

Culture and Language: Realia Explored through Linguistics*

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1. The material

How much real world information do we obtain from the non-denotative part of linguistic structures? I will explore this question using a body of 19th century Russian peasant writing. First, a few words about the data. They are a corpus of personal letters written by members of a single large family. The authors lived in the southern part of the Vjatka province, between the Volga river and the Ural mountains. The addressees were two older sons of the same family who left home as teenagers to earn money. Their whereabouts shift and at some times are not known. The letters cover a period of 16 years and the main authors are the parents, two sons and a daughter. The content covered by the letters – their denotative part – is extremely rich, extending to all aspects of the family’s life. The letters are presently located in the Tjumen’ State Archive (Fond I-134, op. 1, d. 1) in Western Siberia and constitute the largest single collection of personal peasant letters in Russia. This is a work in progress report on a major project that will result in a book-length study of this material.

2. From language phenomena to the realia behind them

Since our focus is not the denotative part but the connotative part, my approach will be pragmatically oriented. Specifically, I will consider what the language *connotatively* tells us about one of the basic components of communication, namely, the

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speaker (or the writer, in this case). I will demonstrate what can be learned about: (1) the persona of the speaker; (2) the relationship of the speaker to the addressee; and (3) the way the speaker views a third person; all this emerges from considering *how* the speaker formulates his or her denotative meaning. The texts adduced here have been normalized only minimally, retaining the original spelling, punctuation (or lack thereof), capitalization, and word boundaries.

I. The speaker’s persona

a. Time and generation

The texts belong to the relatively recent past, yet a past sufficiently removed to allow us to note the distance from our own time. The most obvious sign in Russia’s case is the effect of the orthographic reform that took place after the October Revolution. The texts in this collection are unmistakably pre-Revolutionary, as can be seen immediately from the occurrence of certain now unused letters like Ъ ‘jat, ě’, as in (1a), from the usage of ь ‘back yer’, as in (1b), and from certain grammatical endings, as in (1c):

- | | |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| (1) а. хлѢбъ ‘bread’ | Modern Russian: хлѐб |
| б. сынѢ ‘son’ | Modern Russian: сын |
| в. старшаго | Modern Russian: старшего |

The generational difference as small as that between the two brothers Ivan and Gavriil, born in 1867 and 1872, respectively, and educated in the same village primary school, shows in the adoption of the exclamation mark as the written sign of address in Russian epistolary tradition by the younger brother, but not by the older one; in fact, the older brother uses no punctuation marks after the address; compare (2a) and (2b):

- | | |
|---|------------------------|
| (2) а. Любезный Братецъ Василій Лавровичъ | son Ivan (14), 1882 |
| б. Любезный Братецъ Василій Лавровичь! | son Gavriil (17), 1889 |
| gentle brother V. | Ø/! |

b. Dialectal features

The southern Vjatka province was settled by Russians relatively late, migrations having taken place from different regions to its West, North-West, and South-West. The writing reveals dialectal features that help identify the roots of this family; identification of a scribe’s dialect from his writing belongs, in fact, to the oldest philological tradition. In the case of our corpus, several features can be deduced from non-normative spelling, lexical choice, and syntactic structures. Consider (3) – (6):

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| (3) а. мнѢ въ Ижевскоѣ заводѣ | б. Дедушко |
| toponym, norm: Ižévs ^k ij; | Deduško ‘grandfather’, norm: Deduška |

The adjectival ending in (3a) reveals that the author was an Eastern Slav with no vowel reduction in post-tonic position. The normative spelling of the unstressed adjective ending in the nominative/accusative case like this is *уї* (*ij*), reflecting the originally South Slavic vocalizations of the front jer before /j/, namely *уї/ьї*. The East Slavic reflex was /oj/ but the spelling norm shows this as *ої* only when the ending is stressed. Under the influence of dialects with vowel reduction in post-tonic position, the spelling *уї/ьї* came to be normative in unstressed endings, and eventually even affected the pronunciation. The unstressed ending *ої* in (3a) indicates how the word was pronounced by the author, namely unreduced and with rounding, showing *okan'e*, a feature of North Russian. Similarly, the non-normative diminutive noun ending *-o* in (3b) indicates how the word was pronounced by the author, with *okan'e*.

