

From Imperfective to Progressive via Relative Present

Author(s): Elena Maslova

*Proceedings of the Twenty-Sixth Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on Aspect* (2000), pp. 431-443

Please see “How to cite” in the online sidebar for full citation information.

Please contact BLS regarding any further use of this work. BLS retains copyright for both print and screen forms of the publication. BLS may be contacted via <http://linguistics.berkeley.edu/bls/>.

---

*The Annual Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistics Society* is published online via [eLanguage](http://eLanguage.org), the Linguistic Society of America's digital publishing platform.

## From Imperfective to Progressive via Relative Present

ELENA MASLOVA  
*University of Bielefeld*

### 1. Introduction

According to the recent typological studies (Comrie 1976; Dahl 1985; Bybee et al. 1994), grammatical forms expressing ongoing events fall into two major classes: specifically **progressive** forms are opposed to more general **imperfective** forms, which are also used in habitual and stative contexts. However, as pointed out by Dahl, these contexts are relatively infrequent, which facilitates diachronic shifts from imperfective to progressive and vice versa (1985:93). He mentions two instances of the Progressive-to-Imperfective shift, in Hindi/Urdu and Punjabi. Comrie (1976:101) cites evidence from Yoruba, where the Progressive<sup>1</sup> form is used as a general Imperfective by some speakers, which apparently reveals a similar shift in progress (see also (Bybee et al. 1994:141) for further examples).

In contrast with Dahl's original hypothesis (1985), the grammaticalization-based theory of tense and aspect systems outlined in (Bybee & Dahl 1989) and elaborated in (Bybee et al. 1994) claims that the Progressive-to-Imperfective developmental path is **unidirectional**. The major piece of empirical evidence in favor of this claim is given by the strong cross-linguistic tendency for Progressives to be expressed by periphrastic constructions (Dahl 1985:91), which shows that they emerge at early stages of grammaticalization. Most importantly, however, the possibility of the Imperfective-to-Progressive shift is ruled out by the general unidirectionality hypothesis, which stipulates that the semantic evolution of grammatical items is universally directed from more specific to more general meanings (Bybee et al. 1994:127).

It is clear that no claim of unidirectionality can be empirically verified: if the reverse development is not attested, it does not mean that it is impossible. Yet even a single instance of the reverse development would suffice to falsify such a claim. The major goal of the present paper is to present an example of the Imper-

---

<sup>1</sup> Here and below, categorial labels with capital initial letters stand for language-specific grammatical items.

fective-to-Progressive development and thus to show that the Progressive-to-Imperfective grammaticalization path is not unidirectional. This claim is based on a contrastive analysis of two closely related languages, Tundra and Kolyma Yukaghir. More specifically, I will argue that the Progressive marker in Tundra Yukaghir has developed from a former Imperfective. This "backward" shift has been conditioned by two factors: the development of a newer Habitual suffix and the grammaticalization of the older Imperfective as a Relative Present marker in medial verb forms.

## 2. Tense and Aspect in Yukaghir: an overview

The Yukaghir tense and aspect system is clearly aspect-dominated. The only morphologically marked tense opposition is between Future and non-Future. The temporal interpretation of a finite verb without the Future marker is constrained by its aspectual characteristics, cf.<sup>2</sup>

- |     |    |                     |                     |                                  |
|-----|----|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| (1) | a. | <i>kõtke-j̣- i</i>  | <reach-PFV-3PL:TR>  | '(they) reached (a destination)' |
| T   | b. | <i>qoñ a-d'e- i</i> | <bow-ITER-3PL:INTR> | '(they) are bowing/bowed'        |
|     | c. | <i>wie- a</i>       | <make-3PL:TR>       | '(they) made'                    |
|     | d. | <i>wie-nu- a</i>    | <make-PROG-3PL:TR>  | '(they) are/were making'         |
|     | e. | <i>wie-nun- a</i>   | <make-HABG-3PL:TR>  | 'they make/used to make'         |

