neutralization arises, and to describe the functional-semantic mechanisms underlying this phenomenon.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Western Slavic linguistics put the phenomenon of aspectual competition into international linguistic requisition through the

classical theory of verbal aspect, in which the use of the imperfective aspect in contexts that are semantically perfective was interpreted as a systemic rather than an occasional feature. The general theory of aspectual oppositions and their unmarked members was subsequently developed within typological aspectology. Russian linguistics, in turn, established the notion of aspectual competition, identified the range of contexts in which it occurs, and incorporated the phenomenon into the theory of categorical situations.

An analysis of the English verbal system makes it possible to distinguish the following major types of neutralization:

1. The aspectual neutrality of the Simple Past, whereby "He read the letter" may correspond to both the Russian imperfective (*чумал*) and perfective (*прочумал*), illustrating a domain in which English permits aspectual ambiguity whereas Russian requires an obligatory aspectual distinction.
2. The exclusion of stative verbs from the progressive opposition, accompanied by the gradual erosion of this restriction in contemporary usage (e.g., "I'm lovin' it").
3. Regionally distributed neutralization of the Perfect, whereby American English frequently employs the Simple Past where British English prefers the Present Perfect ("Did you eat yet?" vs. "Have you eaten?").
4. The semantic ambiguity of *would*, resulting in the neutralization of habitual and irrealis meanings ("He would sit for hours" vs. "He would help").
5. Competitive neutralization among future-time expressions, involving "will," "be going to," the Present Progressive ("I'm calling tomorrow"), and the Simple Present ("The train leaves at five").
6. The erosion of the irrealis form "were" (e.g., "If I was...") alongside the preservation of the American mandative subjunctive ("They demanded that he go").
7. The pseudo-past of politeness ("Could you...?"), contrasted with the defective paradigm of modal verbs (must → had to), illustrating the interaction between neutralization and grammatical lacunae.

8. “Do-support,” whereby grammatical categories are transferred to the semantically empty auxiliary “do,” leaving the lexical verb morphologically unmarked (“Did he go?”), while emphatic “DO” demonstratively suspends this neutralization.
9. Peripheral voice neutralization, including media constructions (“The book reads well”) and the colloquial *get*-passive (“He got fired”), which functions as a competing passive alternative.
10. Agentless passive constructions in public and political discourse (“Mistakes were made”), where the suppression of the agent serves pragmatic and rhetorical purposes.

The Russian verbal system is predominantly aspect-oriented, and its principal types of neutralization may be summarized as follows:

1. The general-factual imperfective, whereby the aspectual opposition is neutralized in statements referring merely to the occurrence of an event (e.g., *Ti chital «Mastera i Margaritu»?*; *Вызакзывали такси?*).
2. The distributional unmarkedness of the imperfective aspect, reflected in its exclusive use for the actual present tense, its preference in negative imperatives (*непокупай*), and its regular occurrence with phasal verbs.
3. The perfective past expressing the immediate future (e.g., *Ну всё, я пошёл; Поехали!*), representing an expressive conversion of tense into aspect, paralleled by formulas of inevitable outcome (*Я пропал* ≈ I’m dead).
4. Lexical neutralization of aspect in biaspectual verbs (e.g., *ранить, казнить, стартовать*), a productive peripheral class contrasted with suppletive aspectual pairs (e.g., *брать / взять*) and ongoing debates concerning forms such as *ложить*.
5. The tenseless subjunctive, in which the single pattern *past tense + бы* expresses irrealis situations irrespective of temporal reference (*пришёл бы* may refer equally to the past, present, or future).

