

Poster: possible, but less preferable

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Definiteness marking in the Shoksha dialect of the Erzya language

My paper deals with the declination types in the Shoksha dialect of Erzya. The Mordvin declination system includes definite, indefinite and possessive types, but the latter one is disappearing in the Shoksha dialect and isn't analyzed here. Traditional grammars claim that the only factor regulating the choice between the definite and indefinite types is definiteness of a NP. My field research enables me to argue that the use of a declination type depends not only on definiteness, but also on syntactic function of a NP and on information structure of an utterance. For example, the oblique definite NP in (1) admits both definite and indefinite declination types, in contrast with definite NPs performing any other syntactic function, which require the definite type. In (2) the generic direct object which constitutes the topic must bear the definite type, whereas generic direct objects belonging to the focus may take either definite or indefinite one.

(1) miše-s' tuj-s' t'et'e gorud-te / gorudu-w.
Mike-DEF.NOM leave-PST.3SG this city-DEF.LAT city-LAT
'Mike left for this city'

(2) vrač-tn'i-n' / *vrač-t er'ave kulhcunu-ms.
doctor-PL.DEF-GEN doctor-PL be.necessary:PRS.3SG listen-INF
(As for doctors) 'One should listen to doctors'

I will describe the interaction of the three above-mentioned factors and formulate the following conclusions proved with numerous examples from both typological questionnaires and texts:

Definite NPs must take the definite declination in any syntactic function except oblique. Definite obliques admit both types.

Indefinite NPs are encoded with the indefinite type.

Generic subject NPs must bear definite markers, generic direct objects and generic indirect objects may be encoded with both types (depending on their role in information structure), generic obliques take the indefinite one.

Predicate NPs are encoded with the definite type if the head is in the topic, they are encoded with the indefinite type if the head is in the focus.