There are three morphological layers of Perfective vs. Imperfective marking. The first layer (below, **Internal Aspect**) comprises of a non-productive but rather common Perfective suffix (TK *-j-*, cf. (1a)) and a handful of highly lexically constrained suffixes signifying various types of multiple-event situations (cf. (1b)) (Krejnoviã 1982:124-135). Secondly, there are two highly regular derivational suffixes, which can be referred to as light (TK *-nu-*) and heavy (T *-nun-*, K *-nun(nu)-*) **Imperfective**, cf. (1d) and (1e). The unmarked counterpart of an Imperfective verb is interpreted as perfective, cf. (1c). The semantic distinction between the light and heavy Imperfective relates to the progressive vs. habitual opposition in both Tundra and Kolyma Yukaghir, yet their functional distribution constitutes a significant point of divergence between these languages (see Section 3 for details and examples). The third layer of aspect marking only exists in medial forms, i.e. in non-finite forms

<sup>2</sup> Abbreviations: 1 - first person, 1/2 - first or second person, 3 - third person, ABL - Ablative, ACC - Accusative, AFFMT - affirmative, AT - attributive form, AUG - Augmentative, DP - discourse particle, DS - different-subject, FOC - Focus, HAB - habitual, HABG - Habitual/Generic, INFR - Inferential, INST- instrumental, INTR - intransitive, IPFV - Imperfective, ITER - Iterative, K - Kolyma Yukaghir, LOC - locative, NEG - negative, OF - object-focus, PL - plural, PRIV - Privative, PRNM - pronominal, PROG - progressive, RES - Resultative, SF - subject-focus, SG - singular, SS - same-subject, T - Tundra Yukaghir, TR - transitive.

### *From Imperfective to Progressive*

employed for clause-chaining. The medial forms fall into three classes: Perfective same-subject forms, Imperfective same-subject forms, and aspect-neutral different-subject forms, cf.:

- (2) a. *wie-relek* <make-SS:PFV> 'having made, (he) made and then...'  
 b. *wie-rë* <make-SS:IPFV> '(when) making, (he) made and...'  
 c. *wie-daä a* <make-3SG-DS> '(when) he was making, he made and...'

The Imperfective and different-subject forms are unmarked for the anterior vs. simultaneous distinction, whereas the Perfective forms enforce the anterior interpretation.

### 3. The semantic divergence of Imperfective suffixes

#### 3.1 The light suffix: Progressive vs. Imperfective

In both Yukaghir languages, the light Imperfective encodes progressive situations cf. (3) and (4). Since there is no obligatory past vs. present distinction, the time of reference is determined by the context and/or speech situation; in each pair of examples, sentence (a) illustrates present reading determined by the speech situation, (b) appears in the past narrative context.<sup>3</sup>

- (3) a. *"neme-le wie-nu-më ?"* "me+pandin-nu-jë "  
 T what-FOC make-PROG-OF:1/2 AFFMT+cook-PROG-INTR:1SG  
 "What are you doing?" "I'm cooking."  
 b. *qad'ir la:me-gi-tege me+qohi-nu-m kötkej-da-ha*  
 DP dog-3-AUG AFFMT+dig-PROG-TR:3SG reach-3-DS  
 'When he came, his huge dog was digging.'

- (4) a. *tet-ek ä äi:-nuä ile*  
 K you-FOC search-IPFV-3PL:OF  
 "It is you whom they are looking for!"  
 b. *tä prolubo-ge egedie-nu-j, tude jo:-gele*  
 that ice.hole-LOC look.in-IPFV-INTR:3SG his head-ACC  
*nüie-nu-m*  
 comb-IPFV-TR:3  
 'He was looking into that ice-hole and combing his hair.' (Nikolaeva 1989:T49)

<sup>3</sup> All Tundra Yukaghir examples are taken from a corpus collected by Gavril Kurilov (Russian Academy of Sciences, Yakut department). Kolyma Yukaghir examples come either from the collection published by Irina Nikolaeva in 1989 (references to particular texts are given in brackets) or from texts recorded in 1992 by the author.

In Kolyma Yukaghir, the light suffix is also used in habitual (5) and generic (6) contexts:

- (5) a. *qodo ti:-t kebe-j-nu-l'eł' i?*  
 K how here-ABL go-PFV-IPFV-INFR-3PL:INTR  
 'How do people (usually) get out of here?' (Nikolaeva 1989:T31).  
 b. *qadmudul-e u:ji:-nu-l'eł' a: ködin el+u:j-o:-nu-l'eł'*  
 ring-INST work-IPFV-INFR-3PL:TR right NEG-work-RES-IPFV-INFR(3)  
 'They would make a ring, but it would never fit' (çĖĬ ŐĬ ‡Ė ‡ 1989:T3).
- (6) *pon'qonodo colhoro-le qodit lej-nu-m?*  
 K lynx hare-ACC why eat-IPFV-TR:3  
 'Why does the lynx eat the hare?' (Nikolaeva 1989:T3).

