Putin makes his case

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Putin has banned the use of the word 'war' to refer to the conflict in Ukraine. While such a choice of words is deliberate and conscious, grammatical categories and their meanings are obligatory. The Russian language requires all nouns to represent one of six grammatical cases every time they are used. The meanings of the grammatical cases in Russian have previously been described in the framework of cognitive linguistics, revealing radial categories structured by means of metaphor and metonymy (Janda & Clancy 2002). We build on this description with a methodological innovation, Keymorph Analysis (cf. Cvrček & Fidler 2019), an extension of Keyword Analysis (Scott & Tribble 2006; Baker 2006) to focus on the distribution of grammatical morphology. This first application of Keymorph Analysis to Russian data measures deviations from corpus norms in Putin's use of grammatical case. Our target texts are the twenty-nine speeches officially pronounced by Putin between the launch of Russia's "largest military exercise since the Cold War" on 10.02.2022 (Walker 2022: 27) and the height of the first phase of invasion on 03.03.2022 (Walker 2022: 39). Our reference corpus is Russian InterCorp (Rajnochová et al. 2021), chosen because of its varied composition and UD tagging crucial to Keymorph Analysis.

We target Putin's portrayal of *Rossija* 'Russia', *Ukraina* 'Ukraine', and *NATO* 'NATO' through the lens of grammatical case, quantified as "DIN*" (an adaptation of difference index). DIN* uses relative frequencies to represent the proportion of a given inflected wordform in relation to all occurrences of the lemma in the target text and reference corpus respectively. For each of the three nouns, Putin's usage presents strong deviations from the zero line in the middle of Figure 1, which is what one might expect based on a corpus.

Through grammatical case Putin depicts Russia as a humanized (Dative), agentive actor (Nominative) and a reliable partner for collaboration (Instrumental), but also as the victim of unfair geopolitical maneuvers. Ukraine is presented as relatively static and backgrounded, a territorial location (Locative). NATO is the label for an untrustworthy organization, a mere destination for Ukraine (Accusative).
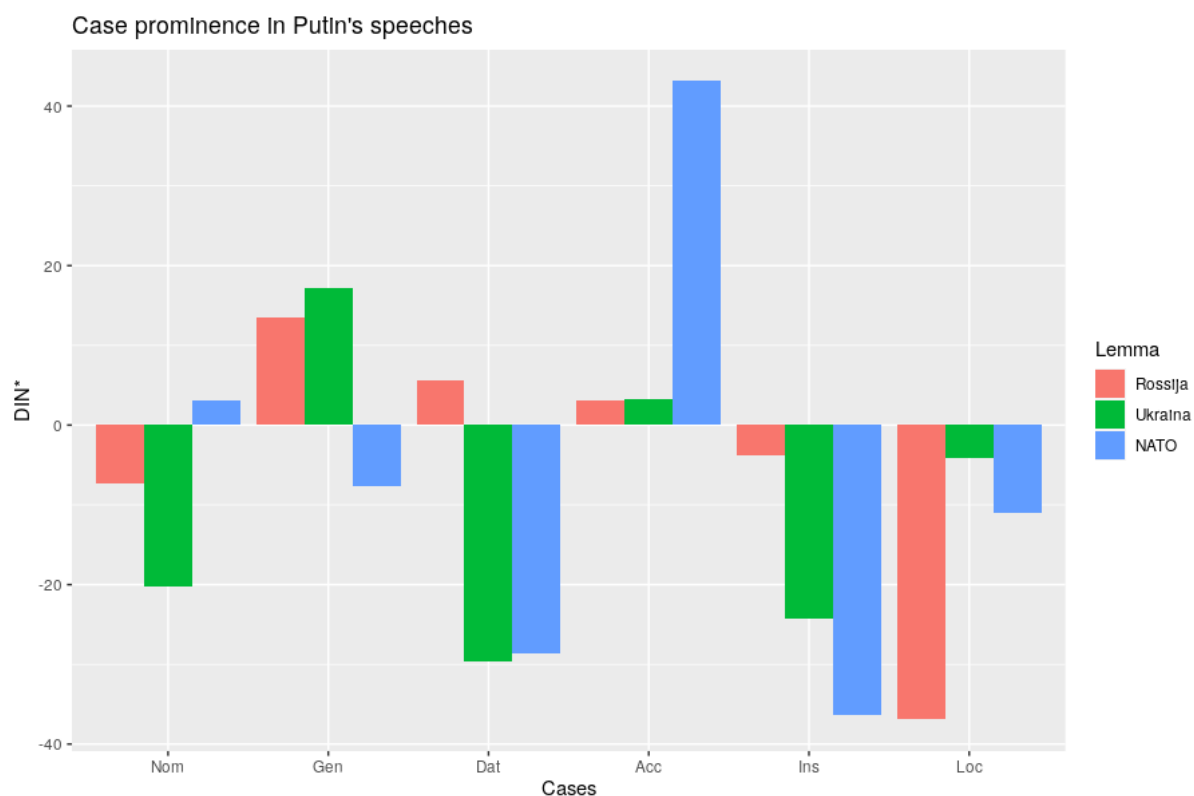
Fig. 1: Visualization of DIN* values of the use of grammatical case in Putin's speeches for the words Rossija 'Russia', Ukraina 'Ukraine', and NATO 'NATO'

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