Anastasia Vyrenkova

Title: Lexical Complexity in the Writing of Russian Heritage Learners

Abstract:

This paper addresses the issue of lexical complexity in written texts produced by heritage learners studying Russian. Although lexical complexity is a measurement often used in both FLA and SLA it still implies different interpretations being understood as complexity in morphological structure semantic density or a combination of these or other features (Cutler 1989; Duran et al. 2004; Pustejovsky 2006; Lu 2018). In this study we base the definition of lexical complexity on the notion of lexical diversity (McCarthy & Jarvis 2008) which measures the number of different words in a given text with the reference to the text’s TTR.

The data for the present study comes from RULEC – a longitudinal corpus of learner essays produced by heritage speakers and L2 learners of Russian. The corpus was collected by O. Kisselev and A. Alsufieva and is now part of the Russian Learner Corpus (Kisselev et al. 2013; Rakhilina et al. 2016). We divided the texts produced by HSs into two groups depending on the proficiency level of their author (Intermediate Low to High and Advance Low to High). To average on the text length parameter the MLTD index was used (McCarthy & Jarvis 2010).

Despite the fact that the overall results demonstrated a clear regress of lexical complexity as HSs gained in proficiency (116.1 for Intermediate level speakers vs. 107.4 for Advanced level speakers) the trend doesn’t hold if we view tokens not as separate lexical items but as collocations or larger constructions containing the type word. For instance the light verb delat’ / sdelat’ ‘to do’ (taken as a type) is used in HS essays in 3 different ways: in its direct meaning (ja ničego ne sdelal’ ‘I did nothing’) with an adjective – to describe caused changes in objects (sdelat’ mir lučše ‘make the world better’) and as part of idiomatic expressions (delat’ vybor ‘make a choice’ sdelat’ vid ‘pretend’). All these patterns are already acquired by lower level HSs however the range of constructions presented by advanced speakers is visibly higher (12.94 for intermediate learners vs. 17.03 for advanced learners).

From this perspective the paper discusses quantitative aspects of acquiring lexical constructions by HS and compares their production to that of L2 learners.