Otvečat: Otvetit'—A Point in Russian Aspectology

Zbigniew Folejewski

To cite this article: Zbigniew Folejewski (1953) Otvečat: Otvetit'—A Point in Russian Aspectology, WORD, 9:4, 377-380, DOI: 10.1080/00437956.1953.11659482

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.1953.11659482

Published online: 04 Dec 2015.
It is a known fact that in the use of the past tense in the so-called *verba dicendi* the rules governing aspect are less strict than for other verbs. The imperfective aspect occurs in many cases where otherwise the context suggests the perfective. Part of the explanation is, of course, the fact that the very character of these verbs usually implies a certain continuity. When the narrative is set in the past and the *verba dicendi* serve for orientation in the situation, continuity is often automatically implied. When one examines the mechanism of aspects in Russian narrative, one is struck by the aspectual behavior of the verb *otvecat’*. This behavior clearly demonstrates an evolution. The specific character and the late aspectual differentiation of this verb has been pointed out by André Mazon in his book, *Emploi des aspects du verbe russe* (Bibliothèque de l’Institut français de Saint-Pétersbourg, t. IV, Paris 1914) p. 193. But in Mazon’s work this verb was treated only in passing. A more detailed investigation of this particular verb should, I think, be of interest because it bears on historical developments in the Russian language and on some features of the Russian literary style as well.

Mazon limits himself to the general observation that “la langue hésite, en un grand nombre de cas, entre l’imperfectif *otvecat’* et le perfectif *otvetit’* au sens de ‘répondit-il’ ou ‘il répondit que. . .’” But in an additional remark Mazon outlines a rather complicated and not very convincing explanation of what determines the choice between *otvecat’* and *otvetit’* in literary usage. He says:

“L’imperfectif *otvecat’* toutefois, à en juger du moins d’après une minutieuse observation du style de Turgenev, paraît plus souvent employé en fonction de proposition incise, au sens de ‘répondit-il’, dans les récits dialogués. Le prêtérit perfectif *otvetit’*, par contre, semble plus usuel dans les relations de caractère plus abstrait qu’un dialogue: ‘Il répondit que . . .’ ou: ‘Comme il avait répondu que . . .’”

To this observation I should like to express some objections and add a few supplementary remarks.

In the first place, in regard to the hesitation of the language in choosing between *otvecat’* and *otvetit’*, it should be stressed that this hesitation is not limited to the verb *otvecat’* but applies to the whole group of *verba dicendi*. This can easily be checked by examining the choice between *govoril* and *skazal*. What is involved here is not a sporadic phenomenon but a phenomenon which is typical of a whole grammatical category, and which can be partly explained, as I have already mentioned, by the nature of these verbs. But it may be pointed out that it is not quite accurate to range the verb *obeščat’* in the same category with *govoril*, *skazyvat’*, *rasskazyvat’*, *dokladyvat’*, *prosit’*, etc. The verb *obeščat’* has no formal aspectual differentiation and its function in narrative can be either imperfective or perfective. Thus the remark about “l’usage si fréquent du pré-
térít imperfectif” of this verb is unclear and can cause misunderstandings. For example we find an amplification of it in the article by the Swedish philologist Claes Oldin, “Randanmärkningar till skoltexter” (Moderna språk, Vol. XII, Lund 1918, p. 44) where a real misunderstanding occurs. Oldin not only ignores the double aspectual function of obeščat’, but wants to explain the frequent use of the imperfective form of verba dicendi in Russian in terms of the stylistic tendency which in some languages is connected with the phenomenon called “le style indirect libre”. (Furthermore, Oldin quotes such examples as: mušik obeščal, sluga doložil, and he asserts that obeščal is an imperfective form and doložil is perfective, while actually both these forms are clearly perfective.) Oldin also discusses the verb pair otvečat’: otvetit’, but he fails to consider the fact that otvečat’, before the quite recent appearance of otvetit’, was used in both perfective and imperfective function. The “hesitation” Oldin observes in the works of various Russian writers is in his opinion mainly a matter of their individual style, without regard to chronology. (It attracts Oldin’s attention that Potapenko does not use the form otvečat’ perfectly while Turgenev does; but Oldin does not take into consideration the fact that Potapenko is a whole generation younger than Turgenev.)

II

It would be of interest to establish the chronology of the historical development of the verb otvečat’, and to this end the first step would be to date the appearance of otvetit’. The task is not easy because the lexical material of the Russian language has not been sufficiently investigated from the chronological point of view. Nor has the language of a sufficient number of writers been thoroughly studied.

Mazon, in limiting himself only to the practice of Turgenev, remarked that the verb otvečat’ “n’a dû cependant prendre la valeur imperfective qu’à une date relativement récente, lors de l’apparition du verbe secondaire otvetit’, et, par suite, pourrait bien aussi ne représenter de la sorte qu’une ancienne forme perfective figée dans son emploi.” But Mazon left a broad margin, for he mentioned only in a footnote that the Novgorod Chronicle uses the form otveščati exclusively, and that the verb otvetit’ does not occur in Sreznevskij’s Materialy. . . . It seems to me that this margin can be reduced by dating the appearance of the form otvetit’ in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to rely here on the existing vocabularies since they do not usually register the complete lexical material of their epoch. Nor do they always take aspectual differences into account. Of the dictionaries available to me, the first in which I found differentiation between otvečat’ and otvetit’

