

On the history of Russian syntax

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It is generally assumed that verb – argument relations were relatively loose in Old Russian. Unlike in Modern Russian, which has a fully developed valency system where the verb determines the number of arguments and their (case) forms, many Old Russian verbs combined with more than one case form in one and the same argument slot or were even open to distinctly different syntactic structures. Approached from the traditional point of view of “verbal government” the data leave a picture of a relatively chaotic syntax in Old Russian and a gradual development up through the centuries towards the apparently more transparent valency system of Modern Russian. Since we must assume that all natural languages exhibit roughly the same (high) degree of structural order this picture must be considered misleading.

With the purpose of offering an alternative description I shall present a number of examples of A2 variation in Old Russian and argue that the syntactic system of Old Russian in general can be interpreted not as valency-based, but rather as construction-based. In order to reach at a coherent description that makes sense in relation to the Old Russian data one must turn the focus away from the verb and in the direction of the construction. It appears that it is possible to set up paradigms of constructions, and that the concept of construction is a prerequisite for making sense of the case forms filling the argument slots. A digression to PIE syntax as sketched by Meillet reveals that the construction-based syntax of Old Russian is probably inherited from an earlier stage of the language.

Finally, by briefly contrasting Old and Modern Russian I shall discuss the principal difference between a construction-based and a valency-based syntax. Both systems can be described in terms of verbs, arguments and adjuncts, but only in a valency-based system is the verb the organising centre.