Grammatical Gender in Ninilchik Russian

This is a study of grammatical gender in a highly-endangered dialect of Russian, Ninilchik Russian. This dialect is spoken in the village of Ninilchik, located on the west coast of the Kenai Peninsula in Alaska.

The history of Ninilchik Russian dates back to the second half of the 18th century and is directly connected to a commercial trading company in Alaska called the Russian-American Company (RAC) (Bergelson and Kibrik 2010). Many Russian traders and officers of RAC married local women from Eskimo-Aleutian, Athapascan, and other Native American groups. As a result, an ethnically mixed group of people emerged, called Creoles. By the mid-19th century, several RAC-retirees decided not to return to Russia and in 1847, a settlement, later called Ninilchik, was founded for them and their families at the mouth of the Ninilchik River. At first, there were only five families living in Ninilchik. However, by the end of the 19th century, over 80 people called the village home. In 1867, the territory of Alaska was sold to the United States. In the decades which followed, Ninilchik residents were relatively isolated. In the 1930s, an English-language school was opened in Ninilchik and the use of Russian was strongly discouraged. As a result, children ceased to acquire Russian as their first language. At present, there are only a few elderly speakers of Ninilchik Russian left. Though their primary language is English, they still recall how Ninilchik Russian was spoken when they were children.

Ninilchik Russian is a distinct and unique variety of the Russian language. All data for the current research come from a single source – a recently published dictionary of Ninilchik Russian (Bergelson, Kibrik, Leman, and Raskladkina 2017). Part of a larger research project started by Kibrik and Bergelson in 1997, it is the only existing dictionary of Ninilchik Russian.

Daly (1985, 1986) was the first to observe substantial differences between the grammatical gender systems in Ninilchik Russian (NR) and Standard Russian (SR). First, the neuter gender agreement is completely lost in NR. Forms that are consistently neuter in SR, trigger either masculine (*moj ako-ška* 'my.MASC window') or feminine (*ako-ška atkr'ít-a* 'window (is) open.FEM) gender agreements in NR. Second, forms that are consistently feminine in SR, can also trigger either masculine (*durn-óy bába* 'foolish.MASC woman') or feminine (*durn-áya bába* 'foolish.FEM woman') gender agreements in NR. And third, forms that are consistently masculine in SR, can trigger feminine gender agreement (*d'ir'ówn-aya yaz'ík* 'village.FEM language') in NR. Thus, the following questions arise. First, has NR developed a unique grammatical gender system or is there no consistency in gender at all, meaning that all variants (masculine or feminine) can be used interchangeably? Second, how can we account for the substantial differences between the gender systems of SR and NR?

I will argue in favor of a unique system of gender that has historically developed in Ninilchik Russian. I will propose a syntactic account for the systems of gender in both SR and NR within the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz 1993; Halle 1997; Marantz 1997, among others) and show how both systems are syntactically different. The anticipated results of this multi-disciplinary research will be of interest to language educators, language-area specialists, language typologists, and theoretical linguists.

References

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