How to investigate interpretation in Slavic experimentally?

In the investigation of meaning that speakers attribute to linguistic strings, Slavic languages present a curious empirical and methodological challenge. They often allow grammatical meanings (such as definiteness, specificity or quantization of the object) to be expressed without morphological marking on the noun phrase. Instead, the meanings under discussion are signaled by the perfective marking on the verb, by information structure (Topic, Focus) or by the word order of the whole sentence. Linguistic Theory often makes categorical predictions about the availability of certain interpretations of strings, while native speaker judgments reveal a lot more intra- and inter-personal variability than predicted. This talk will discuss two experimental studies, looking at Russian object interpretation in perfective and imperfective sentences (Slabakova, 2002, 2004) and definite NP interpretation depending on word order (Cho and Slabakova, in press). The first study employs a multiple-choice interpretation task while the other employs an acceptability-in-context rating task. Both studies reveal that object interpretations in Russian are much more flexible than those in English, and depend not only on word order but on discourse context as well. I will discuss which linguistic approaches can accommodate such variation, and what this flexibility of interpretation entails for experimental methodology.

SLABAKOVA, R. (2002). "Object Interpretation in Perfective and Imperfective Sentences: What do Russian native Speakers Think?" Proceedings of the *Perspectives on Aspect* conference, UiL-OTS working papers.

SLABAKOVA, R. (2004). "Effect of Perfective Prefixes on Object Interpretation: A Theoretical and Empirical Issue." In *Cahiers linguistiques d'Ottawa*, 32, June, 122-142

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