MORPHOSYNTACTIC DIVERGENCES IN RUSSIAN-ENGLISH CONTRASTIVE GRAMMAR: A GENERATIVE APPROACH

Rakhmatilloeva Rukhshonabonu

Abstract: This paper examines the fundamental morphosyntactic divergences between Russian and English within the framework of generative grammar theory. Through a contrastive analysis approach, it was investigated how parametric variation accounts for structural differences in case assignment, agreement systems, and word order patterns. The findings provided in the article, demonstrate that while both languages share universal grammatical principles, they exhibit distinct parametric settings that result in significant typological differences. The study contributes to the common understanding of cross-linguistic variation and provides insights into the nature of Universal Grammar.

Keywords: contrastive grammar, morphosyntax, generative linguistics, parametric variation, Russian, English

Introduction

The contrastive study of Russian and English morphosyntax has long been a subject of considerable linguistic interest, particularly within the framework of generative grammar theory. These two languages represent fundamentally different typological systems: Russian as a synthetic, highly inflected Slavic language with relatively free word order, and English as an analytic Germanic language with fixed word order patterns [1, p. 45]. The generative approach to language comparison, pioneered by Chomsky [2, pp. 12-15], provides a theoretical framework for understanding how universal principles interact with language-specific parameters to produce observable surface differences.

The significance of Russian-English contrastive analysis extends beyond theoretical linguistics into practical applications in second language acquisition, translation studies, and computational linguistics [3, p. 78]. Baker's seminal work on parametric variation [4, pp. 156-158] established that languages differ not in their fundamental grammatical principles but in the specific parameter settings that determine how these principles are instantiated. This paper examines three primary

areas of morphosyntactic divergence: case assignment mechanisms, agreement systems, and word order phenomena.

Theoretical Framework

Generative Grammar and Parametric Variation

The generative approach to contrastive grammar assumes that all human languages share a common set of universal principles while differing in their parametric settings [5, pp. 23-25]. This framework, known as Principles and

Parameters Theory, provides a robust foundation for understanding cross-linguistic variation. The theory posits that the initial state of the language faculty (Universal Grammar) contains both invariant principles and parameters that must be set based on primary linguistic data [6, pp. 67-70].

Within this framework, morphosyntactic differences between Russian and English can be attributed to different parameter settings rather than fundamentally different grammatical systems [7, p. 134]. This approach has proven particularly fruitful in explaining seemingly unrelated surface phenomena through underlying structural principles.

The minimalist program

Recent developments in generative theory, particularly the Minimalist Program [8, pp. 89-92], provide additional tools for understanding morphosyntactic variation. The program's emphasis on feature checking and movement operations offers insights into how different languages satisfy universal requirements through distinct structural means [9, pp. 201-205]. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding case assignment and agreement phenomena in Russian versus English.

Case Assignment Systems

Russian Case Morphology

Russian exhibits a rich morphological case system with six primary cases: nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, instrumental, and prepositional [10, pp. 112-115]. Each case serves multiple syntactic and semantic functions, creating a complex system of morphosyntactic dependencies. The nominative case typically marks subjects of finite clauses, while the accusative marks direct objects of transitive verbs [11, pp. 78-80].

However, Russian case assignment extends beyond simple subject-object relations. The genitive case, for instance, functions in possessive constructions, with certain prepositions, and in negative constructions where it replaces the expected accusative [12, pp. 145-148]. This phenomenon, known as genitive of negation, represents a uniquely Slavic morphosyntactic pattern that has no direct equivalent in English.

The dative case in Russian serves not only to mark indirect objects but also appears in impersonal constructions and with certain predicates [13, pp. 89-91]. Consider the following example:

This construction demonstrates how Russian uses morphological case to encode grammatical relations that English expresses through word order and prepositional phrases.

English Case Residues

English, in contrast, has largely eliminated morphological case marking, retaining only vestiges in the pronominal system [14, pp. 167-169]. The distinction between nominative (I, he, she, we, they) and accusative (me, him, her, us, them) forms represents the primary morphological case marking in modern English. However, possessive constructions utilize either genitive inflection (John's book) or prepositional phrases (the book of John) [15, pp. 234-236].

The loss of morphological case in English has been compensated by increased reliance on word order and prepositions for grammatical relation marking [16, pp. 123-125]. This represents a fundamental parametric difference between the two languages: Russian relies heavily on morphological case for grammatical function assignment, while English depends primarily on configurational properties.