6. Aspectual conversion in polite imperatives, contrasting imperfective forms (*Проходите, Садитесь*) with perfective imperatives (*Сядьте*), alongside the euphemistic replacement *присаживайтесь*.
7. A wide range of directive substitutes, including the infinitival imperative (*Молчать!*; *Показанамнеходить!*), future and past tense forms used with directive force, and alternative hortative constructions (*идём, идёмте, давайпойдём, пошли*).
8. Non-finite modal predicatives (*надо, нельзя, пора*), expressing modality independently of verbal inflection.
9. Relative tense in subordinate clauses (*Он сказал, чтопойдём*), which avoids the sequence-of-tenses rule characteristic of English, together with the taxis relations expressed by Russian adverbial participles, whose use is constrained by subject identity (cf. the Russian equivalent of the English dangling participle).
10. Relic and dialectal taxis constructions, including the anti-resultative construction with *было* (*пошёлбыло, давернулся*) and the Northern Russian possessive perfect (*унегоуйдено*).
11. The multifunctionality of the postfix *-ся*, whereby a single morphological marker expresses passive, middle, reciprocal, impersonal, and dispositional meanings (e.g., *домстроится; собакакусается; мненеспится*).
12. Syntactic depersonalization, encompassing impersonal constructions and the zero copula in the present tense (e.g., *Светаёт; Мненеспится; Ястудент*).
13. Etiquette-driven neutralization of polarity, whereby negative interrogatives function as conventional politeness strategies (e.g., *Неподскажете?; Нехотитечаю?*), with negation serving as a pragmatic mitigator.

The most significant types of neutralization identified above merit closer examination.

The Present Perfect, often regarded as one of the defining features of the English tense–aspect system, exhibits its own domain of neutralization, which is geographically conditioned. American English systematically employs the Simple Past in

contexts where British English requires the Present Perfect: “Did you eat yet?” “I just saw him,” “I already did it,” as opposed to British “Have you eaten?” and “I’ve just seen him.” This distinction has long been recognized in comparative descriptions of the two national varieties of English. From the perspective of grammatical oppositions, this represents a territorially distributed optional neutralization of the contrast between past events with and without current relevance. The American norm neutralizes this distinction, particularly in the presence of temporal adverbials, whereas British English preserves it. Everyday transatlantic communication illustrates the stable coexistence of these two grammatical patterns. Russian, lacking a grammatical Perfect, expresses the same semantic domain by means of aspectual distinctions and word order. Consequently, the contrast between the two languages forms a typologically balanced pattern: Russian obligatorily distinguishes aspect in contexts where English allows neutralization; English obligatorily distinguishes taxis relations where Russian remains neutral; and even within English, the obligatoriness of the Perfect itself varies across regional standards.

Future-time reference in English provides another example of competitive neutralization. The forms “will,” “be going to,” the Present Progressive, and the Simple Present all occupy the domain of futurity (“I’ll call you” – “I’m going to call” – “I’m calling tomorrow” – “The train leaves at five”). Across a broad range of contexts, the choice among these forms is semantically interchangeable, stylistically conditioned, or functionally insignificant. Russian, by contrast, distributes futurity primarily through aspectual opposition: the synthetic future of perfective verbs (*hamuyu*) contrasts with the analytical future of imperfective verbs (*бyдyнycamь*). Unlike English, Russian offers virtually no domain of free competition between future forms, since their selection is determined by aspect rather than by stylistic or pragmatic preference.

The English verbal system also contains a grammatical mechanism that elevates the decategorization of the lexical verb to a systematic principle – “do-support.” In interrogative and negative constructions, all finite grammatical categories are

transferred from the lexical verb to the semantically empty auxiliary “do.” Thus, in “Did he go?” and “He didn’t go,” tense and agreement are realized exclusively by “did,” whereas the lexical verb *go* appears in the bare infinitive (base form), functioning as an “archiform” in the strictest sense of the term. This redistribution of grammatical information represents a distinctive type of morphological neutralization, in which the lexical verb loses its inflectional marking while preserving its lexical meaning.

The Russian verbal system exhibits an equally rich range of neutralization phenomena.

