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Review: Language Description: Cubberley (2002)

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Directory

Daniel Bunčić, [Russian – A Linguistic Introduction](#)

Message 1: Russian – A Linguistic Introduction

Date: Thu, 22 May 2003 16:58:49 +0000

From: Daniel Bunčić <dbuncic@web.de>

Subject: Russian – A Linguistic Introduction

Cubberley, Paul (2002) *Russian: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, xvi+380pp, hardback ISBN 0-521-79191-X, \$70.00; paperback ISBN 0-521-79641-5, \$25.00.

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SYNOPSIS

Paul Cubberley addresses his book to two rather heterogeneous groups of readers (p. 9): on the one hand, teachers of Russian who, while having a good practical knowledge of Russian, would like to know more about the linguistic background of their subject, and on the other hand, linguists who do not know Russian but want to get a general overview over the linguistic peculiarities of this language. Consequently, the book includes a lot of redundancy for both groups, e.g. rather detailed descriptions of such general concepts as the ‘phoneme’ (pp. 53-55) or the ‘sentence’ (pp. 176-178) with English examples, or the double representation of every single Russian example in a Cyrillic and a transcribed form. Nevertheless, Cubberley tries to give “a linguistic introduction” that satisfies both general linguists and Russian teachers, and indeed most information is interesting for all of them.

In this overview the historical and the comparative aspect are always present, as Cubberley views these approaches as basic for the understanding of language. Therefore the first chapter after the short “Introduction” (pp. 1-11) is “History of the language” (pp. 12-52), where Cubberley gives a short overview over the general history of Russia (pp. 12-16), and an introduction into the history of the Russian language (from Indo-European to Modern Russian). Apart from historical grammar (pp. 16-43), which forms the main part of this historical chapter, he also includes short sections about the “Development of the standard language” (pp. 43-48) and the history of Russian writing/orthography (pp. 48-52).

What follows are four chapters about the traditional layers of structural linguistic analysis: “Phonology”, “Morphology”, “Syntax”, and “Word-formation and lexicology”. All of these start with a short “Introduction” for non-linguists into the theoretical framework necessary for understanding the linguistic description. Linguists are each time explicitly told to skip these sections.

The second chapter, named “Phonology” (pp. 53-101), treats phonetics (pp. 55-59), phonology proper (pp. 59-95), including suprasegmental features and matters of style, and a short introduction into the representation of the Russian language in writing (pp. 95-101). Russian Phonology is represented both in a tradi-

tional way based on articulatory features and with binary distinctive features. In his phonemic representation Cubberley opts for a radically distributional analysis similar to the one proposed by the “Moscow Phonological School”.

Chapter three about morphology (pp. 102-175) is a detailed, traditional description of the inflectional system of Russian, ordered according to word classes. Spread over this chapter are declension and conjugation charts for the various word classes, in which the forms and endings are represented phonemically. The morphological description contains thorough treatments of morphophonology, a systematization of stress patterns (including their relative frequencies), and variation.

After another theoretical introduction the syntax chapter (number four, pp. 176-254) gives an overview about sentence types and the syntactical relations within them: “The simple sentence” (pp. 181-226), and “The complex sentence” (pp. 226-252). The latter of these sections enumerates all types of subordinate clauses. The former includes treatments of the parts of the sentence and word order. Syntactical relations within phrases are treated in various ways: While there is a separate section about the nominal phrase (pp. 178-181), which precedes “The simple sentence”, the verbal phrase is dealt with under “The parts of the sentence: The Predicate” (pp. 190-214).

The fifth chapter, “Word-formation and lexicology” (pp. 255-312), is basically an extension of the morphology chapter, namely derivational morphology and compounding, including short sections about various types of borrowing, among others from Church Slavonic. The main part of this chapter is formed by long annotated lists of Russian affixes (in part an adapted version of Cubberley 1994) and compound types and their functions. The second part implied in the chapter heading, “Lexicology (and phraseology)” (pp. 306-312) is a brief comment on lexical relations such as homonymy, synonymy, etc., on the historical sources of the Russian lexicon (Iranian, Germanic, Turkic, Greek...), and on stylistic registers.

The sixth chapter, “Dialects” (pp. 313-331), is a rather exhaustive introduction into Russian dialectology, which of course cannot give a full picture of all Russian dialects, but which provides the reader with a representative overview over the main dialectal deviations from the norm. All levels of language are covered here, including prosody and intonation.