(4) прошу писать мнѣ письма хотя нѣсколько строкъ

I-ask to-write me letters at-least several lines

In (4), a lexical dialectal feature is seen. This usage is observed in the writing of all the authors of this collection, regardless of their level of norm acquisition. In the norm, the underlined word means ‘although’, while in the corpus it is invariably used to mean ‘at least’. The latter meaning, in the norm, is conveyed by *хоть* or *хотя бы*. The non-normative meaning, to the best of my knowledge, has not been identified as a dialectal feature, although this seems the most likely interpretation.

(5) Напиши намъ объ Алѣксея думатьъ или нѣтъ Женитя

write us about A. he-thinks or not to-marry

In (5), we have a well-known contraction in the 3 p. sg. present verb form. This is a rare occurrence in the corpus, perhaps because of the writer’s awareness of its deviation from the norm, *думаетъ*. (The genitive case governed by the preposition *объ* in (5) is another dialectal feature.)

(6) Сеяно гречюхи 3 дес. Пшеницы ячменю 3 д. гречюхи не
sown.n.sg.pass. buckwheat.gen. 3 d. wheat.gen barley.gen 3 d. buckwheat.gen. not
снямено ни зерна пшеницу и ячень выкошено
harvested.n.sg.pass. not-a grain wheat.acc and barley mown.n.sg.pass.

Another well-known Northern Russian feature is the syntactic construction in (6). The predicate is a short form passive participle, used “impersonally”, i.e., in 3 p. sg. neuter, while the patient takes the accusative or partitive genitive case. The writing in this corpus thus fairly unambiguously identifies the authors as speakers of North Russian.

c. Education level, social class

Apart from purely graphic features like handwriting, which often tells us something about the social and/or educational background of the person, a great deal of information about the degree of acquisition of the literary norm and the social factors that underlie it is imparted by linguistic features. We will consider here the role of foreign borrowings as indicators of the degree of participation in the “high culture” of its era. Consider (7)-(12):

(7) Окопировка norm: экипировка 'equipping'

The spelling of this word in (7) shows the writer’s (or his source’s) non-normative pronunciation, avoiding the word-initial [e] and palatalized [k’], both relatively rare in Russian. The change is thus in the direction of russifying the phonetics of the borrowing. The norm, conversely, tends to enforce a pronunciation that is close to the written transliterated form. The realm of the Russian usage is military and the source is likely to be French or German.

(8) исусу Христу [...] исуса Христа ‘Jesus Christ’ Ivan

The attestations in (8) are from the same letter and are separated only by one line. The fluctuation in the spelling of Jesus’ first name shows that the writer was uncertain as to which of the variants to use. The failure to capitalize this name may have an additional connotation, as this is known to be a feature of some of the Old Believers’ writing. In this case, however, documentation from the local church and the 1897 national census records eliminated this possibility. Perhaps, had the writer’s failure to capitalize been caused by his Old Believer background, he would not have fluctuated in the spelling of Jesus’ first name.

(9) изъ одно ятожного делаютъ двухъ ятожный Gavriil
from one- story they-make two- story norm: одно/двухэтажный

The spelling of the normative *этаж-*, from French *étage*, shows in (9) another typically East Slavic way of russifying the alien word-initial [e], namely, by prothesizing a jot. The word evidently entered the writer’s lexicon through auditory channels and the source was another non-normative speaker of East Slavic.

(10) мы съ нимъ ролями помѣнялись, у меня одинъ расчетъ, а у него
we with him roles exchanged at me only calculation and at him
поэзія и любовь daughter Tanya (19)
poesie and love

A more complex example of borrowings is seen in (10) where Tanya, the most educated of the writers, uses correctly not only individual borrowings but phraseology involving them. This sentence is normatively near-perfect and sounds completely literary. Tanya’s sources were clearly the literary models to which she was exposed in

her gymnasium.

(11) *новигация* norm: *навигация* ‘navigation’ all writers all the time

The difference in the sources is seen when (10) is compared with (11), which was written this way even by Tanya. The spelling with *o* suggests that the writers, when hearing [a], engaged in orthographic hypercorrection, based on their experience that what in the norm sounds like [a] is often supposed to be spelled with *o*. This word entered Tanya’s lexicon from her brothers’ and her father’s, since it appears in some of their earliest letters in the collection. The men, in turn, must have acquired it aurally from some speakers of *akan’ e* dialects they were exposed to in their river transport business.