1 Oldin even puts a verb like prodolžat’ in the same category with otvečat’, zamečat’, etc., and is surprised that he finds the imperfective form prodolžal even in situations where a perfective form is expected. He overlooks the fact that the form prodolžat’ as a verbum dicendi is clearly durative. (In Russian, prodolžit’ is used in quite limited function, as a transitive verb, and never as a verbum dicendi.)

were: *Obščij cerkovno-slavjano-rossijskij slovar*. Po poručeniju Komiteta učebnyx zavedenij sost. P... S... Sanktpeterburg 1834, and *Slovar* cerkovno-slavjanskogo i russkogo jazyka Imperatorskoi Akademii Nauk, Sanktpeterburg 1847. (In both dictionaries, however, examples were found only for the use of *otvečat*'). The form *otvetit*' does not occur at all in the older dictionary, *Novyj i polnyj rossijskonemeckij slovar*, sočiněnnýj i popolnennyj po slovarju Rossijskoj Akademii, Sanktpeterburg 1813, nor, of course, in *Slovar' Akademii Rossijskoj*, 1789.

To be sure, this does not prove that the form *otvetit*’ did not exist before 1813; only a careful examination of all the written sources of the epoch could give positive proof on this question. But it may be presumed that such a form, even if it did exist, was not a part of standard vocabulary of the time. I might add that my experience with the literary works of this period indicates that the form *otvetit*’ is practically never used. In the more recent texts the perfective *otvetit*’ begins to occur more and more frequently. Apparently there was a need of the formal differentiation, a need which can be observed also in other cases. But during the whole nineteenth century we still find the form *otvečat*’ used perfectly.

With all these reservations, we can state that the form *otvetit*’ was introduced as a formal complement to *otvečat*’ in the first half of the nineteenth century. Then, gradually the opposition *otvečat*’ : *otvetit*’ limited the usage of *otvečat*’. The process of differentiation was evidently slow. It was retarded in part by the normal conservatism of the language, which kept the perfective function of *otvečat*’ alive even after the form *otvetit*’ had appeared. But at the beginning of the twentieth century the process of differentiation was complete, and in modern Russian there is no doubt that the verb *otvečat*’ is no longer “ambi-aspectual.”

**III**

After the form *otvetit*’ was introduced and generally recognized, the whole question of using the verb *otvečat*’ in situations where otherwise perfectiveness was implied gradually became a purely stylistic matter. Today the relation between *otvečat*’ and *otvetit*’ may be compared with the relation *govorit*’ : *skazat*’. The grammatical difference is quite clear.

On the other hand, we must remember that in Old Church Slavonic and in Old Russian the verb also had two forms: the imperfective in -*avati* and the perfective in -*ati*. Later, in Russian, the imperfective form in -*avati* disappeared, and the form *otvečat*’ carried both functions. Its original perfective character was certainly quite strong, but, on the other hand, its morphological similarity

---

3 In *Veismannov nemeckij leksikon s latinskim*, Sanktpeterburg 1782, in the rubric “beantworten,” we find: *na vopros otvetstvovat’, otvečat’, dat’ otvet*.

4 In the works of Russian writers like Karamzin, Zagoskin, Puškin, Lermontov, Gogol’, the form *otvetit*’ is not encountered, except in quite isolated cases. A characteristic detail can be noted here: In a new edition of Gogol’s *Měrtvye duši* (*Sočinenija*, New York, n.d. (1946?) I found the following sentence: *Eto malen’kije tučki, otvetil Čičikov. Since the form *otvetil* was completely isolated I compared the passage with older editions, and it proved to be an ordinary misprint, or perhaps a subconscious “correction” by the typographer, whose linguistic sensibility dictated the form *otvetil* instead of the original *otvečat*.
to imperfective verbs influenced the popular feeling for its use. At the same
time, the need for a formal distinction caused the coining of a new form *otvetit’*
by analogy to the large number of verb pairs in *-at’ : -it’*. From this time the
limitation of *otvečat’* to its imperfective function was only a question of time.
But the perfective tradition held on for quite a long period.

The whole problem of the aspectual evolution of *otvečat’* is, I think, not with­
out importance since it reflects a more general linguistic tendency. We see how
a verb which primarily belongs to a certain grammatical category (perfective),
gradually begins to be pulled into another (imperfective) category and becomes
a verb of double function. Finally it passes over completely to the second cate­
gory, whereupon its original grammatical differentiation is reestablished in a
new verb pair, but in a reversed order.

It could be of interest to compile statistics for the relation *otvečat’ : otvetit’*
in the works of various Russian writers of the nineteenth century, particularly
of Turgenev, whose works furnished André Mazon with material for his ob­servations. It is relevant to stress the fact that the literary activity of Turgenev
coincides in time with the period of the differentiation process here. In his works,
taken in chronological order, it is possible to follow the evolutionary process.
If we take for example *Zapiski oxotnika* and *Otcy i deti* we can observe that the
form *otvečal* is more frequently used perfectively in the former work than in the
latter. The proportion between *otvečal* and *otvetil* is approximately 7 : 1 in *Zapiski
oxotnika* and 4 : 1 in *Otcy i deti*. Mazon’s remark that the form *otvetil* prevails
in sentences of the type “il répondit que...” does not agree with my observa­tions. On the contrary, the form ...*otvetil on* is more frequently used than *on
otvetil, čto...* Likewise, the form *on otvečal, čto...* occurs more often than *on
otvetil, čto...*

*University of Wisconsin*