

Long Adjective Ending Use in Latvian and Lithuanian: a Description and Comparison

This paper will present a summary of research that has been carried out with the input of numerous Latvian and Lithuanian informants and is still in progress. It is hoped that the findings will be compiled with analogous research conducted in the context of Slovenian and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian, exploration of the latter language's long adjective endings having flourished for some time. In handling the issue of definiteness, central to this discussion, the author will adopt the framework established by Lyons (1999), i.e. his distinction between universal semantic/pragmatic definiteness (identifiability) and the non-universal grammatical definiteness of, for instance, definite articles and long adjective endings (which tends to convey identifiability prototypically, but may stray into other semantic categories).

As in Slavic languages, long adjectives endings in Baltic languages derived from a demonstrative stem, and as in Slovenian and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian, these endings are still in use in Latvian and Lithuanian. But few, if any, grammars of Latvian and Lithuanian offer sufficient explanations of the endings' grammatical, much less semantic and pragmatic functions, and a direct comparison between the two languages has never been made in this regard. The common wisdom is that while in Latvian the semantic distinction between long and short adjective endings is fully meaningful, this is not the case in Lithuanian, in which long adjective endings have fallen into disuse (see for instance, Lyons (1999), pp. 83-84, for a summary of what has been put forward regarding this topic thus far; there have been few developments since). While this is on the right track, it is too general to allow any significant linguistic insight into these languages – a problem that this research, it is hoped, will begin to remedy.

A further problem is that Latvian and Lithuanian long adjective endings are frequently regarded as performing primarily or solely a function in the context of definiteness, occasionally with the caveat that they are obligatory in such collocations as Latvian *zaļā karte* / Lithuanian *žalioji karta*, “green card” (comparable to Slovenian *zeleni karton*, for instance). Yet such noun phrases are extremely common in Latvian and Lithuanian and they are not grammatically definite intrinsically (on any further adjectives added, long endings are not automatically required in Latvian / automatically possible in Lithuanian, contrary to what is normally the case in a grammatically definite noun phrase in these languages). Thus, it should be emphasised first and foremost that long adjective endings in Latvian and Lithuanian perform two entirely separate functions: 1) marking grammatical definiteness and 2) marking a collocation, or, as recently posited by Rutkowski and Progovac (2006) in the context of Lithuanian and Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian, reflecting a classifying (as opposed to qualifying) distinction.

Regarding the first function, there is, on the one hand, considerable divergence between Latvian and Lithuanian in terms of obligatory use. While in Latvian long endings are obligatory on adjectives following demonstratives and possessives, in vocative constructions, and in all semantically definite noun phrases, in Lithuanian long endings are obligatory in none of these contexts. In fact, as grammatical definiteness markers they are obligatory only in epithets and archaisms and are otherwise used only when the speaker wishes to impart emphasis to the semantically definite noun phrase. Thus, at least with respect to the first function, the endings would indeed seem to be falling into disuse in Lithuanian. Another noteworthy contrast is that while long adjective endings may not appear on demonstratives and possessives themselves in Latvian, they may do so in Lithuanian. On the other hand, there is considerable agreement in the semantic scope of Latvian and (when used at all) Lithuanian long adjective endings' first function. Specificity is not conveyed, and in this respect Latvian and Lithuanian differ markedly from, for instance, Serbian/Croatian/Bosnian, as can be elicited from recent insights into this language (see Aljović (2002) and Trenkic (2004)).

The second function appears to be equally widespread in both Latvian and Lithuanian and there is very close, though not complete agreement regarding which collocations are expressed with or without long adjective endings or as full-fledged compounds, with Latvian exhibiting a greater tendency towards full-fledged compounds (i.e. Lithuanian *baltasis kiškis* = Latvian *baltais zaķis*, “[a member of the species] white hare”, yet Lithuanian *baltasis vynas* = Latvian *baltvīns*, “white wine”).

References in this abstract

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