Further, this suffix is compatible with stative verbs. These forms can encode both specific continuous situations (7a) and regularly recurrent states (7b):

- (7) a. *naha: i:s' mełĭe-t qodo:-nu-j el+malaj-nu*  
 K [very long listen-SS:IPFV] lie-IPFV-INTR:3 NEG+fall.asleep-IPFV(3)  
 'He was lying sleeplessly for a very long time.'  
 b. *puge-din el+al'a:-ăuön qodo:-nu-j*  
 summer-DAT [NEG+melt+PRIV] lie-IPFV-INTR:3  
 'It (always) lies without melting till summer.' (Nikolaeva 1989:T35)

The Tundra Yukaghir light Imperfective never occurs in habitual and stative contexts. Hence, the semantic divergence between the light Imperfective suffixes in Tundra and Kolyma Yukaghir fits the cross-linguistic distinction between progressive and imperfective.

### 3.2 The heavy suffix: obligatory vs. optional Habitual

In Kolyma Yukaghir, the heavy Imperfective serves as an alternative encoding option for habitual situations. Generally, the heavy option is chosen to express some sort of contrast between the present and the past. It signals that the situation being described is conceived of as characteristic of the present in contrast to what used to be the case in the past (cf. (8a)), or vice versa (cf. (8b)). Such a sentence usually contains an adverbial expression specifying the time reference:

- (8) a. *ta:t n'e-qanin el+ibil'ie-nunnu-j üi:*  
**K** so NEG-when NEG-cry-HAB-INTR:3SG now  
 'And now he never cries.'
- b. *tuda: ta:t ed'-u-t moda:-nun-d'i:l'i*  
 long.ago so live-0-SS:IPFV sit-HAB-INTR:1PL  
 'That is how we used to live long ago.'

Outside the "contrastive" contexts like in (8), the habitual meaning is routinely expressed by the light Imperfective (cf. (5)).

In Tundra Yukaghir, the heavy marking is required in all habitual contexts, cf.

- (9) a. *me+pondi:-nun-u- en-d'e-l'e-gi*  
**T** AFFMT+let.go-HABG-0-1SG live-AT-PRNM-3  
 'I (always) let go those of them who are alive.'
- b. *ojege-lë janil-ek pun-nun-u-m*  
 hare-ACC trap-INST kill-HABG-0-TR:3SG  
 'He used to kill hares with a snare trap.'

The same suffix is used in generic statements, cf.:

- (10) *mit kode-n t'u:l el+lew-nun-d'el'i.*  
**T** we person-AT meat NEG+eat-HABG-INTR:1PL  
 'We do not eat human meat.'

Furthermore, the heavy Imperfective in Tundra Yukaghir shows a slight tendency towards further semantic generalization, namely, it can encode multiple-event progressive situations. This "invasion" of the heavy Imperfective into the progressive domain is particularly clear in distributive contexts, where the multiplicity of sub-events is determined by the multiplicity of participants involved, cf.:

- (11) *kinoll'elk ai-nun-u-m.*  
**T** whoever shoot-HABG-0-TR:3  
 'Everybody was shooting.'

Apart from the functional distinctions, the Tundra Yukaghir heavy Imperfective is phonologically reduced with respect to its Kolyma Yukaghir counterpart: In Kolyma Yukaghir, this suffix has two allomorphs, *-nun-* and *-nunnu-* (the choice being determined by the following morpheme, cf. (8)), whereas Tundra Yukaghir only has the shorter form. It seems therefore plausible to assume that Tundra Yukaghir represents a next stage of grammaticalization of the heavy Imperfective,

whereby an optional Habitual marker has developed into an obligatory Habitual/Generic.

