

ADJECTIVES IN NARRATIVES IN SPOKEN ESPERANTO

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Abstract

This study examines, from a psycholinguistic perspective, the use of adjectives in the narrative discourse of Esperanto speakers from France, Italy and Russia. The informants speak Esperanto at a very advanced level and use the language in their everyday life. Unlike other languages, Esperanto follows the standard founded on grammatical acceptability: any grammatically constructed statement is acceptable.

The corpus is composed of two types of stories, each presenting different characteristics: stories based on a series of illustrations Cat Story and stories recounted from the speaker's personal experience.

Adjectives are not absolutely necessary - they provide greater precision to the information being conveyed. Before the age of 15, narrative texts may not contain any adjectives. In adults, the presence of adjectives and their number are related to the degree of elaboration of the statement or narrative.

By analyzing the adjectives used in the corpus, I examine their number, their distribution in different types according to their form, and the use of intensifiers. In addition, I examine the place of adjectives – before or after the noun – because Esperanto allows both positions.

Speakers whose L1 is respectively French, Italian or Russian focus on different aspects of the situations they perceive and use different strategies to express them. The most striking differences involve, among other things, the use of adjectives, their functions in the narratives and interaction with other word classes (nouns, adverbs and verbs).

Keywords: *Spoken Esperanto, storytelling, adjectives in narratives, pragmatic transfer from L1, adjective-noun order*

1. INTRODUCTION

This study examines, from a psycholinguistic perspective, the narrative discourse of Esperanto speakers from France, Italy and Russia and the use of adjectives. The informants speak Esperanto at a very advanced level and use the language in their daily life. Unlike other languages, Esperanto follows the standard founded on grammatical acceptability: any grammatically constructed statement is acceptable.

The mother tongue, or first language (L1), remains the frame of reference when learning other languages (L2). Its grammatical categories and lexicon influence the use of L2. This aspect has been well documented through considerable research in the second language acquisition (Gass & Selinker (eds), 1992, Klein, 1986, Odlin, 1989, Dankova, 2009, 1997).

Many researchers agree that each language has its own way of conceptualizing events and that the grammatical and lexical categories of a language influence the conceptualization. Studies by Slobin (1991, 1996, 2003), who analyzes the expression of motion events in languages, emphasize the orientation of the speaker's attention when it comes to reporting dynamic events and static descriptions.

In narratives, adjectives are not absolutely necessary – they provide greater precision to the information being conveyed. Before the age of 15, narrative texts may not contain any adjectives (Gayraud, 2000). In adults, the presence of adjectives and their number are related to the degree of elaboration of the statement or narrative:

- (1) *Yesterday I saw a movie.*
- (2) *Yesterday I saw a good / interesting / fascinating movie.*

In Esperanto, each part of speech is marked by a specific ending, for example, the common nouns end in *-o* and the adjectives in *-a*. The present and past participles end in *-a* as well but they contain suffixes specific to participles: adjective *parola* “oral, spoken”, present passive participle *parolata* (with suffix *-at-*) “spoken” vs present active participle *parolanta* (with suffix *-ant-*) “speaking”. Given the morphological transparency of Esperanto, identification of adjectives as a part of speech is not problematic.

Adjectives and nouns can contain suffixes that slightly modify the meaning: *granda domo* “big house”, *grandega domo* (suffix *-eg-*) “huge house”, *dometo* (suffix *-et-*) “small house”, *kataĉo* (suffix *-aĉ-*) “bad/mean cat”. A specific suffix (*-id-*) is used to form nouns that designate a cub: *katido* “kitten”, *hundido* “puppy”, *ursido* “bear cub”, *vulpido* “fox cub”. In Esperanto, suffixes can form new words: the diminutive suffix *-et-* forms the adjective *eta* “little/small” and the suffix *-id-* forms the noun *ido* “baby/cub”. In the sentence *Eta ido iĝis ega* “Little baby became very big”, the radicals in all the words are formed from suffixes. Used in nouns, some suffixes can replace adjectives: *kajereto* (with diminutive suffix *-et-*) “small notebook” vs *malgranda kajero* or *eta kajero* “small notebook”.

