

The influence of context and semantic factors on the frequency of case forms in spoken Lithuanian

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The starting point of our analysis is the classification of cases proposed by Kuryłowicz (1964, 1977). We will analyse grammatical cases from the point of view of their syntactic functions, whereas concrete cases will be discussed with respect to the semantic functions they are used to perform. Our hypothesis is that from a statistical point of view the frequency of occurrence of a certain case is inversely proportional to the degree of its functional markedness.

Our data clearly indicate that grammatical cases, that is, the nominative, the accusative, the genitive, and the dative are much more frequent than the concrete ones, i.e., those of the instrumental and the locative

The frequency of occurrence of the different case forms of specific words reflects the nature of the category of case in Lithuanian, among other things, the degree of markedness of each case. In addition, the semantics of a noun is a basic factor which influences the frequency of its case forms (cf. Laskowski 1989).

The study is based on the analysis of spoken Lithuanian. The data of adult-directed speech (ADS), child-directed speech (CDS) and child speech (CD) were analysed to reveal the frequency distribution of case forms and their meanings. The data under discussion are transcribed and coded according to the requirements of the CHILDES programme. The results obtained from the analysis of the relevant data demonstrate that similar tendencies prevail in both CDS and CD, but differs in ADS. Therefore, our further discussion will be based on the general use of cases in ADS, CDS and CD. It has to be noted at this point that the statistical difference in the use of nouns denoting animate and inanimate nouns is significant. The most frequent case of animate nouns is the nominative case, the frequency of which is much higher than that of all other cases taken together. In addition, inanimate nouns show preference for the accusative marking, with a frequency close to the nominative.

The analysis of frequency distribution of cases has yielded the following results. The unmarked member in both sub-systems (animate and inanimate nouns) is the nominative case; the

most marked member in the sub-system of animate nouns is the locative case, whereas the most marked member in the sub-system of inanimate nouns is the dative case. The frequency of occurrence of other cases exhibits considerable differences as well, and these depend to which of the two sub-systems – animate or inanimate – the noun in question belongs. Our results corroborate the assumption that the meaning of the noun makes influence on two parameters, first, the semantics of individual cases and, second, their potential of occurrence. The importance of context and the topic of conversations is also a significant factor in the distribution of case forms; it is therefore given some consideration in the present study.