### 3.3 Imperfective-to-Progressive hypothesis

The distribution of the light and heavy Imperfective suffixes in Kolyma Yukaghir is quite typical for semantically close items at different stages of grammaticalization: the more specific and phonologically heavier (i.e. younger) Habitual suffix functions as a contrastive encoding option for a sub-meaning of the older Imperfective. In such cases, the marked form generally tends to expand the range of possible contexts.<sup>4</sup> In the course of further grammaticalization this form can become obligatory and thus take over certain sub-meanings of the older one (Bybee et al. 1994:294-295). Precisely this situation is observed in Tundra Yukaghir, where the heavy Imperfective suffix functions as an obligatory Habitual/Generic, while the light Imperfective is left for marking progressive. It seems thus plausible to hypothesize that the Progressive vs. Imperfective divergence between the light Imperfective suffixes has been induced by grammaticalization of the Habitual in Tundra Yukaghir (cf. 3.2), which has replaced the older Imperfective in habitual and generic contexts, thereby restricting its meaning to progressive. This hypothesis will be referred to below as **Imperfective-to-Progressive** hypothesis.

An alternative explanation of this semantic divergence may be that Tundra Yukaghir preserves the original meaning of the light Imperfective, while in Kolyma Yukaghir this suffix has undergone the **Progressive-to-Imperfective** grammaticalization. Note, however, that this hypothesis entails the assumption of general-to-specific development for the Habitual in Kolyma Yukaghir. The point is that if the light Imperfective formerly signified progressive, then the Habitual could hardly be constrained to contrastive contexts, as it is the case now. Indeed, given that there existed two overt imperfective suffixes, one of them with habitual semantics, it seems highly unlikely that a grammar would prohibit both of them in non-contrastive habitual and generic contexts. Hence, the Progressive-to-Imperfective hypothesis implies that the heavy Imperfective suffix used to express general habitual (or even habitual/generic) and has been now restricted to contrastive contexts in Kolyma Yukaghir.

At first sight, these hypotheses may seem equally plausible (or implausible). In both cases, it is assumed that the development of one Imperfective suffix has induced semantic specification of the other one. This type of semantic change is widely attested cross-linguistically. To give the closest example, a Habitual can develop from an older general Present as a result of grammaticalization of a newer Progressive; English is a case in point (Bybee et al. 1994:153). However, a closer

---

<sup>4</sup> This tendency is described by Dahl in terms of "linguistic inflation", or "rhetorical devaluation" (Dahl 1999).

look at the underlying mechanism of semantic change will rule out the Progressive-to-Imperfective hypothesis. This mechanism necessarily involves a shift from **optional** to **obligatory** use of some marker. It is this shift that imposes additional constraints on the use of a contrasting grammatical item, thereby endowing it with a more specific meaning (Bybee et al. 1994:294). This development obviously requires that one of the items involved serve as an optional marking alternative for a sub-meaning of the other. The output of this type of change is an opposition between two obligatory markers without semantic overlaps.

In this way, the grammaticalization of an optional Habitual can cause the Imperfective-to-Progressive development of another form, thereby giving rise to a Progressive vs. Habitual/Generic opposition, as suggested by the Imperfective-to-Progressive hypothesis. Yet this mechanism does not allow a Progressive to endow contrastive semantics in a Habitual. Furthermore, it can by no means make a formerly obligatory marker optional. Thus, the Imperfective vs. optional Habitual opposition characteristic of Kolyma Yukaghir could not emerge by virtue of this mechanism.

#### **4. The diachronic link between Habitual and Progressive**

The major piece of evidence for the Imperfective-to-Progressive hypothesis is given by the obvious formal similarity between the light and heavy Imperfective, which hints at a diachronic relationship **between** these suffixes. As will be shown in this section, this relationship implies that the light Imperfective in Tundra Yukaghir was formerly able to express habitual. To put it the other way round, the Progressive-to-Imperfective hypothesis does not allow for the possibility of diachronic link between the light and heavy Imperfective suffixes.

The current phonological shape of the Imperfective suffixes licenses two different diachronic hypotheses. First, the light suffix can be viewed as a result of formal reduction of the heavy one (following a path like *-nunnu-* > *-nun-* > *-nu-*). The light and heavy Imperfective are thus taken to represent two co-existing stages of grammaticalization of the same source item. Yet this means that the light Imperfective has developed from an item with habitual semantics, which has been extended to express progressive meaning (as e.g. in Slavic (Dahl 1985:84)). If so, then a Progressive can only emerge at a next stage of development.

