

Tobias Scheer

CNRS, Université de Nice

Course abstract for the class taught in St. Petersburg at NYI 06

The life of yers in Slavic and elsewhere

A typical phenomenon encountered in Slavic languages are vowel-zero alternations (e.g. Polish *wojona* - *wojen* - *wojenny* "war NOMsg, GENpl, adj.", Russian *otec* - *otca*, *lev* - *l'va* "father, lion NOMsg, GENsg"). In a first step, this course studies the incarnation of this phenomenon in various Slavic languages, especially in regard of the behaviour of two alternating vowels in a row (Czech *doměček* vs. Slovak *domoček*). The literature offers various analyses, which are presented and evaluated. Also, the diachronic status and development of Slavic vowel-zero alternations is discussed in some detail.

In a second step, it is shown that a highly specific context is recurrent: "in closed syllables and in open syllables if the following vowel alternates with zero". This is what I call the yer-context. The yer-context governs vowel-zero alternations, but also other phenomena: Western Slavic o-u alternations (Polish *krowa* - *krów*), Polish nasal vowel alternations (*ząb* - *zęba*), Czech vowel length (*žába* - *žab*) and Bulgarian metathesis (*gr̥di* - *gr̥dna*, *gr̥den*). Hence a mechanism beyond mere vowel-zero alternations is needed.

Finally, we will see that the yer-context is also active outside of Slavic, e.g. in French, Italian and German. On top of that, it may also affect consonants (rather than on vowels). The conclusion, then, is that either yers occur in French and the other languages, or yers are not yers: a unified theory that is able to account for all phenomena mentioned with units that are accessible to all speakers is called for.

Topics covered

- vowel-zero alternations in Slavic and other languages
- typology of vowel-zero alternations
- how many different vowels can alternate with zero?
- Lower
- epenthesis vs. deletion analyses
- Havlík's Law
- vowel-zero alternations in absence of Common Slavic yers (*mozkъ* > *mozek*)
- "secondary vocalization" of yers
- diachronic origins and development of vowels before word-final voiced consonants in Western Slavic (Pol *krowa* - *krów*, *ząb* - *zęba*, Cz *dům* - *domu* etc.)

In order to prepare the class, students may read

Rubach, Jerzy 1986. Abstract vowels in three dimensional phonology: the yers. *The Linguistic Review* 5, 247-280.

Scheer, Tobias 2005. Slavic Vowel-Zero Alternations and Government Phonology: Two Approaches, One Solution. *Formal Approaches to Slavic Linguistics 13: The South Carolina Meeting*, edited by Steven Franks, Frank Gladney & Mila Tasseva-Kurkchieva, 300-311. Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications.

[both articles are available at www.unice.fr/dsl/tobias.htm, for the former follow "other people's papers", for the latter "my own papers"]

