

The (in)definiteness of pronouns and its correlation with the conjugation of perception verbs in Mordvin

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Definiteness plays a significant role in the ways of expressing transitivity in Erzya and Moksha. Apart from influencing the marking of the object, it also influences the conjugation of verbs. In the presentation, I examine the pronominal objects of perception verbs to shed more light on the nature of definiteness and the ways of expressing it.

In the presentation, I answer the following questions:

- 1) Which pronouns can be considered definite?
- 2) How different pronominal categories express the notion of definiteness?
- 3) How different types of pronouns influence the conjugation of perception verbs?

In Mordvin, NPs can be marked for definiteness with the declension of nouns. Using the determinate or possessive declension implies that the referent is identifiable for the addressee. (Tichonova 1966, 242–243.) In the case of pronouns, however, definiteness marking is not always present. Different categories of pronouns imply different notions of (in)definiteness, which can affect their morphological marking. Furthermore, Mordvin knows differential object marking and the changes in the case-marking of objects depend on definiteness. Indefinite NPs are left unmarked, whereas definite NPs are in the accusative as a rule (Alhoniemi 1996, 68).

Definiteness does not only influence the morphological marking of nominal categories. It also affects the conjugation of verbs. Mordvin knows two conjugational types: the subject and the object conjugation. Verbs in the subject conjugation agree with the subject in person and number, whereas in the object conjugation, they agree with both the subject and object in person and number. The object conjugation can be used with definite objects only, and this construction usually implies a perfective, completed action. (Марков 1964, 71; Alhoniemi 1994, 145.)

Not all verbs behave in the same way, however. Verbs of perception are almost always in the object conjugation with definite objects in both Erzya and Moksha, i.e. other factors, such as aspect, do not influence the choice of their conjugation type (Марков 1964, 71–72; Alhoniemi 1994, 145–148). Therefore, perception verbs provide a good material for researching the definiteness of objects and how they correlate with the conjugation of verbs.

Based on previous research, it can be expected, that if verbs of perception are in the object conjugation, the object that appears with them can be considered definite. On the other hand, if they are in the subject conjugation, the objects are to be considered indefinite; regardless of their morphological marking.

I collected the material from the MokshEr corpus provided by the University of Turku. I searched the finite forms of the following verbs: Erzya *ńejems* ‘see’, *ma’ams* ‘hear; feel’ and Moksha *ńájəms* ‘see’, *ku’əms* ‘hear’ and *ma’ams* ‘hear; feel’. Apart from this, I visited the Department of Mordvin languages in Saransk in April and consulted native researchers about my results from the corpus and they gave a more profound insight into the semantics of different expressions.

In the presentation, I will show that the notion of definiteness is slightly different in the case of pronouns than in the case of substantives. Furthermore, I will point out the differences between Erzya and Moksha as well, which appear in the morphology of different pronominal categories and in the conjugation of verbs with them. The difference in the choice of conjugation between these languages seems to result from the dissimilarity in constructing transitivity: in Moksha, the morphological marking of pronouns seems to be more relevant in the choice of conjugation type than in Erzya, where other factors also play an important role, and the choice of conjugation depends on the correlation of various features.

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