The last chapter, “Sociolinguistics” (pp. 332-362), begins with a more thorough description of registers, the status of the Russian standard language, and diastatic variation. Problems of interference (diglossia, bilingualism, etc.) are treated shortly (pp. 350-354). The book is finished by a section titled “Pragmatics” (pp. 354-362), which is concerned mainly with forms of address and various possibilities to formulate greetings and inquiries.

Apart from the references to literature quoted, there is a thematic bibliography of recommended titles, which are exclusively in English.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

(a) Presentation of the material

As Cubberley addresses a readership that does not know either Russian or linguistics, the didactic qualities of this book are of special importance. Indeed the author does a good job in explaining everything. Often he demonstrates one thing from several points of view (e.g. “Another way of putting this is...”, p. 73). Sometimes the author does not even fear to contradict himself in order not to introduce all at once, e.g. when he first claims that there are no syllables with hard consonant + /e/ and gives the exceptions from this rule only later (p. 65). Another example of a very good explanation is the problem of the case of a negative direct object (accusative or genitive), where he refers to the notion of topic and comment (p. 215f.). Unfortunately, this notion itself is nowhere explicitly explained.

For non-linguists the introductions into the theoretical framework that begin every chapter will be very useful. Interestingly enough, the first chapter about the history of Russian lacks such an introduction. Are non-linguists who do not know what a phoneme is nevertheless expected to understand the Indo-Europeanist transcriptions and to know what it means when a Proto-Indo-European semivowel [j] becomes a Proto-Slavonic [j]? Clearly this chapter would have needed at least as much introduction as the others.

Of course, there remain several explanations that might be a bit misleading for readers who do not know Russian: For example, in the section about negation there is a statement that “Added negatives [...] emphasise the negative” (p. 184), with the example *On nikogda ničego ne čitaet* ‘He never reads a thing’ (literally: ‘He never does not read nothing’). However, in sentences like these there is no ‘emphasis’ at all, since it is

just ungrammatical not to negate all the three negative words in this sentence: **On nikogda čego-to čitaet*, the literal equivalent of ‘He never reads anything’ is impossible. Also some examples might have been chosen better, e.g. the one that is to show that an acute accent can be used in written texts to disambiguate the word *čto*, which is both a conjunction ‘that’ and an interrogative pronoun ‘what’ (p. 237). However, the sentence quoted would not have been ambiguous even without the accent. (A better example would have been *Ona mne rasskazala, čto ona pišet* ‘She told me that she writes’ vs. *Ona mne rasskazala, čtó ona pišet* (with the acute) ‘She told me what she writes’.)

Cubberley uses different transcriptions for each chapter of his book (transliteration, phonemic transcription, morphophonemic transcription, transliteration or transcription with morpheme borders marked, etc.), which is sometimes rather confusing. Proper names in the text are transcribed unsystematically, e.g. on one and the same page (p. 8) we find “Ščerba” and “Šaxmatov” (with háček, so scientific transliteration), but “Meľchuk” (with “ch” for [tʃ], as in English practical transcription). Even in a column of a table titled “Name (IPA)” there are two non-IPA transcriptions (p. 96).

The chosen representation of stress by an apostrophe after the stressed vowel is a bit confusing, as the apostrophe (in a slightly more italic shape) is also used to indicate palatalized consonants; this results in forms like “n’ed’e’l’a” (p. 113) or “i’l’i” (p. 172). An acute accent above the respective vowel, which is the usual stress marker in Russian, would have been a good alternative.

“Russian – A Linguistic Introduction” is obviously meant as a reference-book rather than to be read from the first page to the last. Therefore it has no conclusion. However, various obstacles make it hard to find the desired information quickly. The table of contents can cover only three of the up to seven levels of subdivision, and the index does not contain concrete constructions. Moreover, bold type is used very sparsely, and the fourth-level headings are only italic, while the fifth-level headings are bold and thus strike out much more. This makes it hard to orient oneself when leafing through the book.

The arrangement of the material does not follow one consistent principle, as it is sometimes onomasiological and sometimes semasiological. The latter arrangement would be the one Russian teachers are used to, whereas the former one would be more interesting for general linguists to find out how certain concepts are expressed in Russian. (Maybe in a second edition one could rearrange the contents of the morphology and syntax chapter into one chapter ‘grammar’.)

(b) Theoretical approach

One of Cubberley’s strong sides is certainly his good overview over linguistic developments going on at the moment (e.g. his evaluation of the status of analyticity, p. 346). Thus he sees many new tendencies that are usually not found in traditional Russian grammars, e.g. that word-final /mʲ/ has been “virtually removed” (p. 77), the acceptable softening of /s/ in ⟨s’est’⟩ /sʲesʲtʲ/ ‘sit down’ (p. 79), the pronunciation tendencies of geminate consonants (p. 81), or the new vocative form (e.g. *Saš!* ‘Sasha!’, p. 95).

