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.