

# **Jakobson's Remarks on the Evolution of Russian and the Slavic Languages:**

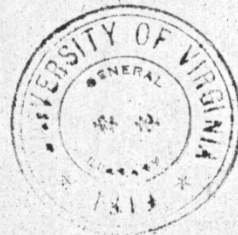
**Its significance and How to Read it**

*Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*

2.

ROMAN JAKOBSON

REMARQUES  
SUR  
L'ÉVOLUTION PHONOLOGIQUE  
DU RUSSE  
*comparée à celle des autres  
langues slaves*



PRAGUE

JEDNOTA ČESKOSLOVENSKÝCH MATEMATIKŮ A FYSIKŮ

1929

# Jakobson's Purpose

- To bring structural methods of phonological analysis to historical linguistics.
- de Saussure—felt that linguistic history was due to haphazard accidents.
- Jakobson tried to prove that certain systematic principles determined the split of Common Slavic into zones and that it was **not** haphazard.
- Jakobson (1929): the first systematic linguistic history, giving systematic reasons for sound changes.

## But, the work never got the recognition some expected. Why?

- 1. The Russian original was lost in World War II and only a French translation survived.
- 2. Trubetzkoy told Jakobson his style was overly metaphorical and difficult, relying on terms like the **battle, duel, or conflict** between phonological oppositions.

## **Sample of Trubetzkoy's comments in a letter to Jakobson:**

- “All these defects, the result of haste and not enough restraint when you deal with an extremely strong torrent of ideas, become twice as bad in translation.”
- “Because of all this, the book is very hard to read. To some extent, it's the Russian linguistic tradition. But your ‘unreadability’ is different than Fortunatov's or Bubrikh's.”
- “The thoughtful reader will overcome this difficulty, and if not for the stilted translation, your book would have made a great impression. But only a thoughtful reader will see and appreciate this, and that's the minority. A mediocre linguist (like Belic) won't understand a thing. By the way, with a little effort you could have made it comprehensible even for every mediocre linguist. Of course, you'll never change.”

## Original Russian:

Все эти недостатки, последствия торопливости и недостаточной выдержки перед, правда, исключительно сильным напором потока мысли, усугубляются переводным языком. Переводность всё время чувствуется, многие фразы очень  
Правда, это до некоторой степени традиция русской лингвистики. Но у Вас “трудночитаемость” совсем иного характера, чем, скажем, у Фортунатова или у Бубряха. Конечно, “вдумчивый” читатель одолеет эту трудность

Средний читатель-лингвист (вроде Белича) просто ничего не поймет. А, между тем, при известном старании можно было бы всё это разжевать и подать так, чтобы почти всякий средний лингвист понял.

## **Jakobson's Letter in Reply to Trubetzkoy:**

- Unfortunately, I have to agree with what you say about my written style. True, the translation takes a lot away from the book. The original is much more succinct. But, my inability to develop a thought remains.
- Only it's not the result of haste. On the contrary, the more I work on something, the more attention it gets. If I re-work a chapter, I inadvertently fill it with more and more ideas that come into my mind.
- If you wish, it's the Ushakov School. Not the linguist Dmitry Ushakov, but the icon painter Simon Ushakov. The sense of how one section relates to the whole work gets lost. However harmful this is to my work, it's extremely hard to get rid of it psychologically, except by writing short articles on single subjects.

## **Metaphors for Relative Chronology**

Jakobson's difficult metaphors often are ways of expressing relative chronology. Almost everything in the book hinges on whether certain things occur before or after the loss of final short vowels in Slavic languages.