Alternatively, the heavy Imperfective may represent a "frozen" combination of two light Imperfective suffixes, which has been reanalyzed as a single Habitual marker (*\*[V-nu]-nu-* > *V-nunnu-*). According to this hypothesis, the habitual meaning was formerly signaled by attaching a second Imperfective suffix to a verb stem which already contains this suffix. An important piece of evidence in favor of this possibility is given by the following synchronic phenomenon. In Kolyma Yukaghir, the combination of the light Imperfective with an Internal Imperfective



suffix (cf. Section 2) tends to function as the heavy Imperfective. In this morphological context, the non-habitual readings of the light Imperfective are virtually excluded, and the resulting forms typically occur in contrastive contexts characteristic of the heavy Imperfective, cf. (8) and (12):

- (12) *ta:t n'e+anure-t tuda: am-āi:-nu-l'eł' i odu-pe*  
 so RECP+love-SS:IPFV long.ago die-ITER-IPFV-INFR-3PL:INTR Yukaghir-PL  
 'That is how the Yukaghirs used to die from love long ago.' (Nikolaeva 1989:T35)

Examples like in (12) show that the context of another imperfective suffix can enforce habitual interpretation of the light Imperfective. Hence, it may be hypothesized that a similar disambiguation could be achieved by combining two regular imperfective suffixes.

It is clear, however, that this is only possible if habitual belongs to the set of contextual sub-meanings of the suffix involved. For example, the synchronic phenomenon exemplified in (12) does not exist in Tundra Yukaghir, where the current meaning of the light Imperfective suffix is strictly progressive. Hence, this hypothesis also implies that the light Imperfective covered habitual meaning at an earlier stage of development. Since the heavy Imperfective exists in both Yukaghir languages, this observation pertains to the common Yukaghir stage and thus suggests that the modern Tundra Yukaghir Progressive has evolved from a common Yukaghir Imperfective.

To sum up, whatever the specific hypothesis, any diachronic link between a Progressive and a Habitual/Generic must involve an Imperfective, simply because this is the only category which provides a semantic "bridge" between otherwise distinct progressive and habitual meanings. Hence, if the Tundra Yukaghir Progressive had never functioned as a general Imperfective, there could be no diachronic relationship between the light and heavy Imperfective suffixes.

## 5. Imperfective and Relative Present

If the Imperfective-to-Progressive hypothesis introduced in 3.3 is accepted, it can still be argued that this development is simply not an instance of grammaticalization, insofar as the meaning of the light suffix has been restricted as a result of grammaticalization of a contrasting suffix, rather than by virtue of its own semantic evolution. If so, then the Yukaghir case cannot count as a valid counterexample to the general unidirectionality hypothesis. This section is intended to show that the hypothesized Imperfective-to-Progressive development in Tundra Yukaghir is very similar to genuine grammaticalization, so that there seem to be no empirical reasons to consider it as an essentially different process.

An important structural change in grammaticalization is the rise of **paradigmatic oppositions**, i.e. of mutual exclusivity among items which are, in principle, semantically compatible and used to co-occur freely at an earlier stage of development (the most commonly cited instance of this phenomenon is the English system of modal auxiliaries). Lehmann (1995:123) describes such grammatical constraints in terms of loss of variability, which is taken to be a major criterion of grammaticalization. Now according to this criterion, the Tundra Yukaghir Progressive is more grammaticalized than the Kolyma Yukaghir Imperfective, since it is paradigmatically opposed to Inferential. Furthermore, this is the only significant structural distinction between these suffixes, hence the only applicable criterion of grammaticalization.

The Inferential suffix (TK *-l'el-*) is compatible with the Kolyma Yukaghir light Imperfective (cf. (13a)), as well as with the heavy Imperfective suffixes in both Yukaghir languages (cf. (13b) and (14)).

- (13) a. *jurgu: molho-n o:ĩi:-gi ilbu-nu-l'el.*  
**K** hole inside-PROL water-3 flow-IPFV-INFR(INTR:3)  
 '(It turned out that) the water was flowing through the hole.'
- b. *āa:j-e, tabaq-e omni:-n āomo:ie-pul moj-nunnu-l'el' a:*  
 tea-ACC tobacco-ACC kin-AT elder-PL hold-HAB-INFR-3PL:TR  
 '(They say that) tea and tobacco were usually kept by kin elders.'
- (14) *tü tude kone-pul-hat tude na:di-j-o:l-hane*  
**T** PRXM his partner-PL-ABL PERS:3SG need-0-RESNR-ACC  
*men-nun-l'el-u-m.*  
 take-HABG-INFR-0-TR(3)  
 '(They say that) he used to take from his partners whatever he needed.'

