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The Prosodic System of Northwest Russian Dialects

Topic of Research

In my dissertation I examine the accentual systems of northwest Russian dialects in two ways: within a framework of historical linguistics and within a framework of acoustical phonetics. The research is based on vast amount of data which was collected in dialectal fieldwork in northwest Russia.

Until recently scholars have believed that Slavic languages had inherited three accentual patterns (AP) from their prehistoric ancestor. Words of AP-A and AP-B had the accent essentially staying in one place, whereas in AP-C it jumped from syllable to syllable ('mobile') as endings or prefixes were added to the word. In the last two decades members of the Moscow accentological school, led by V. A. Dybo and S. L. Nikolaev, have suggested that there was a fourth pattern, AP-D, representing a composite of AP-B and AP-C and showing different later reflexes in different dialect areas. This fourth pattern, the mixed paradigm, was first noted in masculine nouns in Croatian dialects (a South Slavic branch). A similar phenomenon was found in west Ukraine and in the northwest and west of Russia in the geographical area of the "Krivichi" tribe, which populated this area around the 10th century.

In my research, I conduct a comprehensive study of the accentual and prosodic system of the "Krivichi" dialect. It contains a comparative dialectal study and a reconstruction of an accentual system common to all the northwest dialects. A special attention in my dissertation is given to reflexes of AP-D. I attempt to prove that AP-D is indeed a case of retention rather than innovation, and that it points to an archaic isogloss of Common Slavic origin.

In addition, I conduct an acoustical research of the accentual system in the northwest dialects and compare them with standard Russian. I examine the intonation contours of sentences and their correlates with the accentual system of the words.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

My project on Russian dialects has implications for the fields of Slavic accentology and general linguistics. Very little has been done in this area by American Linguists because of lack of access to rural areas in Russia; and the native Russian speakers who come to the US, are speakers of the standard Russian language. It is important to record older generation speakers while still possible. The archaic rural dialects in

Russia have been rapidly eroded in the course of recent generations due to the modernization of society and more extensive education. Language variations are being lost, and with them we lose the additional evidence of human migration.

An extensive analysis of the recorded material will enable us reconstruct the previous accentual system of the East-Slavic languages and dialects and to follow the historical human migration patterns in this area. The phonetic study of my research could have impact on phonological theory and phonetics, which are founded upon the analyses of typologically diverse prosodic systems, but have not yet confronted the Russian dialectal variants.

Additionally, the recorded data will be used for developing materials for sociolinguistic and culture courses dealing with rural Russia.

Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

For the historical-dialectal part of my research, I recorded villagers (mostly women) onto audio tapes. With each consultant I had several interviews. First I recorded just plain texts which were elicited in a conversation with the consultants. These recordings include narratives of local tales, histories, everyday life, and spontaneous speech through conversations. After that I used contextual elicitations based on a questionnaire. This questionnaire is designed to elicit the maximum amount of information on the accentual behavior of the inherited Proto-Slavic lexicon in all morphological categories. For example, I would first ask the consultant whether she knew a specific word. If the answer is positive, I would ask her for the meaning of this word and the local pronunciation. Usually, an associative text would follow. Next, I would create a sentence where she has to insert the word in a specific grammatical form, which I am looking for. Sometimes when I suspect that the form is not a dialectal one, but a borrowing from the standard Russian, I would create a conversation where this word will have to occur in the form I need in a spontaneous speech. For this part of the research I recorded mostly women of age 60 and older whose mothers were from the same area.

After returning from the expeditions I analyzed the data in Moscow. That process includes, listening several times to the data, transcribing it, and creating a data base in my computer. In addition to my recorded data, I got an access to a dialectal archive of the Russian Academy of the Sciences. There, I obtained additional data of northwest dialects from Pskov area, and Toropets district. After creating the data base for all the material of all the dialects (I have around 20 dialects altogether), I could start the comprehensive analysis. During my stay in Moscow I consulted the Moscow accentologist V. A. Dybo who had valuable suggestions for my historical and comparative analysis.

I also recorded materials for my acoustical study. These recordings were done in a restricted contextual environment. There was a carrier sentence which consultants were asked to repeat several times, and each time with a target word from my list, such as: "The teacher wrote on the board the word _____."

After consultants learned the task, I only needed to say the word, and they would insert the word in the carrier sentence. For this study I recorded people in the northwest and west areas, and also in Moscow.

My research site included villages in the areas of Tversk, Smolensk, and Moscow. In the Moscow area I choose the most western parts in order to establish borders of the dialect with the accentual deviation from the standard Russian. I recorded data in the district of Mozhaisk from villages such as Shoxovo, Gridnevo, Nikolaevka, Uvarovka. In the Tver area I recorded in the district of Vyshnii Volochok in villages such as, Pochinok, Soroki, Shepel'kino, Grjady. In the Smolensk area I recorded in the district of Gagarin in villages such as, Barsuki, El'nja, Saburovo.

Research findings and preliminary conclusions

I found that in most of the recorded northwest and west Russian dialects similar accentual pattern occurs, which is different from standard Russian. Quantitative analysis points to a relative chronology of this accentual isogloss. The most western part of Moscow area shows a different type of accentual system. Based on that, the most eastern borders of the Kriviči dialect could be established. There are additional archaic features in, for example, Pskov dialects, which confirm the hypothesis that these dialects were different from those upon which standard Russian is based. Thus it looks like the migration to this area was done by separate groups rather than by one East Slavic group. Later, the different groups converged and created one linguistic continuum, the East Slavic zone. However, the different dialectal features in this zone preserve those differences, which point to a case of retention rather than innovation.

Future research agendas

My historical analysis has not been finished yet. With the assistance from V. A. Dybo I attempt to find the linguistic environment that created this accentual isogloss in other Slavic languages as well as in related languages beyond Slavic, such as Baltic (Lithuanian, Latvian).

Since I have a large amount of recorded data, I intend to continue to study the northwest dialects. In the future I intend to concentrate on the acoustical part of my study. There are other issues that will need to be addressed in the area of social linguistics. One of them is “how the local dialectal variants coexist with the standard Russian language simultaneously with the mass media, centralized education, and other factors?” Based on the data, I'd like to write about the life of Russian villages in contemporary Russia.