

GRAMMATICA: SOFTWARE FOR STUDENTS OF RUSSIAN

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Grammatica is a newly released software application for intermediate and advanced students of Russian. Its initial, and primary, function, according to its [website](#), is to display stress patterns for the words in any Russian text. This is the reason I was motivated to take a look at it, since in reading Russian poetry, I sometimes have trouble knowing where to put the stress. But Grammatica, a Danish-owned, Kiev-based company directed by Jacob Joensen, is improving the product beyond that rudimentary—although not simple—function. It analyzes the grammar of a sentence, displays the full inflection or conjugation of a word in a pop-up menu, identifies other words in the passage with the same grammatical properties and related words, and provides a rudimentary translation (**Figure 1**).

patterns change with inflection, sometimes changing the meaning of the word altogether. The reviewers pointed out a few errors of this type (see examples in **Figures 2** and **3**).

Thus **ряду** should be stressed on the second syllable, not the first, in this sentence; **самого** with the stress on the first syllable as shown, means “most” or “uttermost,” whereas the actual meaning here, “himself,” requires the stress on the last syllable. By consulting the pop-up boxes (shown), the reader can see alternate inflections and stress patterns. If Grammatica cannot identify the word, it puts no stress mark.

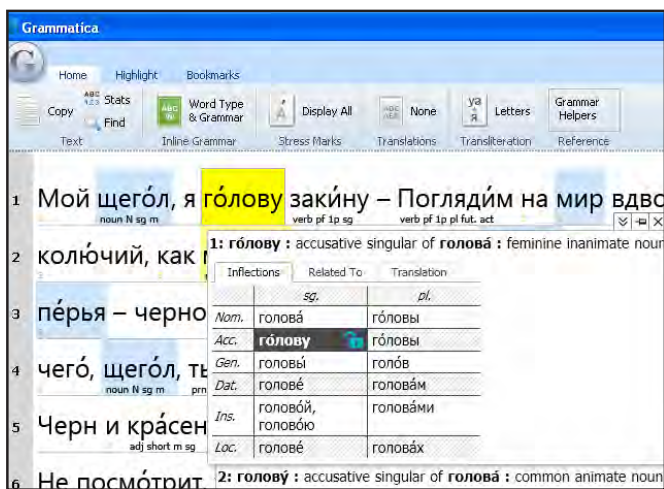


Figure 1. Grammatica has analyzed a sentence for stress and basic grammar. The user has clicked on “голову” for more information, and a pop-up box provides a declension.

How accurate is it? To answer this question, I asked native speakers of Russian to volunteer to review some sample text. Galina Kakhoun, Tatjana Lukinych, and Yulia Novikova-Wythe of the LinkedIn Russian Translators Group were kind enough to read and comment on a PDF I sent them of Grammatica’s analysis of a couple of poems by Osip Mandelstam, and some commentary on them randomly chosen from the Internet.

Grammatica’s “export to PDF” function shows only the basic, “first pass” information: stress marks and grammatical analysis; the reviewers did not see the information provided by pop-up boxes.

Grammatica’s performance turned out to be far from perfect. The stress markings were quite good, so for my purposes of poetry reading, the application is acceptable. But, of course, Russian grammar is very highly nuanced (“maddening,” is the word we foreigners use), and stress

