Old Languages, New Ways?

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Abstract

Historical linguistics has always been a cornerstone in Russian studies, and most programs have traditionally included courses in Old Church Slavonic (OCS) and the history of Russian. But do such courses have a place in curricula of the future? In this article, I argue that historical linguistics is more relevant than ever, and I discuss seven pedagogical principles for courses in historical linguistics. I suggest that future courses should be more theory-based and technology-based, but that the centerpiece should still be reading of medieval texts.

0.   Introduction

The last couple of years I have been working on a textbook entitled *How Russian Came to Be the Way it Is* (Nesset 2015), which follows the history of the Russian language from Common Slavic to modern times. The project has given me ample opportunity to reflect on how to teach historical linguistics, and in this article I will discuss seven pedagogical principles that emerge from the book. However, while working on the present article, I realized that the question "how to teach historical linguistics?" presupposes a more fundamental question, namely "should we teach historical linguistics at all?", which I will address in section 1. The pedagogical principles are explored in sections 2 through 8, before I summarize the contribution of the article in section 9.

1.   Why teach historical linguistics?

Do today's students of Russian really need courses in historical linguistics? Are OCS and Old Russian still relevant in the information age? While at first glance historical linguistics may seem an old-fashioned and esoteric discipline, I suggest that it is highly relevant in the twenty-first century. In order to understand and analyze ethnic and political conflicts in the Slavic world of today, students need a thorough understanding of the genetic relationships and the development of the Slavic languages, and they furthermore need to understand the basic principles of historical linguistics. In the following, I will discuss a couple of examples from "dilettante linguistics", which testify to the relevance of historical linguistics in our time.

One of the wonderful things about being a linguist is that wherever you go you meet people who are interested in language – and very often have strong opinions about language. Unfortunately, some of the strong-opinioned laymen consider themselves experts. The result is dilettante linguistics, i.e. linguistic "analysis" carried out by people who lack the necessary competence in the field. As pointed out by Zaliznjak (2009), dilettante linguistics is potentially harmful in the Internet age, since the internet makes it easy to propagate all kinds of dilettante

approaches to language. Regretably, dilettante linguists are taken seriously by large groups of readers; for laymen, it is not always simple to distinguish between trustworthy information and outlandish proposals.

Among the favorite topics of dilettante linguists are etymology, language development and the genetic relationships among languages, i.e. core issues in historical linguistics. A prominent example from Scandinavia with relevance for Slavic studies is the book *Jakten på Odin. På sporet av vår fortid* (2001), where Thor Heyerdahl and Per Lillieström propose a number of folk etymologies (popular etymologies), e.g.:

(1)   *Azov* (name of city) = *as-hof*, i.e. 'temple of the (Scandinavian) gods'
(2)   *Udiny* (Russian name of the Caucasian people *Udi*) = *Odin's people*

Popular etymologies like these are advanced in order to motivate the theory that Odin, the god that was worshipped in Scandinavia in the viking age, was a king who lived around Azov before he migrated to Scandinavia in the year 63 B.C. For our purposes, in-depth discussion of the etymologies in (1) is superfluous, since Hovdhaugen et al (2002) have conclusively demonstrated their untenablity. As pointed out by Hovdhaugen et al. (2002, 103), the form *áss*, which Heyerdahl and Lillieström (2001, 156 et passim) relate to Azov, is from Old Norse, which was spoken roughly a millenium after the time when Odin and the other gods allegedly dwelled in the Azov area. Around 63 b.C., the relevant form would be *ansu-* or *ansi-*, which unfortunately (for Heyerdahl and Lillieström) does not resemble the name Azov very much.

A similar point can be made about the superficial similarity between *udiny* and *Odin* that motivates the folk etymology in (2). At the time when Odin supposedly lived in the Azov area, his name would have had the form *Wotan* or *Wodan*, which makes the relationship to the Udi people in the Caucasus less than obvious (Hovdhaugen et al. 2002, 104). In addition, the element *–in–*, which is crucial for the etymology in (2), is from the *Russian* name of the people, and therefore hardly relevant.

Although the etymologies in (1) and (2) are flawed from the point of view of (professional) linguistics, it may not be easy for a non-linguist to see these problems, especially since the etymologies were advanced by a very famous person. What kind of competence is needed in order to be able to understand the pseudo-scientific nature of the proposals in (1) and (2)? In addition to general competence in the field of history, one needs to know about regular sound change ("sound laws") and their chronology. Only a person who knows that language doesn't change in erratic ways is in a position to resist the temptation to accept folk etymologies based on accidental similarities between individual lexical items. In short, what is needed is basic competence in historical linguistics.

