



The Misspelling of Adpositional Phrases in Estonian – Illiteracy or Manifestation of Semantic Difference?

Anni Jürine

University of Tartu

anni.jurine@ut.ee





Structure of the presentation

- Adpositional phrases in Estonian
- Research problem
- Synonymy and polysemy
- Results of the experiment
- Analogy and lexicalization



Adpositional phrases in Estonian

pea-Ø *kohal*
head-gen above

‘above the head’



Estonian adpositions

- Estonian adpositions are mostly postpositions.
- Adpositions have evolved from nouns via grammaticalization.

- Kohal ← koha-l
above place-ade



Initial research problem

In Estonian there is a noticeable tendency to misspell adpositional phrases as one word.

pea-Ø kohal → *peakohal*

head.gen above

‘above the head’



Possible ways of explaining the tendency

- Illiteracy
- Compounding is a productive mean of word formation in Estonian.
- Ortography as an artifact – a convention that does not tell us anything about language itself.

→ no interesting reason?



Constructional synonymy?

If there is no particular reason for misspelling the adpositional phrases, this tendency could be described in terms of constructional synonymy.

- Words and phrases = form-meaning pairings
- Two forms, one meaning = constructional synonymy?



Constructional synonymy

pea-∅ kohal = *peakohal*
head.gen above
'above the head' 'above the head'



What motivates the variation?

However, previous research has shown that there are several factors affecting the spelling of adpositional phrases. These include:

syntactic – whether there is an attributive before the noun

morpho-phonological – number of syllables

educational – ‘better’ schools vs ‘regular’ schools

semantical – whether the adpositional phrase is figurative



Semantical motivations

The differences in form are related to the differences in meaning?

pea-∅ *kohal* → *peakohal*
head.gen above
'above the head' 'above'



Polysemy of adpositional phrases

... as a way to explain the misspelling.

Hypothesis:

Adpositional phrases are polysemous, and speakers use different forms to differentiate between the distinct senses (literal and metaphorical senses).



Polysemy of the adpositional phrase *jalge alla* ('under the feet')

Meie- \emptyset **jalg-e** **alla** jää-v sild õõtsu-s
 1pl-gen foot-pl.gen under stay-ptcp bridge shake-pst.3sg
 'The bridge underneath our feet was shaking'

Võta-me reede-l rännutee- \emptyset **jalg-e** **alla**
 take-1pl Friday-ade journey-gen foot-pl.gen under
 'We start our journey on Friday'

Ta tramp-i-s meie- \emptyset õiglus-tund-e **jalg-e** **alla**
 2sg trample 1pl-gen justice-sense-gen foot-pl.gen under
 'He walked all over our sense of justice'



Forced choice task

The aim was to clarify

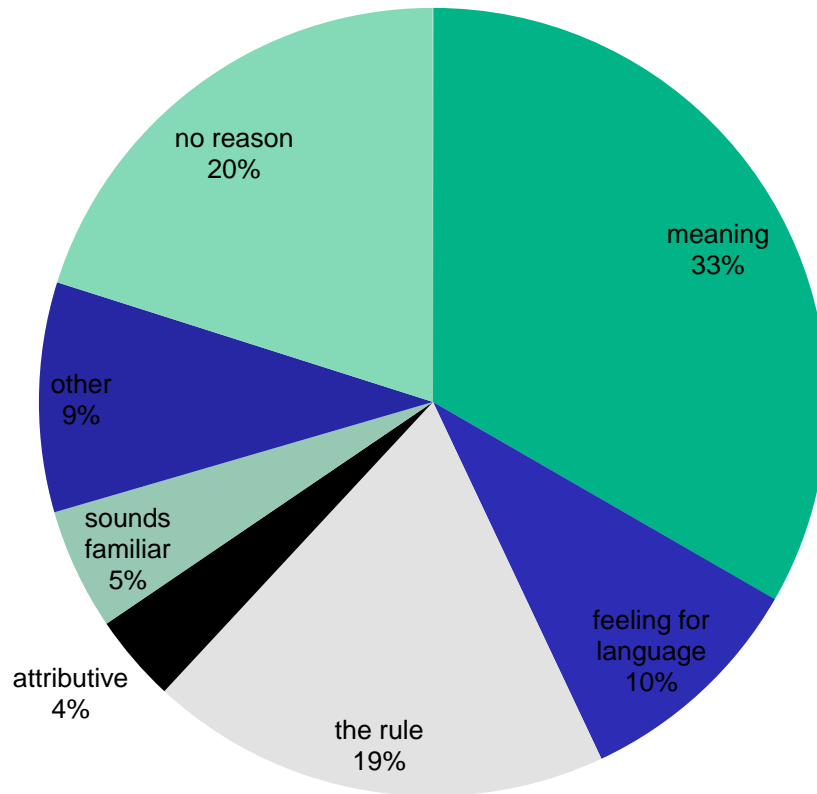
- Whether language users perceive different senses of the adpositional phrases.
- Whether the metaphorical senses are more likely to be associated with the incorrect form.

