

Factors determining the use of definite and indefinite declination types in the Shoksha dialect of the Erzya language

The Mordvin languages (Erzya and Moksha) have three types of noun declination: indefinite, definite and possessive. The aim of my research is to analyze the factors determining the use of definite and indefinite declination types in the Shoksha dialect of the Erzya language¹. The possessive type nowadays is going out of use in the Shoksha dialect (it occurs mostly in the nouns denoting relatives and always admits of substitution for the definite type) and isn't discussed in this paper.

Traditional grammars (e.g. [Kol'adenkov, Zavodova 1962: 83]) view definiteness of a noun phrase (NP) as the only factor influencing the choice of a declination type. I will show that this factor is important, but not the sole one. My talk will be devoted to a thorough discussion of the following three factors: referential status of a NP, syntactic function of a NP, information structure of a sentence.

In my investigation of the way referential status affects the choice of a declination type I use the classification suggested in [Paducheva 2007]; I understand all the terms for different kinds of referential status in accordance with that work. In my presentation the encoding of definite, indefinite; generic, universal, existential NPs will be considered.

There are many cases in which the explanation for the choice of a declination type cannot be provided, if one takes into account merely the first factor. Thus, for instance, in (1) both the subject and the direct object are generic NPs, but it is only the direct object (and not the subject) that may be encoded with the indefinite declination in these conditions. In (2) the indefinite declination is allowed in the definite NP performing a function of an oblique object (which is forbidden if a definite NP has another syntactic role). Here we are confronted with the effect of the second above-mentioned factor – syntactic function of a NP. I will demonstrate in my talk that the rules regulating the choice of a declination type are the strictest for subject NPs, less strict for direct object NPs and indirect object NPs, and the least strict for oblique object NPs.

oftu-s' / *ofta mozet s'iz'n'i-m-s loman'/loman'-t' (1)
bear-DF.NOM bear can bite.to.death-NZR-ILL man man-DF.GEN
[Everybody knows:]² The bear can bite the man to death

t'et'e gorut-te-st / gorut-sta mon tuj-i-n' vet'e il'h-t' koda (2)
this city-DF-EL city-EL I leave-PST-1SG five year-PL ago
[I want to tell you about Saransk] I left this city five years ago

The third factor determining the choice of a declination type is information structure of a sentence. When analyzing this factor we divide a sentence into a topic (what a sentence is about) and a comment (which provides information about the topic). Generally speaking, the factor of information structure is less significant than that of referential status, but in some cases it is information structure that has a decisive influence on the choice of a declination type. Thus, the information status of a topic correlates with the use of the definite declination type; for example,

¹ The investigation is based on my field data collected during the linguistic expedition to Mordovia organized by Moscow State University in 2007 (supported by Russian Humanitarian Scientific Fund, grant № 07-04-18025e)

² In square brackets I give a broader context

the generic NP – direct object in (3) is encoded with the definite type, because it is in the topic of the sentence.

rabočij orhčamu-t' / *orhčama možna kadu-m-s kudu-sa (3)
working cloth-DF.GEN cloth may wear-NZR-ILL house-LOC
[As for working clothes] One may wear working clothes at home

It should also be pointed out that information structure of a sentence governs the encoding of predicate NPs. If a predicate NP is in the comment part of a sentence, the definite declination is not used (4). On the other hand, if the head of a NP is in the topic part, it is the definite type that must be chosen (5).

min' mat'emat'ika-n' učit'il'h-t'/učit'il'h-t'ama³/*učit'il'h-tn'e (4)
we maths-GEN teacher-PL teacher-1PL.PRES teacher-PL.DF
[-Peter and Ivan, what do you do for a living?] - We are maths teachers.

min' jot-t učit'il'h-tn'e/*učit'il'h-t'/*učit'il'h-t'ama, at ploha-t (5)
we good-PL teacher-PL.DF teacher-PL teacher-1PL.PRES not bad-PL
We are good teachers, not bad.

Abbreviations

1,2,3 – 1st,2nd,3rd person; DF – definite declination; EL – elative; GEN – genitive; ILL – illative; LOC – locative; NOM – nominative; NZR – nominalizer; PL – plural; PRES – present tense; PROL – prolative; PST – past tense; SG – singular.

References

- Feoktistov A.P.* Dialekty mordovskih jazykov [Dialects of the Mordvin languages] // Paasonens H. Mordwinisches Wörterbuch. Band 1. Helsinki, 1990.
- Kol'adenkov M.N., Zavadova R.A.* Grammatika mordovskih jazykov. Chas't' 1. Fonetika i morfologija. [Grammar of the Mordvin languages. Part 1. Phonetics and Morphology] Saransk, 1962
- Kuznecova A.I.* Kategorija verbal'noj reprezentaciji v ural'skih jazykah // Konferencija po ural'skim jazykam k 100-letiju K.E. Majtinskoj. Tezisy. [The category of verbal representation in the Uralic languages // Conference on the Uralic languages devoted to the 100th anniversary of K.E. Majtinskaja. Abstracts] Moscow, 2007.
- Mironov T.P.* Ten'guševskij (šokšinskij) dialekt kak rezul'tat skreščen'ija [The Tengushevo (Shoksha) dialect as a result of crossing]. Saransk, 1936.
- Paducheva E.V.* Vyskazyvanije i ego sootnes'ennost' s dejstvitel'nost'ju [Utterance and its reference to actuality]. 5-th ed. Moscow, 2007

³ Here we are confronted with the phenomenon when a noun in the predicate position has a verbal affix (for more details see [Kuznecova 2007])