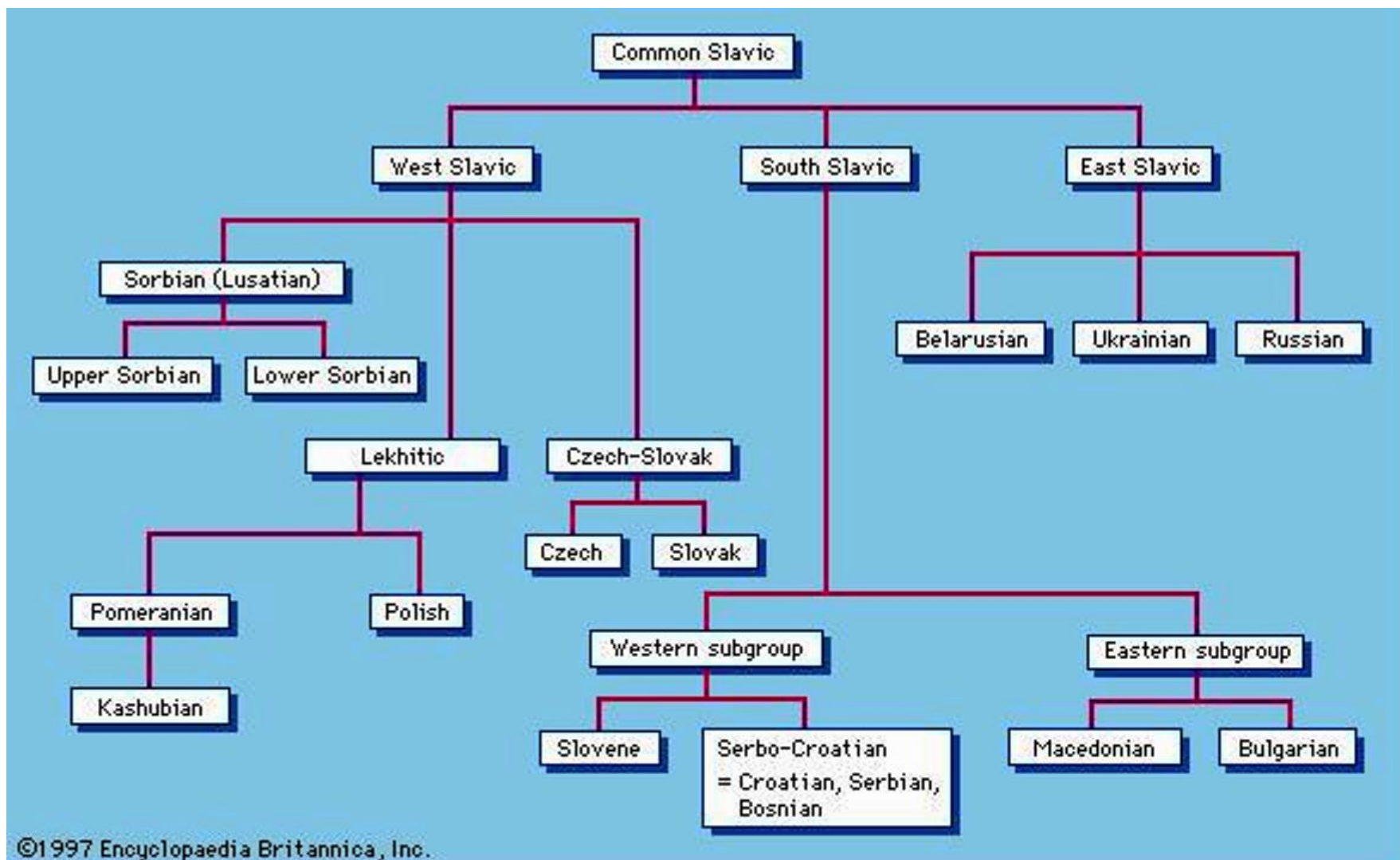
One ordering means absence of conflict and certain changes, but the opposite ordering means that conflict and linguistic change do occur.



- **Jakobson's Method:**

- Lay out general linguistic principles for several phonological features which either could not co-occur in the same system or had to co-occur.
- Jakobson thought that these were universals or near universals, that applied to most or all world languages, not only Slavic.
- Each group of features produced a unique combination of features in the various Slavic zones.
- Before looking at these linguistic rules, let's briefly review of the Slavic map and language areas.





- **Phonological trigger** for change in all Slavic zones: loss of weak jers (short high vowels, front and back: ь and ъ, as in [dan'ь] vs. [danъ]). This started in the SW of Slavic, moving NW and East.
- Prior to this, consonants before front vowels had become palatalized, symbolized here by [n'].
- If the vowels ь/ъ were to drop, a new kind of palatalized phonemic opposition could come about. This is characteristic of Russian and some other Slavic languages, but not Slovene, Serbian, Croatian, etc.
- Jakobson's principles address this.

