

Semantic factors in case loss:
the Serbian-Bulgarian dialectal continuum

Masha Kyuseva¹, Alexander Krasovitsky², Matthew Baerman³, Greville G. Corbett⁴
(University of Surrey^{1,2,3,4}; University of Oxford²)

Keywords: South Slavonic, Serbian, Bulgarian, case decline, case semantics

Over time there has been a dramatic loss of rich case systems across languages of Europe. The analysis of historical texts has revealed the general picture about how this process occurred, yet the details of how it was implemented largely elude us. In particular, what happens to the case meanings when the morphological form falls out of use? Are they all expressed by an alternative form? Do they merge with the meanings of another case? Or is the unity of meanings that was supported by a common inflectional form completely dismantled?

To answer these questions, we need to be able to analyse multiple contexts in which the old case value competes with the innovation(s). This is hard to achieve using historical texts. We propose instead to look at data where this change is still taking place, namely within the South Slavonic dialect continuum formed by Serbian and Bulgarian. Standard Serbian represents a conservative variety with six (or even seven) case values, while Standard Bulgarian represents an innovative variety where nouns do not inflect for case at all. The dialectal continuum between these two extremes shows the transitions from larger to smaller case systems (Belić, 1905; Stojkov, 1975; Sobolev, 1991). These changes over space can be used to model changes over time, providing records of different historical stages that can be studied directly.

We address the semantic consequences of case loss by focussing on the decline of one case, the instrumental, in its non-prepositionally governed uses. The rationale is that it has a clearly delimited set of meanings, and minimal syncretism; it therefore allows us to factor out extraneous variables and so provides a clear starting point. The data come from two sources that represent two areas on the dialectal continuum. First, the texts of the interviews from Paraćinsko Pomoravlje (Miloradović, 2003: 317-350; 14221 tokens); this Kosovo-Resava dialect from central Serbia still shows an active use of cases. And second, the corpus of Torlak dialect transcriptions¹ (Vuković, 2020; 489021 tokens); the Torlak region covers Eastern Serbian and Western Bulgarian dialects, where case is much more constrained.

Our analysis shows that the meanings of the non-prepositional instrumental are not covered by one alternative means of expression. Instead they are split over a number of different prepositional constructions. The choice of prepositions is not random and is largely determined by functions of the original case form.

(1) <i>kop-a</i> dig-PRS.3SG	<i>motik-om</i> hoe-INS.SG	⇒	<i>kop-a</i> dig-PRS.3SG	<i>s</i> with	<i>motik-u</i> hoe-ACC.SG
(2) <i>zov-e</i> call-PRS.3SG	<i>telefon-om</i> phone-INS.SG	⇒	<i>zov-e</i> call-PRS.3SG	<i>na</i> on	<i>telefon</i> phone[ACC.SG]
(3) <i>rad-i</i> work-PRS.3SG	<i>subot-om</i> Saturday-INS.SG	⇒	<i>rad-i</i> work-PRS.3SG	<i>u</i> in	<i>subot-u</i> Saturday-ACC.SG

The meanings of the instrumental are reconceptualized in order to fit in the semantics of the available prepositional constructions. For example, the instrument is reinterpreted as an additional object participating in the action and is expressed with the preposition *s* ‘with’ (1); the mediator receives an interpretation as the end-point of the movement and is denoted with the preposition *na* ‘on’ (2); the temporal meaning is expressed as a location, using the preposition *u* ‘in’ + accusative (3). We can witness the semantic closeness between the two competing strategies of expression by observing them being used synonymously in more conservative speech in Paraćinsko Pomoravlje: *javio telefonom* (instrumental) vs. *na telefon* (preposition) ‘called on the phone’; *ide kolima* (instrumental) vs. *sas kola* (preposition) ‘goes by car’. In more innovative dialects of the Torlak region only the prepositional constructions remain.

These data offer a unique window into the organization of case systems and allow us to rethink widespread assumptions about their semantic structure. Diachrony is a valuable indicator: how a system changes helps us to understand its earlier state. Hence if functions of the old case value can be drastically scattered among different new means of expression, that suggests that this case has no unified meaning (contra Jakobson 1936), and behaves more like a contingent cluster of functions.

¹ https://www.clarin.si/noske/run.cgi/first_form?corpname=torlak;align=

References:

- Belić, A. 1905. Dijalekti istočne i južne Srbije. [Dialects of east and south Serbia]. In: *Srpski dijalektološki zbornik*, vol. 1. Beograd. 1–715.
- Jakobson, Roman O. 1936/1971. Beitrag zur allgemeinen Kasuslehre: Gesamtbedeutungen der russischen Kasus. *Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague* 6:240–88. [Reprinted in Roman Jakobson (1971) *Selected Writings: II: Word and Language*. The Hague: Mouton, pp. 23–71. Translated 1984 as: Contribution to the general theory of case: general meanings of the Russian cases. In Linda R. Waugh & Morris Halle (eds.) *Roman Jakobson. Russian and Slavic Grammar: Studies 1931–1981*, pp. 59–103. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.]
- Miloradović, Sofija. 2003. *Upotreba padežnih oblika u govoru Paraćinskog Pomoravlja: Balkanistički i etnomigracioni aspekt* [The use of case forms in the speech of Paraćinsko Pomoravlje: Balkanistic and etnomigrational aspect]. Beograd: Etnografski institut SANU
- Sobolev, Andrej N. 1991. Kategorija padeža na periferii balkanoslavjanskog areala [Category of case on Balcan Slavic areal periphery]. *Zbornik Matice srpske za filologiju i lingvistiku* 34 (1): 93-139.
- Stojkov, S. (ed.). 1975. *Bâlgarski dialekten atlas. T. III. Jugozapadna Bâlgaria. Čast 1. Karti. Čast 2. Statii, komentari, pokazalci*. [Bulgarian dialectological atlas. Volume III. South- West Bulgaria. Part 1. Maps. Part 2. Articles, commentaries, indices]. Sofia: Bâlgarskata akademija na naukite.
- Vuković, Teodora. 2020. Spoken Torlak dialect corpus 1.0 (transcription), Slovenian language source repository CLARIN.SI, <http://hdl.handle.net/11356/1281>