



UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Grammar in the service of ideological messaging: Putin's speeches 2022-2024

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CLEAR

Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian



Threat-Defuser

(Norwegian Research Council)

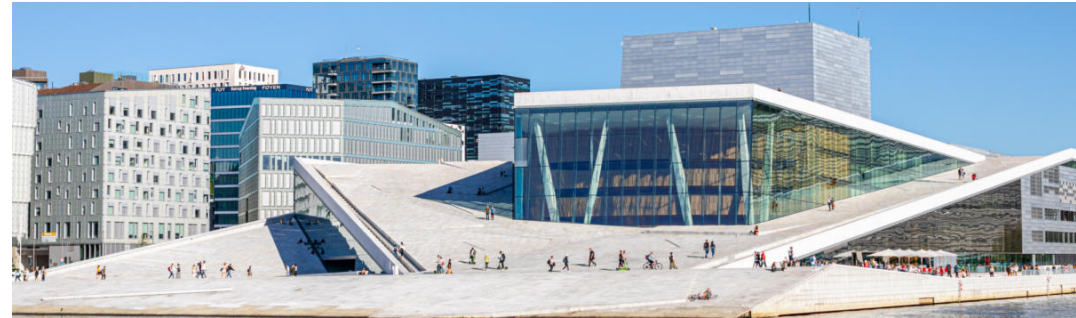
Does grammar mean anything?

- Is grammar mere “plumbing”?
- Or is it more like a sound track?

