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Person in Slavic relative clauses

If a relative clause is headed by a locutor personal pronoun and the relativizer is a relative pronoun, predicate agreement in the relative clause is often subject to some variation. The predicate can either agree¹ with the head of the relative construction, as in (1a) or take 3rd person agreement (1b).

Slavic languages differ considerably in the patterns of person agreement in relative clauses. Some of the data is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Person of the verb with the head 'I' in oblique forms²

	Language	Source of quantitative data	1st person	3rd person	ratio of 1st person
East Slavic	Russian	RNC	1	22	0,0
	Belarusian	Yandex	1	18	0,1
	Ukrainian	Yandex	3	39	0,1
West Slavic	Czech	CNC	4	12	0,3
	Upper Sorbian	HOTKO	7	4	0,6
	Polish	NKJP	50	20	0,7
	Slovak	SNC	79	23	0,8
South Slavic	Bulgarian	BNC	22	2	0,9
	Croatian	HNK	86	4	1,0
	Macedonian	Google	12	0	1,0
	Slovene	Google	4	0	1,0

The data shows that person agreement with the head is most viable in South Slavic languages and most infrequent in East Slavic languages.

Despite the differences, East Slavic and West Slavic languages show some common statistical tendencies in the distribution of 3rd person and non-3rd person agreement.

First, the predicate is more likely to take 1st or 2nd person agreement if the head is in the nominative. A similar, albeit qualitative rather than quantitative, tendency has been

¹ The term "agreement" is used here pre-theoretically and means just a coincidence of the feature.

² Only the morphological forms with consistent person opposition were considered.

Belarusian, Ukrainian, Macedonian, and Slovene are less reliably comparable to other languages, because the necessary data could not be found in national corpora and Internet searches were conducted.

pointed out for English (Ross 1970; Akmajian 1970), German (Heck, Cuartero 2008), and Dutch (de Vries 2002: 228–229).

Second, plural heads are more likely to trigger person agreement.

The first tendency bears close resemblance to the principles of number agreement in East Slavic relative constructions. In East Slavic languages and Czech, the relative pronoun ‘who’, which does not decline for number, can introduce a relative clause headed by a demonstrative pronoun in the plural. This construction is almost unattested in other Slavic languages (Kholodilova, forthcoming). Czech predicates appear in this construction almost invariably in the plural (Křížková 1970), while agreement in East Slavic languages tends to depend on the case of the head, the plural being more frequent if the head is in the nominative (Kholodilova 2015).

To sum up, West Slavic and especially South Slavic languages usually show person and number agreement between the head and the predicate of the relative clause, irrespective of the case of the head, while East Slavic languages tend to avoid agreement with the head, especially if it is not in the nominative. Some of the changes which enhanced the latter tendency are relatively recent, see Table 2.

Table 2. The ratio of first person agreement in Russian relative constructions (RNC)

	18th–19th c.	20th–21th c.
‘we’, nominative	1,0	1,0
‘I’, nominative	0,9	0,4
‘we’, oblique	0,8	0,2
‘I’, oblique	0,1	0,0

I suggest that the preference for non-agreement with the head in East Slavic languages is at least partly due to the loss of pro-drop. In South Slavic and West Slavic languages, the predicate alone can be used to establish the person and number in the relative clause, while East Slavic verbs tend to need a pronoun in the nominative to take non-third person agreement and a plural noun or pronoun in the nominative to appear in the plural.

Examples

(1) Milorad Pavić. Dictionary of the Khazars (Parasol)

a. 2nd person agreement

Srećna sam što si ti, koja ne voliš Isaka, ostala SR. (orig.)
 happy am that are you which not love.PRS.2SG Isaac remained
tamo, daleko od nas.
 there far from us

Som št'astná, že Ty, ktorá Izaka neľúbiš, si zostala tam, ďaleko od nás. SL.

Щастлива съм, че ти, която не обичаше Исак, остана там, далеч от нас. BG.

Среќна сум, што ти, која не го сакаш Исак, остана таму, далеку од нас. MK.

Szczęśliwa jestem, że ty, która nie kochasz Izaaka, została ś tam, daleko od nas. PL.

b. 3rd person agreement

Я счастлива, что ты, которая не любит Исаака, осталась RU.

I happy that you which not love.PRS.3SG Isaac remained
там, далеко от нас.
there far from us

‘I’m glad that you, who do not love Isaac, have remained there, far away from us.’

Corpora and search engines

BNC, Bulgarian National Corpus, search.dcl.bas.bg

CNC, Czech National Corpus, www.korpus.cz, accessed via “Kontext” interface at kontext.korpus.cz

Google, google.com

HNK, Croatian National Corpus, hnk.ffzg.hr/

HOTKO, Hornolužický textový korpus, korpus.cz/corpora/run.cgi/first_form, accessed via “Kontext” interface at kontext.korpus.cz

NKJP, National Corpus of Polish, nkjp.pl

Nova Beseda, bos.zrc-sazu.si/a_beseda.html

Parasol (von Waldenfels, Ruprecht and Meyer, Roland (2006-): ParaSol, a Corpus of Slavic and Other Languages. Available at parasol.unibe.ch. Bern, Regensburg)

RNC, Russian National Corpus, ruscorpora.ru

SNC, Slovak National Corpus, korpus.juls.savba.sk

Yandex, yandex.ru

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