

Alexander Krasovitsky (University of Surrey)

Morphosyntactic change in Russian: a corpus-based approach

Russian has undergone a remarkable degree of morphosyntactic change over the last two centuries. Changes have affected the distribution of cases (e.g., genitive/accusative on direct objects), number values (for example, in subject-predicate agreement), and the choice of long and short forms of predicate adjectives. This resulted in competing morphosyntactic choices. To capture the trajectory of change we have investigated morphosyntactic variation within ten equal time periods using statistics extracted from a corpus of literary texts from 1801 to 2000.

Our study reveals a complex relationship between historical change and synchronic variation. Morphosyntactic choices are typically conditioned by multiple factors. As the innovative form expands over time, the role of conditioning factors changes: some become more prominent, others gradually diminish. To take just one example, in 19th century Russian verb aspect played a dominating role in the variation of genitive/accusative objects of negated transitive verbs: perfectives took both cases, while imperfectives favoured the genitive. As the accusative spread in the 20th century, aspectual difference became less important than the noun's lexical semantics, which increased in significance with both aspects. We will show that while the direction of change remains constant, there may be a subtle switch in the factors conditioning variation.