The Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, the Department of Slavic Languages & Literatures, and the Language Universals and Linguistic Diversity Colloquium of the Department of Linguistics at Harvard University present a

Workshop in Russian Language and Linguistics

All students, teachers, and linguists welcome!
Light snacks and a grand prize provided!

Wednesday, March 13, 2013
3:00-5:00
Barker 133

Featuring talks by:

Tore Nesset		Laura A. Janda
University of Tromsø	and	University of Tromsø
"In which case are Russians afraid?"		"Finding Meaning in Russian prefixes"

If you have any questions, please contact Steven Clancy <sclancy@fas.harvard.edu> for more information.
_____

Abstracts:

"In which case are Russians afraid?"
Tore Nesset, University of Tromsø
A general rule in Contemporary Standard Russian is that verbs containing the reflexive postfix –*sja* do not combine with objects in the accusative. For instance, *dobit'sja* 'achieve' takes an object in the genitive and *zanimat'sja* 'engage in' governs the instrumental case. However, there are some exceptions to the rule. A case in point is *bojat'sja* 'to be afraid of', which is attested with accusative objects in modern Russian. How frequent is the accusative with *bojat'sja*? Which factors motivate the use of the accusative? This talk addresses these questions on the basis of data from the Russian National Corpus.

"Finding Meaning in Russian prefixes"
Laura A. Janda, University of Tromsø
It is commonly assumed that the prefixes in Russian verbs like написать/na-pisat' 'write' and сварить/s-varit' 'cook' are semantically empty because the corresponding imperfective verbs писать/pisat' 'write' and варить/varit' 'cook' have the same meanings. There are nearly 2000 prefixed verbs like these, formed by combining approximately 1400 imperfectives with 16 prefixes. Textbooks simply require learners to memorize these combinations and linguists have not previously provided any comprehensive analysis.
We set forward a new hypothesis, namely that the Russian verbal prefixes function as verb classifiers. The purpose of the prefixes is to convert amorphous states and activities into discrete events and to group verbs according to the types of events they express. In other words, Russian prefixes are in effect a verb classifier system similar to those proposed for Mandarin Chinese, Hindi-Urdu, and a number of Australian languages.
Our hypothesis is tested on the basis of quantitative research on corpus data and statistical models (chi-square, logistic regression, etc.). Our webpage http://emptyprefixes.uit.no/book.htm houses links to our database and statistical models.
The description of Russian prefixes as a verb classifier system has pedagogical value since we can redesign our curricula to teach students the system according to its meaningful groupings rather than requiring rote memorization.
In short, the proposal to recognize Russian prefixes as verb classifiers supports the community of people interested in Russian grammar to be better linguists, better instructors, and better learners.