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endeavors

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**DARK
ENERGY,
NEUTRINOS,**
*and other
strangeness*

TANK CAMERA

GRAMMAR

*in a pile
of sand*

story by Mary Alice Scott

photos by Jason Smith



Above: One of the unusual tools Laura Janda uses to explain aspect, a grammatical category in many Slavic languages. The ping-pong ball embedded in sand demonstrates the concept of one thing happening (the perfective aspect) as another is going on in the background (the imperfective aspect).

Without the Internet, their research would be impossible. Without the lunchtime team meetings in front of a chalkboard covered in diagrams, it wouldn't be as much fun. Laura Janda whizzes through her latest brainstorm (she says she hasn't slept



much all week because she keeps coming up with new ideas), covering her diagrams with dots and arrows, and switching between speaking Russian and English. Her graduate students are on the edges of their seats, ready to respond. But what are they so excited about?

Grammar. Janda works on aspect, a grammatical category in many Slavic languages, including Russian. Aspect has to do with how people conceptualize time. It's complicated. Hyug Ahn, a master's student, says that even most native Russian speakers can't explain what aspect is or how it is used. And Janda says, "You can go through entire books of lists explaining when to use different aspect, and it looks grotesque because they seem totally unmotivated, just this random horror."

But aspect doesn't have to be so difficult. "It's a myth that the divisions of grammati-

cal categories are infinite and chaotic. They are actually quite finite and well ordered," she says. But no one has ever explained that to students. Janda has a lot of ideas about exactly how these categories are organized, and her research is helping her develop new tools for teaching Slavic languages to non-native speakers.

Janda's method includes using rocks, sand, blocks of wood, and ping-pong balls to explain the complexities of aspect and other Slavic grammatical categories, which require adding a marking to every noun, pronoun, and verb in a sentence to indicate relationships among objects and ideas. "A lot of the categories have never been described even by theoreticians very well," Janda says. "And it's hard to teach them to students. It's painful, actually." According to Janda, it's possible to spend several years learning a

Slavic language and still not know the meaning of some sentences.

But with her rocks and sand, aspect begins to make sense. For example, two rocks can never occupy the same space, but two piles of sand can easily be mixed. The two rocks represent sequencing—when two things happen one after the other, requiring the perfective aspect. The two piles of sand mixed together represent simultaneity, which uses the imperfective aspect. Or say you embed a rock in a pile of sand—one thing happens (the perfective aspect) as another is going on in the background (the imperfective aspect). Students get it, and it's fun.

Sean Flanagan, a first-year graduate student, is helping Janda test her method by surveying native Russian speakers who live in North Carolina. The thirty-two questions he uses require the subjects to identify which configurations of blocks of wood and sand

best represent the use of verbs in a sentence. He and Janda want to find out, as Flanagan says, “Is this just a nice model that helps us explain to students pedagogically how aspect works, or is this a real connection that’s happening in the minds of native speakers?”

Dealing with differences in cultural background has put an interesting twist on his survey. Flanagan says that Russians’ love for working puzzles conflicted with the purpose of the survey—to find out whether native Russian speakers conceptualize aspect in the same way that Janda has explained it. “I think every single person I interviewed told me that it was set up wrong. I would tell them that there are no right or wrong answers, and that was very frustrating for a lot of them,” Flanagan says.

The vocabulary Janda and her students are studying and categorizing is huge. “If all the words that are used were put in dictionaries, the dictionaries would be bigger than this room,” Janda says half-jokingly to the gradu-

ate students in her office. Part of testing her theory involves finding good examples of the myriad ways that verbs are used and examining how they fit into Janda’s system.

And that’s where the Internet comes in. Search engines make it possible to search a huge amount of data for specific words and phrases in Russian. The team uses the examples for the interviews and in the online Slavic language resources they are creating, so Janda doesn’t want just anything. Anne Keown, a doctoral student, says, “[Janda] likes a certain type of sentence for her examples—something that can stand the test of time, something that can stand alone without any significant context.”

Still, they search a wide range of resources. Flanagan has found information from Russian professional wrestling web sites and voodoo instruction manuals, for example. And the language used on the Internet is spontaneous—it’s the way people really talk. The students have found verb usages on the Internet that they never would have found in a dictionary.

So far, the findings lean in favor of Janda’s concept of categorization, but they plan to test their methods further. As Flanagan says, “It’s not enough to simply come up with something theoretically. The closer we get to what’s actually going on in speakers’ heads, the better we’ll be able to teach these languages to other people.”

And now, the sandwiches and cookies are gone, the blackboard is covered with chalk, and Janda has finished explaining her latest brainstorm. It’s time to get to work. ■

Janda, professor of Slavic linguistics, received the Dr. A. Ronald Walton Award for “a career of distinguished service” by the National Council of Less Commonly Taught Languages. She also won a Faculty Fellowship for Teaching with New Media, sponsored by the James M. Johnston Center for Undergraduate Excellence and the Institute for the Arts and Humanities, to continue her work developing books about Slavic grammatical categories. To view the books, visit the Slavic and East European Language Resource Center at www.seelrc.org. SEELRC is funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Relevance, not riches

*Graduate students and
the intriguing languages
of a volatile region*



All the students agree that earning a Ph.D. in Slavic languages is not necessarily a stellar career move. There are very few faculty positions open each year, and other jobs involving Slavic languages are few and far between. Clearly, these scholars aren’t in it for the money, and they’re not just interested in putting words into categories.

Anne Keown is writing her dissertation on how polite pronouns—plural or third person forms of the pronoun “you” used to show respect to the person addressed—in Russian, Czech, and Polish change over time.

“I’m interested in taking things from Czech popular culture and using those for language materials,” she says. “I really like using popular culture, things that Czechs now in Prague are looking at and experiencing every day, and trying to translate that into some way to teach language.”

Hyug Ahn studies so-called Slavic reflexive sentences—those which refer back to the person speaking. These sentences

sometimes have meanings other than the reflexive meaning, and they are used widely. Ahn wants to find out why Slavic languages use this construction, when they use it, and how it is related to other languages that have reflexive verbs.

Biljana Belamaric-Wilsey, who is from Macedonia, is a sociolinguist. Her research involves trying to understand language as a part of the society in which it is spoken. The questions she asks are tough.

“What motivates a person to sit and talk to another person one day, and the next day to kill that person? There probably never will be a clear-cut answer, but the closer we get to understanding that, the closer we get to preventing it.”

And Sean Flanagan says, “I believe that the areas in which Slavic and East European languages are spoken are volatile areas and will be important in the world forever. I would hate for something big and scary to happen with some ultranationalist movement in Russia, or another giant conflict in the Balkans, and not have enough linguists to help take care of these things.”

—Mary Alice Scott

Laura Janda with grad students (clockwise from left) Hyug Ahn, Biljana Belamaric-Wilsey, Anne Keown, and Sean Flanagan.