Definiteness in Erzya: pragmatic factors related to generic and predicate uses

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1. Introduction.

This paper deals with the use of two declination types in the Shoksha dialect of Erzya. These types are called indefinite (example (1)) and definite (example (2))¹.

(1) synst il’ht’ ejhkakš-t kefta, t’or-ynge i styŕ-inge.
    they.GEN be.PST.3PL child-PL two boy-DIM and girl-DIM
    ‘They had two children, a boy and a girl’

(2) mon’ t’it’e-s’ pek pr’evij.
    father-DF.NOM very clever
    ‘My father is very clever’

On the whole the rules regulating the choice of a declination types are rather complicated. This choice depends not just on definiteness (as often stated in traditional grammars), but there are three relevant factors here:

- Referential status of a NP
- Syntactic function of a NP
- Information structure of an utterance.

The use of the two declination types is determined by the interaction of the three above-mentioned factors, which can be represented in the scheme below.

¹ There exists also the possessive type, but it is going out of use and I will not discuss it.
As can be seen at the scheme above, the interaction of the three factors is rather complicated, and it requires some theoretical account (and it is not quite clear what theoretical framework might be the most suitable for ‘explaining’ the interaction of such different factors). In this paper, however, I will concentrate not on the whole problem of that interaction, but on some aspects of this problem which are closely related to information structure. They are: the encoding of generic direct objects and the encoding of predicate NPs. But before going to the analysis itself let us outline the required theoretical background.

2. Theoretical background [Lambrecht 1994].

I use the definitions of pragmatic presupposition and pragmatic assertion formulated in [Lambrecht 1994]:

- **Pragmatic presupposition** is the set of propositions lexicogrammatically evoked in a sentence which the speaker assumes the hearer already knows or is ready to take for granted at the time the sentence is uttered (p. 52).

- **Pragmatic assertion** is the proposition expressed by a sentence which the hearer is expected to know or take for granted as a result of hearing the sentence uttered (p. 52).

These notions may be quite clearly illustrated in examples (3) and (4) cited from [Lambrecht 1994]:

(3) p. 226:
Sentence: My car broke down.
**Pragmatic presupposition:** ‘speaker’s car is a topic for comment x’
**Pragmatic assertion:** ‘x = broke down’

(4) p. 228:
Sentence: My car broke down.
**Pragmatic presupposition:** ‘speaker’s x broke down’.
**Pragmatic assertion:** ‘x = car’

Now, after this brief introduction, let us turn to our Erzya data and try to account for those cases of NPs encoding where information structure appears to be the key factor.

“Informally” the rules for generic direct objects encoding may be formulated as follows:

Generic NPs–direct objects belonging to a topical domain are encoded with the definite declination (5-6).

(5) rabočji orhčamu-t’ / * orhčama možna kadu-ms kudu-sa.
working cloth-DF:GEN cloth may wear-INF house-LOC
{As for working clothes} ‘One may wear working clothes at home’

(6) vrač-tni’-n’ / * vrač-t er’ave kulhcunu-ms.
doctor-PL. DF:GEN doctor-PL be.necessary:PRS.3SG listen-INF
{As for doctors} ‘One should listen to doctors’

Contrary to (5) and (6), if a generic NP–direct object is in the focus part of an utterance, both declination types are possible. Consider (7).

(7) – mez’e večke pet’e-s’ jarsa-ms?
what like.PRS.3SG Pete-DF:NOM eat-INF
– pet’e-s’ večke gryba-t’/......gryba-tni’-n’ jarsa-ms.
Pete-DF:NOM like.PRS.3SG mushroom-PL mushroom-PL DF:GEN eat-INF
‘– What does Pete like eating? – Pete likes eating mushrooms’

Now I will suggest an analysis for those cases in terms of [Lambrecht 1994]. Let us have a closer look at (5). It can be divided into pragmatic presupposition and pragmatic assertion in the following way:

**Pragmatic presupposition:** ‘Working clothes are a topic for comment x’

**Pragmatic assertion:** ‘x = may be worn at home’

So we see that the NP meaning ‘working clothes’ falls under the scope of pragmatic presupposition and admits only the definite declination type.