For the Tundra Yukaghir Progressive, such forms are impossible. As shown by examples like in (13a), the progressive and inferential **meanings** are easily compatible. Hence, the constraint on compatibility appears to be imposed by the grammar (rather than being motivated semantically) and thus constitutes a clear indication of a more advanced grammaticalization. In effect, this constraint draws the light Imperfective suffix out of the domain of derivational morphology and integrates it into an inflectional paradigm. If the Imperfective-to-Progressive development was determined by grammaticalization of the Habitual, as suggested in 3.3, it remains unclear why it should be accompanied by the rise of a paradigmatic opposition between Progressive and Inferential. This opposition indicates that something beyond the influence of a contrasting suffix must have been involved in this process.

As it seems, the additional factor which has played a major role in the Imperfective-to-Progressive shift is grammaticalization of the light Imperfective into a **Relative Present** in medial verb forms, which has taken place in Tundra Yukaghir. If used in an Imperfective medial form (see Section 2), the light Imperfective signifies that the event is ongoing at the time of reference, as determined by the main clause, cf. the contrast between (15a) and (15b):

- (15) a. *lewdie-nu-rë t'a:rt'eqa:n mon-i*  
 T eat-PROG-SS:IPFV Ch. say-INTR:3  
 'While eating, Charchahan said [...]'
- b. *sajre-pul jawner neregej-rë me-jaba" i*  
 eagle-PL all get.struck-SS:IPFV AFFMT-die-3PL:INTR  
 'All the eagles were shocked and died.'

The light Imperfective suffix is impossible in the Perfective medial forms, since they are incompatible with the relative present reading (see Section 2).

In Kolyma Yukaghir, the light Imperfective does not express relative present, as shown by its compatibility with Perfective medial forms, cf.:

- (16) a. *juö-nu-delle mon-i "omos"*  
 K [look-IPFV-SS:PFV]say-INTR:3SG [good-INTR:3]  
 'He looked at it for some time and said "It is good"' (Nikolaeva 1989:T9)
- b. *mido-nu-lle ada:-n ejre-lle jelohude*  
 roam-IPFV-SS:PFV there-PROL walk-SS:PFV back:DIR  
*n'a:s'eda-j-l'el" i*  
 return-PFV-INFR-3PL:INTR  
 'They roamed there for some time and came back.'

The Kolyma Yukaghir Imperfective preserves its essentially aspectual semantics in medial forms, i.e. it signals that the event is viewed as having some internal temporal structure (in the context of a Perfective medial form, it is usually employed to indicate that the event was taking place during a protracted period of time). Thus, both the development of the light Imperfective into the Progressive in finite forms and its grammaticalization into the Relative Present in medial forms took place only in Tundra Yukaghir. To be sure, this observation does not prove that there is a causal link between these processes, yet it strongly suggests that they are not independent of each other.

There are two additional arguments in favor of an intrinsic relation between these processes. To begin with, the relative present and progressive meanings are very similar: in both cases, the suffix signifies that the event is ongoing at the time

## *From Imperfective to Progressive*

of reference, the only difference being that the time of reference is determined by the main clause in one case, but by a broader narrative context in the other. In other words, the Imperfective-to-Progressive and Imperfective-to-Relative Present developments involve essentially the same semantic change. It seems also worth noting that the context of medial clause precludes habitual reading of the light Imperfective, insofar as clause chains establish temporal relations only between individual events.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this context may have endowed the semantic component "single event" in the light Imperfective suffix (this mechanism of semantic change is described in (Bybee et al. 1994:295-296) for modal meanings developing in subordinate clauses).

More importantly, this hypothesis reveals the semantic motivation for the paradigmatic opposition between the Progressive and Inferential markers. In different-subject medial forms the Inferential signals relative past, so that the light Imperfective and the Inferential are opposed as contrasting members of the same grammatical opposition, cf.:

- (17) a. *oqomoni ta:t orn'ie-nu-da-ha n'awn'iklie-lë wa:j kelu-l.*  
T suddenly [so cry-PROG-3-DS] polar.fox-FOC again come-SF  
'Suddenly, when he was crying, the polar fox came again.'
- b. *ta:t mol-l'el-da-ha sa:nmonil'e-le juo" u-mle*  
[so say-INFR-3-DS] forest-FOC see-PL-OF:3  
'After he had said this, they saw a forest.'