(12) a. *параходь* norm: *пароходь* ‘steamship’ Ivan 1886-
b. *пароходь*, *пароходь*, *пароходь* (1889)–*пароходь* (1889-) Gavriil
c. *параходь* (1893) – *пароходь* (1895-) Tanya

The long time span covered by the letters allows us to observe some evolution in the acquisition of the norm over time. The acquisition does not take place uniformly with all the writers. Thus, taking as an example the word *пароходь*, a high frequency word in the collection (due to the river transport topics frequently mentioned in it), we can see that Ivan never changed his hypercorrect phonetic spelling of the word throughout the corpus. Gavriil, on the other hand, fluctuated only in his first letter but already in the next letter shifted to the norm for good (12b). The fluctuation in his first letter, interestingly, went from the normative phonemic spelling, which probably reflected his own *okan’ e* pronunciation, to Ivan’s hypercorrect phonetic spelling. Tanya, evidently, pronounced the word with [a] all along, but normalized her spelling later; we happen to know from her letters that the shift to the norm in her case coincides with her attendance at a teachers’ preparation program in 1894. A careful examination of the spelling of borrowings thus shows us not only the level of norm acquisition but also its progression with each of the writers.

d. Genderlects

The materials allow us a rare glimpse of the genderlects of Russian peasants of the late 19th century. One distinction that is fairly certain is that the level of formality the males in the collection chose in contrast to the females was considerably higher. Observe (13) and (14):

(13) a. *Любезный сынъ Алѣксея Лаврычъ Здравствуйте!* father
gentle son A. L. hello
b. *Здравствуй милый сынъ Алешинька!* mother
hello dear son Alyoshinka

(14) а. Любезный Братец Василий Лаврович!

Gavriil, 17

gentle brother V. L.

б. Милый мой братъ Вася!!!!

Tanya, 12

dear my brother Vasya

The parallel expressions follow gender rather than generational lines in almost all respects. The adjective *любезный* 'gentle' (used by the men), now obsolete in this usage, is formal and desemanticized; the adjective *милый* 'sweet, dear' (used by the women) is heartfelt and warm. Both the father and the son address Aleksey (19 at the time) and Vasily (25 at the time) formally, with first name and patronymic; both women address them informally, with hypocoristic in the case of the mother and a short familiar form in the case of the daughter. Even the word *Братец* 'brother' (used by the men), despite its diminutive suffix, is void of endearment. The exclamation marks are somewhat more complicated: that they appear in both (13a) and (13b) is not significant, since both parents' letters were penned by scribes; while the lexical items can reasonably be assumed to originate in the dictating party, the punctuation marks or capitalization belong to the scribe. The difference between (14a) and (14b), on the other hand, is significant, and here we see that while the brother uses a single exclamation mark, the norm he has adopted, the sister uses five of them, clearly injecting the address with personal excitement, typical of women's discourse, according to Zemskaja et al. 1993. Additional typically female features can be found in other letters by the sister, e.g., (15):

(15) Давно уже думала тебѣ написать кое что..... да вѣдь собраться-то

long already I-thought to-you to-write something but ptcl to-get-ready to

писать для меня, почти тоже, что тебѣ жениться [...] ужасно

to-write for me almost same as for-you to-marry terribly

скучаю

Tanya, 16

I-miss

Here, at least two female traits can be detected: the use of suspension points, indicating unfinished, unverbilized content, and the use of so-called exaggerated vocabulary, in this case, *ужасно* 'terribly'. Although Tanya's language at this point has almost completed the transition to the literary norm, the fact that the mother's language in (13b) shows parallels with Tanya's language in (14b) suggests that in the language of the late 19th century peasants in this area there existed some difference between the genderlects.

II. The speaker vs. the addressee

a. Kinship terms: siblings and cousins

Here we consider the range of references of the term *сестра* ‘sister’, used in (16) by the author to refer to herself. The letter is quoted at some length to show that its content is rich in hints and allusions (and also, incidentally, full of so-called female features), to the point of being cryptic to the outsider; it was evidently, however, meant to be understandable to the addressee (the parentheses, the exclamation marks, the long stretch of dots, and the underlining are in the original, and the gradual decrease in the size of the original letter is conveyed here by a difference in font size; the vertical double bars “||” indicate the beginning of a postscript on the letter’s margin). Observe (16):

(16) Многоуважаемый, Василий Лаврович! [...] и извинитъ меня но я надеюсь что вы уже простили меня за то что такъ я долго молчал<a> Но право повѣрте! я не могла тогда (вамъ) писать. [...] Если не забыли те слова которы<e> говорили.. когда-то..... Или однимъ словомъ если (не забыли) будтѣ здоровы. уважающая васъ ваша сестра Евдокія Б || Да, я слышал<a> что вы женитѣсь. || [...] я нисколько не изменилась по отношенію къ вамъ всѣ такая какъ и была раньше вы знаетѣ по прежнему <так> же (т.е.е.) л.т.

