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Title: Difficulties in Teaching Russian Grammar to American students at an Advanced Level

Abstract:

One of the major challenges for learners of Russian moving from the Intermediate to Advanced levels (CERF levels B2 to B3) is learning synonymous expressions and appreciating their semantic and stylistic nuances.

We suggest that a productive approach to teaching a range of syntactic models is the utilization of the notion of universal semantic categories such as TIME, SPACE, POSSESSION, CAUSATION, etc. Appealing to universal semantics allows for engagement with a range of morpho-syntactic structures, while simultaneously enriching learners' knowledge of vocabulary. A basic architecture of a course built on this principle is such: 1. presentation of new material through model constructions (these can be represented in tables or short texts); 2. practice with vocabulary (in case the vocabulary is specific to the semantic category); 3. student autonomous work with the Russian National Corpus to obtain typical examples of usage; 4. communicative activities that prompt the learners to actively use the structures; and 5. a culminating activity (essay or oral presentation).

The challenges of this approach mainly concern the presentation of the new material, and often stem from the morpho-syntactic characteristics directly related to different lexico-semantic groups or to a specific communicative function. For instance, some challenges with the category of TIME in Russian appear to be related to the use of prepositions под+ACC., накануне, and спустя+PAST. Each structure requires an individual solution: под+ACC. is presented lexically through a list of specific and limited number of phrases (под вечер, под утро, под старость); накануне is approached semantically, by explaining the component of eventprominence in the semantics of such structures as накануне праздника; and the use of спустя+PAST is explained through its discourse meaning and its functioning in the narrative.

Such a pedagogical approach allows to diversify the learners' repertoire of syntactic constructions while keeping the function in the center of the attention.