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Towards a contrastive functional grammar for non-native learners: A comparative corpus-based approach to possession in Czech and Polish

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Possession can be expressed in a number of ways even in a single language, let alone cross-linguistically; what still remains to be worked out in sufficient detail is the exact nature of the variation and the relationships among the variants. (Fried 2009: p. 213)

Many types of possessive constructions (Haspelmath 1999; Heine 1997; Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2003) are attested also across Slavic languages (Fried 2009; Stefan 2016). Interestingly, even languages within the West Slavic subfamily differ in the distribution of these constructions. This is where L2 learners of a language closely related to their L1 often stumble (Amenós-Pons et al. 2019; Dušková 1984). Typical differences include possessive forms in Czech, where Polish prefers genitive postmodifiers, while dative adjuncts are common in both languages. A single parallel concordance (split into two examples) shows a dative adjunct in Czech translated as a genitive modifier in Polish (1) and a Czech possessive form translated as a dative adjunct in Polish (2).

(1) Boučková (2008, 2017); quoted from InterCorp v.15

   Přestěhovala jsem Matějovi pokoj […]   (cs)
   rearrange.PST.1SG.F Mat.DAT room.ACC

   Przemeblowałam   pokój   Matěja […]   (pl)
   rearrange.PST.1SG.F room.ACC Mat.GEN

   'I re-arranged Mat's room …'

(2) ibidem

   […] *přestěhovala   Lukášův   pokoj* […]   (cs)
   rearrange.PST.1SG.F Luke.POSS room.ACC

   […] *poprzestawiałam Lukášowi meble* […]   (pl)
   rearrange.PST.1SG.F Luke.DAT furniture.PL.ACC

   '… [I] rearranged Luke's room …'

Existing contrastive studies of possession in Czech and Polish, which could not benefit from a corpus-based analysis, only provide a partial picture (Lotko 1997, p. 45). Our remedy is to use available corpora to analyse a wide range of patterns of expressing possession (i) within a noun phrase – as an attribute or argument of a participle – or (ii) as an argument of a verb.

Our key research questions are: How Czech and Polish agree and differ in the expressions of possession and their distribution? How are they reflected in non-native written production? What methodological suggestions for teaching Czech and Polish as a L2 can we draw from the answers?

The analysis of differences is based on the reference corpora: the Czech National Corpus[1] and the National Corpus of Polish,[2] and a parallel corpus – InterCorp[3]. The quantitative and qualitative analysis of L2 acquisition patterns (including error analysis) is based on the two available learner corpora – CzeSL[4] and PoLKo[5]. The Czech and Polish data and the CEFR proficiency levels (Council of Europe, 2020) are analysed separately.

The comparative function-based analysis links contexts of possessive expressions with up to eight main lexicogrammatical patterns (including those exemplified above), used in specific functions (e.g., ownership, kinship, body-part). The analysis is followed by a systematic description of the function-pattern correspondences. The description is evaluated in large data samples. The use of learner corpora helps to identify the most likely pitfalls L2 learners encounter in specific communicative contexts. The result serves as a preliminary of a larger project aimed at building a contrastive functional[6] grammar to support Polish and Czech learners of Czech and Polish.

Our preliminary findings indicate that although multiple patterns are available for most functions in either language, L2 leaners even at the more advanced B2 level often use a pattern marked as foreign or even ungrammatical for both syntactic and lexical (collocational) reasons, including cases of redundant use of possessive or dative pronouns. The findings underline the need for a targeted description of the function-pattern correspondences across the two languages.

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[1] https://www.korpus.cz

[2] http://nkjp.pl

[3] https://wiki.korpus.cz/doku.php/en:cnk:intercorp

[4] http://utkl.ff.cuni.cz/learncorp/

[5] http://utkl.ff.cuni.cz/teitok/polko/

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