

MARGJE POST

“Frog Story” and “Map Task” in the Russian countryside

In Russian dialectology, most data are collected by means of traditional methodology. Most dialectologists use questionnaires, mainly for lexicographic purposes, which is a highly developed field of research in Russian dialectology, as in Russian linguistics in general. In addition, spontaneous monologues and dialogues are recorded. The language consultants are elderly inhabitants of remote villages. The dialectological data obtained through these methods do not allow direct comparative studies of prosodic properties, which is the topic of my current research project,¹ such as syllable length, syllable strength and intonation.

In order to obtain such data, three phonetic experiments have been carried out with Russian dialect speakers and speakers of Standard Russian. These experiments have been widely used for various linguistic studies in other countries. None of these experiments was originally designed for fieldwork conditions in the Russian countryside, at home with elderly dialect speakers with limited education. Therefore, the results are not as good as they could have been, provided they had been conducted under ideal conditions. Still, as I will argue in this short article, the resulting data are useful for comparative studies in various linguistic fields.

So far the experiments have been carried out in Moscow and Tromsø – with speakers of Standard Russian – and in Lovozero and Varzuga (Kola Peninsula), with speakers of other varieties of Russian and speakers of Kildin Saami and the local Ižma dialect of Komi.² We intend to expand our data collection during future fieldwork expeditions.

¹ The post-doctoral research project “The Atypical Utterance Prosody of the Northern Russian Dialects of the White Sea, an Endangered Language Variety in a Language Contact Area” (2006-2009) is funded by the Norwegian Research Council NFR, № 171929/B20.

² I am very grateful to all participants in the experiments for their cooperation. I am indebted to the staff of the Department of Phonetics of the Russian Academy’s Institute of the Russian Language in Moscow for their hospitality, to Elena Šabrova for rewriting

“The North Wind and the Sun”

In the first experiment the participants read the short tale “The North Wind and the Sun” (see Appendix), inspired by the Norwegian project *Nordavinden og sola: En norsk dialektprøvedatabase på nettet* (Almberg & Skarbø 2002), which is published on the internet.³ In this project, 54 different versions of this story were recorded from speakers from 52 different places in Norway and from a single speaker of Norwegian as a second language, a Russian pronouncing the Norwegian text with a Russian accent. The website of the project contains a map of Norway with links to the files, two different phonetic transcriptions (in SAMPA and in IPA), an orthographic transcription of each text, sound files in both mp3 and WAVE-format and sociolinguistic information about the speakers. The participants were asked to adapt the text to their own dialect and read it as if the audience was a speaker of the same dialect. The text “The North Wind and the Sun” was chosen because it is used by the International Phonetic Association for the presentation of language samples.⁴ The 1949 *IPA* publication contains a Russian version of the tale. Since the Russian text is written in a bookish style, it was rewritten in a more colloquial style, the result of which is given in the Appendix. So far we have gathered recordings of this text from ten speakers.⁵ They read the text as it is, without adaptation to their own dialect. A link to one of the recordings is given in the Appendix.

Ideally, the dialect speakers would have read a version in the dialect. However, this task is far more problematic to realise in Russia than in Norway, where dialect use is not restricted to local settings in

the text for the first experiment and to David Pineda for his help in designing and drawing the maps of the third experiment and for his assistance in conducting the experiments in Lovozero and Varzuga.

³ The address of the Norwegian project is <http://www.ling.hf.ntnu.no/nos/>

⁴ “The North Wind and the Sun” is presented in 51 different languages in *IPA* 1949 and in 29 languages in *IPA* 1999.

⁵ So far the text has been read aloud by four speakers of Standard Russian, four speakers of the Varzuga dialect and three speakers from Lovozero with different mother tongues – a Saami and a Komi woman and a Russian from the coastal settlement Ponoj. Among the speakers were eight women and one man, representing various age groups and levels of education.

remote villages, but dialects are heard even in formal communication between people from different regions. Most Norwegians use a language variety different from the two standard written languages and they are used to read texts written in forms deviating from standard language, living in a linguistic society with a number of written norms. Furthermore, a large part of the participants in the Norwegian project are linguists themselves.