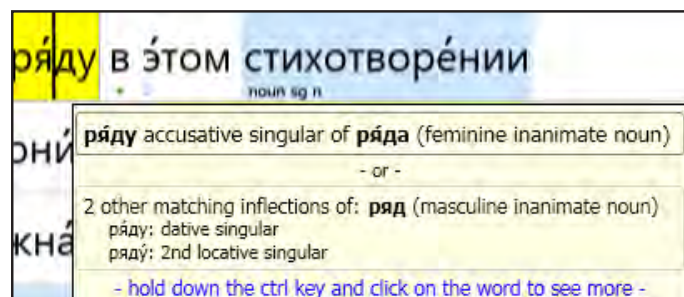


Figure 2

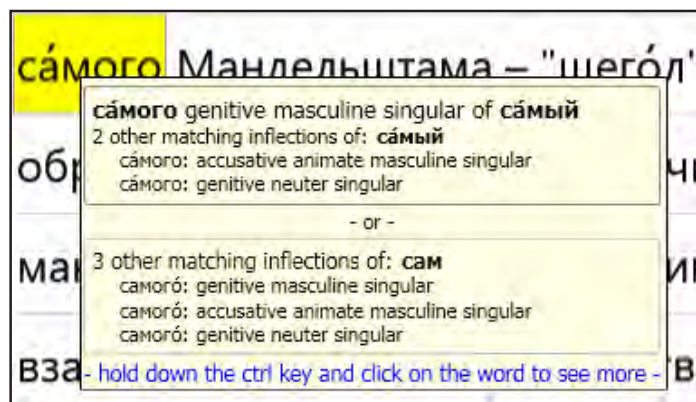


Figure 3

The “first-pass” grammar analysis was not as good as the stress analysis, with nominative and accusative often being confused (**Figure 4**). In this example, нелогичность should be designated as nominative. The pop-up boxes provide additional information, helpful for the student who is not a total beginner. It is clear that Grammatica cannot be used by a student to check his or her work.

Director Joensen points out that identifying a Russian noun or adjective as nominative, accusative, or genitive can be quite difficult. Grammatica runs some simple rules to try to find the most likely inflection. (Does it follow a preposition? Is it adjacent to an adjective that does not have the

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same inflection?) “This analysis works mostly as a convenience feature,” he wrote to me. “It is still far from perfect, but we will improve on it in the future.”

The translation feature, he said, “is quite basic; it is still in an experimental state.” Unlike Google Translate, for example, it is not a statistically based machine translation system, with millions of bilingual documents in its database. It translates each word from its base form, providing a hint to the reader of what each word means, but not a correct English sentence. “Grammatica will never be able to automatically do a 100% correct grammatical sentence analysis or translation,” Joensen said. “This is not the purpose of the software. The purpose is to be able to copy-paste any text into Grammatica and have all the information about each word instantly available. From there it’s still the user’s own headache to make sense of it by studying the language!” Fair enough.

Joensen has hired eight more people for the summer months to work on improving data quality and adding information about morphology. “I’m especially excited about the morphological information,” he wrote. “This will allow Grammatica to connect words to their roots, prefixes, suffixes, etc., and provide analysis of the parts of a word. We have done some testing with this, and I think it will work out quite well. My hope for this, as was the idea with Grammatica from the beginning, is that learners will be able to understand a text with many fewer dictionary lookups. It is of course a lot more useful to be able to understand a word from its context and morphology, than just to see the same word in English.”

As someone who not infrequently finds herself looking up the same word many times, I will be very interested to see how that works!

Who will use this product? It would certainly be useful for teachers and students. I think its benefit to translators



Figure 4

is minimal, except for language study (and for fun). It will probably not solve the thornier problems of grammar – e.g., in one of Mandelstam’s “goldfinch” poems, he writes: “В обе стороны он в оба смотрит – в обе!” Grammatica and I were both stumped as to why в обе appears in two places, and в оба in one. The program’s initial analysis is quite slow: You are not going to run a 10 K word financial report through this thing – nor would there be any reason to do so, unless you intended to recite it at the next meeting of your local Poetry Reading Group.

For those of us who are far to the north side of our 40th birthday, there is an awful lot of mousing and clicking. Since we still own our college grammar books, we do have another recourse, after all. The text-message and iPhone generation may view the matter differently.

On the technical side, Grammatica runs on Windows XP, Vista, and 7, which is an unfortunate limitation for MAC and Linux users. The installation was easy (I had it installed on Windows XP). I have experienced quite a few crashes of the program, but that may be a problem involving my Virtual Box setup of Windows within a Linux shell.

Grammatica can be downloaded from www.grammatica.com for \$69, and there is a 20-day free trial. Readers of *SlavFile* may receive a 15% discount for a single license, up to the end of 2011 (1,000 users maximum), by entering the following promo code when purchasing the software: 0260-47FD-8F8F-B2BA.

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