- Most of the principles address how vowel accents interface with the possibility of new palatalized consonants, coming from jer-fall.
- In Common Slavic, the first syllable could have two different accented types: rising and falling. Vowels could be long or short, but had to be long for the rising/falling opposition. Jakobson treated long vowels as consisting of two halves or moras:  $\check{\text{a}}\check{\text{a}} = \bar{\text{a}}$ .
- Falling tone was equal to accent on the first mora ( $\check{\text{a}}\check{\text{a}}$ ) and rising was an accent on the second one ( $\check{\text{a}}\acute{\text{a}}$ ). Accents on other syllables were set off by rising tone, so the accent was called tonal.

**Rule 1:** Vowel tone requires quantity and implies that “stressed vs. unstressed” is based on high pitch or tone, not loudness.

**Rule 2.** Phonemic dynamic stress (non-tonal) and vowel quantity are mutually exclusive, because if there are moraic longs with free stress, the different stresses equal tone. (A language can't have free stress across syllables but not inside moraic syllables.)

**Rule 3:** If a moraic tonal opposition inside a syllable is absent, then stressed vs. unstressed must be based on loudness, not vowel tone.

**Rule 4:** Consonant palatalization and vocalic tone are mutually exclusive. A language can't have both consonantal and vocalic tone. **Relates to jer-fall.**

- If the language had tone to start with and then consonant palatalization developed at the moment of jer-fall, it was possible for the language to have “conflicting” features that could not combine, so something had to be lost.
- “Conflicting” features meant that the language had to get rid of one or the other, or both.
- A Slavic language could either avoid all conflicts by changing its system prior to jer-fall, or deal with a set of phonological conflicts otherwise.

- Jakobson named two types of conflict: “A” occurred if consonant and vocalic tone clashed in the same system (due to palatalizing jer-fall against the backdrop of tonal accent).
- In this case, the vowel tone was lost, but then vowel quantity was paired with non-tonal accent, which also could not combine, producing “Conflict B.” This meant that either phonemic vowel quantity or phonemic stress accent (non-tonal) could not co-exist. One or both had to be eliminated.



- The major Slavic zones changed their systems either before or after jer-fall.
- Thus, Jakobson's theory of phonological conflicts can be treated as differences of relative chronology.
- Jakobson's zones can be depicted as an isogloss for jer-fall that is moving from SW to both Northeast and East, and which may or may not be preceded by another isogloss for loss of phonemic tone.
- You can analogize it to a race where the person in the lead changes back and forth.
- The following charts shows the direction of these changes across the Slavic map.