The reading task in the form we have conducted it has certain disadvantages. First, read speech is different from spontaneous speech. It shows less variation and the speaking style is generally more formal. Second, speakers tend to adapt, to a varying degree, to normative, Standard Russian pronunciation when reading aloud. Northern Russian speakers with little reduction in their ordinary speech tend to read aloud with more vowel reduction and with reading-style intonation. On the other hand, orthography influences pronunciation. Many Russians with restricted experience in reading aloud pronounce the sounds as they are written, i.e. with incomplete reduction, even speakers using full vowel reduction in their everyday speech. As a result, speakers with a close-to-standard pronunciation might speak with *okan'e* in read speech, while some Northerners might adapt to the norm and avoid the *okan'e* that is common in their ordinary speech.

In spite of these disadvantages, the recordings we have made provide valuable data for comparative studies in segmental and suprasegmental phonetics, since they contain different pronunciations of the same words and phrases by speakers of different varieties of Russian. The pronunciations by dialect speakers from Varzuga and speakers of Standard Russian have already been used for a study of the difference between tense and lax consonants, which is large in several Northern Russian dialects.⁶

Frog Story

In the second experiment, the participants were asked to tell a story, based on the pictures in a children's book without text (Mayer 1969), known as

⁶ Касаткин & Касаткина 1993; Князев 1991; see Пост, in prep.

the “frog story”. This book is widely used by linguists in many countries, mainly for recordings of children’s speech for studies in first language acquisition. Prof. Christian Sappok (University of Bochum, Germany) has collected many recordings from children in Russian villages (pers. comm.). In order to provoke a less formal speaking style, he has changed the task by offering the pictures in random order to a pair of children. Before telling the story they first have to cooperate and put the pictures in the correct order. This method leads to interesting dialogues, but, unfortunately, it is not appropriate for use with adults.

We have conducted this task in several languages. Apart from speakers of Standard Russian and Russian dialect speakers from two old Russian settlements on Kola Peninsula (Varzuga and Ponoj), we have recorded the frog story in Saami and in Komi, as spoken in Lovozero. Two speakers of Saami and one Komi speaker told the story both in their native language and in Russian, enabling comparative studies.⁷

The frog story recordings can be used not only for phonetic analyses, but also for research in a wide range of other fields. The material is ideal for narrative studies. Our first recordings show large individual differences in the way the story is told. In our recordings, the highly educated Muscovites use a narrative style that is radically different from the way the story was told in Varzuga, the Lovozero speakers taking an intermediate position. The following speaker, with a normative pronunciation, a former teacher (b. 1949), told the story as if she was reading from a book, using well-formed, complex sentences with gerunds and participle constructions. She kept distance to the events of the story, presenting them in the past tense, as shown in the next fragment:

[01Frog1.wav](#)⁸ (1.8 MB)

Однажды маленький мальчик принес домой спрута-лягушку. Он сидел, и долго смотрел на это милое, зелененькое чудовище. Собачка прибежала. Тоже стала смотреть на лягушку. Ей было интересно, кто же там сидит в банке. [pause] Но когда мальчик с собачкой улеглись отдыхать, лягушка

⁷ In total we recorded eight versions of the frog story in Russian (three Muscovites, a speaker from Varzuga and one from Ponoj, a native speaker of Komi and two native speakers of Saami), three versions in Saami and two in Komi.

⁸ These and the following hyperlinks lead directly to the sound files to be downloaded from the Faculty of Humanities’s website.

выскочила из банки ... и убежала. (Ну ...) Мальчик, проснувшись, увидел, что банка пустая. Лягушки нет.

The next storyteller, a dialect speaker from Varzuga with low education (b. 1926), told the story in the present tense, as if the events are happening here and now. She linked the story to her own life and her own village in the next fragment, when she started explaining to me how many frogs there used to be in the village when she was younger (the cited fragment gives only the beginning of this explanation):⁹

[02Frog2.wav](#) (1.3 MB)

А тут ... на дереве ... Дерево-то тут дак на дерево зтянулись. О ...

[turns the page]

Во! Лягушка не одна оказалась. Виш! Лягух. Сколько стало. А у нас раньше лягух дома сколько было. Раньше [unintell.] лывы-то у нас везде эти лужи-то были вот там, мешкамы-то. Но. Дак эти ... лягух-то этих по летам-то, андели, квакают, квакают. Вот там я еще жила, когда у матери-то, в мамином-то доми у отца-то, [...]