If we try to compare (5) with the second sentence in (7), we will immediately encounter the difference concerning information structure. The analysis of (7) is as follows:

**Pragmatic presupposition:** ‘Pete likes eating x’

**Pragmatic assertion:** ‘x = mushrooms’

As distinct from (5), the generic direct object in (7) constitutes pragmatic assertion and may bear either definite or indefinite declination type.

Having discussed our first ‘pragmatic’ problem, let us go on to the second one, which is encoding of predicate NPs.

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2 It is an interesting question, however, whether there is any semantic/pragmatic difference between the two declination types here. Some native speakers (but not all) suppose that if we encode the NP ‘mushrooms’ in (7) with the definite declination, it will mean that Pete “likes eating all the existing mushrooms”. But on the whole definite and indefinite types seem to be interchangeable in this case, although it would be very interesting to look for any distinction (probably a subtle one and depending on some discourse factors).

As soon as one considers predicate NPs (like those in (8) and (9)), it is easy to arrive at a conclusion that their referential status and syntactic function (i.e., two of the three factors relevant for the choice of a declination type) are the same. So the rule of their marking immediately seems likely to be related to pragmatics.

Informally it may be stated that predicate NPs are encoded with the definite declination if the head is in the topic, they are encoded with the indefinite declination if the head is in the focus. Compare (8) and (9).

(8) sond’e styr’jalga-s’ *vrač/*vrač-s’.
she.GEN female.friend-DF.NOM doctor doctor-DF.NOM
‘Her friend is a doctor’

(9) skal-s kudu-n’ *žvatna-s’ / *žvatna.
cow-DF.NOM house-GEN animal-DF.NOM animal
‘The cow is a (lit. “the”) domestic animal’ (not wild).

It may be argued that in (9) we come across a contrastive case which may adhere to its own specific rules. In fact, however, it is not contrastiveness that affects the use of the declination types here. Consider (10):

(10) vas’e-s’ šač-s’ sokav-sa.
Vasja-DF.NOM be.born-PST.3SG Sakaev-LOC
t’ete vel’i-t’e-st son tuj-s’ kemin’ ijh-t’ koda.
that city-DF-EL he leave-PST.3SG ten year-PL ago
sokav-s’ pokš i maze vel’i-s’ / * vel’i.
Sakaev-DF.NOM big and beautiful village-DF.NOM village
‘Vasja was born in Sakaev. He left that village 10 years ago. Sakaev is a (lit. “the”) big and beautiful village’.

Example (10), from my point of view, doesn’t admit any contrastive interpretation. The speaker and the addressee simply share the information that Sakaev is a village, and the speaker adds some additional information – i.e. his opinion that the village is big and beautiful.

The analysis of predicate NPs encoding is analogous to that of generic direct objects. Consider the information structure of the last sentence from (10) first:

Pragmatic presupposition: ‘Sakaev is a village having properties x’
Pragmatic assertion: ‘x = big and beautiful’

The NPs ‘a village’ belongs to the pragmatic presupposition and obligatorily takes the definite affix (and the same happens with the ‘generic’ examples (5) and (6)).

As regards example (8), it may be analyzed like that:
**Pragmatic presupposition:** ‘Her friend is x’

**Pragmatic assertion:** ‘x = a doctor’

Here the NP ‘a doctor’ is encoded with the indefinite declination. But it doesn’t admit the definite declination, as distinct from generic direct objects falling under the scope of pragmatic assertion.

5. Conclusion.

In conclusion, we may formulate the effects produced by pragmatic factors on the encoding of generic direct objects and predicate NPs in the following way:

A NP under the scope of **pragmatic presupposition** takes the **definite declination**, As far as NPs in **pragmatic assertion** are concerned, they take the **indefinite declination** only, if they are predicate NPs, and they admit both **indefinite** and **definite declination**, if they are generic direct objects.

References