

Modern Russian history through the New Year addresses

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Abstract

This paper presents a corpus analysis of the addresses that the leaders of the Soviet Union and Russia deliver every year before the New Year. The content of a New Year address is strongly codified and usually contains references to important events of the previous year. Analysis of the ways that the lexical patterns used in the New Year addresses are transformed and follow changes that have occurred in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia provides information about the ways linguistic units reflect political realities.

1 Introduction

In Russia during the Soviet regime the Communists banned Christmas along with all other religious holidays. As a result, in Russia, New Year's Eve has replaced Christmas as the major winter holiday and has become associated with many traditions. One of these traditions is the President's New Year address, which is shown on television before the Kremlin clock bell strikes midnight. This tradition started with Brezhnev's New Year address, broadcast on December 31, 1970, and has continued even after the fall of the Soviet Union. This paper investigates how the language of the New Year addresses is affected by the political situation of each relevant year. Changes in the use of the words in the New Year addresses reflect the important changes that have occurred over forty-five years.

This research project is similar in part to the work of Cvrček and Fidler (2013) that analyzes Gustáv Husák's (President of Czechoslovakia 1975-1989) New Year addresses. Cvrček and Fidler used data from the Czech National Corpus and investigated these data via keyword analysis (a method that statistically identifies words that are more frequent in the investigated text than in the general linguistic patterns of the language; see Scott and Tribble 2006, Baker and Ellece 2011). Cvrček and Fidler found correlations between the appearance of certain keywords in the New Year addresses and historic events. For example, in the aftermath of the 1968 normalization and Charter 77 human rights movement in Czechoslovakia when alliance with the USSR became particularly important, the word *sovětským* 'Soviet' appeared in the New Year addresses for years 1975 and 1978. Martial law in Poland and American sanctions of Poland in 1981 correlate with the words *světě* 'world' and *napětí* 'tension' in Husák's address at the end of the year 1981. The rise to power of Gorbachev in 1985 brought topics of disarmament (*odzbrojení*) and international affairs (*mezinárodní*) into the New Year address discourse. Not only is the appearance of keywords important, but sometimes the absence of an expected keyword might be important, too. For example, Cvrček and Fidler show that traditional Soviet discourse elements such as *drazí* 'dear' and *lidu* 'people' appear in almost every New Year speech between 1975 and 1987; however, both of these words disappear with the collapse of the Soviet regime and fall of the Berlin Wall.

Function words have been shown to correlate significantly with their authors' intentions. For

example, Baker (2006: 145) in his study of the fox hunting debates in the British House of Commons shows that the pronoun *I* is a significant keyword for the group that opposes fox hunting, but not for the proponents of fox hunting. The speakers who were against fox hunting frequently used expressions such as *I believe* or *I think*. By contrast, pro-hunters did not use first-person pronouns because their intent was not to be personally associated with the sport. Instead, they used impersonal phrasing such as *Most people with common sense would say....*

Another example that illustrates the importance of functional markers in discourse analysis comes from a study by Fidler and Cvrček (forthcoming) in which Fidler and Cvrček analyze texts that are in Czech and appeared in March 2015 in the Russian web portal ‘Sputnik Czech Republic’ (a Russian news and opinion portal). They show that

in this edition, instances where the word *Rusko* ‘Russia’ occurs provide important information about the ways Russia is portrayed. In their study, Fidler and Cvrček use a representative corpus of written Czech texts published in 2014-2015 as a reference corpus. In the referent corpus, *Rusko* ‘Russia’ most frequently occurs in the nominative case, indicating that it performs the syntactic role of an active agent that is in charge of the event in which it is involved. However, in ‘Sputnik’, *Rusko* ‘Russia’ is attested more frequently in indirect cases – dative, instrumental, and accusative – which serves to show Russia not as an active actor, but as a patient upon which an action is directed.

In this article, I take into account the function words that are among the 100 most frequent words and analyze the additional information that is provided by the use of pronouns in the New Year addresses.