A particularly dangerous combination is dilettante linguistics and political conflict. Consider the following quote:

(3)   "Kak i sama ideja ukrainstva, 'mova' – iskusstvennoe, ne organičnoe istorii
        zapadnoj Rusi javlenie, ètakij filologičeskij gomunkul. Sozdavalsja ukrainskij

jazyk gruppoj l'vovskich (lembergskich) učenych i literatorov na avstrijskie den´gi, vo vtoroj polovine XIX veka."
(http://newsland.com/news/detail/id/469746/)

Quotes like this, where dilettante linguists or people citing them argue that the Ukrainian language is artificial or constructed, are widespread on the internet. I will refrain from commenting on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict itself and the rhetorical strategies used by the author of (3), since these issues are irrelevant for the present study. What is important in the present context is a linguistic problem, namely that the author fails to draw a distinction between standard language and non-standard varieties. If the quote in (3) is about non-standard varieties of Ukrainian (i.e. Ukrainian dialects), the claim is false. As is well known in Slavic linguistics (cf. e.g. Shevelov 1979), the Ukrainian dialects have developed gradually like any other (Slavic) dialects. If the quote is taken as a claim about the Ukrainian standard language, it is true, but trivially so, since all standard languages *by definition* are the product of conscious standardization. In other words, by definition all standard languages are "artificial constructs":

(4)   "Whereas one thinks of normal language development as taking place in a rather haphazard way, largely below the threshold of consciousness of the speakers, *standard languages are the result of a direct and deliberate intervention by society* [my emphasis. TN]. This intervention, called 'standardisation', produces a standard language where before there were just 'dialects' (i.e. non-standard varieties)." (Hudson 1980, 32)

Once again we must ask what kind of competence is needed to see the linguistic problems with assertions like (3), and once again the answer involves basic competence in historical linguistics, in this case the distinction between the subdisciplines we may refer to as "history of standard language" and "historical dialectology" (see e.g. Uspenskij 2002, 7ff.).

To summarize, in order to prevent students from being fooled by dilettante linguistic "arguments", we need to give them some basic competence in historical linguistics. Students who are equipped with knowledge about the basic principles of historical linguistics, as well as the history of the Slavic languages, are in a position to reach their own informed opinions on how relevant various linguistic claims are to the political situation in the Slavic world today. With this conclusion in mind, let us turn to the question of how to build up such competence, which will occupy us in the remainder of the article.

2.   The Text Principle – linguistics with texts as the centerpiece

When I was taught OCS and Old Russian as a graduate student, the approach was essentially philological. We were given texts to read, and the teachers commented on factual and linguistic issues as we were reading. Although I liked reading the texts, I was frustrated, because I had a hard time getting an overview of the language system. I missed systematic overviews of the grammar and phonology, and the changes that the language had undergone since Common Slavic.

When as a young linguist I got a chance to teach OCS and Old Russian for the first time, I decided to do things differently. Instead of the philological approach of my teachers, I adopted what we may refer to as a "linguistic approach". I provided short overviews of grammar and phonology, and discussed the main linguistic changes in some detail. Texts were only introduced towards the end of the course, and we did not spend much classroom time reading them, since (as I reasoned) the students had been given the necessary linguistic tools to handle the texts themselves. To my great surprise and disappointment, I had to realize that my approach fell on its face. In part, this may have been due to my lack of experience as a teacher, but the students found the linguistic tools I provided rather abstract, and it seemed far from obvious to them how they were supposed to be used.

Over the years I have experimented and tried to strike a balance between the philological and linguistic approaches in various ways. After some twenty years of teaching experience, I have come up with an approach that I refer to as "linguistics with texts as the centerpiece". The students are offered a crash course in Old Russian nouns and verbs and are then given their first text to read. They realize that they are actually able to make sense of a text written almost a thousand years ago, and this inspires them to learn more about grammar and the changes it has undergone since the middle ages. We then read more texts and work on historical grammar and phonology throughout the semester. However, the grammar is not presented as commentary to the texts, but is instead addressed in separate presentations. This facilitates a more systematic overview of the grammar and is the reason why I refer to the approach as "linguistic", rather than "philological".