Perception of architecture



Perception of architecture



Perception of film

Voice

+

Soundtrack

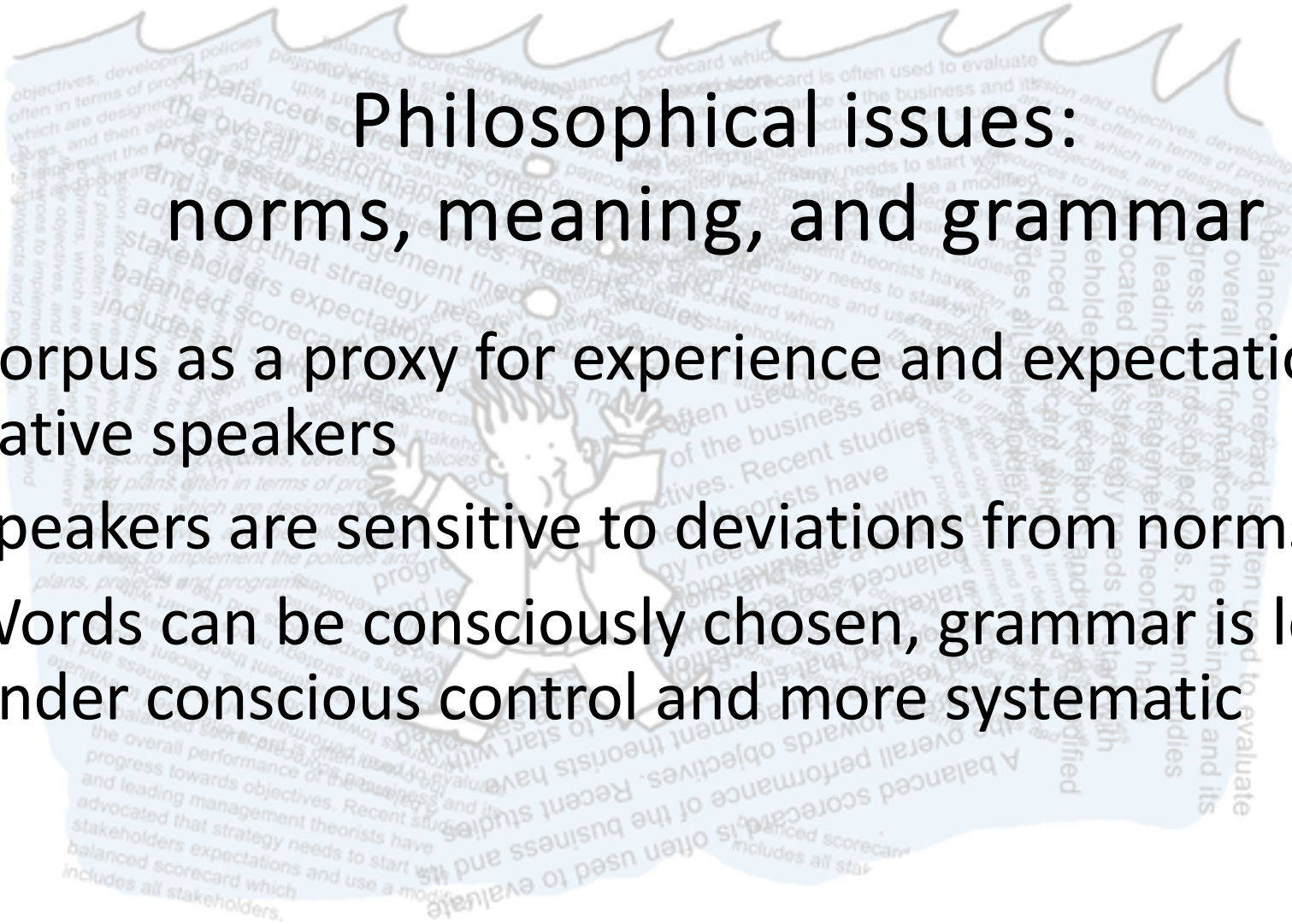


“Background music”
is an important part of the message

Grammar as a drumbeat



- Grammar is obligatory, systematic
- Grammar reveals the conceptual landscape of discourse
- Russian nouns are obligatorily marked with one of six cases
 - Cases bear abstract meanings
- We compare the distribution of case in a target text (Putin's speeches) with a reference corpus (large representative sample showing expected distribution in Russian)
 - **3 words: 'Russia', 'Ukraine', 'NATO'**

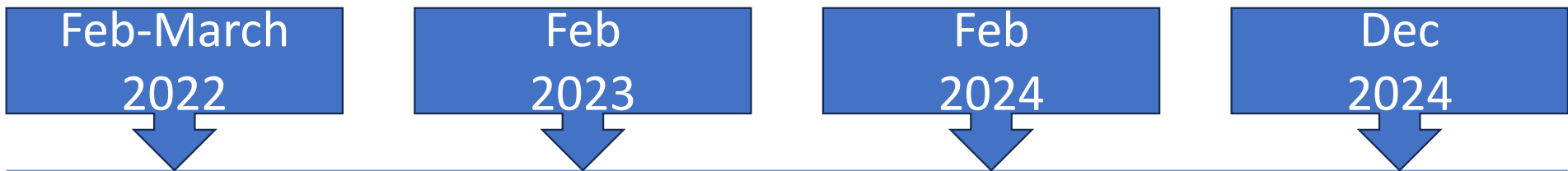


Philosophical issues: norms, meaning, and grammar

- Corpus as a proxy for experience and expectations of native speakers
- Speakers are sensitive to deviations from norms
- Words can be consciously chosen, grammar is less under conscious control and more systematic

Overview

- Keymorph Analysis as an extension of Keyword Analysis
- Meanings of Russian grammatical cases
- Longitudinal study of Putin's use of case

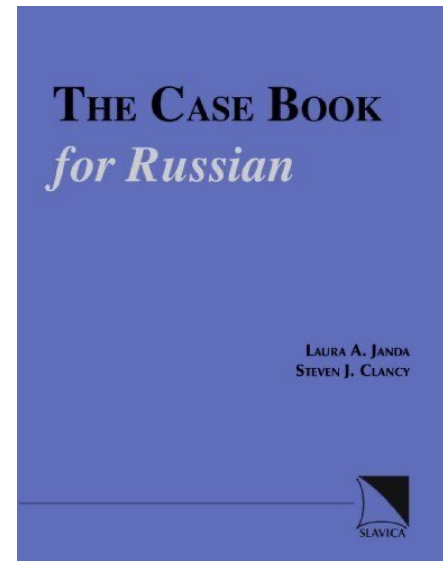


Keyword Analysis >> Keymorph Analysis

- **Keyword** Analysis (cf. Egbert & Biber 2023):
 - focus on the distribution of **words**, identifying as “keywords” those that are unusually frequent in a target text vs. reference corpus
 - widely used in corpus-assisted discourse analysis
 - mostly used with English, which does not mark case on nouns
- **Keymorph** Analysis:
 - takes advantage of grammatical case (expressed by **morphemes**)
 - developed by Fidler & Cvrček (2017, 2018, and Cvrček & Fidler 2019) on the material of Czech
 - ours is the first pilot study/proof-of-concept using Russian data

Meanings of Russian grammatical cases

- Meanings most relevant for analysis of Putin's speeches
 - Nominative (NOM): agent (subject); label
 - Genitive (GEN): agent or patient; possessor; goal
 - Dative (DAT): potential agent, experiencer or competitor (usually human); contours of a space
 - Accusative (ACC): patient (direct object); destination
 - Instrumental (s + INS): collaborator
 - Locative (LOC): a place



