Arbitrariness of verbal theme vowels through an empirical lens: the case of BCMS

Boban Arsenijevič
University of Graz

This talk addresses the issue of the arbitrariness of verbal theme vowels, in terms of their semantic and syntactic content as well as of their selection. A theoretical stance that is largely grounded in armchair linguistics is critically examined from a strongly empirical perspective, using the Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian (BCMS) verbal system as a case study. The analysis draws on data from the Western South Slavic Verb database (WeSoSlaV), which contains over 8300 verbs annotated for more than 40 properties. Through quantitative analysis, the study explores the extent to which these properties contribute to predicting variation in the selection of theme vowels and assesses the potential for formulating an algorithm for this selection. The results confirm the armchair linguistics conclusions, suggesting that BCMS verbal theme vowels are indeed semantically and syntactically empty, as neither semantic nor syntactic properties play a significant role in predicting their variation or in constructing decision trees for their selection.