

When we pronounce English sentences such as *The cup broke* ~ *John broke the cup*, we usually do not pay attention to the fact that we use the same form (broke) in different constructions. In the former case, it has only a subject (such constructions are called intransitive), in the latter, the verb is construed both with a subject (John) and an object (the cup), and the construction is called transitive. Yet the ability of the verbs such as *break* to have different meanings (syntax) in different contexts does not result in miscommunication for the speakers of such languages as English. Such verbs (linguists call them ‘**labile**’) are also found in many other Indo-European languages spoken in Europe, such as German (*Die Tasse brach* ~ *Peter brach die Tasse*) or French (*La tasse a cassé* ~ *Pierre a cassé la tasse*). However, and most amazingly, many other languages of the Indo-European linguistic family (i.e. languages going back to the same proto-language that was spoken approximately seven thousand years ago) normally require different forms in different contexts, that is, they have no or very few labile verbs. These languages include, for instance, Sanskrit, or Old Indian (the intransitive verb *bhidyate* ‘breaks’ differs from the transitive *bhinatti* ‘(makes) break’). Even such closely related languages as Slavic, which are very similar in many respects, differ in this feature cf. Polish (*Woda leje się* (z kranu). ‘Water runs (from the tap)’ ~ *Jan leje wodę* ‘Jan pours water’ – different forms) and Russian (*Voda ljet* (iz krana). ‘Water runs (from the tap)’ ~ *Ivan ljet vodu* ‘Ivan pours water’ – same form). Such versatility observed within just one language family puzzled historical linguists and Indo-Europeanists for more than 100 years.

The **subject of this research project** is the evolution of labile verbs in several groups of Indo-European languages. Although this phenomenon is well-known to linguists and described in grammars, we do not yet understand the bulk of historical mechanisms that are responsible for the rise, development and disappearance of labile verbs. In particular, we are unable to explain why in some Indo-European languages the class of labile verbs such as *break* or *brechen* is increasing (as in English, German or Greek), while in other languages this class is decreasing (as in Indic and Iranian languages).

The **aim of the project** is to uncover the most important mechanisms of changes in syntax that explain how languages and their constructions can become so different in the course of time and yet perfectly fulfill their function – human communication. I will focus on the history of verbal constructions in several branches of Indo-European languages (Indo-Iranian, Germanic, Romance and Slavic), paying special attention to the evolution of the systems of labile verbs and explaining why and how the labile verbs emerge and disappear. Specifically, I will explain why in some languages labile verbs are becoming more productive (as in English or Greek), while in other languages this class is decreasing (as in Sanskrit) or entirely lacking (as in modern Turkic languages). I will also test the hypothesis about the existence of many labile verbs in the Indo-European proto-language.

My main **working hypotheses** are:

- The class of labile verbs in the Indo-European proto-language is much smaller than suggested by earlier scholars.
- The Western and Eastern Indo-European languages crucially differ with regard to the main tendencies of development that can be observed in the history of their syntax.
- Many labile verbs found in a number of Indo-European languages must be secondary innovations which do not testify to the existence of the corresponding labile verbs in the proto-language.

The **originality** and challenging character of this project directly follows from the fact that there are no studies on the history and evolution of labile verbs. We do not know why and how in several languages labile verbs are becoming more productive, while in some other languages this class is decreasing or entirely lacking. This project aims to fill this lacuna. My research will uncover, systematize and explain these and other processes that determine the evolution of syntactic constructions.

Moreover, the scientific value of the project does not amount to the study of this specific issue. Obviously, the rise or disappearance of labile verbs must be one of the key features in the history of language evolution that are of crucial importance for understanding why languages originating from one single proto-language have become so different. Accordingly, my research will help to understand some very basic mechanisms of language change that will contribute to understanding how languages can change so drastically and yet remain able to successfully function as the main tool of human communication.

The research will concentrate on those Indo-European languages or branches which provide the richest evidence for a study of labile verbs in a historical perspective. These include, quite naturally, languages that in their documented history attest either (i) the rise and expansion of labile patterning (most Germanic languages, and, especially, English; many Romance languages, such as Latin or French; some Slavic languages), or (ii) the decline and disappearance of this phenomenon (Indic and Iranian languages). My analysis of the history of labile verbs will be based both on the study of historical text corpora and of the existing studies on the history of verbs and verbal constructions in these languages.