Russian offers a huge choice of different suffixes: *собака* (*sobaka*) “dog”, *собачка* (*sobachka*) “small/little dog” (diminutive, affectionate), *собачонка* (*sobachonka*) “small/little poor dog” (double diminutive) or *кот* (*kot*) “cat” (male), *котик* (*kotik*) “small/little cat” (diminutive, affectionate), *котяра* (*kotiara*) “big cat” (augmentative and/or slightly pejorative), *котичье* (*kotishche*) (augmentative). Several diminutive suffixes can add different degrees of diminution to the same word.

Italian has several diminutive and pejorative suffixes for nouns, the suffix *-in-* is the most productive diminutive suffix that can be added to many nouns: *tavola* “table” – *tavolina* “small table”, *uccello* “bird” – *uccellino* “small/little bird” but also “baby bird”. The double diminutive is possible in Italian.

In French, diminutive is formed with various suffixes, but these suffixes are not as productive as in Russian or in Italian. Adding the adjective *petit* “small/little” before a noun is the most efficient way to express the diminutive in French.

Intensifiers can be used with adjectives. They add nuance, strengthen or weaken the intensity of the meaning of adjectives: *totally lost*, *very nice*, *incredible gifted*, *pretty good*.

Given the fact that Esperanto speakers come from various linguistic backgrounds, their choices in Esperanto are often influenced by their first language. Esperanto allows a greater flexibility than other languages because of its standard founded on grammatical acceptability: any grammatically constructed statement is acceptable. The multitude of usages of Esperanto and acceptance of this variation on the part of speakers represent the distinctive characteristics of modern Esperanto.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants, men and women, were selected and divided into three groups: speakers whose L1 is respectively French, Italian or Russian. The informants speak Esperanto at a very advanced level, use the language in their everyday life and take part in Esperanto events in different countries.

The corpus is composed of two types of stories, each presenting different characteristics: stories based on a series of illustrations *Cat Story* (Hickmann, 1982, cf. *Appendix*), and stories recounted from the speaker’s personal experience. The number of participants is 8 per group. The data were gathered following a very strict protocol. The goal of the study was not revealed to any of the participants, who were recorded separately. For *Cat Story*, each participant was invited to look carefully at the series of illustrations *Cat Story* and to tell a story as if he/she were speaking to a child. Some participants played the game and produced a very elaborate story, others simply told what is happening; the degree of elaboration and the length of the stories are variable. Similar corpora are available in respective languages (French, Italian and Russian).

The use of common stimulus material simplifies the comparison of the narratives produced by the French, Italian and Russian participants. On a cultural level, *Cat Story* is neutral and gives no advantage

to either of the groups, and does not contain elements specific to a particular culture that could be understood or interpreted differently according to the participant's culture and language.

The corpora of *Cat Story* in Esperanto produced by Italian, French and Russian speakers contain respectively 630, 876 and 822 words, and the corpora in personal narratives respectively 1410, 1572 and 1662 words. Similar corpora collected for another study are available in Italian, French and Russian.

By analyzing the adjectives used in the corpus, I examine their number, their distribution in different types according to their form, and the use of intensifiers. In addition, I examine the place of adjectives – before or after the noun – because Esperanto allows both positions, and the use of suffixes that can be used instead of adjectives.

A chi-squared test is performed for quantitative data.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The informants use more adjectives in personal narratives than in *Cat Story*: the personal narratives are longer than the narratives based on the series of images, but the length is not the only explanation (see Table 1). Italian and French informants display similar behavior and there is little difference between the two groups. In *Cat Story*, Russian informants use more adjectives than the other two groups together and less adjectives in personal narratives, but the difference is less significant in personal narratives.

The chi-square test is very conclusive: $\chi^2 = 23.484$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$ (Table 1).