Target texts and Reference Corpus

Target texts = Putin's speech

- Feb-Mar 2022: all of Putin's output from 10.02. (joint maneuvers with Belarus) through 02.03.2022 (height of first phase of invasion)
- Feb 2023: Putin's address to the Federal Assembly 21.02.2023
- Feb 2024: Putin's address to the Federal Assembly 29.02.2024
- Dec 2024: Putin's speech at Direct Line / Year-end Summary 19.12.2024

Reference Corpus = Representative sample of Russian norms

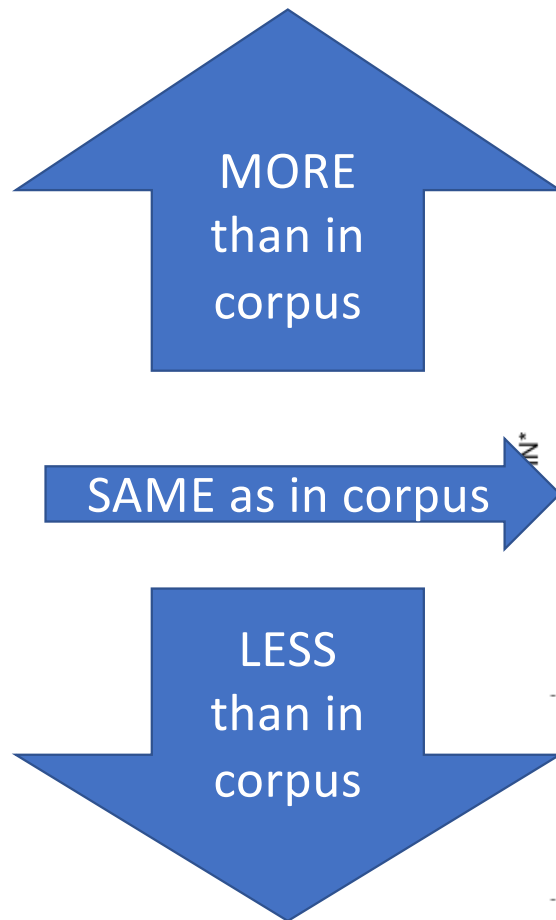
- Russian InterCorp (Czech National Corpus www.korpus.cz) 20.1 M tokens