The instructions

- To choose between the two forms
- To explain their choice in free form



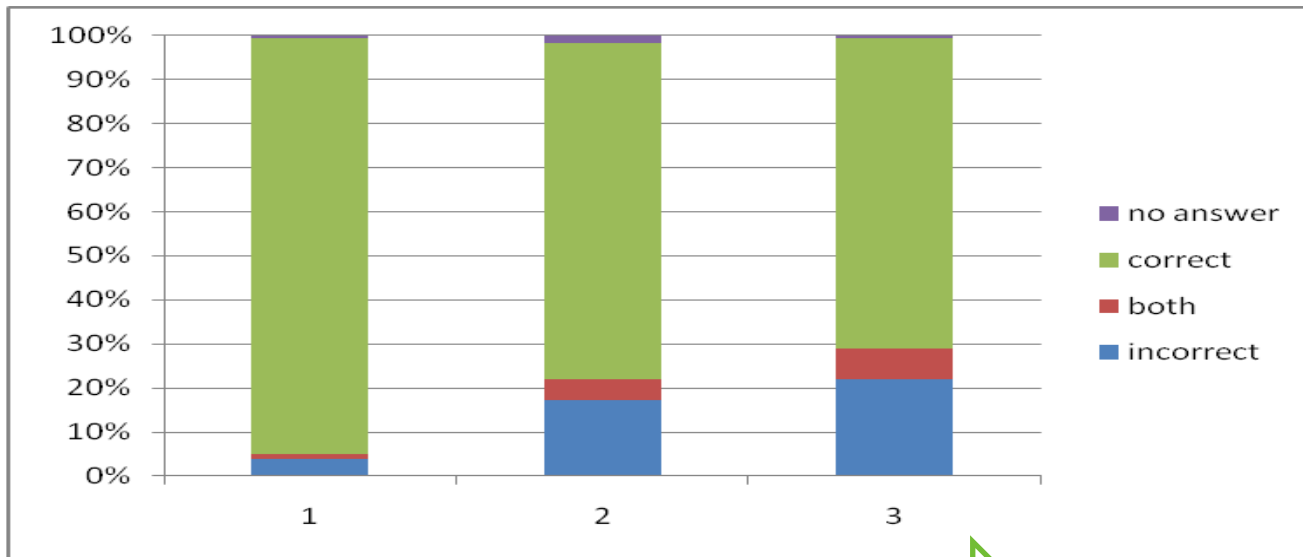
Participants' explanations of choosing either form





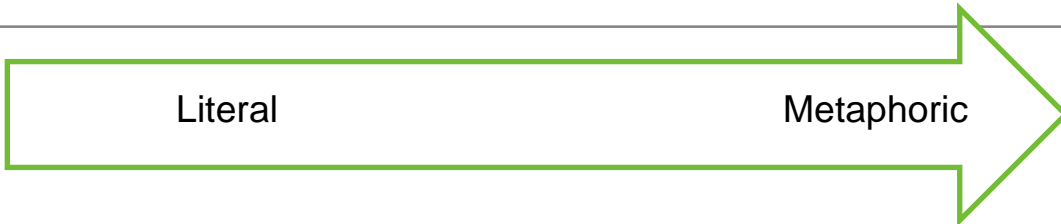
Misspelling and meaning

How many correct/incorrect forms were chosen in contexts with different levels of figurativeness.



Literal

Metaphoric





Some conclusions

- Participants seemed to perceive the different senses of adpositional phrases
- Metaphorical senses tended to be associated with the incorrect form



Analogy of compound adverbs

The category of compound adverbs consists of complex words that have a meaning which is figurative and thus different from the literal meaning of those words.

*üle*käte

lit. **over** hands
'out of control'

The words in this category may set the example to misspell adpositional phrases.



Lexicalization of adpositional phrases

The described process is claimed to be lexicalization, which in this account is believed to have the following features:

- Adoption into mental lexicon,
- Processing as a holistic unit
- Changes in form: compounding



To conclude

The current variation, i.e. spelling the Estonian adpositional phrases as either one or two words, may indicate the beginnings of new compound adverbs.

The process is believed to be triggered by the polysemy of adpositional phrases, i.e. the phrases have several meanings and speakers try to make a distinction between them.

It is claimed that the metaphorical senses of adpositional phrases are lexicalizing, and one important mechanism contributing to this is analogy.