In order for the "linguistics with texts as the centerpiece" approach to work, students need a textbook offering an accessible introduction to the history of the Russian language. However, at the same time they need a handbook, i.e. a reference tool where they can easily find the paradigms and other grammatical information they need while reading texts. I could not find an ideal book on the market, so I started working on the book that will appear as Nesset 2015.

3.   The Morphology First Principle – Phonology Taking the Back Seat

This principle is a corollary of the principle discussed in the previous section, but it deserves attention as a separate principle, since it goes against traditional approaches to teaching OCS and the history of Russian. Standard textbooks present the historical phonology first, and then proceed to morphology (cf. e.g. Ivanov 1990, Borkovskij and Kuznecov 2004, and Vlasto 1986). The logic behind this approach is presumably that it is useful to have a basic understanding of historical phonology before one studies morphology, since the effect of phonological change is visible in the morphological system. For instance, the second palatalization created an alternation between /k/ and /c/ in stem-final position (cf. Old Russian *ruka* (nominative singular) ~ *rucě* (dative/locative singular)). Clearly, it is useful to know about the second palatalization before you learn about the inflection of *ruka* and similar nouns.

However, two considerations have led me to present morphology before phonology. First of all, as explained in the previous section, I think it is important to

start reading texts as early as possible, and for this purpose the morphology of nouns and verbs is essential. A full understanding of phonology, on the other hand, can wait. The second consideration is that in my experience students find phonology harder than morphology. Language is essentially a means to convey meaning, and since phonology focuses on form rather than meaning, it comes across as abstract and difficult for students. However, if they are presented to the paradigms of words like *ruka*, they will see that the /k/ ~ /c/ alternation sets Old Russian apart from Contemporary Standard Russian, and therefore they have a motivation to find out how the alternation came about.

Admittedly, placing the chapters on morphology before the ones on phonology, as I have done in Nesset 2015, comes with a cost, since it forced me to include a number of cross-references to later chapters on phonology in the morphology sections. However, it seems to me that this disadvantage is outweighed by giving the readers what they really need first.[1]

4.   The Current Relevance Principle – Today's Exceptions are Yesterday's Rules

How can we arouse the students' curiosity about historical linguistics? Most students are not interested in OCS or Old Russian as such. Modern Russian tends to be considered more relevant, since it relates directly to their Russian language skills, which, in turn, are important for whatever aspect of Russian studies they want to pursue. In other words, the teacher of OCS and Old Russian is faced with the task of *creating* an interest in the subject. This is not an easy job.

A possible response to this problem, which teachers of OCS and Old Russian have adopted for generations, is to take modern Russian as the starting point for teaching historical linguistics. Students care about the exceptions and challenges of modern Russian grammar, and they may therefore be interested in learning about the diachronic processes that have created these exceptions. For instance, every student struggles with the consonant alternations in modern Russian verb inflection, and it is relevant for them to learn about the palatalizations that created this major challenge for second language learners of modern Russian. In a similar vein, the peculiar behavior of the so-called postfix *–sja* in modern Russian creates problems for second language learners, and it may be interesting for them to learn about the historical processes that targeted clitics in Old Russian – a field that has developed rapidly in recent years (cf. e.g. Zaliznjak 2008). The nominal system is also full of exceptions that can be explained historically; well known examples include irregular plurals originating from dual forms (e.g. *roga* 'antlers' and *berega* 'riverbanks') and reminiscenses from unproductive declensions such as *vremja* 'time', *telenok* 'calf' and *mat'* 'mother'. Doubtlessly, students can benefit from learning about the diachronic processes that created the exceptions, and this is the essence of the slogan "today's exceptions are yesterday's rules". In Nesset 2015, I have taken this seriously. I start each chapter with a brief discussion of the features of modern Russian that are relevant for the topic of the chapter.

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[1] Let me add that the chapters are written such that they can be read independently, and die-hard phonologists are welcome to read the phonology chapters before they turn to morphology.

5.   The Interactivity Principle – Today's Technology Meets Yesterday's Languages

It is a pedagogical truism that you learn more from doing things than from just reading about them. How can this be applied to courses in OCS and Old Russian? How can we make our courses in historical linguistics interactive? I argue that today's technology offers opportunities that we need to implement. I will discuss two of them.