Putin at the time of full-scale invasion 10.02.2022 - 02.03.2022

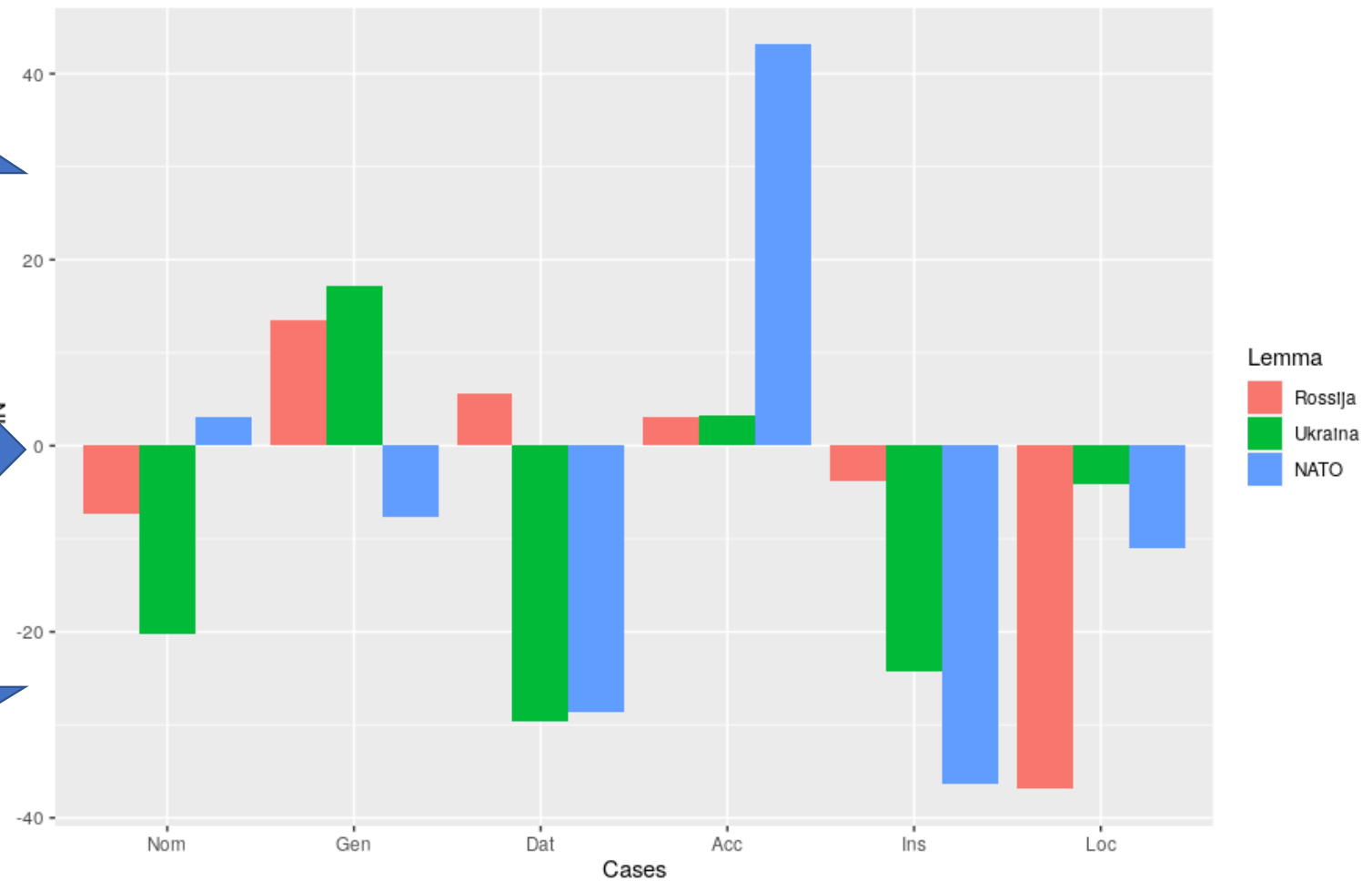


28,518 words

Comparison with reference corpus



Case prominence In Putin's speeches 2022



Russia in 2022



- Russia represented as
 - a dynamic agent (NOM)
 - a collaborator (INS)
 - treated unfairly (ACC) and therefore in need of a strong leader
 - humanized, inspires empathy (DAT)

Ukraine in 2022



- Ukraine represented as
 - passive (NOM with stative verbs)
 - manipulated (ACC)
 - dehumanized (little DAT)
 - not a collaborator (little *s* + INS)
 - just a location, a region (*na* + LOC, GEN)

NATO in 2022

- NATO represented as
 - just a label, not an agent (NOM)
 - a threat (GEN)
 - a destination or container (ACC, LOC)
 - not a collaborator, dehumanized (little INS and DAT)

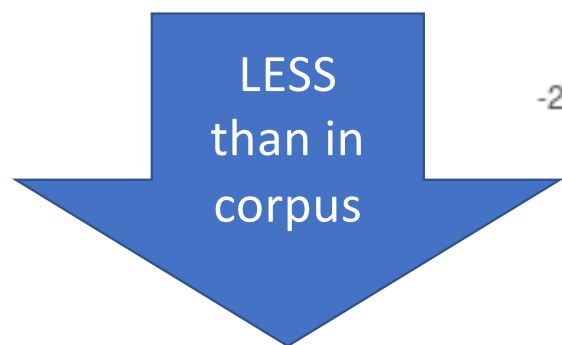
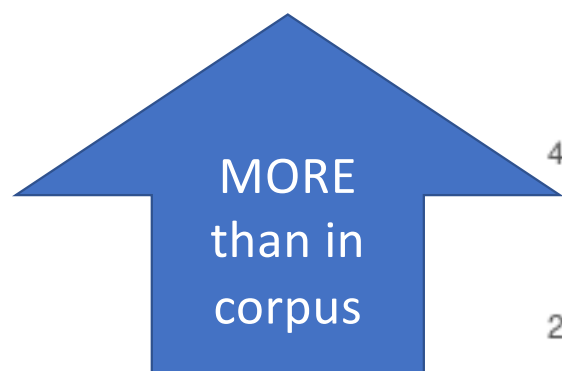


Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly Feb 21, 2023

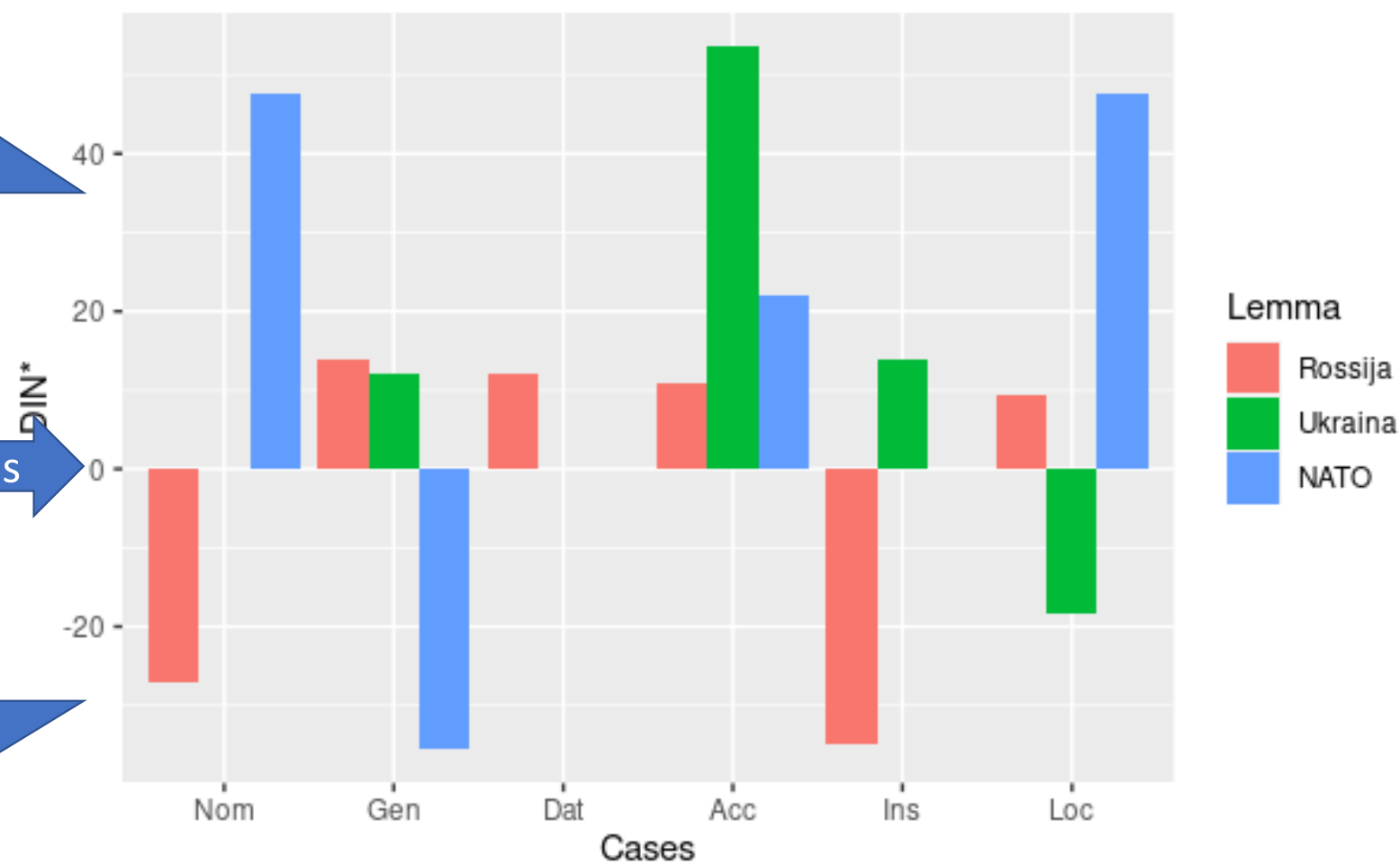


Caveat: some distortion due to much smaller dataset

10,538 words



Case prominence in Putin's speech (Feb 21, 2023)



Russia in 2023



- Russia represented as
 - an agent that helps others, remembers, depends on its citizens, an open country (NOM)
 - a land of great potential and people, unfairly targeted (GEN)
 - united ($s + \text{INS}$)
 - being exploited but cannot be defeated, the place to invest (ACC)
 - humanized and victimized, in no need of cooperation with western economies (DAT)
 - a place with a strong economy and values (LOC)

Ukraine in 2023



- Ukraine represented as
 - non-existent as an actor (no NOM)
 - entirely manipulated, the destination of NATO's weapons (ACC, *na*)
 - dehumanized (no DAT)
 - not a collaborator (no *s* + INS), a name rendered "just for now" (subject to change) (INS)
 - the location of a conflict and a neonazi regime (*na* + LOC)

‘Ukraine’ appears only 12 times in 2023 speech:

Мы не воюем с народом Украины...

‘We are not fighting with the people of **Ukraine (GEN)**...’

А в наше время из Украины они стали делать <<анти-Россию>>.

‘At present they have started to make **Ukraine (GEN)** into an “Anti-Russia”’

этот проект ... с одной целью - оторвать эти исторические территории, которые сегодня называются Украиной , от нашей страны.

‘this project ... [has] one goal – to tear away from our country the historical territories that are now called **Ukraine (INS)**’

Запад использует Украину и как таран против России, и как полигон.

