The Slavic languages

By Roland Sussex and Paul Cubberley


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Ever since seeing the mysterious Cyrillic letters stenciled on nuclear missile tubes in the film *Hunt for Red October*, I have been endlessly fascinated by Russian, and later, by extension, the other Slavic languages. This lifelong fascination has most recently been rewarded by Roland Sussex and Paul Cubberley’s masterful linguistic survey of the language family in *The Slavic Languages*, published in 2006 as part of the Cambridge Language Surveys series. With this book, the authors present “a typology of the Slavic languages—what makes them a language family and how they differ from one another—using conventional linguistic notions and terms” (13).

The family of Slavic, or ‘Slavonic,’ comprises thirteen national languages, five ‘sub-national’ languages, and three extinct languages. These are further divided into South Slavic, East Slavic, and West Slavic. The eighteen living languages are spoken by upwards of 300 million people in Europe and Eurasia. The following table shows the Slavic languages according to their major geographical groupings (adapted from page 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National languages</th>
<th>Sub-national languages</th>
<th>Extinct languages</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>South Slavic</strong></td>
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<td>Slovenian</td>
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<td>Bosnian</td>
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<td>Serbian</td>
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<td>Bulgarian</td>
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<td>Macedonian</td>
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<td>Old Church Slavonic</td>
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<td><strong>East Slavic</strong></td>
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<td>Russian</td>
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<td>Rusyn (Rusnak)</td>
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<td>Belarusian</td>
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<td>Ruthenian</td>
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<td>Ukrainian</td>
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<td><strong>West Slavic</strong></td>
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<td>Sorbian</td>
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<td>Polish</td>
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<td>Czech</td>
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<td>Slovak</td>
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<td>Lachian</td>
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According to the authors, Slavic is the most studied language family in the world (14). Although Slavic peoples comprise only 6% of the world’s population, studies of their languages account for an astonishing 25% of the world’s linguistic literature. Appendix C of the book catalogues the many journals, conferences, monographs, and electronic resources that are devoted to Slavic linguistics. The seventeen-page bibliography gives further testimony not only to the great many works on the subject but also to the great lengths Sussex and Cubberley went in surveying this language family.

The Slavic Languages distills much of the available knowledge on Slavic into one accessible volume. The book is a virtual one-stop shop for Slavic linguistics. Melding diachronic and synchronic approaches, the authors survey the Slavic languages in a holistic manner: covering not only strictly linguistic topics, but also the historical, political, and social contexts in which the languages have developed and continue to do so. Special emphasis is put on the important pre- and post-Communist era socio-political issues affecting the languages and their speakers. The breadth of information covered is reflected in the book’s chapter titles, provided here:

1. Introduction
2. Linguistic evolution, genetic affiliation and classification
3. Socio-historical evolution
4. Phonology
5. Morphophonology
6. Morphology: inflexion
7. Syntactic categories and morphosyntax
8. Sentence structure
9. Word formation
10. Lexis
11. Dialects
12. Sociolinguistic issues

For each of these chapters, the authors manage the impressive task of incorporating data from each of Slavic’s three sub-groupings. As I am currently facing the challenge of writing a grammar of one language, I appreciated all the more the challenge of writing a comparative grammar of twenty-one languages. However, for a book of this length (600 pages) to cover such breadth, it obviously has to sacrifice some depth on any particular language or sub-grouping.

But this lack of language-specific depth is just another attractive feature of the book. Many people interested in Slavic linguistics have entered the field through the gateways of major national languages like Russian, Polish, or Czech. The Slavic Languages accommodates readers with prior knowledge of at least one Slavic language by allowing them to compare examples they can understand with ones they cannot. Nevertheless, the authors strove to write roughly at an undergraduate level and above (in linguistics) so that those with no prior knowledge of a Slavic language would not be excluded. It is true that personally I enjoyed being able to rely on the little Russian I know, but the book is written clearly enough to profit any reader with sufficient interest in the topics.