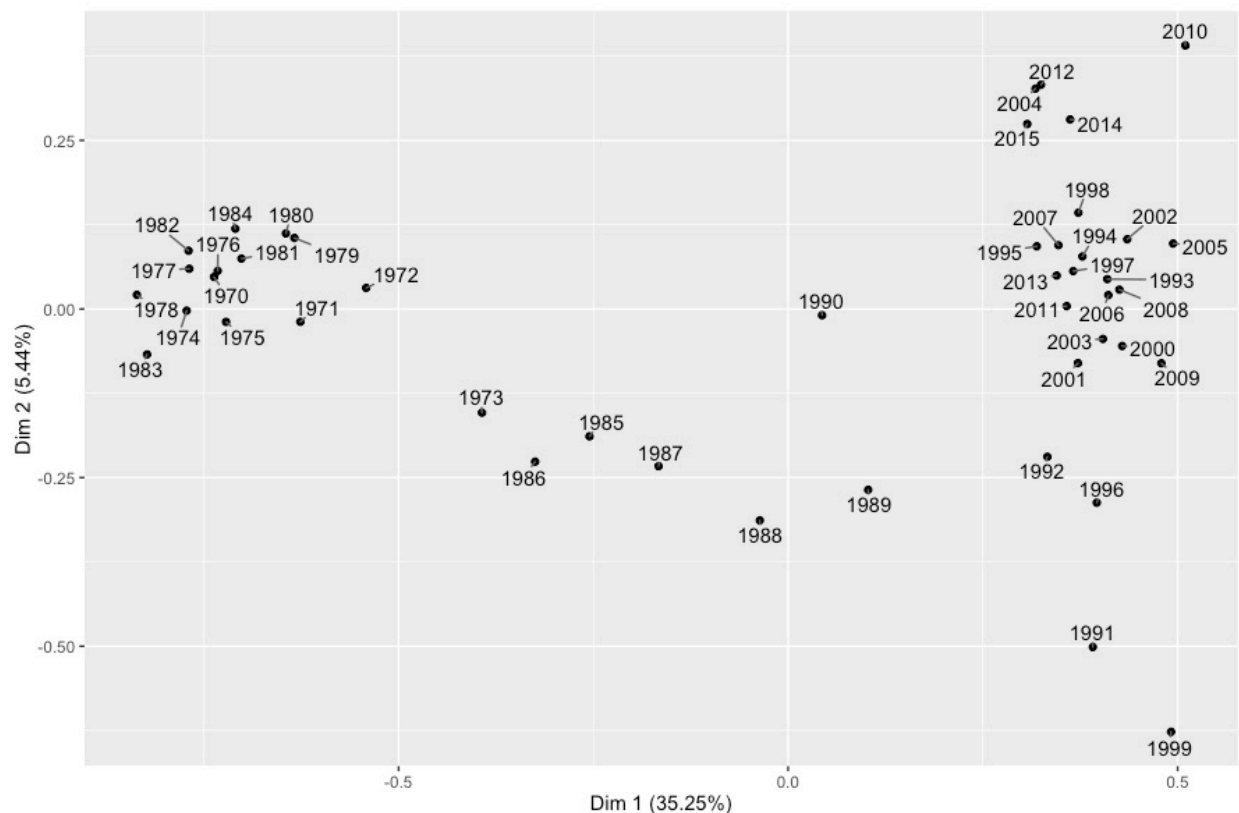


Figure 1. Correspondence analysis of 100 most frequent words in the New Year addresses: clustering of years.

2 Analysis

The goal of this project is to use the collection of the New Year addresses in order to show that the lexical features of a collection of different texts are alone sufficient to cluster them. For this project I have collected the New Year addresses given in Soviet Union and Russia at the end of the years 1970 through 2015. I extracted 100 of the most frequent words among all the New Year addresses and produced a matrix with the 100 most frequent words as the rows of the matrix and the years from 1970 to 2014 as the columns of the matrix. Each cell of the matrix contains the frequency of a word, measured in ipm (items per million), in the New Year address delivered in a given year. For example, the word *bol'soj* 'big' appears three times in the New Year address delivered in 1970. The length of the New Year address that year was 605 words. Therefore, in the cell at the intersection of the row for the word *bol'soj* 'big' and the column for 1970, we have $4958.68 = (3/605) * 1\,000\,000$.

I employed correspondence analysis (CA), a method that combines provided variables and finds the dimensions that explain the most variation in the data (Yelland 2010), to analyze the matrix. However, correspondence analysis only finds dimensions that explain the most variation in the data; it is the task of the researcher to interpret those dimensions. I show that the two most important dimensions in the New Year addresses are the political system (Dimension 1) and the economic situation (Dimension 2).

Figure 1 presents the results of the correspondence analysis. The years (designated as points in the graph) when the New Year addresses contained similar words with comparable frequencies are seen to be close to each other, whereas the years when the New Year addresses exhibited different distributions of frequent words are seen to be far from each other. Figure 2 presents the same factor map that also plots Dimension 1 versus Dimension 2, but here the clusters of years are delineated according to political system (ellipses).