‘The West is using **Ukraine (ACC)** both as a battering ram against Russia, and as an artillery range.’

NATO in 2023



- NATO represented as
 - an aggressor, placing weapons on Russia's borders, directly stating that it wishes to defeat Russia, equated with USA and the West (NOM)
 - having expanded to Russia's borders and having representatives who are liars and deceivers (GEN, ACC)
 - the location of multiple nuclear arsenals (LOC)
 - strongly dehumanized (no s + INS, no DAT)

Putin's speech to the Federal Assembly Feb 29, 2024



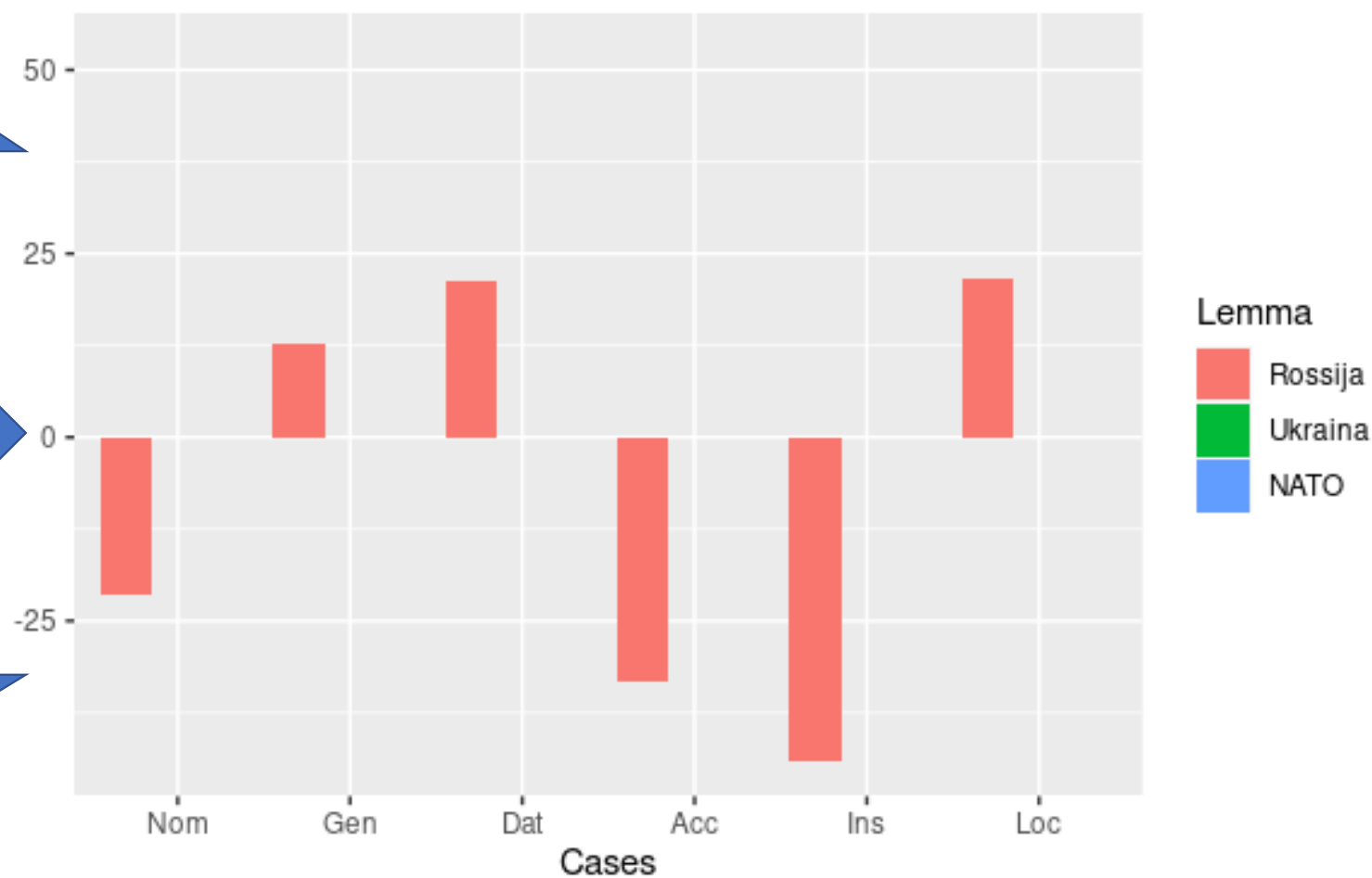
12,660 words

MORE
than in
corpus

SAME as in corpus

LESS
than in
corpus

Case prominence in Putin's speech (Feb 2024)



Speech Feb 2024: Focus is just on Russia

- Russia is in possession of political, economic and scientific achievements, industry, resources

У России давние, хорошие отношения с арабскими государствами.

