Modal borrowing across Slavic
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Among “grammatical” elements, modal words are some of the easiest to borrow [Matras, 2007]. Northern English dialects borrowed modal mun/man/mon ’must; shall’ from Old Norse munu, [Eitelmann, 2013] and refs. therein. Malay Indonesian borrowed a number of its modals, including mesti ‘have to, must’ from Javanese mesti ‘impossible’ and mungkin ‘possible, probably’ from Arabic mumkin ‘possible’, [Tadmor, 2007]. Yakut uses na:da borrowed from Russian nado ‘need’, [Johanson, 2009].

In the examples above, we have “borrowing of matter”, wherein the target language copies a phonological form from the source. There also exists often much less conspicuous “pattern copying”, where the target language adjusts the use of its constructions to match those of the source language. For example, the well-known features of the Balkan Sprachbund such as definite articles or subjunctive-based clauses playing the role of infinitives, are instances of pattern copying. In the modal domain, a clear case of pattern copying is the ‘get’-based modality developed in the Circum-Baltic languages: Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish, Estonian, lesser Finnic languages, and Latvian all have modals derived from the lexical verb ‘get’, though their semantics is not identical across languages.

From the formal semanticist’s point of view, it is meanings of modals under language contact that are the most interesting. When one language borrows a whole modal word from another, which meanings are taken together with the word? When a language applies pattern copying to one of its modals, how exactly the source’s set of meanings affects the target’s set? These questions are not easy to answer because changes in modal meanings can be quite fast. For example, in the late 14th century, can didn’t have any permission or epistemic-possibility uses [Gotti et al., 2002], while by the late 17th century, it already did. So if language A borrowed a modal from language B five centuries ago, we cannot find out what exactly happened by just looking at the distributions in the modern versions of A and B. Fortunately, Slavic languages, with their well-documented history, provide a very fruitful empirical domain in which we can study modal borrowing: there are numerous cases of borrowing among the Slavic modals. Some examples include Ukrainian povynen and treba from Polish; godno in Medieval Polish, likely borrowed from Ukrainian; South Slavic iměti with the infinitive used by East Slavic speakers in literary texts despite its absence in the East Slavic vernacular...

In this talk, I will use historical data to discuss three cases of Slavic modal borrowing: (i) the early uses of Old Czech musiti, borrowed from German müssen, in the 14th century Dalimil Chronicle; (ii) the loss of the possibility meaning of Ukrainian HAVE-based modal maty in the mid-20th century, apparently due to intense contact with Russian; and (iii) the complicated history of recently arisen advice modals Polish warto, Ukrainian varto and Russian stoit.