	Cat Story	Average	Personal Narratives	Average
Italian L1	21	2.6	107	13.4
French L1	28	3.5	109	13.6
Russian L1	58	7.25	86	10.75

Table 1. Adjectives in Esperanto (number of occurrences and average number per story)

Used in nouns, diminutive, pejorative and augmentative suffixes can replace an adjective. It is not common to considerate both adjectives and suffixes together. Since these suffixes play a role similar to that of epithet adjectives, this approach is justified: *malgranda kato* “little/small cat” and *kateto* (with diminutive suffix *-et-*) have the same meaning and the choice between the two options is up to the speaker.

The table 2 presents adjectives and suffixes used in narratives in Esperanto. As the table shows, Russian informants use suffixes more often than Italian and French informants in *Cat Story*: the suffix used by the three groups is the diminutive suffix *-et-* (39 occurrences in total), followed by the augmentative suffix *-eg-* used by Russian and Italian informants (3 occurrences in total) and the pejorative suffix *-ac-* used once by a Russian informant.

The chi-square test is very conclusive: $\chi^2 = 21.1$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.000$ (Table 2).

	Cat Story	Average	Personal Narratives	Average
Italian L1	40	5	111	13.9
French L1	35	4.4	112	14
Russian L1	75	9.4	88	8.8

Table 2. Adjectives and suffixes in Esperanto (number of occurrences and average number per story)

If we take a look at the use of diminutive, pejorative and augmentative suffixes in *Cat Story* in Russian L1, we notice 94 occurrences of these suffixes and 60 occurrences of adjectives in a corpus composed of 10 narratives – that means the use of suffixes is a strategy favored by Russian informants that they transfer to Esperanto as these suffixes are available in Esperanto (cf. Table 3).

For *Cat Story*, each participant was invited to tell a story as if he/she were speaking to a child. Some participants played the game and produced a very elaborate story sometimes with theatrical intonation and role playing. As a hypothesis, I consider that the Russian informants tried to relate their stories to traditional tales with all the stylistic effects that the Russian traditional tales impose as a literary genre and because Esperanto offers them similar means of expression. The gender of informants does not matter given gender balance among participants; this remark is valid for the corpora in Esperanto and in L1.

The chi-square test is very conclusive: $\chi^2 = 29.505$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.000$ (Table 3)

	Cat Story	Average	Personal Narratives	Average
Adjectives	60	6	70	7
Suffixes	94	9.4	24	2.4
Total	154	15.4	94	9.2

Table 3. Adjectives and suffixes in Russian L1 (number of occurrences and average number per story)

The corpus in Italian L1 offers examples of use of diminutive suffixes *-in-* and *-ett-* (the number of occurrences is indicated in parentheses): *uccellini* (8) “baby birds”, *passerottini* (3) “little sparrows”, *gattino* (1) “little cat”, *vermetti* (1) “little worms”.

In *Cat Story*, the adjective *petit* “little/small” is the adjective most frequently used by informants in French L1. In 23 stories based on *Cat Story* in French from France, the adjective *petit* “little/small” represents 21.4% (or 31 occurrences) of all adjectives, and in 38 stories based on *Cat Story* in French from Quebec, 56% or 108 occurrences (Dankova, 2018). It is mainly used as a diminutive to describe the characters:

- (3) *Le petit chat décide de grimper à l'arbre pour attraper les petits oisillons.*

The little cat decides to climb the tree to catch the baby birds.

- (4) *Et là, le petit oiseau s'en va chercher de la nourriture.*

And then, the little bird goes to get some food.

Intensifiers that add nuance, strengthen or weaken the intensity of the meaning of adjectives are used in *Cat Story* and in personal narratives in Esperanto, but they are more frequently used in personal narratives (see Table 4). Italian informants use 15 different intensifiers, French informants use 14 different intensifiers, and Russian informants use 12 different intensifiers in total. Among the most frequently used, there are *tre* “very” (with the variant *tre-tre* “very-very”) with 26 occurrences in total and *sufiçe* “enough” (14 occurrences in total) for all the groups of informants, and *tute* “totally” for Italian and French informants with 9 occurrences in total. There are some examples of use:

- (5) *La stacidomo estis tre granda.*

The station was very big.

