Imperfective past passive participles in Russian
Olga Borik, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Berit Gehrke, CNRS-LLF / Paris Diderot

There is a widespread assumption that past passive participles (PPPs) in Russian are regularly derived only from perfective (PF) verbs, and that the few imperfective (IPF) ones are part of fixed idiomatic expressions, possibly frozen forms that function like genuine adjectives, but certainly not regularly used in passive constructions (e.g. Schoorlemmer 1995, Paslawska & von Stechow 2003). Dickey (2000) in his cross-Slavic comparison of aspect notes that unlike languages like, e.g., Czech, which regularly derives PPPs (and morphologically related event nominals) from both members of the aspectual pair, Russian only derives them from one member, commonly the PF one. The Academy Grammar (Švedova 1980), in turn, states that IPF PPPs are rarely used and difficult to distinguish from adjectives, and it lists a number of IPF verbs that do not form PPPs at all, including secondary imperfectives (SIs). A more nuanced view is found in Knjazev (2007), who also notes that IPF PPPs are used a lot less often and attributes this to the fact that PPPs cannot refer to an event in process, one of the main functions of the IPF. However, he observes that in cases we do find IPF PPPs (in regular opposition to PF ones) they express a general-factual, iterative/repeatable (ograničennokratnoe) or other “retrospective” meaning that the IPF can have.

In this talk, we will discuss the data found in the Russian national corpus (ruscorpora.ru) where IPF PPPs appear in predicative position. For practical reasons, the search was restricted to IMP PPPs directly preceding or following a finite form of byt’ ‘be’ (BE). Our purpose is to investigate the following questions: (A) Are IPF PPPs limited to fixed or idiomatic expressions and should the PPP in question be viewed as a genuine adjective instead? (B) Do only particular verb classes or certain IPF forms derive PPPs, e.g. are SIs excluded? (C) If we find non-idiomatic IPF PPPs in clear passive constructions, what kind of contexts do we find and are there other particular features of these contexts that we can observe? (D) What would be a general semantic characterization of an imperfective PPP? Our findings are as follows.

Concerning (A), we certainly found examples that could be treated as idiomatic (e.g. lykom šit lit. ‘sewn with bast fiber’, meaning ‘simple, ordinary’), fixed expressions (e.g. byl rožden/kreščen ‘was born/baptized’) or as PPPs used as genuine predicative adjectives, such as viden lit. ‘seen’ but rather meaning ‘visible’, and similar such forms related to perception verbs (e.g. slyšan ‘heard, audible’). On the other hand, we also found many cases of IPF PPPs used productively in passive constructions, such as those in (1) and (2).

1) Recepty im pisany byli i na drugoe imja […] prescriptions he.INSTR written.IPFP were and on other name ‘The prescriptions were written by him for different names as well.’

2) Znamenityj pokojnik nesen byl do mogily na rukax […] Famous deceased.NOM carried.IPFP was until grave on arms ‘The famous deceased was carried in arms until the grave.’

IPF PPPs that function as true passive participles in passive constructions give rise to both a stative (in (3)) and an eventive (in (4), as witnessed by the modifiers) passive, hence do not behave as genuine adjectives, but have typical features of a participle.

3) Kryt byl dom solomoj […] ‘The house was covered with hay.’ covered.IPFP was house hay.INSTR

4) Pisano čto bylo Dostoevskim v 1871 godu, pri Pii IX […] written.IPFP it was Dostoevskij.INSTR in 1871 year at PIUS.GEN IX ‘This was written by Dostoevskij in 1871 during (the rule of) Pius IX.’

As for (B), the general impression is that we find a lot of verbs of saying and incremental verbs of creation (write, sew, publish, make etc.), though not exclusively (cf. carry in (2)).
Nevertheless, we did not attest a lot of different PPPs in our search, they were mostly the same forms appearing in many different contexts. This suggests that there might still be lexical restrictions and we suggest an informal explanation for that below. The productivity of those IPF participles that we found corroborates their transparent (compositional) semantics.

We found few SI PPPs in passives, one is illustrated in (5). However, since all the attested examples are archaic (i.e. from biblical texts or texts from the 18th century or before) we conclude for now that PPPs formed from secondary imperfectives are extremely rare.

(5) Čto objavlenii zapisyvany byli v knige po soveršennoj ix očistke […]
that records.NOM written.SI were in book by absolute their clearance
‘…that the records were made in the book after their (i.e., the goods) clearance.’
Concerning (C), we could confirm Knjazev’s (2007) observations: passive IPF PPPs are generally found in non-progressive IPF contexts, e.g. in clearly habitual context as in (6).

(6) [Vjačeslav …] kormlen byl skupno, sderzanno […] ‘Vjačeslav was fed little.’
Vjačeslav fed was sparingly reservedly

However, in most cases we found the general-factual reading of the IPF at play (in the broadest sense, going beyond Maslov’s 1959 original characterization; see, e.g., Padučeva 1996, Mehlig 2012). Therefore, as an answer to (D), we argue that we are dealing with Grønn’s (2004) presuppositional factual IPFs (cf. also Mueller-Reichau 2013). This is evident by the fact that the completion of an event is backgrounded and presupposed, whereas in the foreground we find an expression (a modifier) specifying the manner (in the broadest sense) or the quality of the event. This is often reflected by the word order with the PPP in sentence-initial topic position and the foregrounded information expressed by the modifier appearing after BE, in focus. Some relevant examples are given in (7).

(7) a. Stroeno bylo eto plxoso, xromo, ščeljasto.
built was that badly lamely with.holes
‘It was built/constructed badly, defectively, with holes.’

b. Zapiski byli pisany ne dlja pečati […]
‘The notes were written not to be printed.’
notes were written not for print

Grønn (2006) proposes a DRT account of the presuppositional factual IPF, illustrated in (8a), along the lines of (8b) (semantics of the VP) and (8c) (the VP embedded under Aspect).

In this tavern I wrote.PF first love letter wrote.IPF pencil.INSTR
‘In this tavern, I wrote my first love letter. I wrote it [in pencil].’

b. λe[x | Instrument(e, x), pencil(x)]] [write(e)]
c. [AspectP]: λe[x | Instrument(e, x), pencil(x)]] [e [write(e), e ∈ t ]]

In this notation, the subscripted part introduces presupposed information into the DRS, here the writing event itself. We propose that this account can be extended to most cases where we find IPF PPPs in passive constructions, such as those in (1), (2), (4), and (7), possibly also (6).

Another question that arises from a theoretical perspective is what an IPF PPP can contribute to a passive construction given that the generally accepted semantics for PPPs is formulated in terms of a consequent state attributed to a subject of a passive sentence. The question is then what kind of consequent state can an IPF PPP refer to. We can say that since the completion is not part of the ‘asserted’ meaning but rather presupposed, the IPF shifts the focus on another aspect of the event, instead of the consequent state. Here, depending on the lexical properties of the verb, we get different results, but mostly it is about some circumstance of the event, be it its manner/quality or purpose.