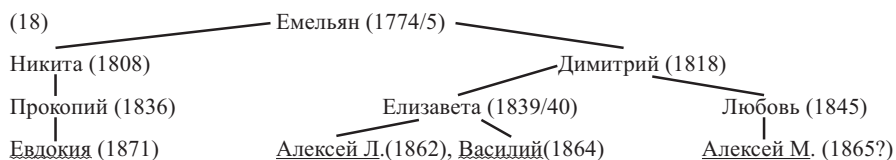
'Much respected Vasily Lavrovich, [...] Forgive me, but I hope that you have already forgiven me for having been silent for so long. But really, trust me! I could not write (to you) then. [...] If you have not forgotten those words you said once..... Or, in short, if you (have not forgotten). Good-bye. Your respectful sister, Evdokia B. Oh yes, I heard that you are getting married. [...] I have not changed at all towards you, still the same I was before, you know, as before, (i.e. s.) l. y.'

Despite the formal beginning, the letter in (16) is obviously a *billet doux*. Given its content, the signature “Your respectful sister Evdokia B.” comes as a surprise, and requires an explanation, which I now provide. Prior to this letter (dated September 1892), there is a related note in Gavriil’s letter dated February 1892; see (17):

(17) Душинька Бехтерева выходитъ замужъ За Пермскаго купца Зеленина Ивана Петровича Старшаго сына его Алексѣя Ивановича
'Dushinka Bekhtereva is getting married to the Perm merchant Z., I.P.’s oldest son A.I.'

If we keep in mind that one of the informal hypocoristic variants of the Russian name *Evdokia* is *Dushinka*, then we see that the person reported in February to be getting married to a merchant named Zelenin is the author of the love letter addressed in September to Vasily. Given the hypocoristic *Dushinka* used by Gavriil, considerable closeness between his and her families can be posited, although she clearly is not his

real sister. Indeed, genealogical research revealed that the families were related in the following way:



The branches converge in the 18th century on Emelyan Bekhterev, the father of Nikita and Dimitry, the first of whom was Evdokia's grandfather, and the second of whom was Vasily's (as well as Gavriil's and the other siblings') grandfather. When Evdokia identified herself in her love letter to Vasily as his "sister", she was thus correct, as long as the word can be used to cover distant cousins. And indeed, in a letter of 1881, we find another such signature, given in (19):

(19) Aleksey M. to Aleksey L.: Вашъ Братъ Алексѣй Родигинъ 'Your brother A.R.'

In this case, the signer gives his last name, which can be traced to that of the married name of Vasily's aunt *Lyubov*, his mother *Elizaveta*'s sister (see (18)). The first cousin Aleksey M. thus refers to himself as "brother", while addressing his first cousin Aleksey L. This, in fact, was not a semantic shift but rather an abbreviation. The Russian kinship terms for cousins removed by different degrees are expressed by the nouns "brother/sister" modified by adjectives specifying the degree to which they are removed; see (20):

- (20) родной брат 'brother'
 двоюродный брат 'first cousin'
 троюродный брат 'second cousin'

The romantic mystery of letter (16) is solved by the note (21) found in the church records of the village where Evdokia lived, recording the marriage of Evdokia to Vasily:

(21) Женихъ и невѣста по случаю родства въ 6 степени повѣнчаны по резолюціи Его Преосвященства отъ 15 Января сего 1893 г. за №122.