This short-distance narrative style, with links to the present and the life of the speaker herself is predominant in Russian dialect story telling, as opposed to a more frequent use of a distant point of view in Standard Russian speech, being more influenced by the written literary language; see e.g. Гольдин 1998; Букринская & Кармакова 2006. This difference has a parallel in the opposition in distance between the *svoj* vs. *čuzoj* mode of communication, as explained by Yokoyama (Йокояма 1993), which is reflected in intonation (Yokoyama 2001).¹⁰ The distant *čuzoj* mode is characteristic for standard, formal language, the short-distance *svoj* mode is typical for standard colloquial Russian and even more predominant in Russian dialectal speech; cf. Krause, Sappok & Yokoyama 2003; Sappok 2005.

⁹ The text is given in a transcription based on Standard Russian orthography. A description of the dialect of Varzuga is given in Post 2005, chapter 4.

¹⁰ Yokoyama uses these terms for a slightly different relation: Whereas the above mentioned case reflects a difference in distance between narrator and story, the *svoj* / *čuzoj* modes concern the distance between speaker and hearer.

Map Task

Our third experiment consisted of a map task, inspired by similar experiments conducted in other languages. The web site of the original map task (Anderson et al. 1991)¹¹ contains a long list of research projects, based on map task data. The main purpose of our map task was the collection of question utterances for the study of question intonation in varieties of Russian. Map tasks have been used for this purpose in other languages before, among others, for the study of intonational variation in questions in varieties of Italian (Grice & Savino 2004) and German (Kügler 2004).

The map task is an interactive game with two participants. One of them is given a map with a number of objects and a route drawn on it, the other participant is given a map without a route. They cannot see each other's map. The first speaker's task is to explain the route to the second so that the second can draw the route; this second speaker is encouraged to ask questions. Some minor differences between the maps stimulate the involvement of discussions. Our speakers were explained that we were interested in the way they exchange information by talking together. The contents of the maps had to be adapted to a Russian setting. David Pineda stood for most of the design and for the drawing; see Figs. 1 and 2.

The map task was successfully conducted with two Russian students, although the number of questions they asked was low. However, the experiment proved difficult to be carried out with elderly speakers in Lovozero and Varzuga. Not only did we record very few question utterances, many participants did not really understand their task. We did not succeed in explaining to them what they were supposed to do. One of the participants interpreted the maps as representing her own village, and did not understand why the chosen route was not the shortest possible one, as shown in the following fragment. It was clear that this participant from Varzuga was not used to do such tasks. In the excerpt cited below, her partner in the game tries to explain to her that it does not matter that there is no movie theatre in their village. But, still confused, she keeps

¹¹ <http://www.herc.ed.ac.uk/maptask/>

interpreting the map as representing her own village, referring to their own school as being somewhere else:

[03MapTask.wav](#) (1.8 MB)

А как, дорога-то все равно ... очень ... чересчур уж без толку она! По нашей-то умственной-то головы. Без толку сделано, неправильно. Много кружаний. Много обходов везде то и пришло. Вот например Успенску-то церковь-то знам где стоит например ...

Пошла я начало начинать, отсюда. А это что такое? Кинотеатр. А кинотеатр у нас где? Тоже нету.

— *Неважно где, вот ты пошла от кинотеатра, просто.*

Ну, пошла, пошла, пошла. Мимо пятиэтажки прошла, обернулась туды кругом, и по тропинки, по тропинки, дошла я до школы, ... Но правда, наша школа наверху. Сейчас. [...]

The transfer of the map to the speaker's own village was unintendedly supported by the fact that we put a church on the map, similar to the famous Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Varzuga.

The misunderstandings clearly show that the task was not designed to be conducted in the setting of a typical Russian dialectological interview. Many of the dialect speakers started off with a negative attitude dialectologists often meet in Russian villages. Most local dialect speakers, who, almost by definition, are of high age, have low education and have spent most of their lives in a remote village, are impressed by the visit of university representatives and their microphones and assert that they do not understand anything and do not have anything interesting to tell. The dialectologists visit the speakers at their homes, an unusual setting for conducting experiments. Furthermore, in our case, the speakers were not informed about the task until close to the end of our visit. In most Russian villages the number of dialect speakers is very restricted, and we did not have time to search for the best possible participants. These conditions differ radically from the typical university or high-school setting, common in map tasks, with students being used to this kind of tasks.

