Variation in the nominal declension in Timok vernaculars

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This study investigates the variation in the marking of indirect objects and possessors in Timok vernaculars (Eastern Serbia). Timok vernaculars belong to Balkan Slavic, where the typical synthetic (i.e., inflectional) marking of syntactic functions on nominals was gradually replaced by analytic (i.e., prepositional) marking (Asenova 2002, Ivić 1998, 2009, Mišeska-Tomić 2004, Sobolev 2008, Wahlström 2015). However, both types of marking are still attested in Timok; cf. the synthetic dative in (1a) and (2a), and *na* 'on' + oblique case constructions in (1b) and (2b).

(1) POSSESSOR MARKING

(a) *ormar gde su **njoj**.*DAT.F.SG *sedele stvari*
    'the closet where her clothes were'

(b) ***na nju**.*OBL.F.SG *muž poginuo u rudnik*
    'her husband died in the mine'

(2) INDIRECT OBJECT MARKING

(a) *zavati vodu, nosi **sestrama**.*DAT.F.PL
    'take out the water, carry it to your sisters'

(b) *ona dumaše **na baštu**.*OBL.F.SG
    'she spoke to (my) father'

Starting from previous empirical research (Konër, Makarova & Sobolev 2019), we hypothesize the frequency of analytic marking to be higher than the frequency of synthetic marking in Timok. On the basis of theoretical descriptions which suggested the existence of a 'declensional hierarchy' (Sobolev 1991, 2008), according to which some nominal categories are more prone to analytism than others, we also expect a certain degree of variation between different linguistic categories.

The empirical data for the study are taken from the Spoken Torlak dialect corpus (Vuković 2020). The total number of analyzed examples is 675. The dependent variable was the type of dative case marking (*na* + oblique case vs. synthetic dative), while independent variables included function (indirect object, possessor), part of speech (nouns, personal pronouns), and nominal categories: noun type (proper, common), grammatical number (singular, plural), grammatical gender (masculine, feminine, neuter), animacy (animate, inanimate), reference to persons (referring, non-referring).

The results show that the use of the analytic construction prevails significantly (Figure 1): 84% to 16% (Chi-square goodness-of-fit test $\chi^2(1)=312.12$, p<0.001). There is also a connection between the type of case marking and function, as the dative case is highly infrequent for possessors, whereas analytic marking appears for both functions.

Regarding the part-of-speech variable (Figure 2), the analytic marking prevails with nouns (76.44% vs. 4.59%), while personal pronouns are slightly more used in the dative (11.41% vs. 7.56%). Additionally, as shown by a logistic regression, although the dative case is overall less likely to be observed marking the possessor, pronouns are almost 19 times more likely than nouns to occur with the synthetic dative (Figure 3, Table 1).

As for the declensional hierarchy, the results show higher percentages of analytic marking in all nominal categories (Figure 4, Table 2). However, a logistic regression revealed that variation is influenced by the grammatical gender of nouns (the synthetic strategy is more likely to occur with masculine nouns), and their grammatical number (synthetic strategy more likely with plural nouns).

We conclude that even though the analytic marking prevails overall, a certain degree of variation is caused by linguistic factors, suggesting that some categories are indeed more prone to analytism than others.
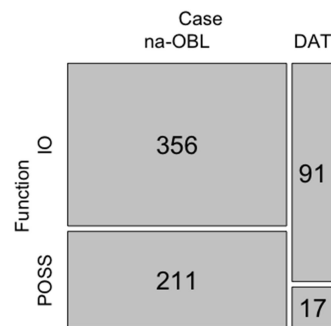
Figures and tables

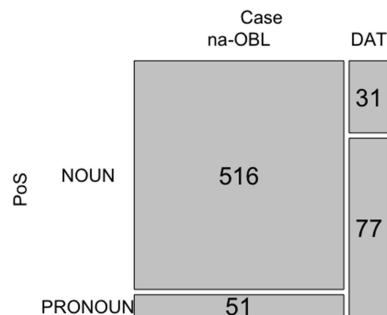Figure 1: Type of marking: overall and per functions (absolute frequencies)