'The groom and bride on account of their 6th step kinship were wed with a dispensation granted by His Reverence of January 15 of this year, №122.' (Izhevsk State Archive, 26.1.27.169ob.-170)

b. Short and long interlocutor distance in word order and intonation

We shall now consider some subtle encoding of interlocutor relationship into intonation, as it correlates with word order. To put it briefly, when the speaker posits the relationship between him/herself and the addressee to be distant in some way, and when the discourse is a planned one, he or she implements an intonational formula that lacks

sentential stress, while the word order proceeds from the Topic to the Comment. When the relationship is posited to be close and informal and the discourse is spontaneous, the Comment is assigned the sentential stress and is fronted. (This is a very simplified account of extremely complex phenomena, here couched, in part, in terms of Topic-Comment Articulation – a widely known, albeit ill-defined, conception; for a full account, see, e.g., Yokoyama 2001.) Since the intonational distinction that goes hand in hand with word order correlates with different modes of speaker-addressee relationship, it is possible to “read” these different relationship modes by looking at the written word, as in (22):

(22) Любезный сынъ, Василій Лавровичъ! Впервыхъ спѣшу послать
 Вамъ свое благословеніе нижайше кланяюсь ижежаю всего хорошаго.
 Увѣдомляю Васъ, что бабушка Прасковья Васильевна 15 сего Сентября
 въ 8 часовъ вечера волею Божіею померла, [...]

‘Gentle son, V.L., First of all I hasten to send you my blessing, I bow deeply and wish you all the best. I inform you that your grandmother P.V. by God’s will died on September 15 of this year, at 8 in the evening.’

|| Страница которая **уВась** была, благодарить и **унась** она гостила недѣлю.
 wanderer which at you was thanks and at us she stayed week

This excerpt is from the father’s letter, informing Vasily of the grandmother’s death, as well as of some other domestic events. The difference in the modes is seen between the first part, where the news of the death is conveyed (and, in fact, all the other news in the letter), and the postscript about the wanderer. In the formal first part, solemn-sounding and monotonic, there is no sentential stress marked on any constituent. In the short two-sentence postscript, in contrast, there is sentential stress in the relative clause and in the second sentence (boldfaced here). The difference in tone is conspicuous, so much so that it may be possible to suspect that the postscript was authored/dictated by the mother rather than by the father: the less formal language, as we have seen in (13), tends to belong to her (and it was not unusual for her not to sign her portions of letters written as part of a joint effort).

c. Assessing the addressee’s cognitive state

When the speaker conforms to Topic-Comment Articulation, his/her reasons for considering something to be the Topic, in the ideal situation, are based on an assessment that the item treated by him/her as the Topic is indeed such, i.e. is activated in the addressee’s mind. If the speaker’s assumption is that an item is not activated, he or she must, ideally, treat it as a Comment, and postpose it, if the intonation is formal,

or place the sentential stress on it, if the intonation is informal and spontaneous. Let us consider in these terms the case of the underlined word in (23); the preceding and following contexts are supplied.

(23) Писемъ давно не получали что за причина.? Посылай денегъ поскорѣе.

объщались послать осенью. Каково живешь и гдѣ зимуешь.

'We have not received letters from you for a long time. What's the reason? Send money faster. You promised to send it in the fall. How is your life and where are you spending the winter?'

Окопировка на тебя была отъ брата Алексея.

equipping for you was from brother A.

слѣдовательно ты куда тратишь деньги. насодержаніе дешевле противъ нашего, если ты получаешь по 20 р. в мѣц. должно оставатся худо красная.

'So what do you spend your money on? With living expenses less than ours, if you get 20 rubles a month, there should be at least 10 rubles left.'

These excerpts are from the father's letter to Vasily. The underlined word may or may not be carrying the sentential stress. If the word is assumed by the father to be activated in the reader's mind at the point of entering into this sentence, then it does not carry the stress, and if it is assumed not to be activated in his mind, being mentioned to him for the first time or unexpectedly, then it does carry the sentential stress. We have several clues to go by when deciding which of the two situations is more likely. First, we know that the father tends to be formal, and this speaks in favor of the word not carrying the sentential stress. If so, we must assume that there is probably a good reason for the word to be activated in the son's mind at the moment of reading the sentence. Since the word does not appear in the preceding context and does not seem to be reasonably associated with anything in it, what activation route could there possibly be that the father might go by in assessing the word (or rather, its referent) as being activated in the son's mind? The genre being epistolary, what is left is the context of the preceding letter, i.e., that to which the father is responding. We don't have that letter in our collection, but the preceding letters from the parents to both sons provide some helpful context. Namely, we know that the parents are poor and badly need money. We also know that the second son Vasily had just joined the first son Aleksey in Siberia and had found a job. Based on the assumption that the underlined word was indeed mentioned in Vasily's previous letter, it becomes possible to reconstruct the sequence of exchanges as follows. Parents: send us the money you earn; Vasily: I need it to equip myself (i.e., to get decent clothes); parents: equipment (clothes) was supposed to be given to you by your older brother. Such a hypothetical reconstruction, resting as it is

