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Vyjádřete (svůj nebo Vaš?) názor.

Possessives as politeness markers in Bulgarian, Czech, and Russian

Keywords: possessive pronouns; reflexive; politeness; Bulgarian; Czech; Russian

In the typology of possessive adnominal modifiers, Slavic languages belong to the reflexive type, i.e. they have a special reflexive possessive item to distinguish a co-referential pronominal possessor from a non-coreferential pronominal possessor (Manzelli 1990). However, the actual use of reflexive possessives varies across Slavic languages as well as across conditions within a language. Slovene and Russian have been reported to make the most use of the reflexive possessive, whereas Polish and Bulgarian (in long pronouns) the least (Pekelis 2021). It has also been observed that in Slovene, the reflexive possessive is less obligatory in 2nd person plural/polite contexts¹ than in the 2nd person singular, where it often competes with the non-reflexive possessive (Uhlik/Žele 2020).

In this presentation, we address the question whether possessive pronouns in Bulgarian, Czech, and Russian are used in 2nd person contexts similarly to Slovene. Specifically, we test two hypotheses. First, the non-reflexive possessive is more frequent in 2nd person polite/plural *Vy*-contexts, as in example (1) from Russian, than in the 2nd person singular, as exemplified by (2):

(1) *Kogda Vy prišlěte mne Vašu stat'ju?*

'When you.2PL send me your.NREFL.PL article?'

(2) *Kogda ty prišlěš mne tvoju? stat'ju?*

'When you.2SG send me your.NREFL.SG article?'

Second, the non-reflexive possessive is more frequent in imperatives as in (3) than in indicatives as in (2) above.

(3) *Prišlite mne Vašu stat'ju.*

'Send.IMP.PL me your.NREFL.PL article.'

To test these hypotheses we extracted 2nd person possessives in comparable web corpora of Bulgarian, Czech and Russian (bgTenTen12 v2, csTenTen12 v9, and ruTenTen11) as well as in the subcorpora of untranslated texts from the national corpora of these languages (BulNC, SYN2015, RNC). For Czech and Russian, we chose 4000 random occurrences of 2nd person possessives in the TenTen corpora and 4000 in the national corpora per language. The chosen 4000 sentences exemplified four different conditions with 1000 examples per condition (singular + indicative, singular + imperative, plural/polite + indicative, and plural/polite + imperative). For Bulgarian,

¹ Plural, plural polite and singular polite contexts in Slavic languages are not distinguished morphosyntactically.

long and short forms of possessives from both corpora were analysed separately, leading to four samples for Bulgarian with 4000 sentences each.

The results confirm the two hypotheses for Russian and for Czech showing that the reflexive is the default possessive in the 2nd person singular, and the non-reflexive is used only in up to 5% of singular examples. In 2nd person plural/polite contexts, the reflexive is still the preferred possessive but the non-reflexive is used in up to 10% of the indicative and up to 20% of the imperative Vy-contexts. In Bulgarian long possessives, the non-reflexive is overall much more frequent than in Russian and Czech, and whereas the reflexive still dominates in the singular (up to 75% of examples), the non-reflexive is used in 46% of plural plural/polite indicative and in 54% of imperative contexts. In Bulgarian short possessives, only the reflexive possessive occurs in both singular and plural/polite contexts.

To summarize, the non-reflexive in Czech, Russian, and Bulgarian long possessives is most frequent with polite Vy-forms in imperative contexts. In terms of theory of politeness by Brown and Levinson (1987), imperative contexts represent acts that threaten the addressee's negative face because they urge him to act in a way he might not want to. Special polite forms of personal pronouns are one of the linguistic means to avoid the direct reference to the addressee and thus to reduce the degree of face threats (Helmbrecht 2003). In our case, this function of the personal pronoun Vy is complemented by the use of the non-reflexive possessive Vaš. The non-reflexive can be considered a less direct reference to the hearer than the reflexive possessive because, due to implied plurality, the non-reflexive distributes responsibility imposed on the hearer by the imperative over the plurality of addressees.

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