

Proper treatment of long vs. short form adjectives in Serbo-Croatian

We investigate the syntactic and semantic aspects of what is traditionally viewed as **specificity agreement of adjectives with nominal expressions** in Serbo-Croatian. Based on the semantic effects of instances that lack this marking but appear in specific environments, we argue that the marking under investigation is better explained in terms of the **contribution of the adjective to the definite description derived in the nominal expression**. Linguistic data are discussed suggesting that effects of this phenomenon can be observed in other languages, and that it is an instance of the more general tendency of grammar to avoid discontinuous background- and comment-sequences.

Bare Serbo-Croatian (S-C) adjectives (known as ‘**short form**’ adjectives, **SF**) are traditionally claimed to appear **only in non-specific environments** (1a). In specific, and definite environments, they take an ending to build the ‘**long form**’ (**LF**), as in (1b). The long form is taken to **agree in specificity** with the nominal expression they are part of, and not to mark the familiarity of the property denoted by the adjective (e.g. Stevanović 1986), which implies that it is **uninterpretable on adjectives**. While the long form can never occur in non-specific environments, cases with the **short form in definite contexts** (SF_iDC) have been attested (1c), but characterized as rare exceptions.

- (1) a. Dobio sam ogreban auto. (all examples are from S-C)
gotten Aux.1Sg scratched.SF car
‘I got a scratched car.’ (non-specific!)
- b. Dobio sam ogrebani auto.
gotten Aux.1Sg scratched.LF car
‘I got the scratched car.’ (minimally specific, a definite reading contextually favored)
- c. Dobio sam onaj mali ogreban auto.
gotten Aux.1Sg that small.LF scratched.SF car
‘I got that small scratched car.’

We argue that the occurrence of SF_iDC is not a rare exception, but a **regular configuration** that reveals important facts about the nature of the SF-LF opposition. An extensive examination of examples both extracted from corpora and constructed for grammaticality judgments shows that SF_iDC can appear with exactly **two types of interpretation**. One is **non-restrictive modification (NRM)**, fully matching that of apposition (*neverovatan* in (2c)). The other interpretation is based on a **difference in discourse functions (DDF)** between the higher portion of the nominal expression, marked for specificity (*onaj* in (2c), topical), and the lower, consisting of the adjective and the noun (*SLADAK DEČKO* in (2c), focal); usually, it is contrastive topic or focus vs. background or topic.

- (2) a. Ovaj neverovatan bojni brod je pod mojom kontrolom.
this incredible.SF battle-ship is under my control
‘This incredible battle-ship is under my control.’
- b. Misliš onaj SLADAK DEČKO?
mean.2Sg that cute.SF boy?
‘You mean that CUTE BOY?’

We argue that **NRM** cases **derive from apposition**. This is the typical position of non-restrictive modifiers. However, in certain cases, due to the **prosodic insufficiency** of the adjective, to the discourse role that it bears, or both, it is preposed (due to the latter component, DDF subsumes NRM).

- (3) Ovaj bojni brod, neverovatan *(i očaravajuć), pod mojom je kontrolom.
this battle-ship incredible.SF and enchanting, under my is control
‘This battle-ship, incredible and enchanting, is under my control.’

DDF cases involve the marking of the interplay between the **restrictor set** and the **referent** of a nominal expression (e.g. for (1c), scratched cars figure as the restrictor set, from which that small one is selected, cf. Gengel & McNay 2006). SF marks that the adjective intersects with the noun to determine the restrictor set, while the sequence marked for specificity selects a referent from this set (establishing a partitive relation similar to the English Partitive construction). The trigger for an overt realization of the restrictor set is that it has a discourse function which is different from that of the selected referent (topic vs. contrastive topic in (1c), focus vs. topic in (2b), respectively).

Proper treatment of long vs. short form adjectives in Serbo-Croatian

In addition to the role played by discourse functions and prosodic aspects, NRM and DDF cases share one more property: **the adjective is not part of the description used to identify the referent of the whole nominal expression**. This means that the **LF ending is in fact interpretable on the adjective** – it marks not that the nominal expression is specific, but that the adjective is no more than part of the definite description of a referent. More precisely, an LF adjective has no interpretation beyond its compositional contribution to the definite description. SFiDC escape the definite description derived, figuring either as predicates, or as parts of the description of the restrictor set. In this view, **LF is the default, and SF the marked form**. In the default case, an adjective in a referential nominal expression participates in the definite description that it builds. Lack of the marking of this participation indicates that the adjective has a special interpretation (NRM or DDF).

A natural question arises, whether the participation in the definite description is a grammatically relevant parameter **in languages without a counterpart of the LF-SF distinction**. We argue that it is, and briefly discuss different empirical phenomena that support this view, from the effects of prosodic insufficiency in the English translation in (3), through the DP-NP asymmetries in nominal predicates, to ezafe and related phenomena, and to the adnominal markers in Chinese (*de/ge*), Japanese (*no*) and Malay (*punja*).

We conclude that the LF adjectival ending in S-C is interpretable: it marks that the adjective is only interpreted as contributing to the respective definite description, and is covered by its discourse function. Marking of this phenomenon is not limited to S-C – it can be observed in a number of other languages too. Our analysis provides support to the attempts to explain the dislocation phenomena in terms of avoidance of discontinuous prosodic units (a tradition started by Zubizarreta 1998).

References:

- Zubizarreta, Maria-Luisa 1998. *Prosody, Focus, and Word Order*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Gengel, Kirsten & Anna McNay. 2006. "Recursive information-structural layers in syntax: Evidence from the vP layer". *Proceedings of CamLing 2006*, 100–107.
- Stevanović, Mihailo 1986. *Savremeni srpskohrvatski jezik* (Contemporary Serbo-Croatian language) vol. 1, Belgrade: Naučna knjiga.