on the assumed Topic status of the underlined word ‘equipment’, which rests, in turn, on the assumption that the father’s intonation here lacked the sentential stress, may seem rather subtle; yet the following context lends it considerable credence: the father goes on to tell Vasily that, given that the clothes were supposed to be given to him by his older brother, there is hardly anything for him to spend his salary on. If we did not make these assumptions, the underlined word would have to be sententially stressed, and the sentence would be conveying a piece of news, roughly: ‘(Guess what) – there were some clothes sent to you by your brother!’; this would clearly not dovetail with the following context.

d. Imposing the speaker’s cognitive state

When the speaker conforms to Topic-Comment Articulation, his/her reasons for considering something to be the Topic are nevertheless not always objectively well-founded in the context, as they presumably were in (23). When the speaker feels he can command what the addressee *should* be thinking about, he proceeds on this impositional assumption and treats some items that are at the center of his/her own attention as if they were at the center of the addressee’s attention as well. Consider the underlined words in (24):

- (24) лето нынче было дождливое и холодное
 summer this-year was rainy and cold
у рожай хлеба былъ средній умолодь плохой
 harvest of-grain was so-so yield poor
съ овина падаетъ отъ десяти до двенадцати пудовъ
 from barn yields from 10 to 12 poods
 а огурцовъ вовсе небыло унасъ аржаного хлеба на жато 20 овиновъ
 and cucumbers at-all were-none at us rye grain reaped 20 barns
цена хлебу аржаному отъ 45к до 50коп пшеничная мука отъ 80к до 1 руб.
 price for-grain rye from 45 k. to 50 k. wheat flour from 80 k. to 1 r.
овесъ 30коп
 oats 30 k.

All the underlined words in (24) were treated by the speaker as if the addressee is concerned with their referents at the moment of reading each respective sentence. Unlike the underlined word in (23), there is no contextual evidence that these words appeared in the addressee’s previous letter. Yet it is clear that these things represent matters of standing concern for the father. Information about the harvest appears in most letters, and each time the word order is like that in (24). The explanation for such treatment must then be sought in the speaker’s imposition of his own matters of current

concern. From this order (assuming, of course, the formal intonation without the sentential stress), we thus get to know not only what is constantly on the mind of the father – farming weather, harvest, yield, grain prices – but also what the father unilaterally assumes must therefore also be on his son’s mind.

III. The speaker vs. the referential world

Besides the speaker him/herself and the addressee, pragmatics also includes the third party, as the prototypical representative of the referential world. The ways the speaker views and understands the third party can also be glimpsed from the linguistic form. Consider the cases of personal names in section a. and the speaker’s categorial thinking in section b. below.

a. Personal names

The next excerpt is from the father’s letter of 1884:

(25) Родился сынъ послѣдошекъ – зовуть Николай, Кумомъ сынъ Иванъ и Кумошкой Сноха Роиса Давыдовна [...] Роиза Давыдовна пріѣхала [...] не следовало бы такую брать %*Нѣшкы!*%

‘Our lastborn was born, named him N., his godfather is our son Ivan and his godmother is our daughter-in-law Roisa Davydovna [...] Roiza Davydovna arrived [...] (he) should not have taken such a %xxxxx!% (wife)’

The name of the new daughter-in-law, underlined in (25), is given in this letter in two different spellings only a few sentences apart. Since the difference involves the voicing of the second consonant, it must have originated in the dictating party’s pronunciation practice. If so, there must be a reason for such fluctuation in a relatively short name, which, moreover, does not look normative in either of the forms recorded in (25).

A check in the baptismal records of the infant – since the daughter-in-law, according to the letter, was made the newborn baby’s godmother – showed that, strangely enough, the woman was not actually listed, but only the child’s godfather; cf. (26):

(26) April 29, 1884, Baptismal record: Николай ‘Nikolai’
родители – Лавр Иванов Стефанов и законная жена его Елизавета Дмитриева, оба православные; восприемник – того же дома родной сын Лавру Иоанн.
‘the parents are L.I.S. and his lawful wife E.D., both Orthodox; the godfather is L.’s native son of the same family Ioann’

It should be noted that appointing only a single godparent at that time was

extremely rare, although not forbidden. This, naturally, called for further research, including a check for other references to the same person in the corpus. The cross-referencing yielded (27) and (28). The reference in (27) appeared in the father's letter of 1885, and he evidently avoided calling her by her first name; the second reference, in a letter of 1888 by one of the sons, gave a third variant of the spelling.

