

The importance of having a degree: Missing short and long form adjectives in BCMS

Predrag Kovačević¹; Berit Gehrke², Marko Simonović³

¹University of Novi Sad; ²Humboldt University; ³University of Graz

The use of (attributive) long form (LF) and short form (SF) adjectives (As) in Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian (BCMS) is traditionally linked to nominal (in)definiteness [\pm DEF], as shown by the translations in (1), sometimes also to (non)specificity [\pm SPEC] (Aljović 2002). The marking of \pm DEF/SPEC via LFs/SFs is taken to support extending the DP hypothesis to BCMS, an articleless language, where the LF/SF difference is viewed as a morphological signal of the presence of a DP (Progovac 1999; Leko 1999). However, Kovačević (2014) shows that LFs can occur in non-specific contexts and SFs can be found in definite contexts, with the LF-to+DEF/SPEC and SF-to-DEF/SPEC patterning violated in both directions (2). Stanković (2015) treats LFs as ambiguous in terms of definiteness, specificity, and subsective/intersective readings, while SFs remain -DEF, \pm SPEC, and intersective, yet still adopts a DP-based analysis. Notably, however, SFs can appear in definite/specific contexts, as in (2a).

There are paradigm gaps, in the sense that some As miss LFs or SFs, and we observe that these primarily involve non-gradable As. Missing LFs occur with possessives (*Petrov*(i)* ‘Peter’s’), missing SFs with relational (e.g. *seosk*(i) put* ‘village road’) and spatial As (*prednj*(i) točak* ‘forward wheel’), active participles (*trčec*(i) korak* ‘running pace’), and attributive *l*-participles (*umrl*(i) čovek* ‘deceased man’). These As also lack comparative (and superlative) forms (**seoskiji* ‘village.COMP’ **prednjiji* ‘forward.COMP’, **trčeciji* ‘running.COMP’, **umrliji* ‘deceased.COMP’), which is standardly assumed to be a hallmark of non-gradable As. These gaps resist explanations based on nominal \pm DEF/SPEC. While some of the most frequent suffixes that derive As lacking SFs introduce phonological structures that are not attested word-finally (e.g. *-sk*) (Simonović 2016), such an account is definitely not available for the lacking LFs or for “minimal pairs” of As derived by the suffix *-(a)n*, which can be both gradable (*rad-n-i/radan-∅ čovek* work-an.LF/SF man ‘a hardworking man’) and non-gradable (*rad-n-i/*radan-∅ dan* ‘work day’), where the gradable member of the pair allows both LFs and comparatives (*rad-n-iji čovek*) but the non-gradable one blocks both (**radan dan*, **radniji dan*).

Rather than signaling \pm DEF of the nominal referent, we propose analyzing the SF/LF distinction in terms of definiteness of degree (DoD), with a morphosyntactic locus within the AP (similar to Marušič & Žaucer’s 2014 analysis of the definite clitic *ta* in colloquial Slovenian). We follow a common analysis of gradable As as involving scale structure and expressing a relation between an entity *x* and a degree *d*, which is a point on the scale (e.g. Kennedy & McNally 2005 [KM]). We furthermore assume that this point can be (in)definite (unique or anaphoric), and (epistemically and/or scopally) (non)specific. Under KM’s analysis the degree argument always gets existentially closed, and this happens either when degree modification is added, or by an empty POS(itive) head, which locates *d* on the scale with respect to a contextually determined standard, (3). We depart from this analysis in three ways: (a) we assume that also non-gradable adjectives involve scale structure, treating gradability as a mere reflex of vagueness resolution (cf. Sassoon 2013), in that less vague or sharp predicates are incompatible with degree modification because they involve a trivial 2-point scale ([0,1]); (b) we dissociate degree modification from existential closure of *d*, following Bierwisch, Kamp & Rossdeutscher (2024) [BKR]: degree modification adds further conditions on *d*, but the existential (or other) import does not depend on this; and (c) existential closure is just one way of binding *d*, which is the standard way in languages that lack definiteness marking in the degree domain, such as English. BCMS, on the other hand, has a definite marker in the degree domain, and we propose that this is