✘ Czech Dialect

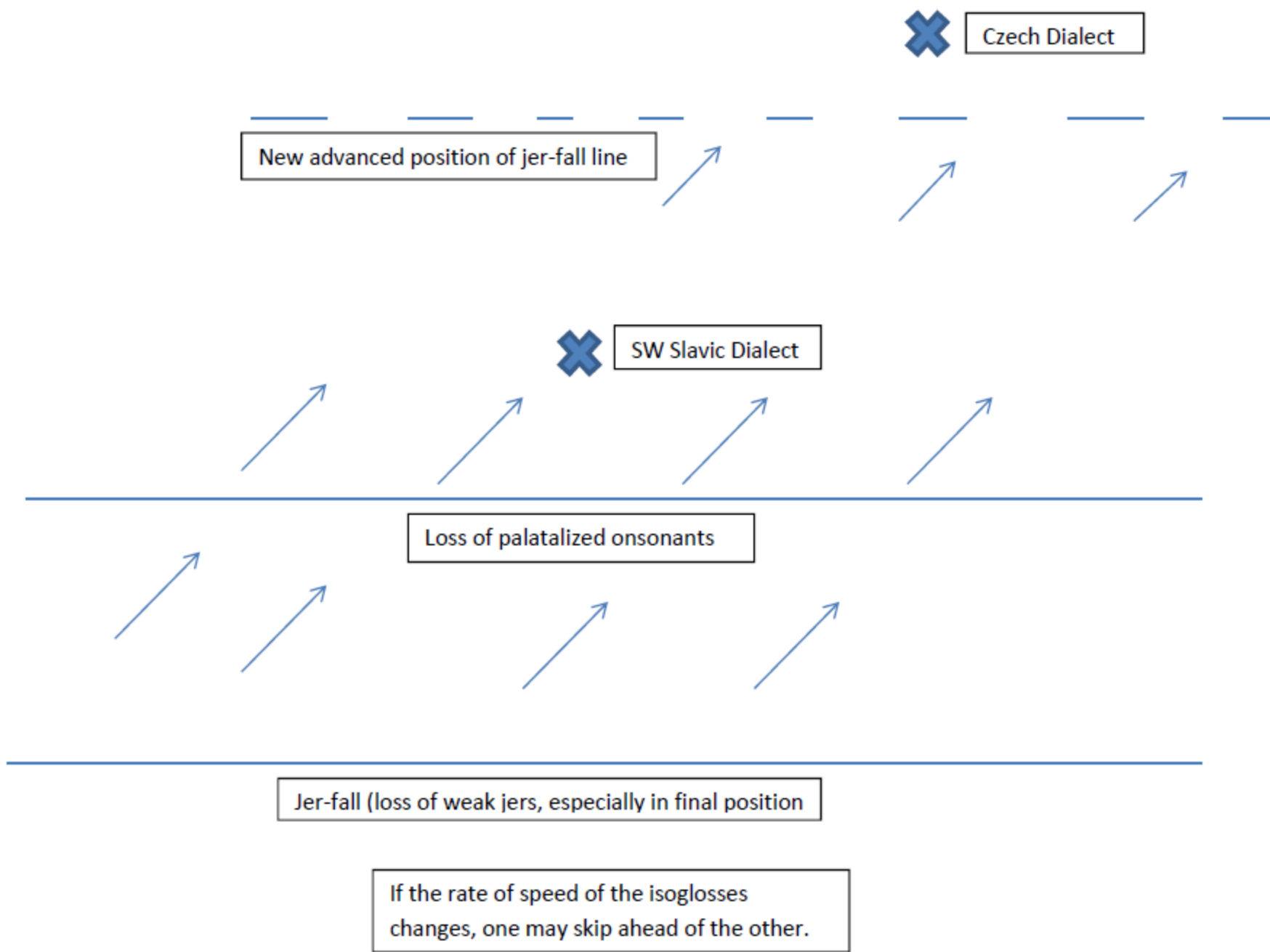
New advanced position of jer-fall line

✘ SW Slavic Dialect

Loss of palatalized consonants

Jer-fall (loss of weak jers, especially in final position)

If the rate of speed of the isoglosses changes, one may skip ahead of the other.



NE (East Slavic)

West Slavic

**Polish**  
 Loss of Vowel Tone/Quantity Before Jer-Fall  
 Consonant Palatalization and Phonemic Quantity (Later lost)  
 No "conflicts"  
 Free stress lost—Quantity remained in Old Polish, later lost.

**Russian/Belarusian**  
 Loss of Vowel Tone/Quantity Before Jer-Fall  
 Consonant Palatalization and Dynamic Stress:  
 No "conflicts"

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**Ukrainian**  
 Tone loss after jer-fall :  
 tonality conflict  
 Consonant Palatalization survives with evidence of conflict (hardening in some positions).  
 Dynamic stress , but weaker than Russian, with some traces of old quantity.

**Czech/Slovak**  
 Tone loss after jer-fall:  
 tonality conflict  
 Both cons. and vowel tonality are lost.  
 Free stress lost—Quantity remains

SW

SE

**SW (Slovene, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian)**  
 Consonant Palatalization Lost Before Jer-Fall  
 Tonal Accent and Quantity but no Consonant Tone

**West Bulgarian**  
 Tone loss after jer-fall :  
 tonality conflict  
 Both cons. and vowel tonality/quantity are lost.  
 Mostly dynamic stress.