(27) сноха <да>выдовна беременна

'daughter-in-law Davydovna is pregnant'

(28) Раиса Дав. Raisa Dav.

Neither of these attestations produces conclusive results; they merely deepen the sense that something is amiss. The information that the daughter-in-law was pregnant in 1885 prompted a look into her baby's baptismal record, and this is where the answer was found; cf. (29):

(29) September 23, 1885, Baptismal record: Вера 'Vera'

родители – Алексей Лавровъ Стефановъ, православного
вероисповедания, и законная жена его Луиза Давыдова,
Лютеранского вероисповедания.

'the parents are A.L.S., of the Orthodox confession, and his lawful wife Luiza Davydovna, of the Lutheran confession'

The daughter-in-law turned out to be a Lutheran named Luiza (the russified version of *Louise*). So the father's discomfort with the sounds of his new daughter-in-law's name in (25), consistent with his avoidance of saying it in (27), was resolved. Moreover, this helped decipher a previously illegible word. The third letter of the last word in (25) was unclear. It looked like *ш*, and that led to the speculation that it could reflect a phonetic spelling of *ж*, devoiced by assimilation to the following voiceless [k]. Once the word was assumed to be *нѣжку*, it was tempting to further hypothesize that it was a dialectal form built on the root /nĕg/ 'tender' and therefore might mean something like *нѣженку* 'molly-coddle', a reasonable thing to be criticized for by a hard-working peasant father-in-law. But with the new insight into the reasons for the father-in-law's discomfort, a rereading provided a much simpler and even obvious answer: the undecipherable word was not *Нѣжку* but *Нѣмку* 'German', the letters *ш* and *м* quite often being indistinguishable in script. (The alternate reading did not occur to me at first because a German bride in a peasant family in that part of Russia would have been unexpected at that time.)

If the example in (25) showed meaningful ambivalence in the sounds of a referential term, then in (30) we have a series of names that present first and foremost the problem of the speaker's empathy in choosing the order in which these names are presented. Consider the following list of young villagers drafted in 1886, in the father's

rendition:

(30) Въ солдаты нынче приняли Богданова Данила у Филипа Прохорова
Андреяна у Старовера Прокопья Василья у Листофора Николая

'As soldiers they accepted this year B. D. from F. P. A. from Old Believer P. V. from L. N.'

The list is ambiguous in many ways, it being unclear even how many people were drafted. There are seven first names, and two names that could either be family names or patronymics; there is also one noun that means “Old Believer”, a label rather than a personal name. All the nouns are in the accusative/genitive case, two Russian cases which show syncretism for animate nouns. The preposition *y* ‘at, from’, which governs the genitive case, occurs three times, so the nouns’ case could be due either to their status as indirect objects or to their being governed by prepositions. Moreover, the word order is relatively free and cannot be expected to indicate grammatical relationship (although prepositions precede the Ns they govern). The presence of the prepositions means that the names include the heads of the households (fathers) from which the men (sons) were drafted. Thus the phrases (a) “*y* + N.gen. + N.acc.” or (b) “N.acc. + *y* + N.gen.”, respectively, mean: (a) ‘from father A, son X was taken’ or (b) ‘son X was taken from father A’. In addition to lexical and grammatical clues, there is a pragmatic factor that can be taken into account, namely, empathy. If we assume that the two possible phrasings (a) and (b), just listed, convey the same denotative reality, option (a) would imply the speaker’s empathy with the parent, while option (b) would indicate his empathy with the son. If we hypothesize that the father, who is the speaker in this case, is more likely to take a parent’s point of view, we would expect him to express that denotative meaning in the form of (a). With this hypothesis, if we begin at the end, we arrive, backwards, at the following three combinations: from L. they took N., from P. (the Old Believer) they took V., from F. P. they took A. This leaves the first two nouns without the prepositional phrase, one of them either a last name or a patronymic, and the other the first name. Using the assumptions we have just made, there is no way to go any further.