The robustness of the proposed analysis can be tested by examining a grammatical domain that is described differently in the two languages, namely hortative constructions expressing joint action. Russian employs a broad range of forms to invite or encourage collective action: *идём!*, *идёмме!*, *давайно́йдем*, *давай́менойдем*, *пошли!*. Present, future, and past tense forms, together with analytical constructions, compete within a single communicative function. The distinctions among them are primarily stylistic rather than grammatical, as the oppositions of tense and mood are neutralized in the context of hortative meaning. English, by contrast, expresses the same function almost exclusively through the construction “let’s,” together with its negative variants “let’s not” and the colloquial “don’t let’s.” Thus, the rich variety of Russian hortative forms converges in translation into a single English construction, representing the reverse of the aspectual asymmetry discussed above, where multiple English interpretations correspond to a single Russian form. Hortative constructions therefore complete the pattern of cross-linguistic symmetry. Russian morphology is considerably more elaborate in this domain than English; however, this morphological richness gives rise to internal neutralization. Forms that are redundant for grammatical differentiation gradually cease to express distinct grammatical meanings and become stylistic variants of the same communicative function. In this respect, the principle of linguistic economy first formulated by Martinet at the phonological level finds a parallel in syntax:

an excessively rich inventory naturally becomes the primary locus of functional neutralization.

The phenomenon of sequence of tenses defines another domain in which English grammatical strictness contrasts with Russian flexibility. In English indirect speech, the tense of the subordinate clause is normally shifted in accordance with the tense of the reporting verb (“He said he was tired”; “She said she would come”). Russian, however, preserves the temporal perspective of the original utterance (*Он сказал, что устал; Она сказала, что придёт*), allowing a future form in the subordinate clause despite a past-tense verb in the main clause. From the perspective of neutralization, the Russian strategy suppresses the opposition of absolute tense in favor of relative temporal reference. The tense form in the subordinate clause is interpreted relative to the time of the reported speech rather than to the speaker’s present moment, thereby neutralizing the distinction between the original speaker’s “now” and the reporter’s “now.” The consequences of this asymmetry are well known in translation practice. Mechanical transfer of the Russian pattern frequently produces forms such as “He said he will come,” whereas literal transfer of the English sequence-of-tenses rule into Russian results in equally unnatural constructions. As is typical of cross-linguistic interference, errors arise precisely in those grammatical domains where the native language neutralizes distinctions that remain obligatory in the other language. This phenomenon constitutes yet another symmetrical contrast between the two systems: English maintains stricter temporal relations in the domain of real events, whereas Russian preserves greater flexibility; in irrealis contexts, however, the distribution of grammatical constraints is largely reversed.

Another important type of neutralization is associated with Russian reflexive constructions such as *Книга читается легко* (“The book reads easily”) and *Ткань стирается при тридцати градусах* (“The fabric washes at 30 degrees”). Here, the postfix *-ся* functions as a highly productive marker of grammatical syncretism. The same morphological form expresses passive (*дом строится рабочими*), media (*стекло бьётся*), reciprocal (*друзья обнимаются*), impersonal (*мне не спится*),

and dispositional or characteristic meanings (*собакакушается*). The multifunctionality of *-ся* represents a characteristic form of functional convergence within the Russian verbal system and may be viewed as a functional counterpart of the English *-ing* form. As in other cases of grammatical neutralization, the intended interpretation is resolved by contextual cues: the presence of an instrumental agent favors a passive reading, whereas lexical semantics, animacy, and conventional usage determine media, reciprocal, or dispositional interpretations.

The grammatical category of person also undergoes functional neutralization through depersonalization, reaching its fullest expression in Russian impersonal constructions. Sentences such as *Светаёт, Морозит, Мненеспится* (canonically represented in Pushkin's line *Мненеспится, нетогня...*), *Лодкуунесловетром*, and *Дорогузамело* eliminate the grammatical subject altogether. In such constructions, the third-person singular neuter form functions as an "archiform," representing the absence of an explicit agent. English, whose syntax requires an overt subject, resolves the same communicative need through formal expletive subjects such as *it* and *there* ("It's getting dark"; "It's freezing"; "There's no sleeping now"). In this case, the syntactic subject position is preserved while its semantic content is effectively neutralized.

