

Experimental Evidence for the Role of Existential Commitment in the Licensing of the Genitive of Negation

The genitive of negation (GenNeg) is an alternation between nominative/accusative and genitive case marking on the (underlying) direct object (DO) under sentential negation (1). This alternation correlates with a number of semantic variables, including specificity (e.g., Timberlake, 1975; Babyonyshev & Brun, 2002), where genitive marked DOs are interpreted as non-specific (2a) and accusative (typically) as specific (2b). However, given the right context, even proper names may participate in the alternation (3).

In recent influential analyses, existential commitment (EC) has been implicated as a central component underlying the case alternation (Kagan, 2013; Partee et al., 2012). That is, genitive marked nominals lack EC, and accusative marked nominals (typically) carry EC. In this analysis, a nominal carries EC if the attitude holder is in a veridical state as to the existence of a referent for the nominal in the relevant worlds/situations. However, a nominal lacks EC if the attitude holder is in a nonveridical state regarding the existence of that nominal in the relevant worlds/situations.

Previous quantitative research on GenNeg is divided as to the role of EC. For example, Cho (2018) examines the role of specificity using a judgement task and finds that GenNeg is accepted more when the nominal is nonspecific. However, in this study specificity is confounded with EC (that is, -EC contexts are nonspecific, and +EC contexts are specific). Vaikšnoraitė (2021) tests the roles of definiteness and EC in judgement data and finds no effect for either. However, based on the provided example items, this study tests commitment to the non-existence of the nominal, not lack of EC.

In this study, adult Russian native speakers ($n = 12$) were tested on the acceptance of genitive and accusative case marked nominals in +EC and -EC contexts using an acceptability judgment task (AJT). Participants were presented with a context (in English) and were asked to rate a sentence (in Russian) using a 4-point Likert scale. Test items consisted of 2 contexts (+EC/-EC) and 2 case alternations (Nom or Acc/Gen) to form 4 conditions, with 14 items per condition, resulting in 56 total test items. Additionally, in order to test for effects of specificity, within the -EC contexts DOs were classified as specific (proper names) or non-specific (common nouns). Thus, context and specificity (2×2) were crossed with 7 items per subcondition.

The results indicate that the Russian speakers rated the use of accusative higher than genitive in +EC contexts ($p = .022$). Additionally, the participants rated the use of genitive higher than accusative in -EC contexts ($p = .038$). Finally, participants rated genitive higher in -EC than +EC contexts ($p = .033$). Accusative case marked nominals were not rated differently between +EC and -EC contexts ($p = .124$).

Furthermore, within the specificity subconditions of the -EC contexts there were effects of case. Genitive specific nominals were rated higher than accusative specific nominals ($p = .003$). Genitive non-specific nominals were rated higher than accusative specific nominals ($p = .001$). Additionally, accusative non-specific nominals were rated higher than accusative specific nominals ($p < .001$). However, there were no differences found between specific and non-specific genitive nominals ($p = .763$).

The results are taken to provide experimental support for Kagan's analysis of GenNeg. That is, EC plays a role in the licensing of GenNeg, such that -EC contexts increase the acceptability of the genitive over +EC contexts. Finally, these results do not indicate a difference in judgement due to specificity for genitive marked nominals.

Linguistic Examples

- (1) a. Otvet ne prišol. (Babby, 1978, p. 13)
 answer.Nom NEG arrive.Past.
 “The answer did not arrive.”
 b. Otveta ne prišlo.
 answer.Gen NEG arrive.Past
 “No answer arrived.”
- (2) a. Anna ne kupila knigi. (Harves, 2002, p. 38)
 Anna NEG buy.Past books.Acc
 “Anna did not buy (the) books.”
 b. Anna ne kupila knig.
 Anna NEG buy.Past books.Gen
 “Anna did not buy (any) books.”
- (3) a. Maša ne vidna. (Padučeva, 1997, p. 106)
 Masha.Nom NEG seen
 b. Maši ne vidno.
 Masha.Gen NEG seen
 “Masha can’t be seen.”

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