

Case compounding and discourse structure in Moksha

(submission for “Workshop on information structure and discourse”)

Case compounding is inclusion of more than one case marker within one phonological word (Noonan 2008). This paper deals with discourse properties of case compounding in Moksha (< Mordvin < Finno-Ugric). The presented data were collected in Republic of Mordovia, Temnikov district, where the western variety of the central dialect is spoken.

- (1) a. *t'en'i sev-k kastr'uk-stə don'c'kej-t'*
now take-IMP pot-EL pumpkin-DEF.GEN
b. *t'en'i sev-k kastr'uk-stə-t'*
now take-IMP pot-EL-DEF.GEN

‘And now take the pumpkin in the pot.’

In Moksha, double case marking arises in elliptical constructions, when a head of a noun phrase or of a relative clause is omitted. The case marker of the omitted element lands on the dependent noun that is already modified with its own case. In (1a), there is no ellipsis: the noun *kastr'uk* ‘pot’ comes with the elative marker and depends on the noun *don'c'kej* ‘pumpkin’, the latter stands in definite genitive, which is the direct object case in Moksha. In (1b), the head noun is elided, and the dependent one appears with two case affixes: elative and genitive.

There arises a question: which discourse factors govern the choice between (1a) and (1b)? Although the speakers eagerly accept and interpret structures like (1b), the elicitation can hardly help us to come up with an answer, as macro-structure of discourse and large-scale factors are evidently at play. Meanwhile, written texts, such as newspapers and fiction, contain only sporadic examples of case compounding, as it seems to be avoided in the standard variety of language. The corpus of spontaneous texts that is at our disposal at the moment contains nearly 5000 words, and it does not include any examples of double case marking.

That is why we have chosen the method of a ‘referential communication task’ (Krauss & Weinheimer 1966 among others), which offers an opportunity to encourage native speakers to use complex grammatical structures that otherwise are rare in colloquial speech. In the course of such experiment, two native speakers are provided with the same scene (painted picture) and a set of entities (small figures). The experimenter stands near one of the participants (which is called Director) and moves figures, placing it on the picture according to the prepared scenario. The second participant (Matcher) does not see what happens, but he has to repeat all the actions. In order to fulfill the task, the Director describes everything that he sees to the Matcher. Matcher is allowed to ask questions if something is unclear to him. As a result of the experiment, a spontaneous dialogue between the Director and the Matcher appears. Due to the design of the scenario, it is much richer in the constructions the researcher is interested in than a plain narrative usually is.

The initial hypothesis was that case compounding appears in the contexts, where one needs to distinguish between two or more entities with similar, but not identical characteristics. To put in another way, the genus is highly activated, and the species is unknown, or ‘quaestio’ (Klein & von Stutterheim 1987), so the speaker may omit the expression of the genus (‘pumpkin’ in 1b) and to land its case marker on the expression of the species (‘in the pot’ in 1b). Thus, in order to obtain texts, which include double case marking, the participant were provided with six groups of similar objects with minimal differences. Figures from the one group were moved simultaneously, so that more than one object became highly activated.

By now, we have six experimental texts, which consist of about 12,000 tokens in total. In the talk, we are going to elaborate on our results, which appeared not to agree with the initial hypothesis in several points.

Abbreviations.

IMP — imperative; EL — elative; GEN — dative; DEF — definiteness.

References

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