Contact-induced morphosyntactic change: Russian in Eurasia

Existing evidence indicates that the structures of multiple indigenous languages in Eurasia are changing due to contact with Russian (Anderson 2017; Grenoble in progress, 2003; Janhunen 2005; Malchukov 2003), regardless of the typological structure or genealogical affiliation. This talk presents data from an ongoing study of language contact and change in order to understand the dynamics of contact-induced change, with particular attention to the nexus of linguistic, sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic factors that drive language change and shift. The investigation incorporates formal psycholinguistic tools into the study. Traditional research on language contact has been largely observational, resulting in generalizations that are difficult to evaluate. For example, one contested claim is the role of linguistic constraints, and another the position of social factors: Thomason & Kaufman (1988:35) that “it is the sociolinguistic history of the speakers, and not the structure of their language, that is the primary determinant of the linguistic outcome of language contact.” At the same time, Matras (2007: 34) argues that “borrowing is motivated by cognitive pressure on the speaker to reduce the mental processing load by allowing the structural manifestation of certain mental processing operations in the two languages to merge” (see also Elšík & Matras 2006; Heine & Kuteva 2005; Lucas 2012; Matras 1998).

In this talk I provide a road map for investigating these claims, focusing on changes in Evenki (Tungusic, head-final) in contact situations with Russian, drawing on my own field data and supplemented by other published data featuring typologically and genealogically distinct languages in Eurasia. I focus on three linguistic parameters: word order, case usage, and subordination strategies. These three parameters were chosen for the focus of investigation because they are interconnected. Word order is known to interact with other morphosyntactic features, including the case marking system. Word order is known to interact with other morphosyntactic features, including the case marking system; existing psycholinguistic research suggests that this is due to a complexity tradeoff (Sinnemäki 2014) along with a balance between production and processing costs on the one hand, and communicative success on the other (Fedzechkina et al. 2016, 2012; Kurumada & Jaeger 2015).

I show significant changes from Tungusic models to more Russian-like morphosyntax, including a shift from SOV word order to SVO and word order driven by information structure, reduction in the number of cases, in particular spatial cases, finite subordination using interrogative words as subordinators, and the use of prepositions. Similar changes are found in other Eurasian languages, including Chuktok-Kamchatkan, Finno-Ugric and Turkic languages. The data we have at present suggest that these changes take place sporadically in the speech of individual speakers, and that language shift probably impedes them from spreading. Although clear patterns emerge, innovations do not diffuse across the speech population. These changes are indicative of language shift rather than contact-induced convergence and are representative of larger patterns of language shift of minority language speakers to Russian throughout Eurasia.