With the advent of large electronic corpora, the theoretical linguist has got a new and powerful tool in his/her hands, and this tool can also be used for pedagogical purposes. While most corpus resources cover modern languages, the Russian National Corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru) also has a historical subcorpus, and the Tromsø Old Russian and OCS Treebank (TOROT, http://nestor.uit.no/) also contains key texts from OCS and Old Russian. On the basis of these and similar resources we can create exercises, and students can carry out searches and work on small-scale studies of a variety of grammatical phenomena. Data are just a keystroke away, and our classroom practice should take advantage of that fact.

The traditional textbook is just that – a book on paper. However, in the Internet age the very concept of "book" is changing rapidly. Can courses in historical linguistics benefit from these changes? I think the answer is "yes". While the traditional paper-based book is far from dead, there are good arguments for supplementing the paper-based textbook with internet-based resources. Let me briefly comment on three advantages. First, a site in addition to the paper-based book allows the author to update the book continuously. For example, it is possible to comment on new developments such as the discovery of new birch bark letters and the publication of new scholarly works. Second, an Internet site gives the author the opportunity to explain things in a dynamic fashion by means of presentations or videos. Thus, in derivations that involve multiple steps and several sound laws a video or presentation makes it possible to build up the derivation step by step. A case in point is the interaction of Havlik's law with the transition from /e/ to /o/ in Old Russian, where it is beneficial to first show the original word with the yers intact (e.g. *рьsъ* 'dog'), then show which yers are in weak position, before one clarifies the change of the strong yer to /e/, which subsequently turns into /o/. The third advantage of supplementing a book with an Internet site is that it facilitates interactivity. In addition to being able to look up things and access additional information, the students can engage in interactive exercises of various types. In short, they become active doers, not just passive readers – thanks to new technology.

6.   The Context Principle – Language Change and Historical Context

Above I have emphasized the value of reading texts. This provides a cultural anchor for the linguistic facts students have to acquire. However, the need for context goes beyond the texts. It is important that students are able to relate the history of the Russian language to Russian history in general.

Let us consider a concrete example. An important theme in medieval history is the tension and conflict between Moscow and Novgorod, which culminated in

Novgorod's final surrender in 1478. Is this political conflict relevant for the history of the Russian language? As Zaliznjak has argued recently, the Novgorodian influence on modern Russian may have been more extensive than traditionally assumed.[2] For instance, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that the impetus for the analogical leveling of the /k/ ~ /c/ alternation in nouns like *ruka* came from Novgorod, since Old Novgorodian did not have this alternation.

Although the last word has not been said about the Novgorodian influence on modern Russian, it is clear that in order to assess the basic idea, the student needs knowledge not only about the linguistic facts, but also about the relevant facts from political history. The question is how to ensure that the students build up both kinds of competence. Simply assuming that students will acquire knowledge about general history elsewhere seems unrealistic, since medieval history is not the most highly prioritized topic in the curricula of most universities. However, it seems equally unrealistic to spend a large segment of a course in Old Russian on political history. The solution I advocate in Nesset 2015 is to include a short introductory chapter on general history. While the relevant chapter does not do justice to the complexity of the topic, it offers an overview of important issues and gives a chronology of major events. In this way, the chapter provides the students with a "template", to which they can "anchor" the linguistic development that is the main topic of the book.

7.   The Think for Yourself Principle – the Relevance of Linguistic Theory

A worst-case scenario is for courses in historical linguistics to degenerate into force-feeding of accepted truths that students find irrelevant. This kind of teaching is not only a pedagogical disaster, but is also at variance with the *raison d'être* of universities, which is to stimulate critical thinking. How can courses in OCS and Old Russian become a source of inspiration for independent thinking rather than just memorization of "done-and-dusted facts"?

There is no single answer to this question, and some solutions have already been hinted at in section 5 about interactivity. In this section, I will explore another partial response, which involves linguistic theory. "Critical thinking" essentially means the ability to understand the logical connections between ideas and to evaluate and build up arguments. In short, we want our students to be able to form independent opinions of what they read, and eventually be able to carry out their own research. In order to do this, the students need certain theoretical tools. Clearly, students need to learn a number of sound laws, but in addition they need to reflect on what a sound law is, and they need to reflect on the strengths and limitations of a theory of exceptionless sound laws. Similarly, in addition to learning about the genetic relationships among the Slavic languages, it is helpful for the students to learn about the strengths and limitations of the family tree model as a model of genetic relationships compared to other models, e.g. the wave model.