Polite negation constitutes another pragmatic domain in which verbal oppositions are neutralized, this time involving grammatical polarity. Russian polite questions such as *Неподскажете, которыйчас?*, *Нехотитечаю?*, and *Выневыходите?* are formally negative but function pragmatically as affirmative requests or invitations. Here, negation operates not as a logical operator but as a conventional marker of politeness and mitigation. English employs an analogous strategy in polite suggestions and invitations, for example "Why don't you join us?" and "Won't you come in?" where negative form likewise serves a pragmatic rather than propositional function.

Finally, the tense systems of both languages converge in one of the most expressive manifestations of functional neutralization – the historical present. In both Russian and English, this

narrative device has become a conventional feature of popular storytelling. Russian anecdotes typically begin with the historical present (*Заходит как-то мушкетёр в бар...*), while English jokes display an almost identical narrative formula ("A horse walks into a bar..."). Narrative present tense is equally characteristic of sports commentary, film synopses, and dream narration in both languages. Within this discourse type, the opposition between present and past tense is functionally neutralized. The suspension of temporal contrast serves a clear communicative purpose: by relinquishing its ordinary temporal reference, the present tense acquires the ability to create immediacy, vividness, and the illusion of direct participation in the narrated events.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparison of the English and Russian verbal systems reveals not merely differences in grammatical means but fundamentally different typological organizations of the verbal category itself. The Russian verb is structured around the category of "aspect": the opposition between perfective and imperfective determines the choice of verbal form, shapes the interpretation of tense, influences imperative and infinitival constructions, governs taxis relations, and ultimately affects translation strategies. The English verb, by contrast, is organized around "tense," "taxis," "perfectivity," "progressivity," and a highly developed system of analytical constructions. Consequently, each language rigorously maintains distinctions within its own dominant grammatical domain while relatively freely neutralizing those categories that are typologically peripheral.

In English, aspectual meaning is frequently left formally unspecified. The Simple Past may express meanings that Russian must distinguish through aspectual morphology. Thus, "He read the letter" may correspond either to *Он читал письмо* or *Он прочитал письмо*. The English form itself does not indicate whether the action was completed, whether a result was achieved, or whether the event reached its natural endpoint. These interpretations are recovered from context, temporal adverbials, discourse, or the translator's choice. Russian,

however, cannot remain grammatically neutral in the same position: *читал* and *прочитал* represent different aspectual perspectives, and selecting between them constitutes an obligatory part of the speaker's grammatical competence.

English compensates for this aspectual neutrality through an elaborate network of tense–aspect constructions, including the Simple, Progressive, Perfect, and Perfect Progressive forms. Yet even within this system certain oppositions undergo functional neutralization. American English frequently employs the Simple Past where British English conventionally prefers the Present Perfect (“Did you eat yet?” vs. “Have you eaten?”). As a result, the distinction between a completed past event and a past event with current relevance is partially neutralized in American English, leaving its interpretation to contextual information, temporal adverbials, and communicative expectations.

The Russian verbal system, being fundamentally aspect-oriented, displays the opposite profile. Aspect retains a high degree of grammatical prominence, yet even this central category undergoes functional neutralization in specific contexts. The most characteristic example is the general-factual imperfective, as in *Ты читал «Мастера на Мизгирю»?*, *Вы заказывали такси?*, and *Я уже обращался к врачу*. These forms do not describe an event as an ongoing process but merely establish the fact that it occurred. Here, the imperfective functions as the unmarked member of the aspectual opposition, capable of expressing factual occurrence without conflicting with the resultative interpretation of the event. Thus, even the dominant grammatical category of Russian possesses contexts in which its opposition becomes functionally weakened.

The typological asymmetry becomes particularly evident in the domain of irrealis. English distinguishes “would come” from “would have come,” thereby maintaining a grammatical contrast between hypothetical future situations and counterfactual past events. Russian, however, employs the single construction *пришёл бы* for different temporal interpretations. Depending on context, it may refer equally to the past, present, or future. Russian therefore neutralizes temporal distinctions within the subjunctive mood, whereas English preserves taxis distinctions

through analytical verbal forms. In this domain, Russian aspect-centered organization yields to modal generalization, while the English tense–taxis system maintains grammatical differentiation.

