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## Targeted Testing: Where Grammar Meets Proficiency and Authentic Content

In his 1940 short story *Kočerga* ‘The Poker’, Mixail Zoshchenko utilizes a peculiarity of Russian grammar—the difficulty of forming a genitive plural—as the foil for a critique of Soviet society. At the same time, however, this story highlights the fact that Russian morphology is so complex that it can be challenging even to native speakers. While Zaliznjak (1980) and Zoshchenko agree that the genitive plural of *kočergá* will be *kočerëg* if one has to form it, the genitive plural of *kargá* ‘crow, hag’, like that of *kočergá*, is labeled *zatrudnitel’no* ‘difficult’ by Zaliznjak (1980:143). Elsewhere, however, Zaliznjak (1980:46) gives the accusative plural (which for animates is identical with the genitive plural) as *karg*. Meanwhile the genitive plural of *kabargá* ‘musk-deer’ is specified as *kabaróg* without any hesitation. Given that difficult points of morphology are more likely to be encountered and mastered later in the study of a language, one can hypothesize that knowledge of grammar is correlated with proficiency. In particular, the ability to produce unusual or unpredictable grammatical forms is the kind of native-speaker knowledge that characterizes general linguistic ability at the higher levels of competence in foreign language learners. In these brief remarks I shall give some examples that support this view. I shall also note the evaluative efficacy of other grammatical and stylistic features, some of which often receive inadequate pedagogical attention.

In the fall of 1975 I had the opportunity to test the abovementioned hypothesis, and while the size of my sample was not significantly large (about a dozen students), the results nonetheless reinforce the later findings of Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993), which I shall discuss below. My experiment was based on comparing the results of a Russian proficiency test used by Howard Aronson at the University of Chicago in 1971 with those of a Russian proficiency test used by Gerald Berent at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 1974. Berent’s test was an elaborate measure of the traditional four skills—reading,

writing, listening, and speaking. It involved translations in both directions as well as an oral interview. It required several hours to administer, and many more hours to evaluate. It was scored on a scale of zero to one hundred. Aronson's test consisted of 50 grammatical questions in which students were asked to produce unusual, uncommon, or difficult forms, including some for which the point was to know that the requested form does not normally occur at all. The test was graded by giving two points for every correct answer or one point in the case of correct form but incorrect stress. Some example questions and answers are given below:

1 sg. pres. *klevetat* 'slander' (*kleveščú*)  
 gen. pl. *mečta* 'dream' (not used)  
 dat. *sorok* '40' (*soroká*)  
 pres. act. pt. masc. nom. sg. *teret* 'rub' (*truščij*)  
 nom. pl. *šurin* 'wife's brother' (*šur'já*)  
 instr. of *tri* 'three' (*tremjá*)  
 masc. past tense *otperet* 'unlock' (*otpěr*)  
 gen. pl. *taxta* 'ottoman' (not used)  
 prep. of *poltorasta* '150' (*polútorasta*)  
 1 g. pres. *molot* 'grind' (*meljú*)  
 masc. past tense *operet* 'lean against' (*ótper*)  
 nom. pl. *dno* 'bottom [of a barrel]' (*dónja*)

As an experienced teacher or scholar of Russian will know, some of these items are covered in grammar-oriented first year courses (e.g., the oblique cases of numerals), some involve loans from Church Slavonic (*klevetat*) or Turkic (*taxta*), while others involve alternations that are the result of regular historical developments (*molot*), and some of the vocabulary includes words that are a part of normal life but not encountered frequently (*šurin*). For the purposes of testing, however, it suffices that these all involve the kinds of grammatical competence possessed by native speakers.

