The linguistics of threats: a cognitive approach to political discourse.

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In times of political tension and conflict, 'threat' figures prominently in political discourse. In the speeches of the Russian president, the west is consistently portrayed as a threat to Russia (Janda et al. 2022). But what does 'threat' mean in Russian? How are threats expressed? Has the concept changed over time? We present three case studies that explore these questions using state-of-the-art methods from cognitive and corpus linguistics. We show that 'threat' can be represented as complex radial categories that undergo considerable change over time. We furthermore demonstrate that Russian uses different strategies to describe and carry out threats.

Case study 1 explores the nouns *groza* and *ugroza*, both of which can be used in the meaning 'threat'. Our analysis of corpus data from 1800 to 2020 indicates that the two words share a radial category network of submeanings that are connected via metaphorical and metonymic links. However, the two nouns have different centers of gravity in the network, and their distribution has changed over time. In present-day Russian, *groza* is dominant in the meaning 'thunderstorm', while *ugroza* describes a wide variety of threats. Our analysis furthermore reveals a diachronic development whereby origins of 'threat' change from denoting concrete physical threats to more generalized dangers, such as nuclear and environmental disasters, diseases, and terrorism, while entities affected by these threats undergo a change from concrete persons via communities and states to the entire planet.

Case study 2 focuses on two near-synonymous verbs for 'threaten': *grozit'* and *grozit'sja*. Thorough analysis of data from two different corpora involving semantic vectors and collocations enables us to tease apart the meanings of the two verbs. We demonstrate that they collocate with different parts of speech and tend to occur in different syntactic constructions. *Grozit'sja* is typically used about interactions between two persons, while *grozit'* has a wide range of metaphorical uses, a tendency that has become more expressed over time.

Case study 3 addresses constructions that are used to carry out threats. Analysis of data from the Russian Constructicon, a digital resource with about 2200 constructions, shows that while Russian has a variety of constructions to perform threats, none of them involve the words discussed in case studies 1-2. We propose a typology of threat constructions involving two participants and three semantic components but show that typically one or more participants or components are not expressed overtly. The constructions are part of a complex semantic neighborhood involving fourteen semantic types of constructions that are connected via lateral and vertical constructional relationships.

Taken together, our three case studies testify to the value of combining classic analytical tools from cognitive linguistics (e.g., radial category, metaphor, metonymy) with digital resources like the Russian Constructicon and methods from contemporary corpus linguistics (e.g., semantic vectors and collocations). The multi-faceted approach we advocate enables us to sharpen our understanding of important concepts in political discourse, such as 'threat'.

Reference
Janda, L.A., V. Cvrček, M. Fidler and A. Obukhova. 2022. The case for case in Putin's speeches. *Russian Linguistics*.