Although the recordings obtained from the map task did not show the desired result, they can be used for a wide range of other linguistic studies, since they contain controlled semi-spontaneous data. Some possible fields of study are topics in segmental phonetics, prosody (other

than question intonation!), morphology, syntax, lexicon and discourse analysis. Keeping to my own field of research, I will give some examples from the last cited fragment. It contains some typical examples of segmental and suprasegmental phonetic characteristics of the Varzuga dialect. The Varzuga speaker pronounces the phrase-initial word *дорога-то* with a prominent first syllable ([04doroga_to.wav](#); 40 kB). This phenomenon is frequent in spontaneous speech (Post 2005: 46-48), but would not have occurred in read speech. Another advantage of the semi-spontaneous map task data is that the speech of this speaker can be contrasted directly to pronunciations in Standard Russian. For instance, the word *кинотеатр* is pronounced with a voiceless *r* in final position after a voiceless stop ([05kinoteatrV.wav](#); 72 kB), typical of the dialect (Пост, in prep.), as opposed to the syllabic *r* in the pronunciation of one of the Muscovites ([06kinoteatrSputnikM.wav](#); 136 kB), a frequent phenomenon in Standard Russian in this position (i.e. between voiceless obstruents and word-finally before a pause after a voiceless obstruent; Аванесов 1984: 306).

Summarising, the proposed methodology, though showing some difficulties when applied in a Russian dialectological fieldwork setting, provides data on various varieties of Russian that can prove to be a rich source for many kinds of comparative linguistic research.

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Appendix

The version of “The North Wind and the Sun” that was read by the participants. The attached sound file ([07NorthWind.wav](#)) was recorded from a speaker from Varzuga (b. 1927). The original Russian text (IPA 1949: 29) was adapted to a colloquial style by the Vologodian dialectologist Elena Šabrova:

Северный ветер и солнце

Поспорили однажды северный ветер и солнце, кто из них сильнее. Говорит ветер солнцу: «Видишь, идет по дороге путник? Кто заставит его снять свой плащ, тот и сильнее.»

Начал ветер дуть изо всех сил. Дул – дул, а путник всё крепче, всё сильнее в плащ кутается. Так и не смог ветер заставить путника его снять. Тут вышло из-за туч солнышко, путника согрело, вот тогда он и снял плащ. Видит северный ветер: сильнее его ясно солнышко!