Figure 2: Marking of case in nouns and personal pronouns (absolute frequencies)
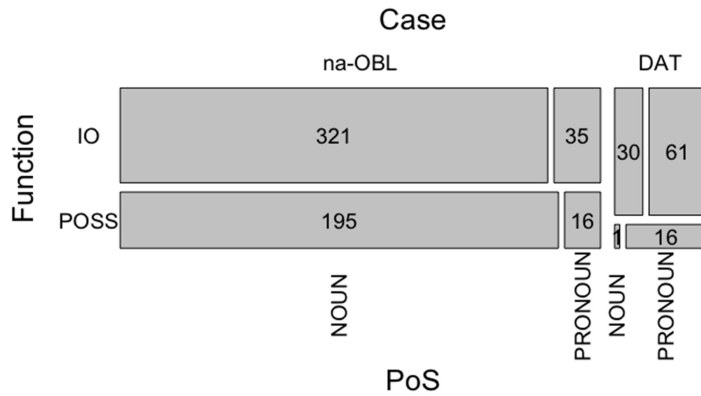
Figure 3: Marking of case in IO and POSS function with respect to PoS (absolute frequencies)

	B (SE)	Z value	Odds ratio	P-value
Intercept	-2.37 (0.19) ***	-12.415		p<0.001
Function (POSS)	-2.90 (1.02) **	-2.846	0.05	p<0.01
PoS (Pronoun)	2.93 (0.29) ***	10.254	18.65	p<0.001
Function (POSS) * PoS (Pronoun)	2.35 (1.10) *	2.134	10.46	p<0.05

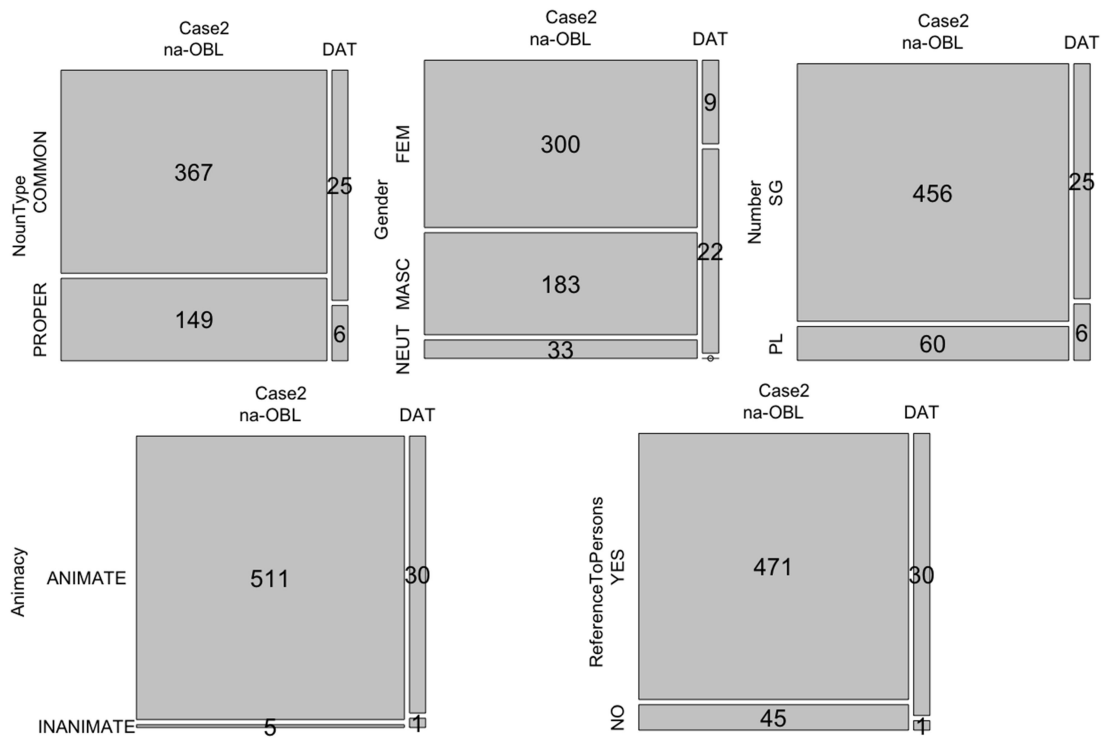Table 1: The effects of function and PoS on the marking strategy

Figure 4: Case marking with regard to nominal categories

	B (SE)	Z value	Odds ratio	P-value
Intercept	-4.04 (0.58) ***	-6.932		p<0.001
GenderMASC	2.24 (0.64) ***	3.477	9.44	p<0.001
NumberPL	3.19 (0.9) ***	3.533	24.28	p<0.001
GenderMASC : NumberPL	-3.67 (1.12) **	-3.265	0.025	p<0.01

Table 2: The significant effects of nominal categories on the marking strategy (logistic regression)

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