

The referential properties of Serbian possessive constructions: clitics vs. strong pronouns

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In this paper, I will present and discuss the results of an experimental study showing that coreference is possible in Serbian possessive constructions. Based on these findings, I will argue that Serbian is not different from typical DP languages regarding binding principles.

The Universal DP Hypothesis claims that all languages have a DP, including articleless languages (Bašić, 2004; Progovac, 1998). The alternative view (Bošković, 2008; Chierchia, 1998) questions the universal availability of a DP and argues that languages with and without articles exhibit different syntactic characteristics and differ in left-branch extraction, adjunct extraction, scrambling, clitic doubling, nominalizations etc. (Bošković, 2005, 2008). The no-DP analysis also claims that Serbian differs from English and German in its binding properties of possessives (Despić, 2011, 2013).

According to Bošković (2005, 2008) and Despić (2011, 2013), it is impossible for the Serbian possessive, *Petrov* 'Peter's' or *njegov* 'his', and the bound element, *njega* 'him' or *Petra* 'Peter' to corefer, as illustrated in (1) and (2) (Despić, 2013).

- (1) ***Petrov**_i omiljeni pas je juče ugrizao **njega**_i. (Serbian)
Peter's favourite dog is yesterday bit him
'Peter_i's favourite dog bit him_i yesterday.'
- (2) ***Njegov**_i omiljeni pas je juče ugrizao **Petra**_i. (Serbian)
His favourite dog is yesterday bit Peter
'His_i favourite dog bit Peter_i yesterday.'

In DP languages, such as English or German, coreference is possible in equivalent examples. The German examples in (3) and (4) show that there is an ambiguity and that both coreferential and non-coreferential readings are possible.

- (3) **Peters**_i Lieblingshund hat **ihn**_{i/j} gebissen. (German)
Peter's favourite dog has him bitten
'Peter_i's favourite dog bit him_{i/j}.'
- (4) **Sein**_{i/j} Lieblingshund hat **Peter**_i gebissen. (German)
His favourite dog has Peter bitten
'His_{i/j} favourite dog bit Peter_i.'

Bošković (2005, 2008) and Despić (2011, 2013) propose that these cross-linguistic differences in binding are due to the absence of a DP in Serbian. Despić (2011) follows Lee-Schoenfeld's (2008) proposal that a phase corresponds to the Binding Domain and assumes that DPs are phases, while NPs are not. Assuming that Serbian does not project DPs, but NPs, the subjects in (1) and (2) are not phases and, consequently, Serbian prenominal modifiers c-command out of the NPs because they are adjuncts. Therefore, binding principles B and C are violated and examples as (1) and (2) are unacceptable.

Despić's analysis has been questioned by LaTerza (2016), who shows that contrary to his predictions, (a) possessive nominals which are further embedded within the subject as in (5) do not lose the constraints on coreference compared to the unembedded cases in (1)/ (2), and that (b) DP languages such as Bulgarian and Macedonian do behave exactly like Serbian (ex. 6).

- (5) ***Prijatelj** **njegove**_i majke je zagrlio **Marka**_i. (Serbian)
Friend his mother is hugged Marko
'His mother_i's friend hugged Marko_i.'
- (6) ***Ivanovijat**_i papagal **nego**_i uhapa včera. (Bulgarian)
Ivan's the parrot him bit yesterday
'Ivan_i's parrot bit him_i yesterday.'

Examples like (6) suggest that it cannot be the absence/presence of the DP guiding (non)coreferentiality in examples like (1). I will argue that it is the presence of the stressed (strong) pronoun instead that favours

a non-coreferential reading in these examples. Like Bulgarian, Serbian possesses stressed (strong) and unstressed (clitic) object pronouns.

As shown by Zec (2002), strong pronouns are capable of being referential on their own while clitics must have an antecedent prominent in the discourse. As shown in (7), the strong pronoun cannot (7b) bear given information while the clitic can (7a).

(7) What does she think of Peter?

a. Poštuje **ga**.
respects him.CL
'She respects him.'

b. *Poštuje **njega**.
respects him.STRONG
'She respects him.'

An experiment was conducted in order to find out whether coreference is (im)possible in the aforementioned constructions in Serbian, and whether there is a difference in the binding of clitics and strong pronouns. A picture selection task was constructed in the online software IBEX farm, using PennController (Zehr, J., & Schwarz, F., 2018). The independent variable was the type of the pronoun (*ga* 'him-CL' (condition 1) vs. *njega* 'him' (condition 2)). The stimuli (N=24) consisted of test sentences as shown in (8) with either a clitic or a strong pronoun, together with 10 filler sentences.

(8) **Petrov** omiljeni pas (**ga**) je juče ugrizao (**njega**). (Serbian)
Peter's favourite dog him.CL is yesterday bit him
'Peter_i's favourite dog bit him_{ij} yesterday.'

The participants (n=36) first heard a short context and saw an introductory picture. Then they heard a test sentence (cf. 8) and their task was to choose which of the two pictures (coreferential vs. non-coreferential reading) matched the corresponding test sentence. The participants accepted coreference with the clitic in 55% of the examples, and with the strong pronoun in 41% of the examples. The statistical analysis shows that the answer of the participants is determined by condition (clitic vs. strong form). These results corroborate that it is indeed possible to have coreference in the given Serbian possessive constructions and that there is a significant difference between clitics and strong pronouns: clitics are preferentially interpreted as being coreferential whereas strong pronouns have a tendency to be interpreted as non-coreferential.

The fact that these possessive constructions allow for a coreferential reading suggests that cross-linguistic differences in binding are not due to the absence of a DP in Serbian. According to Despić's (2013) analysis, a coreferential reading should not be available, independent of a clitic 'ga' or a stressed pronominal object 'njega'. The differences between the clitic and the strong form can be explained by a general preference for the clitic form in these contexts. According to Cardinaletti and Starke's (1999) 'Minimise Structure' principle, it is expected that whenever a deficient pronoun/clitic is available, it should be preferred over a strong pronoun and only if the smaller structure is independently ruled out, the bigger alternative is possible. This means that the clitic *ga* 'him-CL' is in general preferred over the strong form *njega* 'him' in object position in Serbian, in particular in contexts where a prominent discourse antecedent is available. Consequently, differences in interpretation between German and Serbian are not due to syntactic structure and binding, but to (pragmatic) principles determining pronoun interpretation.

Ultimately, this piece of evidence goes in favour of the DP and not the NP analysis. Cross-linguistic differences in such constructions are related to anaphoric resolution and depend on the properties of different types of pronouns available in the language. Given these points, Serbian is the same as German with regard to binding principles, but the preferences for the coreferential reading might be different depending on the pronominal forms available in the language.

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