the adjectival LF morphology; we show how this can be implemented for positive forms in (4). Our analysis predicts that whenever *d* is determinate, (contextually) unique (incl. anaphoric to another degree in the context) or specific, we should get the LF, and the SF should be banned. The proposal directly accounts for the observed paradigm gap in that all non-gradable As, apart from possessives, lack SFs: With these As, *d* is always specific because it is always 1 on the scale, and there is no vagueness or indeterminacy. Note that the LF gap with possessives requires a separate explanation based on the fact that they are derived from referential nouns, which we bracket for now for reasons of space. Our proposal furthermore accounts for new empirical observations regarding degree modification in combination with SFs/LFs, which previous analyses would have nothing to say about: With specific measure phrases modifying attributive As (e.g. ‘2 meters’), there is a strong preference for LFs over SFs (5). Following BKR, we assume that such measure phrases require a degree interval, and the relevant endpoint on this interval is specified (e.g. by ‘2 meters’) and thus requires definiteness marking. Similarly, BCMS comparative and superlative forms, which also operate on degree intervals (again, following BKR), always display LF morphology, (6). On the other hand, with vague degree modifiers like *veoma* ‘very’, LFs co-occur less favorably, (7); We assume that this is so because they are mere standard boosters and still only involve a non-specific degree on the scale. A comparison of the overall frequencies of SFs and LFs with the gradable adjectives *visok* ‘tall’, *mlad* ‘young’, and *star* ‘old’ done on the Serbian Web Corpus reveals that LFs overall tend to be more frequent than SFs (young.LF: 15687 tokens / young.SF: 8017; old.LF: 17455 / old.SF: 4241; tall.LF: 8422 / tall.SF: 14380). However, SFs are more frequent in the context of *veoma* ‘very’ (very young.SF: 241 / very young.LF: 2; very old.SF: 100 / very old.LF: 19; very tall.SF: 424 / very tall.LF: 22). Lastly, we analyze the co-occurrence of SFs and LFs within the same NP, challenging nominal definiteness accounts. In (8), the degrees of the adjectives *obični* ‘regular’ and *jeftini* ‘cheap’ are treated as discourse-unique, prompting a LF, while the SF marks the degree denoted by the adjective *pouzdan* ‘reliable’ as not unique in the context of (Quartz) watches. If correct, the analysis presents a case for a cross-linguistically rare morphological category of definiteness, DoD, which sheds new light on both definiteness and degree in natural language.

- (1) a. *plav-∅ kaput* ‘a blue coat’ b. *plav-i kaput* ‘the blue coat’
(2) a. *Volim taj velik-∅ kaput.* ‘I love that large coat.’ (SF with +DEF/SPEC)
 b. *Treba mi neki velik-i auto.* ‘I need some large car.’ (LF with -DEF/SPEC)
(3) [[POS]] = $\lambda G\lambda x. \exists d[\text{standard}(D)(G)(C) \wedge G(d)(x)]$
(4) [[POS + LF morphology]] = $\lambda G\lambda x.\text{id}[\text{standard}(D)(G)(C) \wedge G(d)(x)]$ (BCMS LFs)
(5) *dva metra visok^{??}(i) čovek* ‘a/the two-meter tall man’
(6) *mlad^{*}(i), bolj^{*}(i), plavlj^{*}(i)* ‘younger, better, bluer’
(7) *veoma mlad^(??)(i) čovek* ‘a/the very young man’
(8) Treba mi [običn-i jeftin-i pouzdan quartz sat]. (attested online)
 need me regular-LF cheap-LF reliable-SF Quartz watch
 ‘I need a regular reliable cheap Quartz watch.’

Selected references: ALJOVIĆ (2002). Long adjectival inflection and specificity in Serbo-Croatian. *Recherches Linguistiques de Vincennes* / BIERWISCH, KAMP & ROSSDEUTSCHER (2024). Internal syntactic structure of adjectival forms & their semantics. Ms. / KOVAČEVIĆ (2014). A very minimal syntax: DP, scrambling and case. MA thesis, Novi Sad / LEKO (1999). Functional categories and the structure of the DP in Bosnian. *Topics in South Slavic Syntax and Semantics* / MARUŠIĆ & ŽAUCER (2014). A definite article in the AP. *Nominal Structure in Slavic and Beyond*. / SASSOON (2013). *Vagueness, Gradability & Typicality* / STANKOVIĆ (2015). *Sintaksa i semantika određenog i neodređenog vida u srpskom jeziku*. PhD thesis, Kragujevac.