Introduction   **Today's Exceptions—Yesterday's Rules**

0.1. Why Study the History of Russian?

Time machines do not exist, but books are good substitutes. This book takes you two thousand years back in time and explains how the Russian language came to be the way it is by reviewing all major changes in the grammar and sound system. I cannot know why you are holding this book in your hands, but a reasonable guess is that you are a graduate student of Russian or Slavic linguistics. Or maybe you are still an undergraduate? Or maybe your main interest lies in Russian literature or history? Or maybe you are a linguist who wants to learn about the history of the Russian language? I have written this book with all types of readers in mind. Beyond curiosity, the only thing you need in order to read this book is some competence in the Modern Russian language. Struggling your way through Russian grammar, you may have asked yourself why there are so many exceptions to the grammatical rules. Take a simple word like **писа́ть** 'write'. Why isn't it inflected the same way as **чита́ть** 'read'? Why do some forms of **писа́ть** such as **пишу́** 'I write' have **ш** instead of **с** in the stem? And why does the stress move to the stem in some of the inflected forms, such as **пи́шешь** 'you write'? Turning from verbs to nouns, you may wonder why nouns occur in the genitive after numerals (e.g., **пять столо́в** 'five tables'). And why do some masculine nouns have the ending **-a** in the nominative plural (e.g., **рога́** from **рог** 'antler'), while most masculines have **-ы** (e.g., **столы́**)? Conversely, why do some neuter nouns such as **плечо́** 'shoulder' take **-и** in the plural (**пле́чи**), when the general rule for neuter nouns is **-a** (e.g., **места́** from **ме́сто** 'place')?

This book provides you with answers to these and many other questions. The slogan in the title of this chapter summarizes the basic pedagogical idea: today's exceptions are yesterday's rules. In other words, the exceptions in Modern Russian are the result of historical processes that are regular and can be analyzed and understood. Learning about the processes that shaped Russian will deepen and enrich your understanding of the modern language. When you have read this book, the seemingly idiosyncratic properties of **писа́ть** and other words will no longer be random facts you just have to memorize, but rather the outcome of regular and well-understood historical processes. In

order to maximize the usefulness of the book, each chapter starts with a presentation of some seemingly idiosyncratic properties of Modern Russian, and then goes on to explain how they developed historically.

At this point I hope to have convinced you that the history of Russian is not an arcane or esoteric topic, but instead it provides you with useful language skills and practical facts you can use. However, after reading this book I hope you will agree that there is more to it than that. One of the most fascinating aspects of language is the fact that it always changes. Historical linguistics is the academic discipline that analyzes language change. Chapter 3 offers a brief introduction to historical linguistics, and the entire book illustrates how these principles apply to the history of Russian. When you have read this book, you will have a good idea about language change and historical linguistics in general.

Yet another reason to study the history of Russian relates to literature and history. A large body of texts has come down to us from medieval Russia, representing a wide variety of genres. These texts provide a unique window into the culture and history of Russia. Admittedly it is possible to read some medieval texts in translation, but no translation does full justice to a text, and not all texts are available in translation. This book provides you with the linguistic tools you need in order to read medieval texts in the original, and thus facilitates a deeper understanding of Russian culture and history. At the same time, knowledge of literature and history enhances your understanding of language. Learning about the intricacies of language change becomes more concrete and meaningful if you are able to situate those intricacies in their cultural and historical context. Therefore, chapter 1 of this book outlines the historical development from the Migration Period to the late 1600s when Peter I "the Great" came to power. Furthermore, chapter 2 engages the relationship between language and literature, discussing major literary works and genres, as well as the development of literacy and writing.

0.2. How to Use This Book

Since this book is designed for readers with different interests and academic backgrounds, there are many ways of using it. First and foremost, you may read it. My goal has been to create a narrative that is simple and has a logical structure, so that the book can be read from beginning to end. If you do not have a background in linguistics, do not despair. I limit the use of linguistic terminology to a minimum, and the terms I use are explained at their first occurrence. At this point a warning is in order. Since this book aims at making very complicated things accessible, I have had to simplify things. This book does not

aim at providing the whole picture. However, if you want to learn more I offer some suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter.

With regard to the structure of the book, I start with three introductory chapters that provide necessary background information on history, literature, and linguistics. If you are well versed in one or all of these fields, you may want to go straight to chapters 4–9, which discuss changes in grammar, and then proceed to changes in the sound system in chapters 10–13. The decision to discuss grammar before sounds is untraditional, but is based on my experience from the classroom. Working with historical linguistics is more efficient (and more fun) if you can read texts and work with the grammar in parallel. The chapters on grammar offer the necessary linguistic tools to get started reading texts, and I have therefore placed them before the chapters on the sound system, which is less directly relevant for your work with texts. However, if you are a die-hard phonologist, it is possible to read chapters 10–13 before 4–9. The chapters on grammar and sound changes are followed by one chapter about the Old Novgorod dialect, which is important for the birch bark letters—a fascinating body of texts from medieval Novgorod. In an epilogue in chapter 15 I reflect on the relationship between the three components of the book: the facts about the history of Russian, the tools from linguistic theory, and the background information about literature and history.

While I hope you will find it worthwhile to read the whole book, I would like to point out that individual chapters and even sections of chapters may be read in isolation. For instance, if you need to brush up your knowledge about the development of the stress patterns in Russian, you may read section 13.1 without looking at any other parts of the book. You may even benefit from the book without actually reading it, since it is designed to be useful as a reference work. It is tabular in form, and using the detailed table of contents and index, you should be able to find the information you are looking for without having to wade through long stretches of prose. Moreover, at the end of the book, there are appendices containing grammatical tables, a list of differences between Old Church Slavonic and East Slavic, as well as a chronological overview of sound changes. There is also an appendix with a short text and grammatical commentary, which helps you get started with the study of medieval texts.

In addition to the book you are holding in your hands, I have a webpage with supplementary information. Check it out at http://dx.doi.org/10.7557/se.2015.1!

Even if time machines do not exist, it is my hope that this book offers a good substitute. However you decide to make use of this book, I hope you will enjoy traveling in time with me. Have a pleasant trip!