It is generally believed that all modern European languages are basically accusative. This seems to be evident for such languages as Latin (with a clear opposition of the markers -s for nominative and -m accusative singular) or modern English (with its rigid SVO word order). More complicated is the case of the modern Russian. “Classical” accusative constructions can be found there in the singular of -a nouns and feminine adjectives, but in all other morphological types (75-80 % of occurrences) the construction is different: the “accusative” has the form of nominative for inanimate nouns, and the form of genitive for personal pronouns and animate nouns. According to traditional Russian grammars, the word order (generally pragmatic in Russian) becomes grammatical if the case markers do not permit to distinguish between the subject and the object. However, counter-examples can easily be found in sentences with thematic subject (e.g. answers to “Who…” questions).

In other words, in a two-actant action sentence the marked “objective” form is only required for an animate Patient, whose actual inactivity conflicts with its potential activity. This shows the importance of the category of animacy (or activity) for the Russian morphosyntax and evokes immediately the idea of the active language type.

Actually, two different approaches to the definition of this language type are found in literature. The first approach is purely syntactic (Kibrik 1992; Lazard 1998). The active (or “dual”) type is defined as the language type where the “Subjective” of one-actant verbs takes the mark of “Agentive” with active verbs (like ‘run’ or ‘swim’), and the mark of “Objective” with inactive verbs (like ‘die’ or ‘fall’). The second approach is “content-oriented” (Klimov 1977). According to this approach the basic feature of “active” languages is the importance for their grammatical structure of expressing an opposition between active and inactive (or animate and inanimate) nouns. It is in the second sense that Russian can be considered to be an “active” language.

In this paper I will argue that Russian morphosyntax is very sensitive to the effective inactivity of animate nouns and vice versa. The Dative case is used to mark actual inactivity of animate semantic subjects. The predicate in these constructions is expressed either by the “impersonal” form (3 sg, neutral, reflexive) of ordinary verbs, or by a word from a special morphological class of predicates without standard verb markers, called the “category of state” in some traditional grammars (Vinogradov 1947). Inanimate Agents tend to be presented by form of Instrumental (the verb taking the impersonal form, as in the previous case). Generally speaking, the “impersonal” verb forms and the “category of state” may be interpreted as a special class of “inactive” verbs. The real Agent in such constructions seems to be an unnamed natural force.

Should this hypothesis on the presence of the “active” strategy in Russian morphosyntax be adopted, the question is what caused the Russian language to develop this strategy. The answer to it would require extensive investigations based on corpora of Old Russian texts and the history of non-Indo-European languages that were in contact with Russian. However, as a primary hypothesis, the influence of old Finno-Ugrian languages can be assumed.

REFERENCES