Definiteness without definiteness: evidence from Old Church Slavonic

Old Church Slavonic (OCS) is the earliest attestation of Slavic, and our best source of evidence on the state of Slavic before the branching into East, West and South Slavic. In the modern Slavic languages we find extreme variation when it comes to definiteness marking: In East Slavic we find none at all, while modern Bulgarian and Macedonian has well-developed definiteness marking.

Neither of these systems are directly inherited from OCS: The Bulgarian system is innovated after OCS, and OCS does not show reliable evidence of it. On the other hand, OCS did have limited definiteness marking on adjectives, but this system is reinterpreted as a distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives in modern East Slavic.

In this talk I will use parallel Greek and OCS data from the PROIEL corpus to look at two other strategies OCS employed to express definiteness, in addition to the limited marking on adjectives. The PROIEL corpus is annotated for information status and anaphoric relations, thus providing us with entirely new data on nominal realisation in the corpus languages.

1) OCS had differential object marking on human masculine singular direct objects, where we find variation between one form identical with the genitive (genitive-accusative) and one identical with the nominative (nominative-accusative). I show that this object marking is driven by definiteness, since the parallel data show not only that the genitive-accusative correlates strongly with the presence of definite articles in the Greek original, but that this correlation is only a symptom of the genitive-accusative’s strong tendency to mark old and accessible referents. I also show that OCS appears to have differential object marking of the discriminatory type, since we find that the genitive-accusative is more likely to appear when both subject and object are discourse-prominent, suggesting that it may have originated as secondary topic marking (as suggested by Dalrymple and Nikolaeva 2011).

2) OCS appears to use possessive pronouns to compensate for the lack of a definite article. When we compare the Greek and OCS data, we find a number of cases where Greek has a relational noun, e.g. a kinship term, with an article but no possessor, which is translated by a relational noun with a possessive pronoun in OCS. Hence, the inference which is only signaled by the definite article in Greek ("the father" signals that it must be possible to retrieve whose father we are talking about), is made explicit by the possessive pronoun in OCS (which has an explicit possessor, "his father").

1 foni.uio.no:3000
References