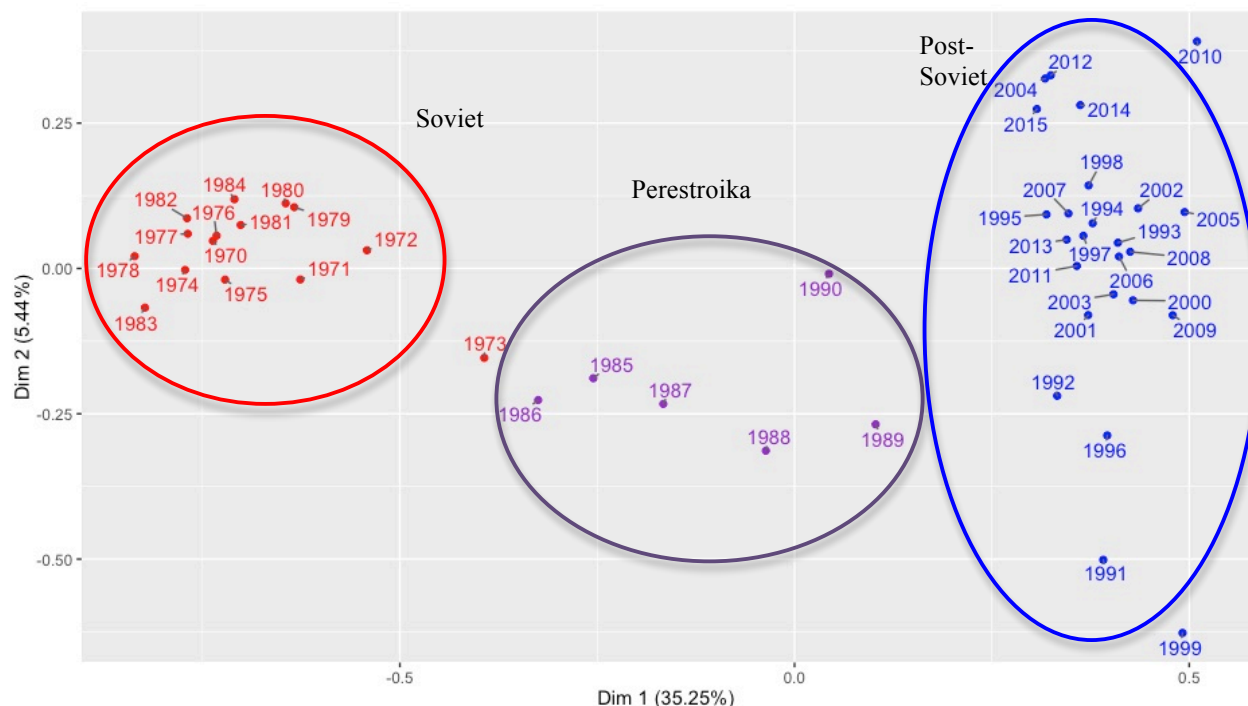


Figure 2. Political system during a year: Soviet period, reformation period (Perestroika), and Post-Soviet period.

Dimension 1 clearly distinguishes among the Soviet years (left red ellipse in Figure 2), reformation years, also known as Perestroika (middle purple ellipse), and post-Soviet years

(right blue ellipse). Thus, Dimension 1 represents a scale of Soviet socialism versus democracy. This observation also is supported by the words that have the most impact on Dimension 1. The words

rabočij ‘worker’, *sovetskij* ‘Soviet’, *socialističeskij* ‘socialistic’, *leninskij* ‘Lenin’s’, and *partija* ‘party’ positively correlate with Dimension 1 and are clearly indicative of Soviet socialism. However, the words *prezident* ‘president’, *Rossija* ‘Russia’, and *graždanin* ‘citizen’ negatively correlate with

Dimension 1 and are indicative of the democratic political system. Figure 2 thus shows that the most important dimension for the 100 most frequent words in the New Year addresses is the political system of the country.