The Slavic Languages makes a four-fold contribution to the linguistic world. First, it concisely summarizes the state of Slavic linguistics today. Given the volume of literature already alluded to above, I imagine this comes as a breath of fresh air to Slavicists. Second, using data and
examples from Slavic, the book leads the reader on a delightful tour of today’s widely accepted linguistic terms, concepts, and concerns. In other words, it provides general linguists with a successful example of basic language description. Third, by comparing and contrasting Slavic languages, the book becomes a valuable resource for people looking to know more about this specific language family. And finally, the book covers issues unique in Slavic linguistics or characteristic of Slavic languages, like ‘pleophony’ (9), the genitive-accusative case (337), verbal aspect (342), the ‘dative of the interested person’ (371), and ‘univerbacija’ (487).

To take a few examples, ‘pleophony,’ or polnoglásie in Russian, refers to the occurrence of an extra syllable in cognates from West Slavic. The word for ‘milk’ is mléko in Slovenian (South Slavic), mloko in Sorbian (East Slavic), but molokó Russian (West Slavic). The ‘genitive-accusative,’ on the other hand, “one of the classic problems of Slavic morphosyntax” (337), refers to a context where the syntax expects an accusative but gets a genitive case instead. Along with noun case, verbal aspect is one of the most controversial grammatical categories in Slavic. Students of Russian will recognize the often puzzling (at least to Anglophones) distinction between the perfective and imperfective, exemplified below (from page 345):

\[
\text{Ón otkryvál [imprfv] oknó.} \\
\text{‘He opened the window’ (but now it’s shut again).}
\]

\[
\text{Ón otkryl [prfv] oknó.} \\
\text{‘He opened the window’ (and it is still open).}
\]

The authors mention that analyses of Slavic verbal aspect have tried to neatly map grammatical forms to semantic notions but have not always succeeded (342). Recent research has demonstrated that analysts need to consider contextual, pragmatic, and even interpersonal factors alongside traditional time-space deixis (346).

Because Slavic languages express possession less explicitly than English, many nouns like body parts, relatives, and inalienable possessions require no over marker of possession at all. However, one way Slavic expresses possession explicitly is through the ‘dative of the interested person,’ exemplified in Russian below (from page 371):

\[
\text{Ón mné ukrál čemodán.} \\
\text{he I-Dat stole-MascSg trunk} \\
\text{‘He stole my trunk.’}
\]

Lastly, univerbacija refers to a Slavic lexical innovation strategy that creates a new single noun from a noun phrase. It typically does this by deleting the head noun, stripping inflectional affixes from the adjective stem, and replacing them with a single suffix. Thus, in Russian (and to a lesser degree Ukrainian and Belarusian), one gets such new words as (from pages 487–488):

\[
\text{ělektríčka < ělektríčeskij póezd ‘electric train’} \\
\text{mobílka < mobíl’nyj telefon ‘mobile phone’}
\]
Univerbacića is just one of many highly productive lexical strategies Slavic languages are using to adapt to the rapid changes occurring in Slavic nations.

Many of the Slavic languages are written in different scripts. For the reader’s benefit, the examples from languages with non-Roman scripts were transliterated. On page 15, the authors introduce the complex problem of orthography and transliteration, and Appendix B covers in detail each of the language’s orthographies and how they were transliterated. Despite these efforts, I found the difficulty of reading examples to be one of the book’s few detractors. If all the examples could have been written in simplified IPA, it would have made the discussions much more accessible to non-Slavicist readers. As a linguist, I enjoy knowing how data sounds as well as looks on paper, and I often found myself skipping examples to avoid the delay of going back to Appendix B to see how some word or morpheme should be pronounced. That said, giving examples in IPA may not have been acceptable in light of the long tradition of Slavic linguistics.

In conclusion, *The Slavic Languages* is an excellent all-around descriptive survey of a major Indo-European language family. As such, if you are:

- a linguistics student looking for a research topic, or data for a project,
- a student of any Slavic language(s) wanting to know how that language fits in among the other Slavic tongues,
- a field linguist working on an under-documented and under-described language, wondering what life must be like for the super-documented families,
- a typologist needing cross-linguistically comparable data from Slavic, or
- a general linguist searching for another successful model of language description,

then you may want to see about picking up a copy of *The Slavic Languages* at your earliest convenience. If, however, you are a career Slavicist, well…you have probably already read it! If not, don’t take my word for it; get your own copy!