Language change in progress: clitic position in Serbo-Croatian

The Serbo-Croatian use of both syntax and phonology to determine clitic placement has intrigued linguists for decades. Many scholars have proposed entirely synchronic approaches to clitic placement in this language (Anderson, 2000; Boškovic, 2001, 2002; Halpern, 1992, 1995; Klavans, 1985; Progovac, 1996; Radanović-Kocić, 1980; Stjepanović, 1999, Schütze, 1994); however none have been able to account for the optionality between the phonological and syntactic definitions of second position. Interestingly, some of the same scholars who advocate a single cohesive account have also observed that clitic placement is in transition in Serbo-Croatian (Radanovic-Kocic, 1988; Rubadeau, 1996; Alexander, 1993). Despite the recognition that this aspect of the language is in a state of change and the inability to account for the phenomenon with a single grammar, a solution which uses multiple active grammars has not been proposed for this puzzle.

I assert that the current state of clitic placement in Serbo-Croatian is produced by two incompatible grammars, precisely what Kroch (1989) predicts for a language in transition, in which the sentences of a language can no longer be determined by one cohesive mechanism. Currently, an older grammar which employs a phonological mechanism for clitic position is being replaced by a newer mechanism which relies on syntax. Both mechanisms are active.

The older prosodic grammar accounts for clitic placement in sentences where the clitic intervenes in a noun phrase as seen in (2), sentences with heavy NP shift shown in (4), and verb initial sentences such as those in (5). The newer syntactically defined grammar determines clitic position in sentences where the clitic follows the second syntactic constituent, as seen in (1), within subordinate clauses such as in (3), and following a relative clause such as in (6).

Examples

(1) Taj čovjek je voleo Mariju
    that man be-3rd-SG loved Maria
    ‘That man loved Maria.’

(2) Taj je čovjek voleo Mariju
    that be-3rd-SG man loved Maria
    ‘That man loved Maria.’

(3) Milen želi da ga vidi (Progovac, 1996)
    Milan wants that him sees
    ‘Milan wants to see him.’
U Rio de Janeiro ostali su dve godine (Zec, 1990, p. 375)

(4) In Rio de Janeiro stayed be-3rd-PL two years
‘They stayed in Rio de Janeiro for two years.’

Dao mi je članak (Schütze, 1994, p. 59)

(5) give me AUX article
‘He gave me an article.’

Djevojka, koju Ivan voli, je fina. (Wilder and Ćavar, 1994, p. 35)

(6) girl who Ivan likes be-3SG pretty
‘The girl, that Ivan loves, is pretty.’

References