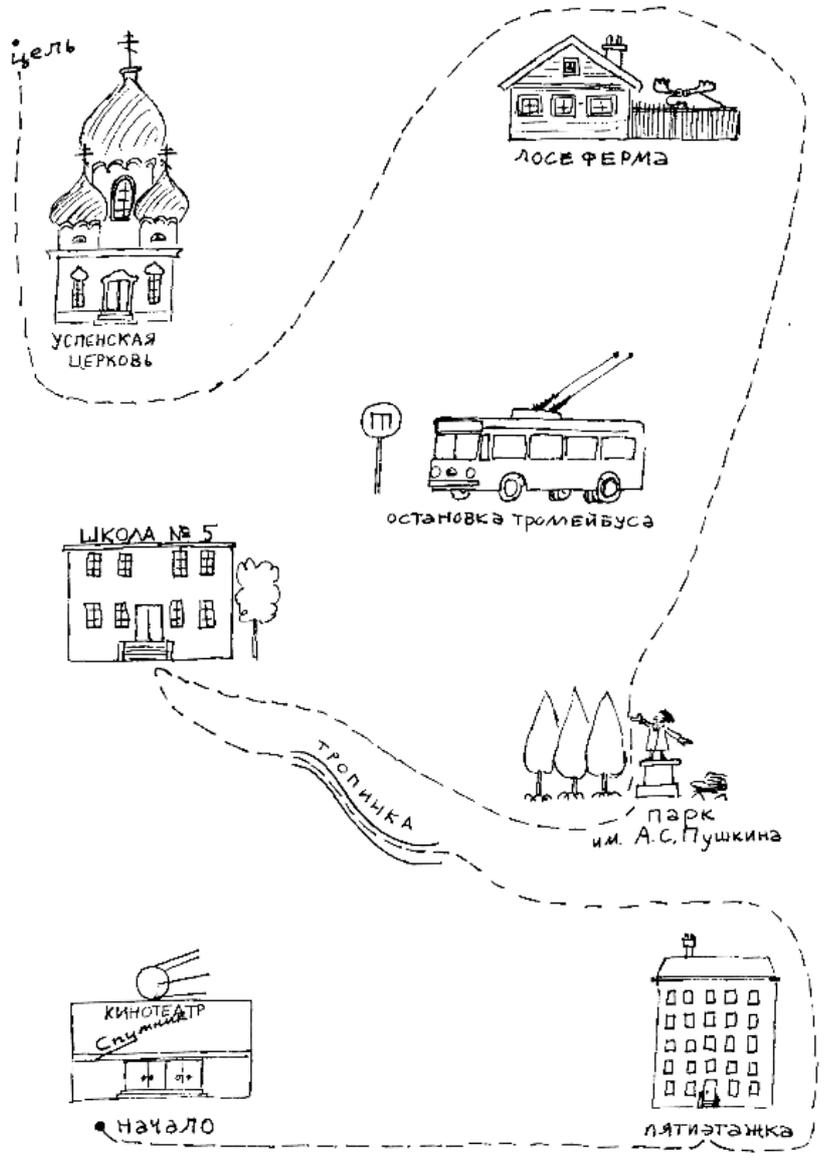


Figure 1. Map 1 in the Map Task, featuring, following the route from the starting point in the bottom left corner, a cinema called “Sputnik”, a five story dwelling house, a footpath, a school called “School number 5”, a Puškin park, a trolleybus stop, an elk farm and a Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary (“Uspenskaja cerkov”).

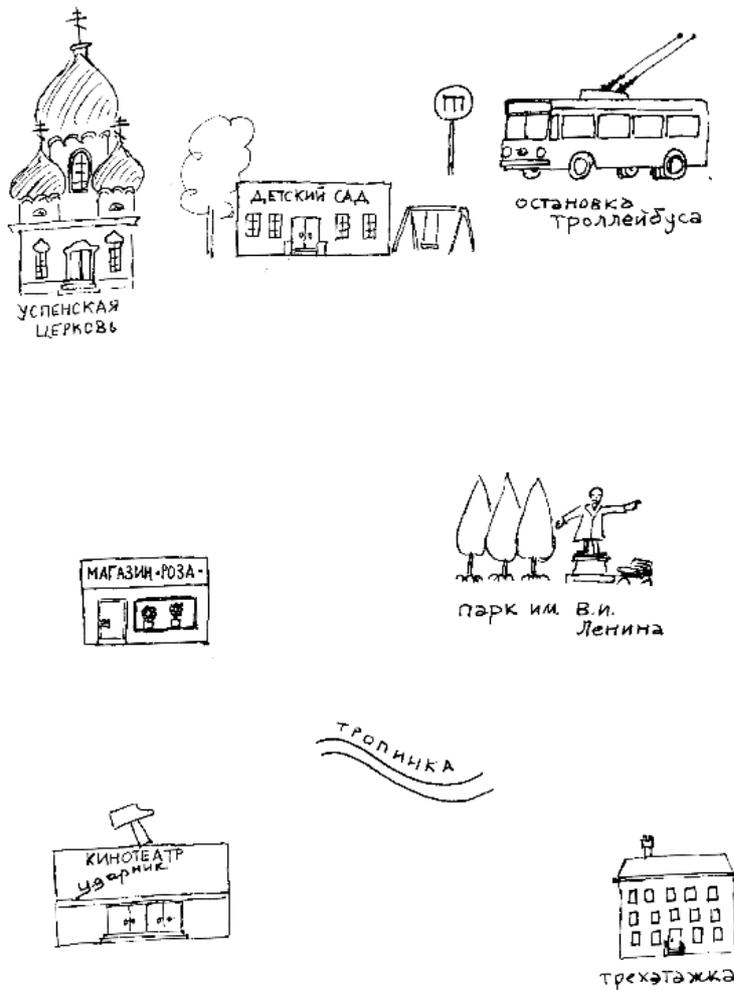


Figure 2. Map 2 in the Map Task, featuring a cinema called “Udarnik”, a three story dwelling house, a footpath, a shop called “Rose”, a Lenin park, a trolleybus stop, a kindergarten and the same “Uspenskaja” Church.