The domain of modality illustrates a case of convergent neutralization. Both English “Could you help me?” and Russian *Невозмо́глибы́вамочь?* employ past-tense morphology not to denote temporal reference but to express politeness and interpersonal distance. In both languages, the tense morpheme loses its literal temporal meaning and acquires a pragmatic function. This phenomenon may therefore be regarded as a form of grammatical fiction, in which the formal grammatical shape remains unchanged while its categorical meaning is reassigned by communicative intention. The same principle applies to polite negative questions such as “Won’t you come in?,” *Неподскажете?*, and *Нехотитечаю?*, which are formally negative yet function as invitations, requests, or mitigated directives.

The category of **Voice** likewise demonstrates partially convergent mechanisms. English middle constructions such as “The book reads well” and “The car handles smoothly,” together with Russian constructions like *Книга́читаетсялегко* and *Тканьхорошо́стирается*, neutralize the opposition between active and passive perspectives. Although the grammatical subject denotes the affected entity rather than the agent, these constructions do not constitute canonical passives. The agent is either omitted or rendered pragmatically irrelevant. This convergence illustrates how typologically different grammatical systems may employ distinct formal resources to accomplish the same communicative goal – representing an event without explicitly identifying its performer and without overt passive marking.

Agent neutralization becomes especially prominent in public and bureaucratic discourse. English expressions such as “Mistakes were made” and Russian formulas such as *Былопринято́решение* and *Допущеныотдельныенедостатки* systematically remove the agent from the syntactic structure. The grammar permits reference to the event while concealing

responsibility for its occurrence. In such cases, neutralization extends beyond morphology to become a discourse strategy in which grammatical structure serves rhetorical purposes. English typically achieves this effect through passive constructions, whereas Russian relies more heavily on impersonal and passive-impersonal patterns.

The grammatical category of person is organized differently in the two languages. Russian freely employs impersonal constructions such as *Светает*, *Морозит*, *Мне неспится*, and *Дорогу замело*. In these sentences, the subject is not merely omitted but is grammatically unnecessary. English, by contrast, preserves the syntactic subject position even when no semantic agent exists, employing formal expletives such as “it” and “there” (“It’s getting dark”; “It’s freezing”; “There is no way”). Thus, Russian grammatically licenses zero subjecthood, whereas English maintains the structural subject position by filling it with semantically empty elements. Both languages ultimately achieve the same communicative effect – depersonalization – through different syntactic and grammatical mechanisms.

The domain of narrative, however, brings the two systems into close alignment. The historical present is highly productive in both English and Russian: “A horse walks into a bar...” and *Заходит как-то улитка в бар...* exemplify the same discourse strategy. In such constructions, the present tense no longer refers to the moment of speaking but instead creates immediacy, vividness, and the illusion of direct participation in the narrated events. The opposition between present and past tense is therefore functionally neutralized for the sake of narrative expressiveness.

In contemporary conversational and online discourse, this tendency has become even more pronounced through quotative constructions such as English “and I’m like...” and Russian *аятакая...* These expressions blur the boundaries between speech, thought, emotional reaction, and gesture, transforming the verbal construction into a performative device that reenacts rather than merely reports the communicative situation.

CONCLUSION

The English verbal system neutralizes aspectual distinctions in contexts where Russian requires an obligatory aspectual choice. Conversely, the Russian verbal system neutralizes tense and taxis distinctions in contexts where English preserves fine-grained analytical differentiation. The two verbal systems therefore exhibit categorical complementarity: each maintains strict grammatical distinctions within its own dominant domain while displaying greater tolerance toward the neutralization of categories that are typologically central to the other language. At the same time, both systems converge in a number of pragmatically motivated neutralization patterns. Past tense forms may express politeness rather than temporal reference, the present tense may function as a narrative device, negative forms may convey mitigated requests instead of negation, and passive or impersonal constructions may serve to suppress the explicit expression of agency. These phenomena demonstrate that grammatical neutralization extends far beyond structural economy. It functions as an essential mechanism for shaping politeness strategies, rhetorical effects, narrative vividness, and discourse management, thereby illustrating the close interaction between grammatical structure and communicative function.

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