The inferences of accusative and genitive in acc/gen alternation in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian

In many Slavic languages, both accusative (acc) and genitive (gen) case can be used for objects of transitive verbs (acc/gen alternation). Previously, it has been proposed that while acc is associated with the definite interpretation of the discourse referent (DR), gen conveys the indefinite interpretation (e.g., Kagan, 2010; Khrizman, 2014). Our novel data coming from authors’ original fieldwork on Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS) show that gen/acc in BCS relates to the specification of the amount of the DR: while acc conveys the interpretation that the amount of the DR is familiar, gen is used for unfamiliar amount, independent of the familiarity of the DR. Our data corroborate to an analysis of the inferences of gen/acc as scalar implicatures, contributing to the debate on the semantics of case alternation across languages.

**Background:** The gen/acc alternation is possible in BCS with the so-called intensional gen, gen of negation and partitive gen that we focus on in this paper. Moreover, the alternation is restricted to plural count nouns and mass nouns. In previous literature on other Slavic languages, acc was argued to convey the definite interpretation of the DR (Kagan, 2010; Khrizman, 2014). This observation was captured by assuming that while acc nouns are of type $e$ and hence referential and/or specific, gen nouns are of type $\langle e,t \rangle$ and hence non-referential and unspecified (e.g. Borschev et al. 2008). By contrast, we show that gen/acc alternation in BCS is not governed by the definiteness of the DR, but rather by the familiarity of the amount of the DR, the observation that to the best of our knowledge was not made before.

**Novel data from BCS:** The choice of the case in gen/acc alternation in BCS is related neither to the uniqueness nor to the familiarity of the DR, the latter shown in (1).

(1) **context:** Beginning of the conversation:

Kupio sam haljine/haljina.

I bought dresses.

Instead, the data show that while acc conveys the interpretation that the amount of the DR was familiar to the speaker and the hearer, gen conveys the information that the amount was unfamiliar, as shown in (2)–(5). When the amount of the DR is familiar (same number of items were tried on and bought), the acc case is preferred, see (2). However, when five dresses were tried on but only two were bought, gen is preferred, see (3). Crucially, the (un)familiarity triggered by gen/acc relates to the amount of the DR, not to DR itself: while in (4) the amount of the DR—but not the DR—is familiar, acc is still preferred. By contrast, in (5) both the amount of DR as well as the DR itself are unfamiliar and gen is preferred, as summarized in the table below.

(2) **context:** Maria and Boban went to Mango. They really liked two dresses that Maria tried on but they didn’t buy them. On the following day Boban decided to make Maria a surprise so he went to Mango but unfortunately the two dresses she tried on were sold out so he decided to buy two other dresses, she didn’t try on. When he came back home he told Maria:

Kupio sam haljine/#haljina.

I bought dresses.

(3) **context:** The same as before but: Maria tried five dresses, Boban bought only two.

Kupio sam #haljine/ haljina.

I bought dresses.

(4) **context:** The same as before but: Maria tried two dresses, Boban bought two blouses instead.

Kupio sam bluze/#bluza.

I bought blouses.

(5) **context:** The same as before but: Maria tried two dresses, Boban bought four blouses instead.

Kupio sam #bluze/bluza.

I bought blouses.

To sum up, while acc gives rise to the inference that the amount of the DR is familiar, gen triggers the interpretation that the amount is unfamiliar. Importantly, both inferences are cancelable, as shown in (6), and
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References

of aspect in the
variation in the

did not buy dresses;” \implies \textit{Boban didn’t buy any dresses}

Analysis We propose that both acc and gen differ wrt the implicatures they trigger. (i) We assume a lexical entry for gen partitive as in (8a). Crucially it is underspecified wrt the amount of the DR. (ii) Gen competes with toliko (‘so much/ many’) which we propose is an anaphoric definite conveying the interpretation that the amount that is spoken about is familiar. It takes the NP and the pronominal index, analysed as a variable of type e. The assignment function maps the covert index to entities which matches the amount of the DR.

\begin{align*}
\text{Maria tried} & \quad \text{Boran bought} & \quad \text{Acc} & \quad \text{Gen} \\
2 \text{dresses} & \quad 2 \text{diff. dresses} & \checkmark & \times \\
5 \text{dresses} & \quad 2 \text{dresses} & \times & \checkmark \\
2 \text{dresses} & \quad 2 \text{blouses} & \checkmark & \times \\
2 \text{dresses} & \quad 4 \text{blouses} & \times & \checkmark \\
\end{align*}

they do not arise in downward entailing environments, as in (7). That is, (7) either with acc or gen doesn’t mean that Boban didn’t buy the (un)familiar amount of dresses but rather that he didn’t buy any dresses at all. This corroborates to the analysis of the inferences of acc/gen as implicatures.

(6)

a. John je kupio haljine, ali ne znamo koliko.

‘John bought dresses_{acc} but we do not know how many.’

b. Boban je kupio haljinu, zapravo kupio je one dvije haljine što smo vidjeli jučer.

‘Boban bought dresses_{gen}, in fact he bought the two dresses we saw yesterday.’

(7) Boban nije kupio haljinu_{acc}/haljinu_{gen}.

‘Boban did not buy dresses.’ \implies \textit{Boban didn’t buy any dresses}

(iii) Assuming the speaker is cooperative and as informative as she can be, by hearing \textit{Boban bought dresses_{gen}}, by Gricean reasoning the hearer would conclude that the speaker didn’t use the stronger \textit{Boban bought toliko dresses_{gen}} cause she was not in position to utter it and therefore is false. But then if the sentence with dresses_{gen} is true and the sentence with toliko dresses is false the inference is that Boban bought an unfamiliar amount of dresses, as illustrated in (10):

(10) It is true that Boban bought (un)familiar amount of dresses and it is false that he bought the familiar amount of dresses

\implies \textit{Boban bought unfamiliar amount of dresses}

(iv) Acc, which is underspecified wrt the familiarity of the amount of DR, competes with the strengthened gen in (10), which conveys the meaning that the amount of DR is unfamiliar. Again, by Gricean reasoning, by hearing \textit{Boban bought dresses_{acc}}, the hearer would conclude that the speaker didn’t use the stronger \textit{Boban bought dresses_{gen}} (with the genitive strengthened with its implicature in (10)) cause she was not in position to do it and thus must be false. Here again, if the sentence with acc is true and the sentence with the strengthened gen is false, the inference is that Boban bought the familiar amount of dresses, as illustrated in (11):

(11) It is true that Boban bought (un)familiar amount of dresses and it is false that he bought the unfamiliar amount of dresses

\implies \textit{Boban bought familiar amount of dresses.}

As the inferences of acc and gen are analyzed as implicatures, it is predicted that they are cancelable and do not arise in downward entailing contexts.

Summary and outlook The novel data from BCS show that while acc conveys the familiar amount interpretation, gen triggers the meaning that the amount of the DR is unfamiliar, pointing to the previously unattested variation in the acc/gen alternation in a cross-linguistic perspective. In the talk, we will also discuss the role of aspect in the gen/acc alternation and we will demonstrate how the analysis extends to mass nouns.