- (6) *Kaj ĉio ŝajnis al mi tute klara.*

And everything seemed totally clear to me.

- (7) *Ĝi estis preskaŭ plata.*

It was almost flat.

- (8) *La hundo vidas tiom kruelan konduton de la kato.*

The dog sees such a cruel behavior of the cat.

The use of intensifiers by Russian speakers differs from that of the other two groups: Russian speakers use intensifiers more regularly in both types of stories while French and Italian speakers use them mostly in personal narratives. Unlike in *Cat Story*, there are no striking differences between the three groups with regard to the use of intensifiers in personal narratives.

The chi-square test is very conclusive: $\chi^2 = 11.351$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.01$ (Table 4).

	Cat Story	Average	Personal Narratives	Average
Italian L1	1	0.125	28	3.5
French L1	4	0.5	31	3.9
Russian L1	12	1.5	24	3

Table 4. Intensifiers in Esperanto (number of occurrences and average number per story)

The place of adjectives – before or after the noun – is another analyzed aspect. Esperanto allows both positions but the use of the adjective-noun order is more common. In the analyzed narratives, the noun-adjective order is extremely rare (9 occurrences in total). In this sense, the weight of use of Esperanto is more significant than the influence of the mother tongue: in Italian and in French, most adjectives are placed after the noun, and in Russian, before the noun with the exception in poetry. In the narratives produced by Italian speakers, there is only one occurrence of noun-adjective order:

- (9) *donante al la besto manĝaĵon taŭgan*
by giving to the animal adequate food

Two French informants use the noun-adjective order once each:

- (10) *en lando fremda*
in a foreign country
- (11) *La birdo trovis la neston plenan je ovoj.*
The bird found the nest full of eggs.

Two Russian informants use the noun-adjective order three times in their narratives:

- (12) *Mia hundo tenas kuniklon jam mortan kaj tre malpuran.*
My dog is holding an already dead and very dirty rabbit.
- (13) *limgardisto germana*
German border agent

Even if Zamenhof, the founder of Esperanto, left a lot of freedom to the speakers of this invented language, the use he made of it testifies to his own lexical, grammatical and syntactic preferences. Various Zamenhof's original writings (letters, speeches, newspaper articles, poems) and translations from different languages into Esperanto made by Zamenhof were first edited in 1929, and then in 1983. The 1983 edition contains 604 pages. Based on his writings, I can affirm that the adjective-noun order is privileged. The noun-adjective order is mainly used in *lingua internacia* "international language", and if two adjectives accompany a noun. There is an excerpt from Zamenhof's speech at the first Esperanto congress in 1905 that illustrates this (Zamenhof, 1929/1983, p. 364):

- (14) ... *ni esprimas nian koran dankon al sinjoro Schleyer, la unua kaj plej energia pioniro de la ideo de neŭtrala lingvo internacia.*

... we express our cordial thank to Mr Schleyer, the first and the most active pioneer of the idea of a neutral international language.

The following excerpt from Zamenhof's speech delivered in 1908 contains two examples of the noun-adjective order: *lingua malnova kaj nova* literally "language old and new" and *esperantista nuntempa* "Esperantist of nowadays" (Zamenhof, 1929/1983, p. 387):

- (15) *Nenie rompiĝas aŭ difektiĝas la kontinueco inter la lingua malnova kaj nova, kaj malgraŭ la fakto, ke nia lingvo forte disvolviĝas, ĉiu nova esperantisto legas la verkojn de antaŭ dudek jaroj kun tia sama facileco, kiel esperantisto nuntempa, kaj li eĉ ne rimarkas, ke tiuj verkoj estas skribitaj ne nun, sed en la unua, suĉinfana periodo de nia lingvo.*

Nowhere continuity between the old and the new language does not break or deteriorate, and despite the fact that our language is spreading widely, each new Esperantist reads twenty-year-old books with the same perfect ease as an Esperantist of nowadays, and he even does not remark that those books were not written today but in the early childhood period of our language.

