Nominative object marking in contact-influenced Russian: pattern borrowing or something else?
(Workshop "The Typology of Contact-Induced Changes in Morphosyntax")

The paper deals with nominative marking of the direct object, attested in some contact-influenced varieties of Russian, along with a standard accusative marking, cf. (1)-(4):

(1) ***Škola** zdes' otkryli* 'They opened a **school.NOM** here' (http://www.parasolcorpus.org/dagrus, L1 Tabasaran<Lezgic<Nakh-Dagestanian)

(2) ***Utki** ubil ja* 'I killed the **ducks.NOM**' (http://web-corpora.net/ruscontact/corpus.html, L1 Forest Enets<Samoyedic<Uralic)

(3) ***Klavka-to** my znajem xorošo* 'We know **Klavka.NOM** <woman's name> well' (http://web-corpora.net/ruscontact/corpus.html, L1 Ulcha<Southern Tungusic<Tungusic)

(4) *S etoj kolodca taskali domoj **voda*** '(We) used to carry **water.NOM** from this well' (Kashkin 2019: 118, L1 Moksha<Mordvin<Uralic)

In Standard Russian, the direct object is marked by the accusative case. The accusative has a dedicated singular form only in one declension class, in one more class it coincides with the nominative, and in the last class it coincides with the nominative or genitive depending on animacy. Plural accusative forms also coincide with the nominative or genitive forms depending on animacy.

Such non-standard nominative uses, as (1)-(4), attested in the Russian speech of bilingual speakers of indigenous languages of Russia, can be analyzed either as pattern borrowing, i.e. calquing a syntactic pattern of the corresponding indigenous language, or as natural development of the Russian system triggered by language contact, i.e. the expansion of the nominative-like accusative to a wider range of contexts. It is often difficult to differentiate between these two types of processes (cf., e.g., Thomason 2009; Poplack & Levey 2010).

If the first hypothesis is true, one might expect different outcomes in different contact-influenced Russian varieties, depending on the object-marking strategy attested in the contacting indigenous language. If the Russian variety is in contact with an indigenous language that manifests differential nominative-accusative object marking, the nominative is expected to be more likely exactly in those contexts in which it is used in this language. For instance, in Russian speech of Moksha speakers (4), non-specific noun phrases are expected to be marked with the nominative (and this is only partially true, according to Kashkin 2019: 117-118). In the Russian variety used by Enets speakers (2), the imperative context is expected to favour the nominative case (and in our data, the nominative object was not attested in the imperative context at all). If the Russian variety is in contact with an ergative language, as in (1), the use of the nominative can be analyzed as copying that of the absolutive case (Daniel et al. 2010: 78 call the feature manifested in (1) "quasi-ergativity"). In this case, such uses are expected to be equally distributed across different types of direct objects.

In contrast, if the second hypothesis is true, then those factors that are relevant for the Russian system itself will favour the non-standard use of the nominative and there are no notable differences between the varieties influenced by different languages. One might assume that the animacy distinction, which is relevant for a part of the Russian object marking system, in contact-influenced varieties is over-generalized to the whole system, i.e. inanimate nouns tend to be marked with the nominative irrespectively of their declension class.

In order to test both hypotheses, in the first part of the talk I will briefly revise nominative object marking in different contact-influenced varieties of Russian, based on the available descriptions and text collections. In the second part of the talk I will focus on one specific variety, i.e. on the variety used by speakers of Southern Tungusic languages (the Amur region), manifesting differential object marking. I will present the results of a corpus-based quantitative study. I test the factors relevant for the choice of the nominative form in Standard Russian (animacy) and those relevant for the choice between the accusative and nominative in Southern Tungusic (definiteness, information structure, see Oskolskaya & Stoynova 2017), using the logistic regression method. The data show a complicated picture. Neither animacy nor definiteness appears to be relevant for the non-standard choice of the nominative. Information structure is relevant, but the Tungusic pattern does not seem to be fully copied. Besides, some other factors, such as morphosyntactic type of the noun, play a role.

References

Daniel M., Dobrushina N., and S. Knyazev. 2010. Highlander's Russian: case study in bilingualism and language interference in Central Daghestan // Instrumentarium of Linguistics: sociolinguistic approach to non-standard Russian. Slavica Helsingiensia 40. P. 65-93.

Kashkin E. 2019. Osobennosti russkoj reči nositelej mokšanskogo jazyka [Some features of Russian speech of Moksha speakers] // Proceedings of the V.V. Vinogradov Russian Language Institute, 4. P. 110-131.

Oskolskaya S., and N. Stoynova. 2017. Differencirovannoje markirovanije ob'jekta v nanajskom jazyke [Differential object marking in Nanai] // Acta Linguistica Petropolitana, XIII(3). P. 336–370.

Poplack Sh., and S. Levey. 2010. Contact-induced grammatical change: a cautionary tale // Auer P., and J. E. Schmidt. Language and Space: An International Handbook of Linguistic Variation. Vol. I. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter. P. 391-419.

Thomason S. G. 2009. Why universals versus contact-induced change // Filppula M., Klemola J., and H. Paulasto (Eds.) Vernacular Universals and Language Contacts: Evidence from Varieties of English and Beyond. London: Routledge. P. 349-364.