Title: Parasitic Words as Discourse Markers: the Case of Russian

Author: Alexei Shmelev, Institute of Russian Language, Russian Academy of Sciences

This presentation deals with so-called "parasitic words", i.e., items that merely clutter speech while adding nothing to the meaning that a speaker wants to express. There is an emerging literature on pause fillers and hesitation markers; however, the Russian linguistic tradition (with very few exceptions) has generally considered them semantically empty and offers prescriptions for eliminating them. I will analyze the use of such items in Russian speech (referring to various corpora) and provide tentative descriptions of their functions; I will pay special attention to hesitation markers (*xmykan'je* and *mekan'je*), spontaneity or overcoming communicative difficulty (*nu*) and the particle *tam* (derived from a pronominal adverb).

Many Russian speakers who find themselves at a loss for words pronounce sounds that are not present in Russian canonic phonetics. Those sounds are referred to as *xmykan'je* (hemming) and *mekan'je*.

Xmykan'je (usually transcribed as *xm* or more often *gm*) is used when one is asked a question that cannot be answered at once or when the interlocutor's utterance is not quite clear. The pauser filler known as *ekan'je* or more often *mekan'je* has quite a different function. It specifies communicative difficulties connected with the speaker's search for means of verbalization.

The particle *nu* is extremely characteristic of various types of communicative difficulties: hesitation, difficulties in linear construction of speech, a choice of adequate description, compensating for a slip of the tongue, etc. Such use is based on the idea that one must meet one's communicative obligations despite certain difficulties that have arisen.

The marker *tam* is used when the syntactic structure of a given phrase or structure of a described situation requires mentioning a detail, yet the choice of this detail or its specific designation is not important.

The proposed analysis shows that the items under consideration are rich in language-specific features and merit special linguistic description.