'Russia (GEN) has long-standing, good relations with the Arab states.'

В прошлом году экономика России росла темпами выше мировой.

'Last year, Russia's (GEN) economy grew at a rate higher than the world's.'

- Things are happening in Russia and all across Russia

В прошлом году в России было построено свыше 110 миллионов квадратных метров жилья.

'Last year, over 110 million square meters of housing were built in Russia (LOC).'

В целом по России за шесть лет благоустроим более 30 тысяч общественных пространств.

'Across Russia (DAT) as a whole, we will improve more than 30 thousand public spaces in six years.'

- Lacking mention of Russia as collaborator

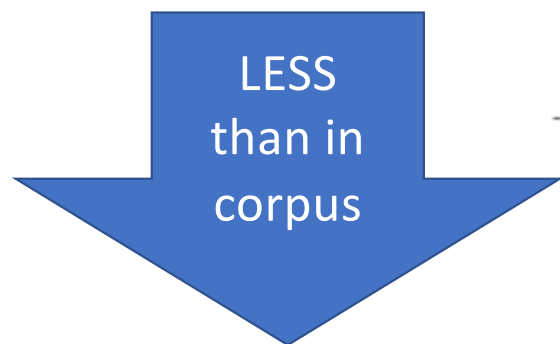
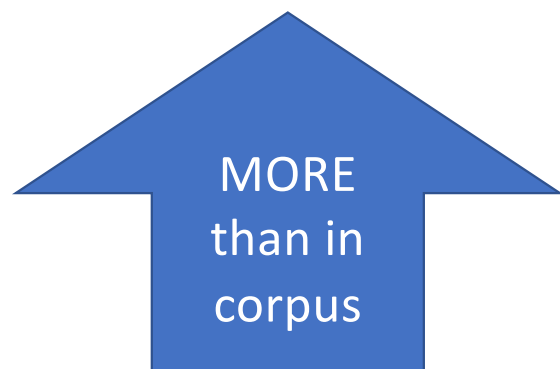
Speech Feb 2024: Focus is just on Russia

- ‘NATO’ appears only once as a noun (+ once as adjective, below):
 - *угрозы, связанные с очередным расширением НАТО на восток*
 - ‘threats associated with further expansion of **NATO** (GEN) to the east’
- ‘Ukraine’ appears only five times, always with preposition *на* ‘on’:
 - 4 times as a mere location of conflicts:
 - *Запад спровоцировал конфликты на Украине*
 - ‘The West has provoked conflicts in **Ukraine** (LOC)’
 - once as a destination
 - *Заговорили о возможности отправки на Украину натовских военных контингентов.*
 - ‘There was talk about the possibility of sending NATO military contingents to **Ukraine** (ACC).’

