

For general sessions or specifically for theme session on:

Title: Cognitive and construction-based approaches to syntactic evolution

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Oblique Subjects in Slavic: From Common Slavic to Contemporary Russian

Barðdal and Eythórsson make the case in several studies (2003, 2005, and 2009 to appear) for oblique subject constructions (those with non-nominative case-marking) in the Germanic languages, not merely as a contemporary development, but as part of an Indo-European inheritance of a range of possible subject constructions. Although the Slavic languages are greatly affected by so-called Nominative Sickness (cf. Barðdal and Eythórsson 2003) — a growing tendency to generalize nominative case marking for subjects to the detriment of oblique subject constructions — there are strong signs of inherited oblique subject constructions as well as new developments of non-nominative subject marking in Russian. Utilizing corpus data, this paper takes up the question of oblique subjects in Slavic, with regard to inheritances from Indo-European and with regard to the further evolution of subject constructions in Russian from its Common Slavic origins through Old Russian to Contemporary Russian, including both the standard language and dialectal data.

Cognitive Linguists are turning in increasing numbers to quantitative methods in their research. In the introduction to Gries and Stefanowitsch (2006:1-17), Gries outlines numerous studies utilizing quantitative and statistical methods, illustrating how the more intuitive practices of Cognitive Linguistics can be supported by “robust empirical and objective evidence” (8). Divjak and Gries (forthcoming and 2006), Gries and Divjak (forthcoming) and Divjak (2006), as examples among many such studies, present compelling analyses of near-synonyms in Russian and English using behavioral profiling, ID tags, and cluster analysis. Clancy (2006) and Croft and Poole (2008) make the case for using the Optimal Classification method of Multidimensional Scaling (MDS-OC) as a rigorously defined mathematical method for revealing structure in language in a way that closely matches traditional Cognitive Linguistic analyses. Furthermore, these quantitative methods allow one to tackle large-scale problems that would otherwise be insoluble by introspection or empirical observation alone. Conceptual spaces and semantic maps created with MDS-OC provide a means of confirming, refining, or challenging those analyses, while acknowledging their strengths and fleshing-out their conclusions, giving teeth to the powerful insights of cognitive linguistics.

This paper will report on corpus data analyzed using these techniques as applied to the question of oblique subjects in Russian to provide a finer grained description and an alternative to the typical tests for subjecthood employed in formalist accounts of subjects (cf. Moore and Perlmutter 2000, Greenberg and Franks 1991), both oblique and non-oblique.

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