

What is a possible word? Evidence from Russian factitive verbs

Anna Endresen & Laura A. Janda
University of Tromsø

What is a possible word in a language? Does an idealized cognitive model exist in a speakers' grammar or only in the imagination of linguists? What does it mean to be "theoretically possible"? The advent of large electronic corpora and software for database management now enable us to extract attested novel words that are generated *ad hoc* and therefore lie beyond the scope of "legitimate" lexicon. In our paper we show how cognitive linguistics can account for probabilistic aspects of grammar in terms of radial structures of linguistic phenomena.

The cognitive approach has facilitated fruitful insights in the domain of word-formation (Booij 2010; Janda 1986, 2011; Nessel 2010; Onysko & Michel 2010). However, newly generated words that are possible for some speakers but not acceptable to others are hard to account for. We present a large-scale corpus-based study of Russian perfective factitive verbs built from nouns and adjectives like *objasnit'* 'clarify' (< *jasnyj* 'clear_{ADJ}'). The Russian National Corpus (www.ruscorpora.ru) attests many low frequency factitives like *omuzykalit'* 'musicalize' (< *muzykal'nyj* 'musical_{ADJ}'), *ukonkretit'* 'concretize' (< *konkretnyj* 'concrete_{ADJ}'), *ovnešnit'* 'externalize' (< *vnešnij* 'external_{ADJ}'), *rasteplit'* 'melt' (< *teplyj* 'warm_{ADJ}') that have marginal status:

- (1) *No tem ne menee ukonkretim texničeskie parametry – dlja ponimajuščix čitatelej.* [RNC, 2003]
'But let us **concretize** technical parameters – for advanced readers.'
- (2) *Fil'my o čudoviščax pozvoljajut zritelju èksteriorizirovat', "ovnešnit'" problemy v forme kinoobrazov, perenesti ix iz sebja na èkran.* [RNC, 2003]
'Films about monsters enable a viewer to exteriorize, **externalize** problems in the form of movie images, transfer them from inside oneself to the screen.'
- (3) *Solnce rasteplilo nebesnuju xmar'.* [RNC, 1987]
'The sun **melted apart** the clouds on the sky.'

The question arises whether such verbs exist in modern Russian and what it means "to exist" – to be generated or to be conventionalized and accepted? It appears that there is no clear-cut boundary but rather a transitional zone of "possible" words. Instead of categorizing such data into words and non-words it is fruitful to address this issue experimentally. We present results of a score-assignment task and statistical analysis of responses.

We propose that productive patterns of derivation consist of core prototypical examples shared by all members of a linguistic community, while newly generated words have an ambivalent nature. Words formed *ad hoc* exemplify the productivity of the pattern but nevertheless belong to the periphery of linguistic competence and are not accepted by all speakers.

Thus, our empirical findings shed light on what happens in the gap between actual and possible words (Bauer 2012) and show how this transitional zone of grammar can be captured within cognitive linguistics.

