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What goes around, comes around: Cases that keep me going

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Abstract

I am fascinated by the treasure trove of meanings tucked away in the grammatical morphemes that many people think of as mere functional fillers. As a student, the Slavic case endings baffled me, then later delighted me with their complex stories about trajectories, time, benefit and harm, labels, and so much more. Some twenty years ago I was satisfied that I had cracked that code, and after writing some articles and a couple of textbooks on the topic, I moved on. But the cases came back to me again and again. I will tell the story of how my work on case semantics later helped to inspire three further projects: two major online resources, the Russian Constructicon and the Strategic Mastery of Russian Tool, and an analysis of president Putin's portrayal of Russia, Ukraine, and NATO.

Case Semantics

After studying Russian for three years in the 1970s, I realized I had a problem. I knew a lot of words, and I could parse just about any sentence, but I was still often stumped about what was meant. A big part of my problem was the meanings of the Russian (and mutatis mutandis Slavic) cases. Later, when I had a steady job, I tackled what I assumed were the hardest cases, the Dative and Instrumental (Janda 1993). Little did I suspect that the Genitive (Janda 1999) and Accusative (Janda 2000) cases would offer plenty of challenges as well. Even the Nominative and Locative were not trivial, and they rounded out the set for two textbooks that I co-authored (Janda and Clancy 2002 and 2006). Here is a very condensed version of the contents of this line of research (illustrated with Russian examples):

Nominative Case has two central meanings.

NOMINATIVE: A NAME can point out an item or be used to call someone, or serve as the grammatical subject.

NOMINATIVE: AN IDENTITY is associated with verbs meaning 'be' in formulations meaning 'X is Y' (as in *Ivan xorošij student* 'Ivan is a good student').

Genitive Case establishes the relationship of a focused entity (a trajector) to something that is backgrounded (a landmark marked with the Genitive).

GENITIVE: A SOURCE references a point of departure further specified by prepositions meaning 'from' as well as verbs expressing withdrawal (like *izbegať* 'avoid', *bojať sja* 'be afraid of'). This meaning is extended metaphorically to other domains such as time, cause, and human relationships.

GENITIVE: A GOAL references the opposite maneuver, further specified by prepositions (like *do* 'up to, until', *dlja* and *radi* 'for', *protiv* 'against') and verbs and adjectives expressing (mostly metaphorical) approach (like *ždať* 'wait for', *želať* 'wish'). This meaning is extended metaphorically to other domains such as time, purpose, states of being.

GENITIVE: A WHOLE references the existence of something as a part of a larger unit or collection. This meaning motivates uses of the Genitive case that translate into 'of' and expressions of possession or color in English. This meaning is also associated with complex prepositional phrases as well as quantification by numerals (*sto studentov* 'one hundred students'), and in partitive expressions (*vypiť čaju* 'drink some tea').

GENITIVE: A REFERENCE locates an item with respect to a landmark in domains of space (like *u* 'by, at'), time (like calendar dates), comparison, and absence (*bez* 'without').

Dative Case encodes the capacity of an entity to interact with its surroundings, by receiving objects, absorbing experiences, or exerting equal or superior strength.

DATIVE: A RECEIVER is used primarily to mark the indirect object, including with verbs of communication and payment.

DATIVE: AN EXPERIENCER is associated with words denoting harm, benefit, belonging to, and needing.

DATIVE: A COMPETITOR expresses the capacity of the Dative entity as compared to another entity that is either equal or lesser in strength or influence, and is associated with the prepositions *k* 'toward' and *po* 'along'.

Accusative Case signals a path toward a destination, or just the endpoint.

ACCUSATIVE: A DESTINATION marks a direct object, which is a metaphorical version of the destination meaning, and is associated with metaphorical extensions to domains such as time, purpose, change of state, mathematics. In the spatial domain, the path referenced by the Accusative case is further specified by prepositions such as *v* 'into', *na* 'onto', *za* 'beyond', *pod* 'under'.

ACCUSATIVE: A DIMENSION measures a distance or size in the domain of space (*rasstojanie v dva kilometra* 'a distance of two kilometers'), or a duration in the domain of time (*interval v dve nedeli* 'an interval of two weeks').

ACCUSATIVE: AN ENDPOINT is primarily associated with the domains of space and time as specified by both prepositions (such as *v* and *za*, both indicating the end of a distance or duration) and postpositions (such as *nazad* 'ago').

Instrumental Case expresses "an accessory for something else" (Janda & Clancy 2002: 19).

INSTRUMENTAL: A MEANS expresses a conduit for an action, such as a path that facilitates motion (as in *idti lesom* 'go through/by means of the forest') or an instrument that makes an action possible (as in *rezať xleb nožom* 'slice bread with a knife'). This meaning is metonymically extended to include use with verbs signifying control and evaluation, and to the agent in a passive construction.