Since the general grammatical constraint on compatibility with the Inferential is semantically motivated only in the context of medial forms, it seems plausible to assume that this context has played a major role in the evolution of the light Imperfective suffix.

To sum up, the grammaticalization of the light Imperfective into the Relative Present seems to constitute an intrinsic component of the Imperfective-to-Progressive evolution in Tundra Yukaghir. This means that not only the Progressive-to-Imperfective developmental path is not unidirectional, but the reverse semantic change may occur as a result of further grammaticalization, rather than just as a side-effect of other developments in the same semantic domain.

## 6. Conclusion

The case of Yukaghir suggests that a universal diachronic theory of tense and aspect systems should account for bi-directional diachronic links between major

<sup>5</sup> The combination of events expressed by a chain can be marked as habitual only as a whole, by means of the Habitual marker on the finite verb.

cross-linguistic categories. In particular, it turns out that Dahl's (1985) original hypothesis of a bi-directional link between progressive and imperfective is supported by empirical evidence. A more general conclusion to be drawn from this case study is that grammaticalization can involve **semantic specification**, hence, the unidirectionality hypothesis for evolution of grammatical meanings must be rejected on empirical grounds.

The same empirical claim is made by Kuteva (1999) on the basis of other examples, namely, the development of a Present Perfect into a Hodiernal Past in Alicante Spanish (274-275), and the Counterfactual-to-Proximative development in Bulgarian (275-277). She suggests that, in order to account for such examples, a theory of grammaticalization should draw a stricter distinction between the "**specific-to-general**" and "**concrete-to-abstract**" dimensions of semantic change. The possibility of "backward" movement is attested only for the former dimension, which means that the unidirectionality hypothesis is empirically falsified only as far as the specific-to-general continuum is concerned.

This proposal appears particularly promising for the case discussed here. The Imperfective-to-Progressive development clearly involves semantic specification, since the semantic component "single event" must be added for a general Imperfective to evolve into a Progressive. On the other hand, the resulting meaning is arguably more abstract than the original one. In fact, the meaning of the Tundra Yukaghir Progressive amounts to two rather abstract semantic features, it signifies (i) a single-event situation which is (ii) simultaneous with the time of reference. In contrast with this, no references to an abstract "imperfective meaning" (e.g. in terms of "internal temporal structure") can suffice to describe the semantics of an imperfective marker in a given language. In particular, the only way to describe the semantics of the Kolyma Yukaghir Imperfective is to list the types of situations which can be encoded by means of this suffix. Although the meaning is more general, it is hardly reducible to a set of abstract semantic features. To put it differently, the semantics of the Kolyma Yukaghir Imperfective centers on the internal temporal structure of a situation, whereas the Tundra Yukaghir Progressive pertains to temporal relations between events. From this point of view, the Imperfective-to-Progressive development in Tundra Yukaghir resembles the more familiar processes of Aspect-to-Tense grammaticalization and can be accounted for as a shift from a more concrete to a more abstract semantic domain.

## References

- Bybee, Joan L. and Östen Dahl. 1989. The creation of tense and aspect systems in the languages of the world. *Studies in Language* 13-1: 51-103.

*From Imperfective to Progressive*

- Bybee, Joan L., Revere Perkins & William Pagliuca. 1994. *The evolution of grammar. Tense, aspect and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1976. *Aspect*. Cambridge University Press.
- Dahl, Östen. 1985. *Tense and Aspect Systems*. Basil Blackwell.
- Dahl, Östen. 1999. Grammaticalization and the life cycles of constructions. Forthcoming.
- Kuteva, Tanya A. 1999. Specification in Grammar. In M.K.Hiraga, C.Sinha & S.Wilcox (eds.) *Cultural, psychological and typological issues in cognitive linguistics*. Amstrdam: Benjamins. 269-284.
- Lehmann, Christian. 1995 (1982). Thoughts on grammaticalization. LINCOM EUROPA
- Krejnoviã Öruhim Ä. 1982. *Issledovanija i materialy po jukagirskomu jazyku*. Leningrad: Nauka.
- Nikolaeva Irina A. 1989. *Fol'klor jukagirov verhnej Kolymy*. Yakutsk.
- Elena Maslova,  
5 Murray, 311,  
San Francisco, CA 94112
- Maslova@jps.net