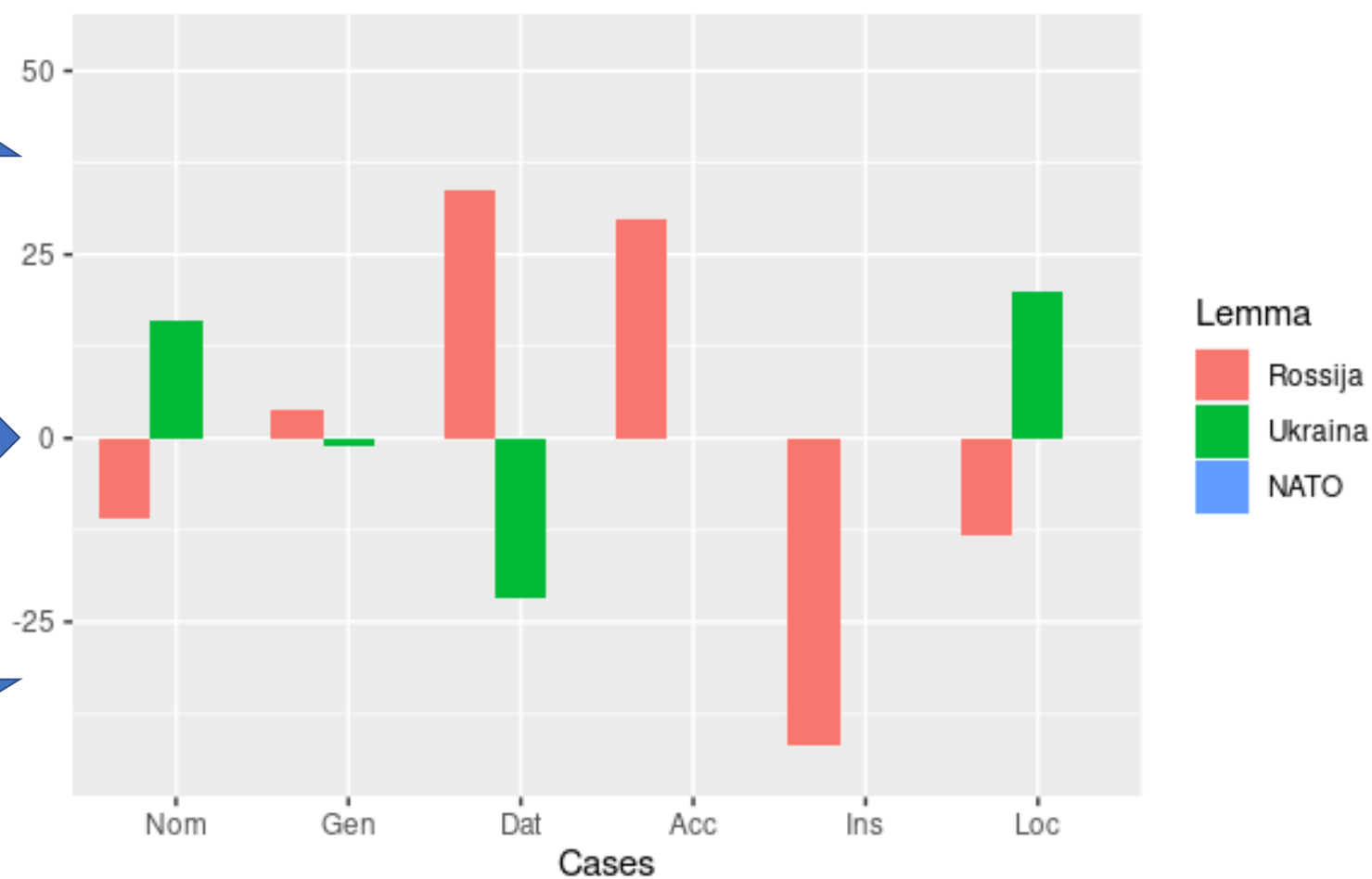
Putin's answers, Direct Line/Year-end Summary Dec 19, 2024



20,930 words



Case prominence in Prjamaja linija (Dec 2024)



Direct Line/Year-end Summary Dec 2024

- Russia humanized

Я сказал сейчас про то, что отношусь к России, как к своей семье.

*'I just said that I treat **Russia (DAT)** as my family.'*

- Russia rated highly by experts, a desirable destination

Международные финансово-экономические институты поставили Россию на первое место в Европе

*'International financial and economic institutions put **Russia (ACC)** in first place in Europe'*

И мы заинтересованы в привлечении именно высококвалифицированных специалистов в Россию

*'And we are interested in attracting highly qualified specialists to **Russia (ACC)**'*

- Lacking mention of Russia as collaborator

Direct Line/Year-end Summary Dec 2024

- Ukraine is mostly a place

Примерно то же самое сейчас происходит на Украине по линии этого жульничества.

‘About the same thing is now happening in **Ukraine (LOC)** through this scam.’

- Ukraine is at fault for negative actions

Но это не наша проблема, это Украина перекрыла поставки нашего газа европейским потребителям.

‘But this is not our problem, it is **Ukraine (NOM)** that has cut off the supply of our gas to European consumers.’

- NATO mentioned only twice, both times: *страны NATO* ‘countries of **NATO (GEN)**’

Putin 2022 vs. 2023 vs. 2024: What has changed?



Over time:

- Russia's role as a collaborator decreases while focus on its assets increases, victimization reduced in Feb 2024
- Ukraine and NATO increasingly marginalized

What else does this buy us?

- Proof-of-concept for Keymorph Analysis applied to Russian data
- Keymorph Analysis complements Keyword Analysis and other traditional methods of discourse analysis
- Analysis of grammatical case reveals roles of social actors in discourse
- Consistent deviation from norms likely has an impact on hearers
- Useful for social science disciplines
- Invites further comparisons (Putin vs. other politicians, etc.)
- Method could be used to analyze other types of manipulative texts

Thank you!

- Threat-Defuser: <https://threat-defuser.org/>

Funded by the Norwegian Research Council

- CLEAR: Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian:
<https://site.uit.no/clear/>



CLEAR
Cognitive Linguistics: Empirical Approaches to Russian