The Acquisition of the Russian Noun Case Paradigm by Adult French Learners

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1. Literature review

Russian grammar causes many problems for students studying it. To understand these problems, we need to understand what errors students are making. This can be done directly by the teacher in the classroom orally or correcting the written work of each student.But then the teacher will not know what errors students make most often and only the teacher's intuition can tell him that.

But on the other hand, it can be done differently. We can put all the texts together and analyze them, so then we will be able to see the main trends. This approach will help to getmore general data.

Errors can be made at different linguistic levels such as phonetics, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, morphology, discourse. So it's very difficult to deal with all levels at the same time. Therefore, in the analysis it is necessary to limit the area of research. In this paper, we decided to focus on syntax errors, but there are a lot of syntax errors, since syntax is alwaysthe most complex and problematic area of grammar. That's why in this paper we will study only errors on the use of cases of nouns.

Analyzing errors can be done in different ways:
- compare the number of correctly used and the number of incorrectly used cases.
- look at the dynamics of errors compared with the volume of texts.
- look at which cases are confused.
- look at the semantics of case with errors.
- look at the syntactic constructions, which included a case error.
- compare changes in the quantity and quality of errors.
- classify errors by different types.
- consider the role of frequency.

It should be remembered that errors can be made because of phonetics or spelling, or the wrong noun gender or declension. In addition, we must not forget that errors in speaking andwriting will differ, as in speaking speed comes first and there is no possibility to revise and correct the text.

In the topic of Russian noun case acquisition, we are interested in one study (Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018). This study examines errors in noun cases made by Spanish-Catalan adult learners of all levels. Such errors are found in prepositional, verb and other constructions. These errors are considered by the authors in three ways. They consider the misuse of the nominative, then consider cases of erroneous use of cases, and separately consider other errors in endings, since the endings of nouns in Russian always mark the case. It is interesting to note that in this study, along with the study of incorrect useof cases, the authors also consider the use of correct case forms. The results of thisstudy show that even though the number of wrong forms sometimes increases, and it seems that students do not learn the material well, in fact, the number of wrong forms tendsto decrease compared to the number of correctly used forms.

So, based on this study, which was conducted with Spanish learners, we will look at how French-speaking students learn Russian cases, and compare the results of our research andresearch of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018.

2.   Methods

To conduct our research, we gave a task to a group of French students. Our participants inthe experiment were 28 second-year students from the University of Nice. All of them studied Russian at the university for 2 years. Age of participants are between 20 and 32 years. There were 5 men and 23 women. The levels of proficiency are as follows: A1 - 9 people, A2 - 13, B1 - 5 and B2 - 1. The level of proficiency in the language was determinedby their teacher.

As for the task itself, we asked the students to give a description of the picture in which different situations are presented. This work was held as a test, so they had more motivationto write it well. Students were given an hour to complete the assignment and were allowed touse a paper dictionary. The picture was taken from a textbook intended for foreign students and developed by Ekaterina Protasova. Textbook called "Vot kak-to tak. ZHizn' v kartinkah", publishing house "Zlatoust", 2016 year.

3. Results

After collecting the corpora, we marked it out so that we could compare it with the results ofCherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018. We marked the following parameters:

- Correct use of 6 cases of the Russian language.
- Wrong use of 6 cases of the Russian language.
- Level of students from A1 to B2.

The correct use of cases allows us to see the number of correctly learned forms in each case, and this parameter allows us to interpret the results obtained with wrong forms in a different way. Now let's look how errors and non-errors in cases are distributed among thestudents.