Agreement Systems

Subject-Verb Agreement

Both Russian and English exhibit subject-verb agreement, but the systems differ significantly in complexity and scope [17, pp. 156-160]. Russian verbal morphology encodes person, number, and in past tense forms, gender agreement with the subject. The present tense paradigm demonstrates rich inflectional patterns:

я читаю (I read.1SG)

ты читаешь (you read.2SG)

он/она читает (he/she read.3SG)

мы читаем (we read.1PL)

вы читаете (you read.2PL)

они читают (they read.3PL)

English subject-verb agreement is considerably simplified, marking only third person singular in present tense (he reads vs. they read) [18, pp. 78-81]. This asymmetry reflects different parameter settings for agreement feature richness.

Adjectival Agreement

Russian adjectives exhibit full agreement with their head nouns in case, number, and gender [19, pp. 201-204]. This creates complex morphological paradigms where a single lexical adjective may have up to 24 distinct surface forms. English adjectives, conversely, show no morphological agreement with nouns, representing a stark typological difference.

The Russian adjectival agreement system demonstrates multiple agreement relations within a single noun phrase:

красив-ые нов-ые книг-и

beautiful-NOM.PL.FEM new-NOM.PL.FEM book-NOM.PL.FEM

'beautiful new books'

This pattern illustrates how Russian morphosyntax encodes multiple agreement relations simultaneously, contrasting sharply with English invariant adjectival forms.

Word Order Phenomena

Basic Word Order Patterns

Russian exhibits relatively free word order with a basic SVO pattern that can be altered for pragmatic purposes [20, pp. 267-270]. English, in contrast, maintains rigid SVO order in declarative sentences, with limited variation possibilities. This difference reflects distinct settings of the head-directionality parameter and the strength of EPP features.

The flexibility of Russian word order allows for various pragmatic effects:

Книгу читает Иван (OSV - focus on object)

Читает книгу Иван (VSO - focus on action)

Иван книгу читает (SOV - contrastive focus)

English lacks equivalent word order flexibility, instead utilizing prosodic stress and specialized constructions for similar pragmatic effects.

Null Subject Properties

Russian exhibits partial null subject properties, allowing subject omission in certain contexts, particularly in imperative and infinitive constructions. English, being a non-null subject language, requires overt subjects in finite clauses due to strong EPP requirements. This parametric difference has significant implications for syntactic structure and processing.

Implications for Second Language Acquisition

The morphosyntactic divergences identified in this study have direct implications for Russian-English second language acquisition. English speakers learning Russian face particular challenges with case assignment and agreement systems, while Russian speakers often struggle with English word order rigidity and auxiliary verb systems.

Transfer effects from L1 parametric settings create persistent interlanguage patterns that reflect underlying grammatical differences rather than simple lexical substitution errors. Understanding these systematic differences can inform pedagogical approaches and curriculum development for both language learning directions.

Conclusion

This contrastive analysis of Russian and English morphosyntax within the generative framework reveals systematic parametric differences that account for surface typological divergences. Russian exhibits rich morphological systems for case assignment and agreement, coupled with flexible word order patterns, while English relies primarily on configurational properties and simplified morphological marking.

These differences reflect distinct parameter settings within Universal Grammar rather than fundamentally different linguistic systems. The implications extend beyond theoretical linguistics to practical applications in language learning, translation, and computational modeling. Future research should examine additional morphosyntactic phenomena and investigate the acquisition of parametric differences in bilingual populations.

The generative approach to contrastive grammar continues to provide valuable insights into the nature of cross-linguistic variation while maintaining the fundamental unity of human language capacity. As our understanding of parametric variation

deepens, so does our appreciation for both the diversity and underlying commonality of human languages.

References

1. Comrie, B. (1989). Language Universals and Linguistic Typology: Syntax and Morphology. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 40-52.

2. Chomsky, N. (1981). Lectures on Government and Binding. Dordrecht: Foris Publications, pp. 12-15.

3. Wade, T. (2011). A Comprehensive Russian Grammar. 3rd ed. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 76-82.

4. Baker, M. (2001). The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar. New York: Basic Books, pp. 156-158.

5. Chomsky, N. (1995). The Minimalist Program. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 23-25.

6. Radford, A. (2004). Minimalist Syntax: Exploring the Structure of English. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 67-70.

7. Roberts, I. (2007). Diachronic Syntax. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 132-138.

8. Chomsky, N. (2000). "Minimalist Inquiries: The Framework." In R. Martin, D. Michaels, & J. Uriagereka (Eds.), Step by Step: Essays on Minimalist Syntax in Honor of Howard Lasnik. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 89-92.

9. Pesetsky, D. & Torrego, E. (2007). "The Syntax of Valuation and the Interpretability of Features." In S. Karimi, V. Samiian, & W. Wilkins (Eds.), Phrasal and Clausal Architecture. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, pp. 201-205.

10. Timberlake, A. (2004). A Reference Grammar of Russian. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 112-115.