**East Bulgarian**  
 Tone loss after jer-fall :  
 tonality conflict  
 Consonant Palatalization survives with evidence of conflict (hardening in some positions)



- The SW (Slovene, Croatian/Serbian/Bosnian) was the only zone that kept vocalic tone and has the least evidence of consonantal palatalization.
- Jakobson assumed that this zone eliminated consonantal palatalization **prior** to jer-fall, so no conflicts occurred here. I.e. they depalatalized all consonants preceding front vowels, never developing the phonemic opposition.

The SW relative chronology looks like this:

1. Loss of palatalized consonants before front vowels. *dan'ь/danъ* → *danь/danъ*
2. Fall of weak jers: merger into *dan*.

- The two areas which experienced jer-fall after the SW are Czech/Slovak to the north, and West Bulgarian to the east.
- They lost **both** consonant palatalization and vowel tone, evidence of Jakobson's "conflict A."
- In "conflict B," Czech/Slovak retained quantity and lost phonemic stress, but West Bulgarian lost phonemic quantity, keeping intensity stress.

- The relative chronology here would be somewhat the opposite of the SW:
- 1. Jer-fall, with potentially phonemic consonant tonality, clashing with vowel tone.
- 2. Loss of vowel tone and change to dynamic stress; loss of consonant palatalization.
- 3. Conflict of quantity and dynamic stress, in favor of quantity (Czech/Slovak) or stress (West Bulgarian).
- Let us now contrast this with the extreme opposite end of the Slavic map, represented by the NE (Russian and Belarusian).

- In Russian/Belarusian, we find full systems of consonant palatalization and dynamic stress.
- This implies no phonological conflict.
- Jer-fall must have been preceded by the loss of phonemic tone and quantity, leaving a clear path for the institution of phonemic palatalization and dynamic stress.
- Implied relative chronology:
  - 1. Loss of vocalic tone (change to dynamic stress) and loss of quantity.
  - 2. Jer-fall, with introduction of phonemic consonant palatalization.

- There were important nuances in the intervening languages, such as East Bulgarian and Ukrainian.
- They can be viewed as transitional zones between intermediate Czech/Slovak/West Bulgarian and Russian.
- Consonant palatalization was not eliminated phonemically, but was partially curtailed in certain environments:
  - In Ukrainian and East Bulgarian, the opposition of consonant palatalization was lost in front of certain vowel groups, such as mid vowels.
  - In Jakobson's terms, "conflict A" may have occurred, but with less drastic results than in Czech. So, relative chronology alone does not address all of the nuances of development in all of the Slavic languages.



- Nevertheless, Jakobson's system give us a very useful tool for understanding the major developments in the change of Common Slavic to the modern Slavic languages.
- Linguists have written papers pointing out individual errors in Jakobson's general principles.
- Pavle Ivić pointed out that dynamic stress and quantity co-exist in a small dialect zone of Montenegro.
- However, this does not negate the value of Jakobson's analysis, which accurately applies to virtually all of the Slavic zones in terms of the phonemic systems involved.
- It is one of the most important pioneering works in the history of linguistics and certainly the most important work of historic linguistics of the Prague School.

# Appendix

- **Diagram of feature combinations**

**Mutually exclusive features  
(Cannot co-occur)**

**1. Consonant Palatalization and  
Vocalic Tone**

**Russian, Polish, Bulgarian have only  
the former (cons. pal.)**

**Slovene/Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian  
have only the latter (voc. tone)**

**2. Dynamic Stress and Vowel  
Quantity**

**Russian, Bulgarian have dynamic  
stress but no quantity.**

**Czech/Slovak have vowel quantity  
but no phonemic stress.**

**Features that must be combined**

**1. Vocalic Tone and Vocalic  
Quantity.**

**Slovene, Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian  
have both.**

**2. Vocalic Tone and Tonal Stress.**

**Slovene, Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian**

**Features that may be combined or  
not**

**1. Consonant Palatalization and  
Dynamic Stress.**

**Russian, Bulgarian.**

**2. Consonant Palatalization and  
Vowel Quantity.**

**Old Polish (before loss of quantity)**

**3. Consonant Palatalization Without  
Phonemic Stress or Vowel Quantity**

**Modern Polish.**

**4. Vowel Quantity Without  
Phonemic Stress or Consonant  
Palatalization**

**Czech/Slovak**