3.1. The distribution of correct forms

Data analysis shows that at the elementary level, students use the nominative very often, about 55.3% of cases, which is understandable, as students begin learning Russian with simple sentences. As you study the language, the share of the Nominative gradually decreases. The percentage of correct forms of a Locative case is also reduced, albeit slightly, from 22.6% to 19.1%, since Locative constructions are supplanted by other constructions. In contrast to the Nominative and Locative cases, the percentage of using other cases increases: Genitive makes a big leap from A1 to B2 from 1.9% to 12.8%, Dativefrom 0.5% to 4.3%, Accusative from 16.4% to 25.5% and Instrumental from 3.1% to 8.5 % Figure 1 shows all our data. Figure 2 shows the results obtained by Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018.
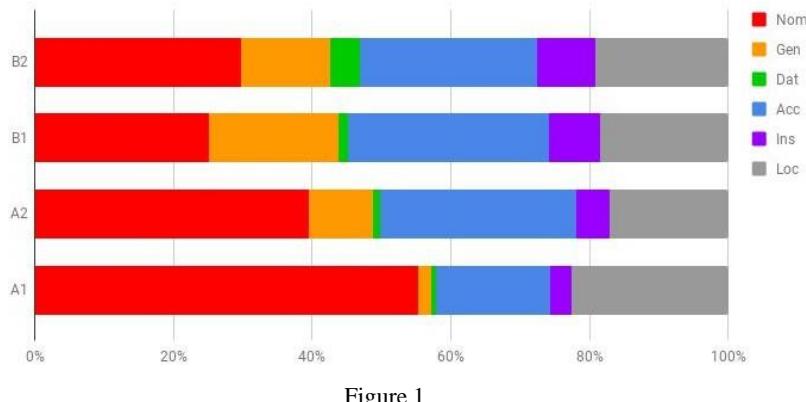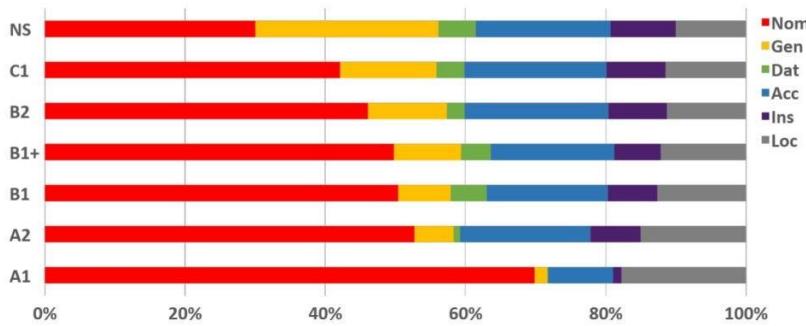

Figure 1

NS — the frequency of Russian cases in the Russian National Corpus (Slioussar & Samojlova 2015).

Figure 2 (Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018)

As we can see, despite the small sample, our figure of the number of correct forms is similar to the one made on the Spanish material. The proportion of different cases from A1 to B2 begins to resemble the proportion of the Russian National Corpus as in work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018.

And now we will look at the distribution of different types of errors by levels.

3.2. The distribution of different types of errors

In our study, we consider only two types of errors: errors in the misuse of the nominative and errors in all other cases. In contrast to the work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018, we do not consider errors in the endings, since we believe that in this type of error there are different phenomena, and this type of error should be made more fractional. For example, now this type hides errors of different origin: mixed softness / hardness of the base (*бел**ий** / бел**ый***), errors in declination (*я вижу стол**у*** (like *девочку*)/ *стол*), errors in the formation of plural forms (*паспорт**ы** / паспорт**а***) or just spelling mistakes (*подошел к стол**и** / стол**у*** since students at the beginner level often confuse spelling).

The number of both types of errors we are considering decreases from A1 to B2. Interestingly, at the B1 level the number of errors in the Nominative case drops sharply, while the number of errors on other cases remains almost stable. This may be due to the fact that at the B1 level students have already mastered the previous rules for the use of cases, and now in difficult cases they often try to use not the initial form, but some other case. Figure 3 shows the results of the analysis of our data, Figure 4 shows the results of the work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018. PF - primary form: wrong use of Nominative,CM - case mixing: incorrectly use of other cases, ME – mixing of endings.
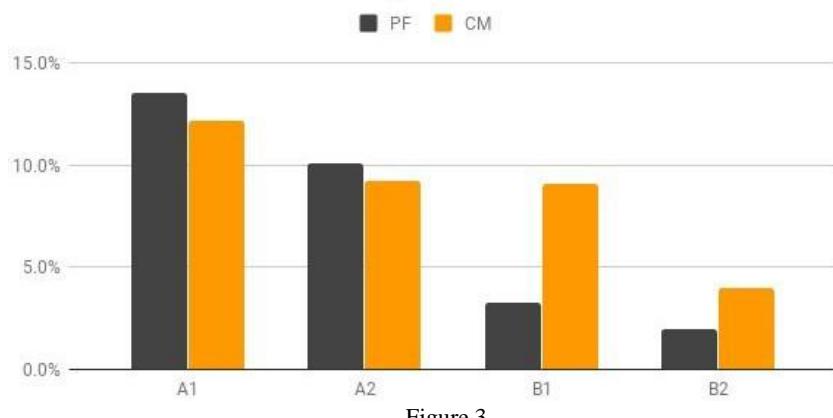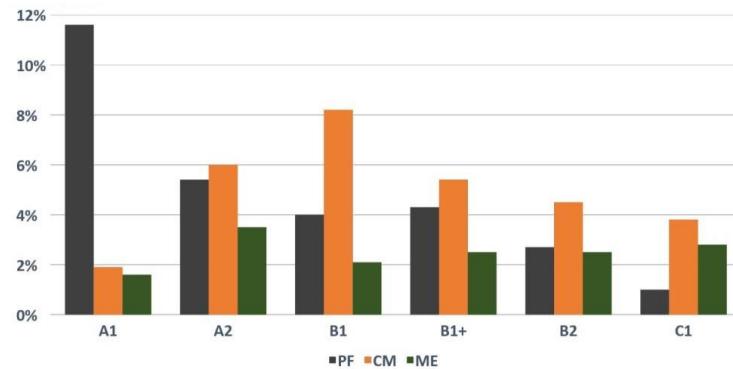