When I began employment as an assistant professor in the Slavic Department at UNC Chapel Hill in 1975, I administered Aronson's test to the same students who had taken Berent's test the year before as well as to the 1975 cohort of entering graduate students. The interesting result was that the numerical scores for those students who took both tests were almost identical in all cases with a variation of five points or less. In the case of the 1975 cohort, their performance on the test reflected their overall ability in Russian at that time, as confirmed by subsequent classroom observation that academic year. The tentative

conclusion one can draw from these results, as indicated above, is that knowledge of grammar is correlated with proficiency.

It is interesting to note that this is precisely the conclusion demonstrated by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsburg (1993:20-21) in a study sponsored by the American Council of Teachers of Russian and the National Foreign Language Center that followed 658 students over the course of six years: “[Q]ualifying grammar and reading achievement scores showed significant predictive value for speaking proficiency, reading proficiency, and listening proficiency alike. [...] Of particular importance here is the strength of the relationships for gains in OPI across different levels and combinations of levels. While significant for all OPI gains, grammar/reading achievement proved to be the most significant (t-statistic +2.6) for the group of learners at the 1+2 speaking threshold, precisely the critical level in speaking proficiency for the greatest numbers of Americans studying Russian abroad. [...] The data in the current study provide the first empirical evidence that investment in grammar instruction in the early years of instruction may result in advances in speaking and listening skills at the upper-intermediate and advanced levels.” Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsburg (1993:21) go on to assert that acquiring other skills is important, too, but it is clear from their apologetics that their results flatly contradict claims made by pedagogical methods that ignore or minimize the presentation of formal grammar and that are sometimes labeled *teaching for proficiency*. (Cf. Friedman 2002a for a critique of approaches to foreign language learning without formal grammar instruction).

Like testing for morphology in languages with complex inflectional systems, translations from English into the target language that require the use of syntactic constructions or grammatical categories that are absent from English is a useful measure of competence. The following Macedonian sentence is illustrative:

He told me something his grandfather told him.  
Mi raskaža nešto što mu go raskažal negoviot dedo.

The translation of this short sentence requires mastery of three important grammatical and syntactic features of Macedonian:

- 1) male hypocoristics are neuter in shape but masculine in gender (*negoviot dedo*)
- 2) confirmative/nonconfirmative (reported/witnessed) verb forms (*raskaža/raskažal*)

3) reduplication of objects marked as specific by means of a clitic pronoun (*što ... go raskažal*).

Another useful device for measuring proficiency that uses a written exam rather than an interview is asking the candidate to write a formal letter requesting some service such as access to an archive. Such a letter requires the mastery of a language's formal written register. While such skills are usually covered in advanced courses in the Commonly Taught Languages, there is a dearth of such information for Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs), and a complete absence in the pedagogical materials for the Almost Never Taught Languages (ANTLs), e.g., Romani, where the informal masculine singular opening is the vocative noun *Phrala* 'O brother', and the formal one is (in Macedonian Arli Romani) the vocative adjective *Pakivalea* 'O respected' (cf. Friedman 2002b).

It must be admitted that a potential problem for targeted testing of grammatical forms or the reliance on a particular marked genre to test for proficiency is that if this practice were to become widespread, foreign language courses would teach to such exams in much the same way that, in some U.S. high schools, students are taught test-taking skills that can enable them to achieve better scores without necessarily strengthening the underlying skills that are supposed to be tested. This is the type of phenomenon that can be used to justify testing methods such as the relatively open-ended interview. Nonetheless, the correlation demonstrated by Brecht, Davidson, and Ginsberg (1993) argues both for serious attention to grammar and for pedagogical methods and materials that are thorough enough to acquaint students with both common and uncommon patterns and paradigms. At the same time, if more general written tests required the mastery of highly marked styles that are nonetheless essential for full literacy in the target language, then there would be an impetus for developing more thorough pedagogical materials in LCTLs and ANTLs.

#### REFERENCES

- Brecht, Richard D. Dan Davidson, and Ralph B. Ginsberg. 1993. *Predictors of Foreign Language Gain During Study Abroad*. Washington, DC: The National Foreign Language Center.
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