

The influence of animacy on the declination of specific monosyllabic nouns in Slovenian

INTRODUCTION. Slovenian has a rich array of phonological alternations and shows an extensive phonological variation in general (e.g., Lenček 1982, Toporišič 2004, Herrity 2000, Greenberg 2008). In this talk, I will discuss a morphologically conditioned phonological alternation in Slovenian that occurs with masculine nouns which end with *-r* (e.g. *primer* ‘an example’). Crucially, the majority of these nouns receive an additional *j* in the paradigm in all cases except for nominative and accusative, e.g., *slovar* ‘dictionary.NOM/ACC’ – *slovar-j-a* ‘dictionary.GEN’, though there is a subset of *-r*-ending lexemes in which this alternation does not occur, for instance *požar* ‘fire.NOM/ACC’ – *požar-a* ‘fire.GEN’. The question is then why this alternation, which seems to be partly phonologically, partly morphologically and partly semantically conditioned (cf. Anttila 2002), occurs with some nouns, but not with others.

TOWARDS A HYPOTHESIS. A preliminary corpus search of the monosyllabic subset of *-r*-ending nouns has shown that there appears to be a high correlation between receiving an additional *j* and carrying an animacy feature especially in the monosyllabic subset of *-r*-ending nouns, for example, *car* ‘the emperor.NOM’ – *car-j-a* ‘the emperor.GEN/ACC’ vs. *bar* ‘bar.NOM/ACC’ – *bar-a* ‘bar.GEN’. Since the subset of monosyllabic items from corpora is sparse (2.6 %), I conducted a nonce-word task to identify the underlying reason for this alternation and to verify the hypothesis that this alternation has to do with animacy.

EXPERIMENT. I conducted an experiment in order to check if animacy is the factor that can help us predict whether a noun will display the phonological alternation under investigation. The experiment focused on the correlation between base-extension and animacy in monosyllabic words. It consisted of a forced-choice task with 14 monosyllabic nonce-words used in a context that unequivocally forced an animate or inanimate reading. Native speakers of Slovenian were first presented with these items in nominative case. This was followed by a sentence where the speakers had to choose between competing forms, a form with *j* and a form without *j* (as an example in Picture 1 in the Appendix shows).

According to the hypothesis, the prediction is that for the example in Picture 1, native speakers will prefer the option with alternation (‘svirja’).

RESULTS. 38 native speakers of Slovenian participated in the experiment. The results show that among inanimate nonce nouns, participants preferred forms where the base was not extended with *j* (71 % without *j*), whereas among animate nonce nouns, participants preferred forms where the base was not extended with *j*, though with a weaker effect than with inanimate nonce nouns (64 % without *j*). The item ‘šnor’ was used with the intention of double-checking the hypothesis that in an animate context speakers will prefer a form with *j* and in an inanimate context a form without *j*. It was therefore used twice but in a different context: once as an animate noun and the second time as an inanimate noun. Results in Chart 1 in the Appendix show that the form where the base was extended with *j* was less preferred when this noun was used in an inanimate context in comparison to the animate context.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION. The results from a nonce-word task are in line with the preliminary corpus data. We can conclude that monosyllabic masculine nouns which end with *-r* in most cases do not show a base-extension, and when they do, this is triggered by the animacy feature. This confirms that this alternation is not only phonologically but also semantically conditioned.

REFERENCES

- Anttila, A. (2002): Morphologically conditioned phonological alternations. In *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 20. 1–42.
- Greenberg, M. L. (2008). *A short reference grammar of Slovene*. Muenchen: LINCOM Europa.
- Herrity, P. (2006). *Slovene, a comprehensive grammar*. London: Routledge.
- Lenček, R. L. (1982). *The structure and history of the Slovene language*. Slavica.
- Toporišič, J. (2004). *Slovenska slovnica* [Slovenian Grammar]. Maribor: Obzorja.

APPENDIX

Svir je človek, ki se ukvarja s pridelavo posebnega plina. V tovarni iščejo novega ...

- ☐ svira.
- ☐ svirja.

Next

Picture 1: An example with the nonce-word 'svir'. (English translation of the Slovenian text: 'Svir' is a person engaged in the production of a special gas. In the factory they are looking for a new ... a) 'svira' (svir.ACC), b) 'svirja' (svir.ACC).)

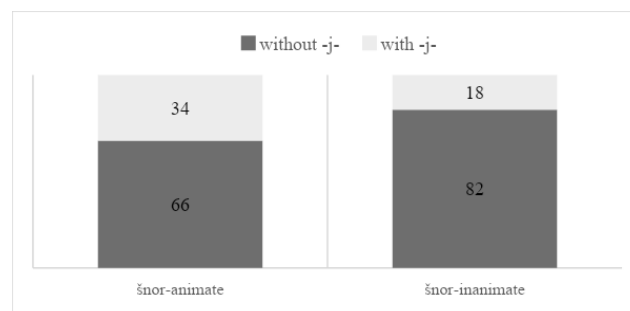


Chart 1: Comparison of animate and inanimate nonce word 'šnor'