While few if any scholars are likely to dispute the value of theoretical reflection, it is not trivial to build up this kind of competence. Far from all students who take courses in OCS or Old Russian have any particular interest in linguistics,

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[2] See interview with Zaliznjak available at http://www.onlinetv.ru/video/1607/?playFrom=240.

and teachers have limited time at their disposal. As pointed out in section 2, in my experience an overly theory-heavy approach does not appeal to most students. However, going to the other extreme and just "smuggling in" theoretical remarks here and there is not likely to have the desired effect either. Therefore, in Nesset 2015 I have included a short introductory chapter that presents and discusses the main concepts of historical linguistics, such as sound laws, analogy, the family tree model, the wave model, grammaticalization, etc. This approach has two advantages. First, the readers are offered a compact introduction, which they can go back to and use as a reference tool when reading the rest of the book. Second, readers who already have acquired the necessary skills in linguistics can skip the chapter. Time will show how successful this approach is in building competence in linguistic theory.

8.   The Frontier Principle – Cutting Edge Research in the Classroom

This principle expands on the discussion of linguistic theory in the previous section. A hallmark of (non-dilettante) science is the Socratic wisdom that "we know that we know nothing". In other words, a true linguist acknowledges that most of what we know is based on hypotheses, the truth of which cannot be demonstrated conclusively. In order to avoid the worst-case scenario described in the previous section, it seems important to present the hypotheses as hypotheses and not as indisputable facts. In my experience, students become inspired when they learn that certain data have been interpreted differently by different researchers, because this demonstrates that historical linguistics is not a set of accepted facts, but rather a dynamic field that is continuously developing. In short, there is a need for new generations of historical linguists with new ideas and different approaches. We should make a feature of telling our students about this.

Luckily, there is no shortage of controversial issues in the history of the Slavic languages. A classic example is the relative chronology of the Common Slavic palatalizations. In Nesset 2015, I present the different hypotheses and offer a short discussion of pros and cons. Another hotly debated question that is discussed in the book is the absence of the second palatalization in Old Novgorodian, and I also address more recent debated issues, such as the meaning of the Old Russian pluperfect (Sičinava 2014).

The challenge of the textbook author and the teacher is to strike a balance between established "facts" and innovative hypotheses. While cutting edge research has a motivating effect in the classroom, students obviously also need a solid understanding of the basic "facts" in order to be able to understand recent hypotheses and assess the pros and cons of debated ideas. The crucial importance of the teacher should not be underemphasized. Since a textbook author can only present the state of the art at the time of publication, it is the teacher's task to bring the latest developments to the classroom. Adopting classroom practices that facilitate solving this task may be the biggest pedagogical challenge the teacher of OCS and the history of Russian faces.

9. Concluding Remarks

Is historical linguistics an old-fashioned topic presenting "done-and-dusted facts" to students who are uninterested in memorizing them? No! Or, at least, courses in OCS and Old Russian do not have to be like that, since – as I have argued – historical linguistics is highly relevant in the twenty-first century. In a time when the Slavic world is tormented by ethnical and political conflict, we need students who have basic competence in historical linguistics. Only students who have a solid understanding of the development of the Slavic languages and the relationships among them are in a position to understand and analyze their relevance to the current ethnic and political conflicts in the Slavic world.

I have discussed seven pedagogical principles for courses in historical linguistics. By way of conclusion, let me repeat them as simple slogans:

(5)   The Text Principle: organize your classes around the reading of medieval texts.
(6)   The Morphology First Principle: teach morphology before phonology.
(7)   The Current Relevance Principle: present yesterday's rules as the explanations for today's exceptions.
(8)   The Interactivity Principle: make your courses interactive by means of modern technology.
(9)   The Context Principle: connect language change to the general historical context.
(10)   The Think for Yourself Principle: give the students the theoretical tools they need in order to think for themselves.
(11)   The Frontier Principle: bring cutting edge research into the classroom.

None of these principles represent revolutionary departures from traditional pedagogy, but taken together they demonstrate that there is potential for renewal and further development. I do not know what I would see if I had a crystal ball, but my guess is that although future courses in OCS and Old Russian are still likely to be structured around the reading of medieval texts, our teaching of historical linguistics will be more interactive, more technology-based and more theory-based than it has been in the past.

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