Figure 3

Figure 4 (Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018)

It is interesting that the graphics this time turned out to be different. We do not have such a difference between PF and CM in A1 and all errors smoothly decrease from A1 to B2, while in the work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018 there is a peak of CM errors at the level B1. According to the materials that we had at our disposal, we cannot understand the reason forthis phenomenon, and we will wait for the publication of this work.

In this regard, it would be interesting to look at the errors that are hidden behind the mixed case. It is possible that the reasons for the fact that the percentage of errors increases at the B1 level in the work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018 and that there is no significant progress in our study at the same level are identical. And yet, if we had the same volume ofthe corpora, then the graphics would have turned out more similar.

Now, to better understand the distribution of errors, we can look at the proportion of correctand incorrect forms.

3.3. The distribution of different types of errors vs correct forms

Figure 5 clearly shows the distribution of the correct cases and errors. If one looks only at errors, it may seem that sometimes there is no progress, or even, conversely, students beginto make more errors. But these figure shows the distribution of correct and incorrect forms? so we can see that the percentage of correct forms becomes more from level to level: at A1, students chose the case correctly in 74.3% of cases, and at B2 level already in 94%.

Therefore, it is so important to look not only at errors, but also at the correct forms. This approach first used, as it seems to us, in the work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018 and inour research, it seems very effective.
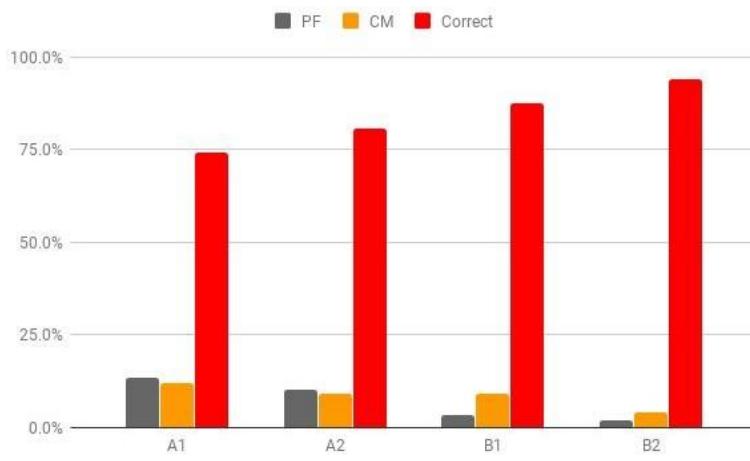

Figure 5

The last thing we would like to consider is the distribution of errors within each case. This willallow us to see how well students use this or that case.

3.4. The distribution of errors in each case

In Figure 6, the distribution of errors steadily falls at each level. The only exception, where the percentage of errors grows, is a Locative case at A2 level compared to A1. If we look at specific errors, we see that at the A1 level students successfully use the locative with the ending *-e*, and at the A2 level students learn new prepositions and use the locative after them and use the second Locative with ending *-y*.

In addition, the Dative very strongly stands out from the rest of the cases. The proportion oferrors in it is several times greater than in the remaining cases. Problems with the assimilation of the Dative in relation to other cases have already been noted in other works,as in Rubinstein 1995, as well as in the Thompson 1980, where the Dative, along with

Instrumental case, appear as the most difficult cases for learning. And these studies were conducted on the oral data of English speakers learning Russian language. In our study, theDative case was also the hardest.