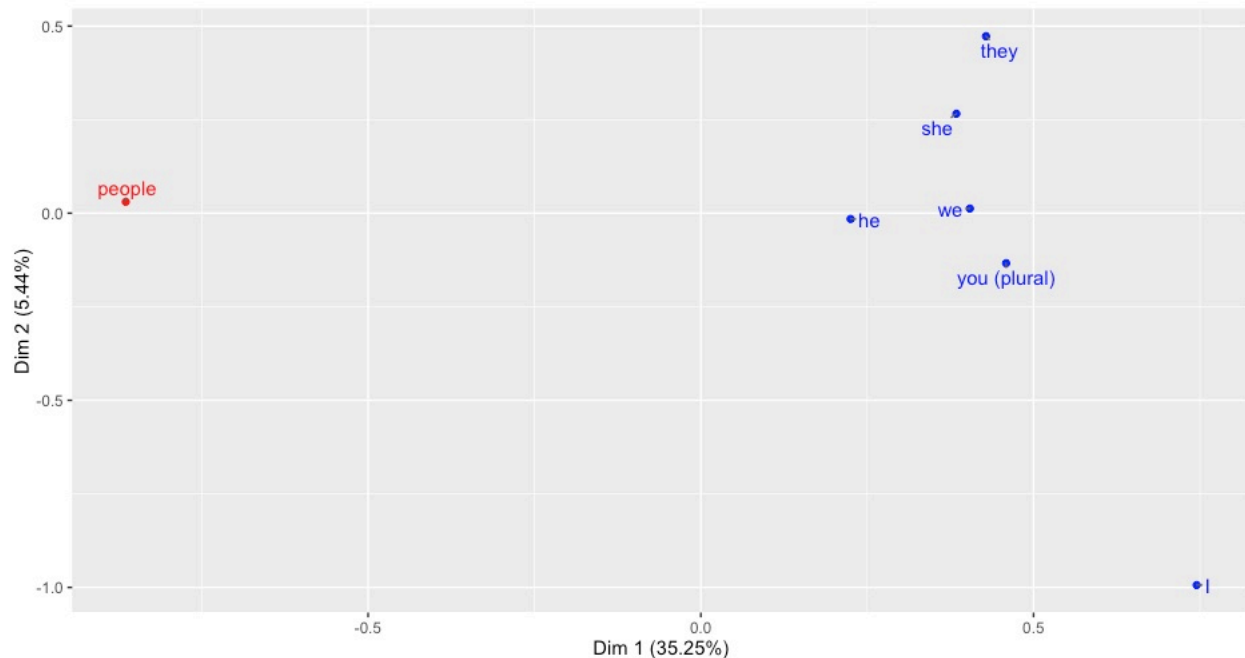


Figure 3. Personal pronouns and the word *narod* ‘people’: Dimensions 1 and 2.

Dimension 2 is an economic indicator that distinguishes between plentiful years and hungry years. This phenomenon can be observed if we compare Dimension 2 with the price of a barrel of oil. Oil and gas were the main exports of the Soviet Union and are still the main exported resources in modern Russia (Ellmann 2006:3). High oil prices tend to reflect a plentiful year, whereas low oil prices most likely indicate that the country faced an economically challenging year. Dimension 2 correlates with the inflation-adjusted price of a barrel of oil¹: $r = -0.37$, $P = 0.01$. The correlation is negative, so the bottom portion of Figure 2 illustrates the hungry years, whereas the top portion reflects the plentiful years. The words that contribute mostly to Dimension 1 are related semantically to the meaning of the dimension.

¹ Data from Historical Crude Oil Prices; inflation is adjusted.

Similarly, the words that negatively correlate with Dimension 2 also point to abundance. These words are *pust* ‘let’, *rebenok* ‘child’, *novogodnij* ‘New Year’s’, *drug* ‘friend’, *vmeste* ‘together’, *prazdnik* ‘holiday’, *sem’ja* ‘family’, which together portray a picture of a large family enjoying the New Year’s Eve meal. On the other end of scale, we find the words *delo* ‘business’, *mnogo* ‘many’, and *put* ‘path’, suggesting that in economically tough years leaders tend to talk about the path ahead and the many things that must be done. Thus, we see that the second dimension in the New Year addresses indicates the economic situation of the country.

It is interesting to pay attention also to the use of personal pronouns that appear among the most frequent words. Figure 3 contains few of the 100 most frequent words distributed on the same map as shown in Figures 1 and 2. In Figure 3 personal pronouns such as *ja* ‘I’, *my* ‘we’, and *vy* ‘you

(plural)' are highlighted in blue. Interestingly, all these pronouns are gathered on the right side of the map, which is the side associated with the post-Soviet years. By contrast, the Soviet years contain only one word that is compatible with personal pronouns in meaning – *narod* 'people', highlighted in red. This grouping of pronouns indicates a change from more collective thinking, which is characteristic of the Soviet era, to more personal interactions, which is characteristic of the post-Soviet era.

3 Conclusions

Thus, by simply observing the 100 most frequent words that appear in the New Year addresses, we can identify the political system of the country for that year and whether the year was economically difficult. We see that the New Year addresses reflect historical changes in modern Russia. Each New Year address is connected to the year when it was given and thus always reflects the political climate of that year. Analyzing ways that the lexical patterns used in the New Year addresses are transformed and follow the changes that have occurred in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia will provide us with information about how linguistic units reflect political realities. The corpus of the New Year addresses is a small manageable corpus where each text has a ritualistic predictable structure, which makes it a perfect testing ground for linguistic analysis. The findings of this study can later be extrapolated and used for analysis of larger collections of historical documents in order to discover ways that such findings reflect historical events.

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