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Morphological Integration of Foreign Elements in Russian: A Comparison of Russian Speakers in Lithuania and Estonia

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, isolated Russian communities within the Baltic States have steadily transitioned from a state of monolingualism to various degrees of bilingualism. Such a change has affected many structural aspects of Russian spoken in the Baltics, providing multiple opportunities to examine language contact and change in a dynamic linguistic environment. However, current research methodology has failed to provide a sufficient analytical method for empirically examining the linguistic outcomes of language contact. Recent studies conducted by Verschik (2004, 2005) and Avina (2006) have addressed the morphological integration of foreign elements by Russian speakers in Estonia and Lithuania but have only attempted a cursory examination of this phenomenon. In her studies, Verschik (2004, 2005) identifies several instances of morphological non-assimilation of Estonian lexical items and morphemes. Conversely, research conducted by Avina (2006) shows successful and fluid integration of Lithuanian lexical elements into Russian speech. My objective is to thoroughly examine these apparent differences by applying novel acoustic methodology in an attempt to provide an effective and quantitative means of examining language contact and change. I argue that the crucial factor influencing successful integration is the acoustic distance between a speaker's L1 (Russian) and L2 (Lithuanian or Estonian). Data used in my analysis was retrieved primarily from online forums and blogs, as well as radio and television broadcasts. The comparison of audio recordings and written texts from Russian speakers in Lithuania and Estonia has revealed several key differences in the integration of foreign elements into the Russian morphological system. Specifically, both Estonian and Lithuanian words ending in the vowel /a/ outwardly correspond with the Russian feminine singular noun class. However, only Lithuanian words demonstrate fluid and pervasive morphological integration by Russian speakers. This suggests that differences in overall vowel quality, obscured by the orthography, prevent the full assimilation of this particular class of Estonian words. I conducted acoustic analyses investigating the overall quality of the vowel /a/ of all three languages. The results of these analyses demonstrate the Lithuanian and Russian vowel /a/ to be acoustically similar to one another, while the Estonian vowel is acoustically distinct. The significant difference between the acoustic structure of the Estonian phoneme as well as the pattern of non-integration of Estonian lexical items strongly suggest that the acoustic structure of the contact language is fundamental to the morphological integration of new words, morphemes and other foreign elements into the speaker's native language. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to apply acoustic models to language contact research in order to better understand the processes of linguistic change at a fundamental level.

Bibliography

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