In this context it is noteworthy that the author often gives an estimated frequency of patterns and additional stylistic information, e.g. for the affixes (p. 263-269) or the stress patterns (p. 122-125), though sometimes I would not agree, e.g. with the “not common” *ov ~ u* alternation (p. 87), which is basic in a group of very productive verbs (*organizovat’* ‘organize’, *risovat’* ‘draw’, *var’irovat’* ‘vary’, etc.).

One of the major advantages of this book is that it treats prosodic features and intonation (a subject in which the author takes a deep interest, cf. Cubberley 1980) much more thoroughly than one is used to and in all relevant chapters, even in dialectology (p. 322-324) – in spite of the few material offered by Russian dialectologists.

In parts the book appears very modern, e.g. when the author claims that “Word order is of particular significance in Russian” (p. 177). At first glance this is contrary to the traditional view that word order has no grammatical significance in a strongly inflecting language like Russian, but what Cubberley means here is the pragmatic function, which, however, he explains rather shortly (e.g. only one and a half page about the influence of topic and comment on word order, p. 225f.).

Unfortunately, this rather short treatment of pragmatic and semantic aspects is typical of the whole book. Another example is the syntax chapter, where Cubberley explicitly opts for a “structural” approach and against a “semantic” approach (p. 177f.) at syntax. There is only one page about the meaning side of the aspect category (p. 150f.), as Cubberley claims that “At the level of linguistics, the concept is not overly difficult” (p. 150). Anyone who has tried to teach a non-Slav to use the Russian aspects correctly knows that it

is a very difficult topic that produces many mistakes. In this context, a quarter of a page about the verbs of motion (p. 151, with not a single example for illustration) is absurd, given that teachers of Russian are one of the two main target groups of this book.

All chapters are treated very much from a historical perspective, because the author is convinced that “a general comprehension of the historical dimension [...] contributes directly to an understanding of the synchronic structure” (p. 10). Therefore e.g. he rejects generative approaches to describe the relationship between the two or even more stems of a verb but tries to operate with their historical development (p. 148-150). This seems sensible enough, but sometimes the historical information is not very helpful, e.g. when *peščera* ‘cave’ is explained to come from *pek-* ‘bake’ (p. 88) or when the reader is told that prepositions like *dlja* ‘for (the benefit of)’, *krome* ‘except’ and *okolo* ‘near’ (p. 171) or particles like *vot* ‘lo!’ or *počti* ‘almost’ (p. 173f.; cf. also p. 263) are “derived from nouns, verbs, etc., but also now considered non-derived” (p. 171). This is not of much help neither for the teacher nor for the general linguists, especially as there is no explanation what these words are actually derived from.

In one case this historical perspective makes Cubberley arrive at a very interesting view of the morphological structure of adverbs: While he does assume that only “nouns, adjectives, pronouns and numerals” have endings (p. 106), on the next page he claims that the adverb *naverx* has a “zero ending”: “{naverx} + {0} ‘upwards’ (cf. {naverx} + {u} ‘up above’)” (p. 107). Diachronically of course this is indeed an ending, since etymologically this adverb is made up of the preposition *na* ‘on’ and the accusative (respectively, locative) form of a noun *verx* ‘top’. Synchronically, however, it should be clear that this adverb cannot have any ending, not even a zero one.

This almost Neo-Grammarians approach contrasts with Cubberley’s strictly distributional phonemic analysis, which results e.g. (as he admits himself, p. 70) in the “counter-intuitive” use of the symbol /i/ for [i] in all phonemic transcriptions. (These transcriptions would have been more readable if they had always been included in phonemic brackets.) Moreover the declension and conjugation charts do not include the written representation of the endings. For example, the genitive singular ending of nouns like *vremeni* ‘time’ (nominative *vremja*) transcribed as *on’-i* is never stressed in any word, so that its first vowel is always pronounced as [ɪ], and written as ⟨e⟩, but for theoretical reasons phonologically transcribed as *o*. Similarly, in the historical *s*-stem nouns like *nebo* ‘sky, heaven’, *čudo* ‘wonder’ or *koleso* ‘wheel’, Cubberley is forced to treat the element *-es-* appearing in all words as *-es-* when it is a theme (in *nebesa* ‘heavens’, *čudesas* ‘wonders’), but as *-os-* when it is part of the root (in *kolěsa* ‘wheels’). This approach is fascinating enough, but without an orthographic and/or phonetic representation it must be rather confusing both for non-linguists and for non-experts at Russian.

