Slavic Linguistic Change and Speech

Alan Timberlake, Columbia University

Linguistic theory, from structuralism through generative grammar, privileges an abstract level of linguistic structure (de Saussure *système*, Chomsky *competence*) over observable facts of language usage (de Saussure *parole*, Chomsky *performance*). That dichotomy limits change to change in system. The presentation here sees change as a matter of speech.

Maintenance of archaisms: Slavic languages have maintained gender and declensional class in nouns and the two-stems of verbs for a thousand years. These are traditional, language-specific patterns learned by imitation of usage.

Speech as model for imitation and innovation: First-language learners imitate the usage they hear. When early on Zhenya Gvozdev (p. 175) said *дай супа* (1.9) or *дай [х]л'еба* (1.11), he used the partitive construction that is frequent in baby talk but restricted in adult Russian. In Old Czech verbs with a long thematic vowel (like {pros-iː-} acquired a new first singular present ending ({pros-iː-m}, in imitation of the five archaic but frequent athematic verbs (*dátь* 'give', etc.). In both instances, the innovation is motivated by frequency, which is a quality of speech, not system.

Internal origin and extension of change: As the dual of nouns disappeared, duals oxymoronically provided the model for modifying plural morphology. We night guess that duals of paired objects were first extended to small coherent groups and then to plurals, in a pattern familiar from many cases; these provide a model for the extension to other lexical items. In fact, uses of etymological duals as plural increased over time, from 67 nouns by 1831 to 180 by 1891 (Beaulieux "Pluriel", 202). Along the way there is competition between the two forms. In Tolstoy's description of hair, the old plural refers to unkempt strands of hair (*мужик в фуражке, из-под которой торчали **спутанные волосы***), while the dual-turned-plural refers to Anna's structured coiffure (*мотая головой [Анна]] отцепляла **волоса***). The example shows elegantly how the life cycle of a change lies in *parole*: a seemingly insignificant fact is extended to other words; by cultural inertia, it is to other linguistic contexts and to other groups of speakers. Beaulieux saw the origin in the *métier*, from which it spread to "le monde des petits fonctionnaires, la bourgeoisie, puis les intellectuels et finissent par passer même dans la langue de chancellerie" (212).

External origins, language functions: Slavic can import constructions that do not fit Slavic typology. The independent infinitive construction seen in famous texts such as *ꙗко дивити сѧ пилатови* (Mk 15.5) 'so that Pilate had to marvel', or *а четвертому не быти* 'and a fourth [Rome] is not to be' calqued from Greek is not easy to reconcile with models of syntax which begin was a single basic structure S → NP VP. How does the dative noun behave both as the target of modality and the agent of its verb? Even worse, in Novgorod impersonal infinitives, which cannot have a nominative subject, have split case marking for objects: nouns marked as animate use the animate accusative (*Не луче **Бога** молити*) while inanimates use the nominative: (*тъбѣ ръже свѣѧ снѧти*). This nominative object seems to violate Slavic or even universal constraints. It is possible because it was borrowed from Finnic during generations of cohabitation. In fact, North Russian absorbed other grammatical features from adjacent languages. Russian used the native preposition *y* to express all kinds of relations (possession, debt, monetary source). From Low German (through the Hanse) Novgorod acquired 'half' numerals (*поло трьтиѧ десѧто* 'half of the thirties' decade' = '25'), and it has the Northern European use of pronouns in legal discourse.

Novgorod developed a civic (commercial and legal) discourse, subsequently borrowed by Moscow. The history of languages involves not only linguistic form but also function.