

Possessive pronouns do not c-command out of the noun phrase in Serbian: Evidence from a self-paced reading task

In this talk, I discuss potential cross-linguistic differences concerning binding principle C between articleless languages like Serbian and languages with articles like English. Based on the results of a self-paced reading task, I will show that Serbian speakers are sensitive to Principle C effects and do not differ in this respect from English speakers. This speaks against existing accounts arguing that possessive modifiers can c-command out of the noun phrase in Serbian but not in English and ultimately against the assumption that Serbian and English crucially differ with respect to the structure of the noun phrase (NP vs. DP).

Cataphoric pronouns trigger a search for a suitable referent in order to resolve their reference. Psycholinguistic research by Kazanina et al. (2007) indicates that this search is constrained by binding principle C: participants actively search for an antecedent following a cataphoric pronoun if there is no violation of principle C (see ex. 1) but not when a cataphoric pronoun c-commands a referential expression within its c-command domain (see 2), resulting in different reading times for the two constructions in self-paced reading tasks (cf. also Drummer and Felser, 2018):

- (1) His_{i/j} teacher talked to John_i.
- (2) He^{*}_{i/j} talked to John_i.

For Serbian, it has been argued that it patterns with English concerning examples like (2) but not with respect to examples like in (1). According to Despić (2013), the possessive in (1) cannot bind the R-expression in Serbian, because in Serbian – in contrast to English – no DP prevents that possessives c-command out of the noun phrase.

However, in an offline study, Serbian native speakers accepted examples as in (3) with coreferential reading and highly rejected examples as in (4), which corresponds to English judgments and suggests that possessives do *not* c-command out of the noun phrase.

- (3) **Njegov_i** menadžer je pričao fanovima dok je **Jovan_i** potpisivao autograme.
his manager aux talked fans while aux John signed autographs
'His_i manager talked to the fans while John_i signed autographs.'
- (4) ***On_i** je pričao fanovima dok je **Jovan_i** potpisivao autograme.
He aux talked fans while aux John signed autographs
'He_i talked to the fans while John_i signed autographs.'

Following the methodology of Kazanina et al. (2007), a self-paced reading task with 46 native speakers of Serbian was conducted in order to empirically test whether they do indeed differentiate between constructions like (3) and (4) or not. If possessives c-command out of their noun phrase as suggested by Despić (2013), no difference in reading times is expected between the experimental condition with pronouns (4) and the condition with possessives (3).

The results of the self-paced reading task reveal that there is indeed a difference in reading times between the two conditions. This indicates that the Serbian native speakers show the same behavior as speakers of a DP language like English: they actively search for an antecedent following a cataphoric pronoun in examples like (3) but not in examples like (4), suggesting that c-command only applies in the latter case. As a consequence, this suggests that Serbian possessives do not c-command out of their phrase, which patterns with the behavior of possessives in DP languages. Based on the results from both offline and online experiments, it follows that a DP shell prevents c-command out of the noun phrase in Serbian as well and that Serbian possessives (just like the English possessives) are not positioned in the Spec of DP or in D°, but somewhere lower as in Spec of PossP from where they do not c-command the R-expression (cf. Kayne 1994).