Pronoun history and infromation structure in 18th century non-religious Russian texts

The registers - situational and context-dependent language varieties (Biber & Conrad, 2019) - that dominated Russian in the diachronic point of view are religious original and translated texts, legends, and chronicles, which are also often bound to religious canons[1] (Azimova & Johnston, 2012; Comrie, 2018; Vakulenko, 1989). An apparent change came with the age of Enlightenment, which began in Central and Western Europe around the middle of the 17th century. The movement came to the Russian-speaking area in the late 17th-early 18th century and started the process of register development in the written language. The range of different registers in written language became broader and included, among other things, travelogues, letters from ordinary people, diaries, and others (Anciferova, 2012; Kotkov & Pankratova, 1964; Mayorov, 2006). This development period of Russian could be understood as the transition phase to the modern Russian language. The changes that take place at this stage should not be understood as selective changes that happened at a specific moment in the history of the language. Before a specific phenomenon becomes noticeable or written down, there must first be a tendency in the development of language history that leads to this change (Lieb, 1970, p. 43).

In transitional stages of language development, pronouns are sensitive and can indicate more profound linguistic changes. Languages can create new pronouns and pronoun functions over time. Among others, there may be denotational semantic reasons, such as the need to convey refined gender and sex distinctions (Lakoff, 1975). Overall, however, changes in pronouns can also affect the syntax, morphology, and information structure of the sentence or phrase. The historical corpus linguistics and digital humanities methods demonstrate the flexible nature of pronouns. For the history of Russian, Meyer (2011) demonstrated by statistical corpus analysis a shift from a consistent null-subject language to a partial null-subject language over a period of about 700 years (cf. Roberts & Holmberg, 2010 for the typology of null-subject languages). Among others, this change weakened overt pronouns & function from demonstrative, referent-introducing, and contrastive to coreferent, which apparently affected 1st and 2nd person before 3rd person. An appropriate comparative empirical analysis must be based on diachronic corpora in which pronouns are annotated in a unified manner across languages for their syntactic roles, information structural categories (focus, givenness, and topic), as well as coreferential properties and links to their discourse antecedents.

The talk aims at providing the first comprehensive, corpus-based investigation of the historical developments of the grammar and use of pronouns in 18th-century Russian non-religious texts. Focusing mainly on the history of subject pronouns, it uses a combination of grammar- and discourse-oriented methods to investigate how pronominal forms and their functions change over time. The analysis discussed during the talk involves compiling, annotating, and evaluating a corpus for Russian. Developing a general workflow that includes all phases of text processing for corpus linguistic investigations and would be projectable to other languages and language development stages is central to our approach to historical corpus data. Furthermore, explicit text selection principles are developed, allowing for a more objective look at language history and intended to redefine language diachronic definitions of past centuries.

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[1] An exception are the birch bark letters from the 11th - 15th century, which represent the spoken register in written form and are now available in a large amount. However, they usually only contain a few lines, phrases, or words (Schaeken, 2019; Zaliznjak, 2004; Zaliznjak, 2006). Texts in other registers also exist, but they are not frequent and only in rare cases originate from a non-religious context.

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