The role of information structure in Czech possessive constructions

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The paper investigates the expression and functional properties of possessive constructions in Czech. The main target of the presentation is to compare semantics and pragmatics of two types of possessive constructions: the internal possessor (IP, attributive possessor) and the external possessor (EP) constructions. More specifically, I will examine the functional properties of the distinct possessor forms (IP vs. EP) in terms of frequency, semantic roles and information structure. Based on the data from the Czech National Corpus (Syn2000, Syn2005, Syn2010) I claim that the actual usage of one or the other possessor type in Czech is not only determined by specific semantic and pragmatic features of constructional elements, ie. the predicate, the PR and the PM (cf. Haspelmath 1999, Fried 2009), but it is also related to the information status of the PR.

The EP construction (terminology based on Payne & Barshi 1999) is a cross-linguistically attested type of construction in which the possessor (PR) and the possessum (PM, nominal possessed by the possessor) do not form a single noun phrase constituent (1a, 2a), opposed to the IP construction (1b, 2b) with the direct syntactic relation between the PR and the PM.

(1)   CZECH
    a. *Matka*   *myje*   *dítěti*   *vlasy.*
        Mother:NOM:SG:FEM   wash:PRS:3SG   child:DAT:SG:NEUT   hair:ACC:PL:MASC
        "The mother washes the child's hair." (lit. The mother washes hair on the child".)

    b. *Matka*   *myje*   *vlasy*   *dítěte.*
        Mother:NOM:SG:FEM   wash:PRS:3SG   hair:ACC:PL:MASC   child:GEN:SG:NEUT
        "The mother washes the child's hair."

(2)   CZECH
    a. *Matka*   *mu*   *myje*   *vlasy.*
        Mother:NOM:SG:FEM   3SG:DAT   wash:PRS:3SG   hair:ACC:PL:MASC
        "The mother washes his hair." (lit. The mother washes hair on him".)

    b. *Matka*   *myje*   *jeho*   *vlasy.*
        Mother:NOM:SG:FEM   wash:PRS:3SG   his   hair:ACC:PL:MASC
        "The mother washes his hair."

I will present an analysis and show how information status properties of the PR interact with other semantic and pragmatic properties of EP constructions in Czech. Principally, I will test the hypothesis whether the Czech external possessors tend to systematically avoid the most prominent (final) position of the information structure, ie. whether they tend to be frequently used in a non-focal position. If the empirical data support the hypothesis, functional explanations for the possessive expressions can finally be suggested, especially, for the form of the pronominal IP & EP possessive constructions (pronominal EPs are prototypically second position clitics (2a), pronominal IPs (2b) are prenominal).

References

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