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Title: Sequence of Tenses in Russian? A Corpus-based Study of Tense Choice in Complement Clauses

Abstract:

It is generally believed that Russian has no sequence of tenses (SoT) in complement clauses and the choice of absolute tense over relative is considered to be a typical error in the interlanguage of non-standard speakers of Russian as a foreign language (RFL) whose native language features SoT. However, all uses of absolute tense in RFL cannot qualify as errors, since Russian shows a great deal of variation in tense choice in complement clauses. One of the factors governing the choice is the semantics of the matrix verb (Barentsen, 1996; Гиро-Вебер, 1975 *inter alia*). Specifically, speech or mental verbs are said to strictly require the relative tense, whereas sensory, emotion, and existential matrix verbs allow for both absolute and relative tense patterns. However, the exact distributional patterns of tenses in complement clauses have never been studied, to the best of my knowledge.

This paper is a systematic corpus-based study of the variation in tense choice across the semantic classes of the matrix verbs in two language varieties: (i) Standard Russian as represented in the Russian National Corpus and (ii) the interlanguage of learners of RFL as represented in the Russian Learner Corpus developed in the Linguistic Laboratory of Corpus Technologies of Higher School of Economics. I examine those clausal complexes where the matrix verb in the past tense and the verb of the complement clause denote simultaneous actions.

The analysis identified an implicational hierarchy of verbal semantic classes ranging from the least likely to tolerate past tense in the complement clauses to the most likely ones: speech < mental < sensory ≈ emotion < existential. Predictably, learners' interlanguage has demonstrated an expressed preference for the past tense in complement clauses. Unexpectedly, though, the above hierarchy holds for the learners' variety of Russian as well. The findings of this paper contribute to the typology of complement clauses and have pedagogical implications for teaching RFL.

References:

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