INSTRUMENTAL: A LABEL is used with verbs denoting being, becoming, and seeming, as in *koška javljaetsja mlekopitajuščim* 'a cat is a mammal'.

INSTRUMENTAL: AN ADJUNCT occurs with the preposition *s* 'with' and expresses companionship.

INSTRUMENTAL: A LANDMARK signifies peripheral locations without contact with the prepositions *nad* 'above', *pod* 'under', *pered* 'in front of', *za* 'behind', and *meždu* 'between'.

Locative Case has only one meaning – LOCATIVE: A PLACE, which identifies locations in space or other domains, always further specified by prepositions *v* 'in', *na* 'on', *pri* 'at', *o* 'about', *po* 'after'.

The Russian Constructicon (https://constructicon.github.io/russian/)

Like the work on case semantics, this project grew out of a frustration with existing resources. According to Construction Grammar (Goldberg 2006), an entire language can be described in terms of the form-meaning pairings that constitute grammatical constructions, but the vast majority of constructions are not represented in reference works. An example of the multiword constructions that are underrepresented is NP-Dat Cop daleko do NP-Gen, as in *Tebe daleko do lučšego rabotnika* 'You are by far not the best worker (lit. To you it is far to the best worker)'. The Russian Constructicon is an attempt to fill this gap (Janda et al. 2018), and our online resource currently provides semantic and syntactic descriptions, examples, and much more for over 2200 Russian constructions on a website that is freely open to the public and searchable according to a large number of parameters. Case semantics play a role in a large portion of Russian multiword grammatical constructions, and the initial inventory of the Russian Constructicon was based on my earlier work on case semantics, and then later expanded through various methods (Janda et al. 2021). The Russian Constructicon is a multipurpose resource, designed to serve linguists as well as learners and teachers of Russian, and has spawned further publications (Endresen and Janda 2020; Endresen et al. To Appear; Janda, Endresen and Zhukova To Appear; Janda et al. To Appear; Rakhilina et al. 2022).

The Strategic Mastery of Russian Tool

(SMARTool: https://smartool.github.io/smartool-rus-eng/)

I used to make beginning Russian students rehearse entire paradigms, but research into the distribution and learnability of inflected forms has made me change my approach. Even a modest vocabulary of a few thousand Russian words has hundreds of thousands of associated inflected forms, however the majority of those word forms are rarely (or never) encountered, and furthermore learning is enhanced by focusing exclusively on the few frequent forms of each noun, verb, and adjective (Janda and Tyers 2018). Corpus data make it possible to discover what forms are most strategic for each lexeme, as well as what grammatical constructions and collocations motivate those forms. The SMARTool (Janda 2019) is a free publicly available resource that presents the three most common inflected forms for over 3000 Russian words at CEFR levels A1-B2, along with their typical contexts, and searches can be filtered according to level, topics (weather, time, health, etc.), grammatical analysis (case, number, tense, etc.), and dictionary form. Case semantics play a large role across the board, as we see in these examples of highly frequent forms for each of the three inflected parts of speech, all of which involve the Dative case:

> Dative Singular for a noun: *Kto ty po special'nosti?* 'What is your profession (lit. who are you according to specialty)?'

> Dative Singular Masculine for an adjective: *Kostja očen' nexotel idti k zubnomu vraču.* 'Kostya really didn't want to go to the dentist.'

Imperfective Present Active Participle Dative Masculine Singular for a verb: *Oni dogovorilis' otpraviť dvadcať tonn xleba dlja pomošči golodajuščemu naseleniju.* 'They agreed to send twenty tons of bread to help the starving population.'

Putin Makes His (Grammatical) Case

While one's choice of words is deliberate and conscious, grammatical case is obligatory and serves as a second channel for signaling the roles notions have in a discourse. Over- and underrepresentation of grammatical cases can be identified by measuring deviations from corpus norms. We compared the use of grammatical case for the nouns meaning 'Russia', 'Ukraine', and 'NATO' in Putin's speeches in the period leading up to and immediately after the invasion of Ukraine (Janda et al. 2022). Our analysis reveals a narrative in which Putin depicts Russia as a dynamic, agentive, foregrounded actor, a reliable partner for collaboration, but also the victim of unfair geopolitical maneuvers. Ukraine, by contrast, is dehumanized as relatively static and backgrounded, often merely a territorial location rather than a state. NATO appears primarily as the label for an untrustworthy organization and a destination for Ukraine.

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Links:

[1] https://doi.org/10.1007/s11185-022-09269-2

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