(c) Reflection of current research

Whenever there is a disputable question, Cubberley quotes both sides of the discussion, and, where necessary, makes a decision (e.g. the origin of the name *Rus’*, p. 12f.; the theoretical framework of intonation, p. 89f.; the classification systems for nouns, p. 111). However, newer, less traditional opinions have a good chance of escaping the author’s notice. Thus, throughout the book the term “Old Russian” is used without even being discussed, although because of the Belarusian and Ukrainian participation in this period of Russian history it would be more appropriate to call this language “Old East Slavonic”. Cubberley refers to a “period of great translation activity under Jaroslav the Wise” (p. 43) without mentioning Francis J. Thomson’s (1988/93) well-substantiated thesis that this myth is in fact based on the mistranslation of an entry in the Primary Chronicle and that such translation activity never took place. The diglossia theory according to Uspensky, Worth and Lunt is called “now generally accepted” (p. 44), though even Uspensky himself has not stood up for it any more lately (see Rehder 1989, Keipert 1999: 739). When treating the so-called “Second Palatalization” (p. 28), the results of which in most contexts disappeared in Russian, it would have been worthwhile mentioning the ancient dialect of Novgorod, which never executed this sound shift at all and on the basis of which probably Modern Russian does not show the results, whereas Ukrainian and Belarusian, not being influenced by Novgorod, continue the Old East Slavonic tradition (cf. Gluskina 1966; Zaliznjak 1995: 37-38, 1998: 448f.).

In some places a book intended as an introduction would have needed some more references for further information. There are several anonymous formulations like “It has been suggested” (p. 111) or “some have argued” (p. 317). Moreover, Cubberley recommends only English-language books for further reading (e.g. p. 332, 363). This may be sufficient for non-Russophone linguists, but it is an unnecessary restriction for Russian teachers.

(d) Material presented

Some very good chapters have already been mentioned: The historical approach, suprasegmental features, and several other rather 'modern' subjects. Two further very good chapters are dialectology (p. 313-331), which is a really good treatment of the linguistic categories that appear in various dialects of Russian (e.g. vowel length, definiteness), and affixation, which is another of Cubberley's specialities (cf. Cubberley 1994).

Unfortunately, many mistakes can be found in political matters, e.g. when Cubberley refers "to the federation as a whole, or, more correctly, to the Russian republic within it" (p. 3; there just is no such entity as a Russian republic within the Russian Federation), or when he enumerates the Slavonic languages: Kashubian is missing in the text (p. 6), and Bosnian on the map (p. 7). This map shows language borders, but they are always identical to state frontiers, although Russian is spoken in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova, Slovenian is spoken in Austria and Italy, etc. However, this simplification is obviously not deliberate, since the language area marked for Macedonian does include large portions of Western Bulgaria (!) and Northern Greece.

There are several minor mistakes and inconsistencies, which probably cannot be avoided in the first imprint of a book of this extent (400 pages of facts!). Some of the less obvious mistakes I would like to mention here.

Cubberley claims that "There has never been a proposal to replace Cyrillic with a Roman script [...], at least not for Russian as such" – however, there have been several such proposals, the most advanced attempt being a project elaborated by the Sub-Commission for Latinization of the Ministry of Science (Glavnauka), which was headed by Nikolaj F. Jakovlev (cf. Alpatov 2001, Ashnin/Alpatov 2001).

Morris Halle's "Sound Pattern of Russian" is quoted as from 1971 (p. 57 and bibliography), which is only the 2nd edition; the 1st edition is from 1959, consequently nine years before Chomsky & Halle's "Sound Pattern of English" (1968), and not just a later adaptation of this.

The Russian word *poltora* for 'one and a half' is made up of *pol* 'half' and (*v*)*tora* 'the second (genitive singular)', so the original meaning is 'half of the second', taking 'the first' already for granted. It is not 'half of three' (p. 143), though mathematically this would make sense, too (cf. Vasmer 1950-58: s.v.).

CONCLUSION

"Russian: A Linguistic Introduction" provides a very comprehensive introduction into Russian linguistics – indeed so comprehensive that it is almost incredible that this work could be accomplished by one man alone. As this man cannot be a specialist in all the fields covered, one can see some differences in quality. The book gives very good information on the phonology, morphology (incl. word-formation) and syntax of the Russian language as it is actually spoken now, as well as to its dialectology, historical grammar and historical lexicology. There are good aspects of Russian sociolinguistics, but semantics and pragmatics are neglected almost completely, whereas the historical approach is a bit over-emphasized.

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A ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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