

Possessives as reflexives and pronouns: on imperfect complementary distribution

In this presentation we would like to discuss the distribution of reflexive possessive and possessive pronouns (mainly though not exclusively) in Polish on the basis of the empirical data we have collected. We find the topic relevant as our findings show that the cross-linguistic complementary distribution of the two types pronouns, which is typically claimed in the literature (see e.g. Hestvik 1992; Despić 2015; Nikolaeva 2014; Witkoś et al. 2020) cannot be fully maintained in Polish and, therefore, any syntactic account of the pronominal binding facts has to accommodate these new facts.

Our point of departure is the well-known observation that in languages which have two types of possessives, e.g. Polish or Norwegian, reflexive possessives are always subject-oriented, as in (1a-b), as opposed to possessive pronouns, characterized by the anti-subject orientation, as in (2a-b) ((1b) & (2b) taken from Hestvik 1992). In languages without reflexive possessives, e.g. English, possessive pronouns can be either subject- or anti-subject oriented, as in (3).

But the situation in Polish is, in fact, more complicated. Although grammar books make the use of subject-oriented 3rd person possessive pronouns ungrammatical, the literature (albeit scarce) does mention the general confusion and lack of consensus among Polish speakers concerning the complementary distribution of these two types of pronouns (see e.g. Jadacka 2006; Danielewiczowa 2019). What is more, there are indications that in other Slavic languages, e.g. Russian (see Nikolaeva 2014, Despić 2015), the situation may be similarly ambiguous. In order to find out whether (and to what extent) subject-oriented possessive pronouns are acceptable in Polish, we have run an acceptability judgment task on a group of 24 participants. The results of the AJT do not fully support the complementary distribution of the two types of pronouns. While reflexive possessives are clearly subject-oriented, possessive pronouns are at least partially acceptable in identical contexts. An additional acceptability judgment task is currently underway to help us isolate the individual factors which influence the gradient acceptability of possessives. The factors we are to consider involve: the transitivity variable (mono-transitive constructions vs di-transitive constructions, see (4) vs. (1)); the gender/number variable (the intervening indirect object does/does not match the subject in gender/number, see (5) vs. (1)) and the perfect subject variable (the subject does/does not show NOM and full agreement with the verb, see (6) vs. (4)). In light of our findings, the looming question is whether the partial acceptability of subject-oriented possessives in Polish should be explained on purely pragmatic / semantic grounds, or whether syntax is involved (and how). We will argue that at least in the di-transitive pattern the reflexive and the (subject-oriented) pronominal possessives are licensed in slightly different derivations, while the mono-transitive constructions show that the use of the possessive pronoun may be extended to encompass the reflexive interpretation, an extension independently visible in OVS orders in (7).

- (1) a. Jan_i powiedział Markowij o swojej_{i/*j} żonie.
Jan told Mark.M about REFL wife
'Jan told Mark about his wife.'
- b. John_i fortalte Ola_j om sin_{i/*j} kone.
John told Ola about REFL wife
'John told Ola about his wife'.

- (2) a. Jan_i powiedział Markow_j o jego^{*i/j} żonie.
 Jan told Mark about his wife
 ‘Jan told Mark about his wife.’
 b. John_i fortalte Ola_j om hans^{*i/j} kone.
 John told Ola about his wife
 ‘John told Ola about his wife’.
- (3) John₁ told Peter₂ about his_{1/2} wife.
- (4) Jan_i spotkał swojego_j/jego_{zi} brata.
 Jan3SG met3SG self’s/his brother
 ‘Jan met his brother.’
- (5) Jan_i powiedział Basi_j o swojej_j/jego_{zi} żonie.
 Jan told Basia.F about self’s/his wife
 ‘Jan told Basia about his wife.’
- (6) Pięciu chłopców_i spotkało swojego_i/ich_{zi} kolegę.
 five boysPL.GEN met3.SG.N self’s/their friend
 ‘Five boys met their friend.’
- (7) Tomka_i kochała jego_i/*swoja_i matka.
 Tomek.ACC loved.F his/self’s mother.NOM
 ‘His mother loved Tomek.’

[Word count: 478]

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