

NEWS IN BRIEF

DOCTORAL THESIS ON THE SPATIAL SEMANTICS OF LOCATIVE CASES IN THE KOMI LANGUAGE

On December 27, 2012, Nikolay Kuznetsov defended his doctoral thesis *Prostranstvennaia semantika mestnykh padezhei komi iazyka (kognitivnyi analiz)* (Spatial Semantics of Locative Cases in the Komi Language (Cognitive Analysis)) at the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics of the University of Tartu (supervisor Docent Tõnu Seilenthal, opponent Cand. Phil. Galina Nekrasova from Syktyvkar).

Linguistic units expressing spatial relations are currently one of the most widely investigated objects in linguistics. A plethora of researches have been dedicated to the semantics of spatial markers in different languages, and a number of treatments have been presented from typological, contrastive and cognitive aspects. The semantics of the locative cases in the Komi language has also been repeatedly investigated (e.g. Evgenii Guliaev, Galina Nekrasova, Maria Usachova); yet, it is the first time that it has been treated from the viewpoint of cognitive linguistics. This proves the topicality of the scientific problem formulated in the dissertation. This research subject is topical not only from the point of view of the linguistics of the Komi language, but also from the viewpoint of Permistics as a whole, as the grammatical system of the Permian languages has not yet been investigated from the aspect of cognitive linguistics.

The dissertation aims to describe and present a cognitive analysis of the spatial meanings of locative cases in the Komi language. Proceeding from this objective, the



Nikolay Kuznetsov. Photo by Andres Kuperjanov 2012.

dissertation groups the locative cases in the Komi language; presents the inner structure of the meaning system of locative cases as a matrix of cognitive domains; presents examples of the use of locative cases in different spatial functions; views spatial meanings from the aspect of centre and periphery and describes mutual relations between prototypical and peripheral usage cases; analyses more specific spatial meanings from the viewpoint of their categorical belonging.

In the subchapter “Case” the author explains the concept of the case, presents data about the category of case in different languages, including Finno-Ugric languages, and classifies cases. An important factor in the semantics of locative cases is the description of spatial situation elements presented in the dissertation: *localisation, orientation, the topological type of landmark*. The research history of locative cases has been described quite specifically, especially the earliest treatments. In the voluminous subchapter “Cognitive Approach in Linguistics” the author presents theoretical foundations of cognitive linguistics (its evolution, main principles and content), which proves that he has good knowledge of the relevant theoretical literature and is able to analyse the material and make conclusions. R. Langacker’s theory has been most persistent in following the main principles of cognitive linguistics in the treatment of natural language grammar, which accounts for the more detailed description of the main ideas of this theory in the dissertation. A significant subchapter here is also “Structure of Meaning. Polysemy”, as its content has a direct relation to the research object. It presents possibilities for describing polysemic linguistic units and explains the concepts of *semantic network, prototype, radial network* and *network model* on the example of lexical units.

The central part of the thesis is the second chapter entitled “Spatial Semantics of Locative Cases”, which starts with a general characterisation of the group of locative cases, which constitute the majority of the declension system in the Komi language. Traditionally, Komi linguistics differentiates between internal and external locative cases. This differentiation is based on the paradigmatic meanings of cases. The author also claims that “unlike internal locative cases, external locative cases do not involve in their main meanings relevance to the inner sphere of the landmark (excl. a number of peripheral usages), which expresses their exterior locativeness” (p. 89). The thesis claims that actually the case paradigm of the Permian languages does not feature the opposition between internal and external locative cases like Balto-Finnic languages do. The subchapter “Statistics” discusses the frequency of case forms; yet, the author could have added statistical data on their usage. An important part of this chapter is the description of the cognitive matrix of locative cases, which distinguishes physical, abstract, social, and event space, and the domains of time, state, scale and abstract relations. The author comes to the conclusion that physical space is in the centre of the cognitive matrix, and the other domains are connected and intersect with it.

The author has provided a thorough overview of spatial meanings of cases. While discussing the locative meanings of cases, the author takes into account the semantic-grammatical features of word forms, which is essential in describing case semantics not only in cognitive but also in traditional linguistics. The author introduces as an example the semantic structure of one of the cases (approximative), pointing out its meanings,

showing the relations between them and presenting them as a network model. Unfortunately, there is no similar network model for the meanings of other cases and their relations. The inner structure of the semantics has been described only as a matrix of cognitive domains. As concerns the other, i.e., non-spatial meanings of cases, they are not described in the thesis proceeding from the cognitive aspect. Also, the meanings mentioned in the thesis have already been treated in research literature (see Guliaev 1961; Nekrasova 2004, etc.). While interpreting the usage of cases, the author provides adequate examples, although these mainly originate from media texts and researches published earlier on.

The doctoral thesis draws on literary language material; yet, in the dialects of the Komi language differences occur in the elements of cases and their usage. The thesis discusses one of the most complex issues in Komi dialectology – the semantics of the case suffix *-ысьбӧдз*. The author gives his own interpretation of its semantics and claims that “it refers to movement from the point of departure [...] to the point of destination in the vicinity of the viewer” (p. 153). However, material from Udora dialect supports the common description of Komi dialectology (see Sorvacheva & Beznosikova 1990; Liashev 1975): different word forms are used if the destination is far from the point of departure and the length of distance is emphasised, and in case the point of departure is nearby (see Nekrasova 2012).

The subchapter “Functional Equivalents of Locative Cases” (pp. 175–182) is dedicated to the functional analogues of locative cases and the description of so-called split coding of topological zones. It also includes parts about postpositional constructions and postpositional formants. In the modern Komi language part of localisation types are expressed only by postpositions and are not marked by cases, whereas others can be expressed in parallel by case forms and postpositional constructions. However, the thesis does not discuss all the postpositions competitive with locative cases. I would suggest it would be interesting to find regularities in the distribution of case forms and postpositional constructions.

Under postpositional formants the author discusses units with *-ладор*-component: adverbs, postpositions, and nouns. Here he dwells on constructions that he conditionally calls *postpositional formants* (see also Itkin 2002: 167), which have analogues in the Vepsa language. However, constructions with the *-ладор*-segment considerably differ from postpositions and case forms formally, semantically and syntactically. They can be used with core case markers, or as subjects or direct objects. These features make them similar to relatives. The author could also have compared the semantics of the suffix *-ла-* and cofix *-лань-*. The similarity of the semantics of these linguistic units is also supported by Valter Tauli and Ago Künnap, who have claimed that a linguistic unit in the role of cofix has a word derivation function (Tauli 1956: 206–207; Künnap 1983: 52–59).

Nikolay Kuznetsov’s doctoral thesis is a complete scientific research on a topical subject. The author demonstrates a thorough knowledge of the basics of cognitive linguistics, understanding of the theoretical problems of the domain, and independent creative thinking in interpreting linguistic material. His work opens a new direction in the studies of the semantics of the grammatical units of the Komi language, making a

major contribution to Komi and Permic linguistics. Kuznetsov's statements provide a foundation for further studies in the sphere of cognitive linguistics. The practical side of the research is also important, as the material can be used in teaching the Komi language as well as in compiling material for basic and special courses at higher educational institutions.

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