

Croatian clitic placement from a usage and psycholinguistic perspective

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In this paper we discuss the results of a corpus-based study of clitic placement and clitic clusters in Croatian, accompanied by results from experiments on gradual grammaticality judgments using acoustic sentence repetition, and text correction tasks, run with native speakers from the three major Croatian dialects (Štokavian, Kajkavian, Čakavian). The corpus analysis, as well as the experiments with native speakers show a high level of variation across and within the individual dialects with respect to:

- placement preferences of clitic clusters
- relative order of clitics within the clitic cluster

Clitics are assumed to cluster in second position in the clause, with little agreement among linguists, about the exact definition of "second position." Further, the relative order of clitic elements among themselves appears to be restricted, as also prescriptive grammars point out.

Corpus analyses seem to provide counter-evidence for such generalizations. We use the Croatian Language Corpus at a stage where it contained approx. 100 mil. tokens from various genres. Multi-clitic sentences show deviations from generalizations and prescriptive rules. This might be due to typos in the corpus, or real idiolectal or dialectal variation. Clear and consistent grammaticality judgments for such examples seem to be impossible to get. This motivates the hypothesis that the constraints on sentential placement of clitic clusters and the relative position of clitics within the cluster are rather soft, i.e. subject to idiolectal and dialectal variation.

Our study is also motivated by the hypothesis that the certainty level of native-speakers in grammaticality judgments is related to the relative frequency of those particular constructions in language data the subjects are confronted with. Corpora offer a possibility for approximations of base-measures.

Experiments

In a first experiment sentences are presented as auditory stimuli to subjects, whose task is to repeat the sentence they heard. The stimuli are constructed as follows:

- 80% unrelated and well-formed constructions
- 10% constructions with syntactic word order violations, that do not contain clitics
- 10% target structures where only the position of clitics in the clause and relative to each other is deviating from the classical generalizations

The expectation is that the number of corrections of deviating structures by subjects is proportional to their certainty. The corrections on target structures are relativized on the basis of the proportions of corrected non-target violations from the structures in (b).

The second experiment is set up as a text correction task, i.e. the subjects are asked to correct a small essay for publication in a local linguistic journal. The proportions of distractors and target structures are kept the same as in the first experiment.

Three subject groups are defined. Each of the groups gets different instructions, for the same text. The first group is informed that the essay is written by a well-known professor of Croatian, who is pointed out to be a capacity in her field. The second group is informed that the text is written by a colleague with less experience in writing essays, who is native-speaker of Croatian. The third group is informed that the text is written by a colleague who joined the research group recently, as a non-native speaker of Croatian. The subjects are asked to correct the essay as soon as possible, since the publication deadline is due.

The expectations are that in the spoken language repetition task (E1) subjects are more likely to correct stronger grammatical violations, and less so constructions where we assume soft constraints being violated. In the text correction task (E2) we expect to see overcorrection of complex sentences for the third group, and a higher acceptance rate for soft violations of grammatical constraints.

Our first pilot study confirms the expectations for experiment E2. Subjects do not seem to be overly sensitive to violations of the relative order constraint of clitics, neither does the position of the cluster as such attract complete attention, as long as the cluster is in some front position in the clause.

We present the results of both experiments, concluding, for the time being, that in this particular construction type, our methods suggest that the low frequent constructions are most likely based on real variation, rather than typos and revision errors. Furthermore, the results of this study show that the widespread generalizations about Clitics in Croatian can be argued to describe potential tendencies in specific variants, but not factive or hard grammar rules.