The noun-adjective order is attested in Zamenhof's poems written directly in Esperanto, the adjectives *plej stranga* "the strangest", *malĝoja* "sad" and *ĝoja* "joyful" follow the noun *sento* "feeling" (Zamenhof, 1929/1983, p. 592):

- (16) *Kaj per sento plej stranga, malĝoja kaj ĝoja,*

En mi batas konfuze la koro.

By the strangest, sad and joyful feeling
the heart beats in me in a confused way

and

- (17) *Mi ne volas esplori la senton misteran*

I do not want to explore the mysterious feeling

4. CONCLUSIONS

Unlike other languages, Esperanto has no territories or stable linguistic communities. Esperanto allows its speakers to follow the "logic" of their first language and offers a great variety of means of expression. Thus, Esperanto makes it possible to reproduce certain strategies used in another language.

The results show that speakers whose L1 is respectively French, Italian or Russian focus on different strategies to describe characters and things in their narratives. The most striking differences involve, among other things, the use of adjectives and intensifiers, the variation of their numbers in two types of stories and the competition between adjectives and certain types of suffixes as well as competition between intensifiers and these suffixes.

The use of Esperanto in linguistically heterogeneous communities also requires adjustments on the part of the speakers. I consider that the fairly homogeneous adjective-noun order is more about adjustment than the influence of a particular language.

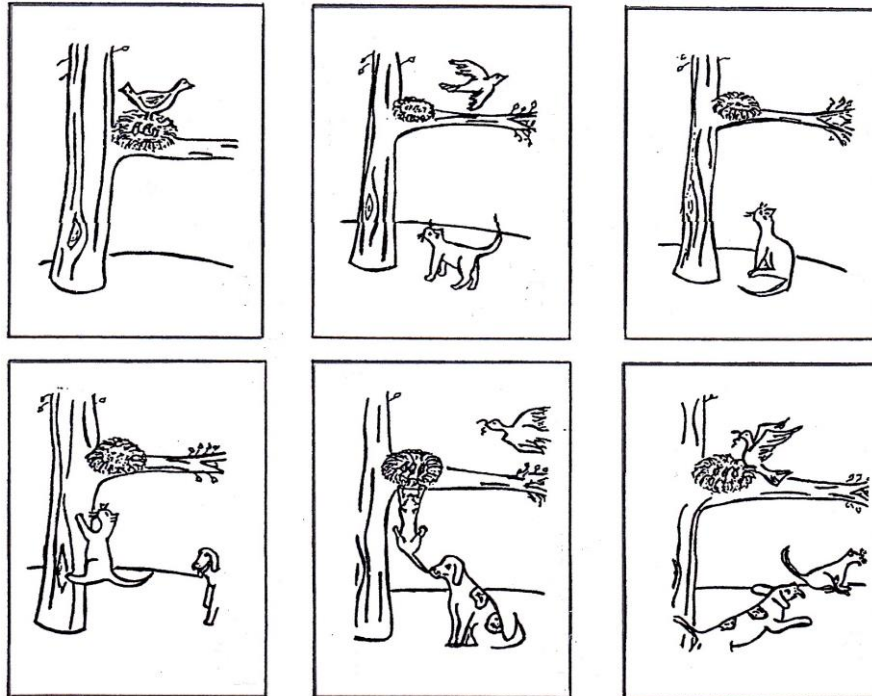
The multitude of usages of Esperanto and tolerance of this variation on the part of speakers characterize modern Esperanto. This variation goes hand in hand with the adjustment on the part of Esperanto speakers with regard to their own expression and understanding of others.

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APPENDIX

Cat Story



Hickmann, M 1982, 'The Development of Narrative Skills: Pragmatic and Metapragmatic Aspects of Discourse Cohesion', PhD Thesis, University of Chicago, Chicago.