Again, we see how important it is to make a comparative analysis of the use of correct and incorrect forms. So, if at some initial level there are very few errors with this or that case, thisdoes not necessarily mean that this case isn't well learned - this may mean that a person tries not to use it and makes mistakes in 90% of cases of its use.
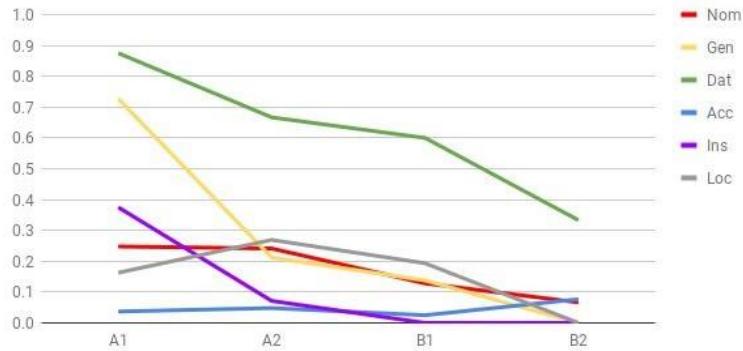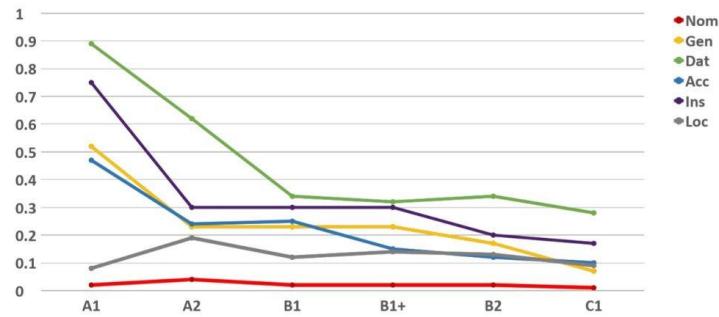

Figure 6

Figure 7 (Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018)

The Figure 6 is very similar to the Figure 7. Dative case in both cases causes the greatest number of errors, the proportion of the Locative case increases by A2 and the general tendency from A1 to C1 is a decrease in errors. But cases are lined up in a different way in complexity, for example, the Nominative case in the French Figure 6 is the third in complexity, and sometimes the fourth, whereas in Spanish Figure 7 the Nominative case hasalways very few errors. But it is possible that this difference in results is due to the fact that we have a small French corpus.

4. Comparative analysis: discussion points

While using the work of Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018, we faced some points that seemed to us controversial, and we would like to discuss them here. So, it's not very clearhow the authors solve the following questions, but perhaps the answers to them will be expanded in the article:

1. The first case is a sentence *"Я покупал журналу"*, which can be interpreted in two ways: either "*журналу*" is the mistaken choice of the case end of the male and neuterDative, which is used instead of Accusative form, or it is a wrong declension, since it is the end of Accusative the first declension of the words on -*a*, and not the masculinewords that have a zero ending.

2. The second case is a sentence *"Продавщица дает человека журнал"*, in which it is not clear which case the person chose, Accusative or Genitive. There are more complex cases. For example, *"Я ищу булочной"*, here the "*булочной*" can be a Dative, Genitive, Instrumentalis and Locative. It is not clear how to count this error: choose only one incorrect case form, while others throw out, or count an error severaltimes for each incorrect case, but then we will increase the number of wrong forms, or we should gather all such errors in

separate category.

3. Nouns, such as coffee, taxi, coat, that don't decline. Should we mark them up as the correct form or is it better not to take them into account? What to do if there is a mistake in such words, for example, *"нет пальту"*. If there was *"нет пальта"*, thenit would be considered as error in the ending, but *"нет пальту"* is case mixing typeof error.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this work was to identify problem areas in the acquisition of case endings byFrench-speaking students and to compare the results with similar study conducted with Spanish-speaking adults. Although we had a small French data for this pilot study, the results of our research largely confirm the results obtained in Cherepovskaia & Slioussar 2018. In particular, we note some recurring trends, namely:

1. The distribution of the correct forms becomes similar to the distribution from the Russian National Corpus.
2. The number of errors in the use of cases gradually decreases.
3. Dative is the most problematic case. This is probably due to the fact that it is rarelyused and therefore little is worked out in the classroom, which entails errors in its use.
4. Nominative and Locative cases are the easiest cases to learn.

Of course, it would be interesting to consider a larger corpus and, if necessary, make some changes in the method of marking and analysis in order to get a more accurate picture of theacquisition of cases by foreign speakers and, perhaps, confirm the general trends in the acquisition of the case system of the Russian language.

6.   Bibliography

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