But the presence of the same list in the rendition of the son Ivan helps clear the confusion; consider (31):

(31) Взяли Солдаты 4 челов 1го Василей Прокоп. Старавер 2й Яков
Данилов Богданов 3й Николай Листофор Зыле 4й Андріянь
Филипов Коробейнико

‘They took as soldiers 4 people: 1st V. P. Old Believer, 2nd Ja. D. B., 3rd N. L. Z., 4th A. F. K.’

Ivan stated clearly that there were four draftees and he followed a clear pattern of listing: each son’s name, then his patronymic, and, lastly, his family name (except that in the case of the Old Believer that label is used instead of the last name). The fathers’

names never figure in his list as such but are only deducible from the patronymics. Ivan lists the draftees as follows; V. P. the Old Believer, Ja. D. B., N. L. Z., and A. F. K. It thus turns out that in (30), in the case of the draftee the father listed first, he never mentioned the son's name, only the father's. The comparison of the two lists (30) and (31) reveals a striking difference between the father's and the son's point of view: the father empathizes with the fathers, while the son empathizes with the sons; the father views the sons as their fathers' attributes, while the son views them as individuals.

b. Categories the speaker creates

The final cognitive aspect to be considered is what the Russian conjunction *a* reveals about how the speaker categorizes the referential world. In the sublinear glosses of the following examples (32) and (33), the conjunction *a* is not translated, but simply marked as **A**.

- (32) у рожай хлеба былъ средній умолодь плохой съ овина падаетъ отъ десяти до
 harvest of-grain was so-so yield poor from barn yields from 10 to
 двенадцати пудовъ **a** огурцовъ вовсе небыло [...] father 1886
 twelve poods **A** cucumbers at-all were-none

This example repeats (24), but here we consider the conjunction. In (32), the conjunction is generated before the last topical item belonging to the composite Topic that consists of {grain, cucumbers}. It shows that the two-member Topic set has now been exhausted. Every set is a product of cognitive categorization; in this case, the category singled out is probably something like {the main things we grow on our farm for making a living: grain, cucumbers}, which makes ample sense in this speaker's world. There are many such occurrences of the conjunction *a* in our corpus and the categories they reveal are for the most part fairly unsurprising.

Example (33), however, reveals some interesting things about the speaker's categorization of the world:

- (33) Лошадей рабочиъ унась 8 работникоъ трое **a** Ваня съработниками ездить
 of-horses working at us 8 workers 3 **A** V. with workers drives
 въ Сарапуль съ бочками father 1886
 to S. with barrels

It is easy to see what the composite Topic in (33) is: as is revealed by the conjunction *a*, the Topic is a three-member set {horses, workers, Vanya}, and the conjunction before the last member *Vanya* closes the list (Vanya is the son Ivan). The category these three members belong to in the speaker's current view (from which this sentence was generated in this form), on the other hand, is rather surprising. Evidently, the three constitute the category of {our workforce: horses, workers, Ivan}. Ivan thus

turns out to be categorized as “part of our workforce”, on a par with horses and workers. This is not necessarily the only way the father categorizes his son Ivan, but in the “here and now” of the discourse given in (33), this is where Ivan belongs.

3. Conclusion

We have considered Russian 19th century texts by so-called “naïve writers”, which have increasingly become the focus of scholarly analysis in the last decade (e.g., Kozlova & Sandomirskaia 1996). The analysis presented here is part of a major study in progress. I have tried to demonstrate that the connotative content of language, i.e., the linguistic form in which the denotative content is conveyed, itself conveys a wealth of information about the participants of each speech event and about the culture they belong to. This is true, of course, of any text. The material presented here is particularly conducive to such analysis because it is situated in the not-too-distant past, which gives the researcher the advantage of being able to find much supportive real-life documentation to test his or her hypotheses. The researcher can also to some extent rely on his or her own modern cultural and linguistic intuitions, which can help with hypothesis-building and developing “hunches”. At the same time, the world and the culture of the authors of these letters are sufficiently removed from the present to make it possible to approach the texts with a salutary objectivity. The “naïve” feature of this particular material is valuable because it constitutes a written record of what is, strictly speaking, a dead language of a folk community. Very little such material is available across languages from the pre-tape-recorder era. The material, though written, contains many features of the spoken language of the recent past precisely because the writers were not literate enough to avoid them in writing, yet literate enough to write them down. These texts can thus make important contributions to the growing field dedicated to the study of spoken language.

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