Case variation in Ukrainian direct addresses in a bilingual context

vocative; nominative; case variation; Ukrainian; Russian

In Modern Ukrainian, addresses use either the vocative or nominative case. Since 1991, only the variant with the vocative case has been approved as a standard one [1]; the Soviet-era norm allowed for variations [2]. The use of the vocative case in addresses is cultivated and maintained as an authentic feature of the Ukrainian language that distinguishes it from Russian. Since the 1920s and up to the present day, linguists have associated the spread of the use of the nominative case in addresses with the undesirable influence of the Russian language on the grammatical structure of Ukrainian [3].

In this study, we aimed to trace the influence of speakers' Ukrainian-Russian bilingualism on their choice of vocative or nominative in Ukrainian speech. For the research, we chose 28,896 contexts with addresses in different cases from the parliamentary transcripts of 2007-2024, including texts by 276 speakers, at least 10 contexts from each. The contexts were selected from officially published parliamentary transcripts annotated with UDPipe 2 using the uk_parlamint model[1]. The model allowed us to distinguish the nominative in address from other functions of this case. We analyzed the languages used by each speaker in the parliament and speakers' origin regions and looked for a correlation between this and the use of vocative or nominative.

Fig. 1 shows speakers by their case choice (% of vocative in the horizontal direction) and language usage (% of Ukrainian in all speakers' transcripts in the vertical direction). Among those who switch to Russian, there are people with both low and high proportions of vocative case in their addresses. Switching to Russian in the parliament ceased after 2017; it was practiced mainly by representatives of pro-Russian political forces to demonstrate their agenda [4]. The use of the nominative case in the vocative function obviously does not carry such ideological significance, it is individual and varies both among those who switched to Russian and among those who speak only Ukrainian.

Fig. 2 shows the distribution of the data by region; the share of vocative in addresses has little correlation with the greater prevalence of Russian in the regions of the East and South [5]. The individual choice of the speaker has a strong influence. For example, three MPs from Crimea, whose first language, according to their biographies, was Russian (Refat Chubarov, Lyudmyla Denisova, Iryna Friz), use the vocative in 83-98% of their addresses, which is above the average. On the other hand, there are MPs from the predominantly Ukrainian-speaking region of Lviv, who use vocative in their addresses in 25-40% of examples (Mykhailo Khmil, Rostyslav Shurma, Ivan Vasyunyk).

With such significant individual variation, the parliamentary corpus does not reveal regional patterns in case choice. Nor does it show a significant influence of Russian on this variation at the individual level. These data strongly suggest that Russian influence on case choice in Ukrainian direct addresses is unlikely.

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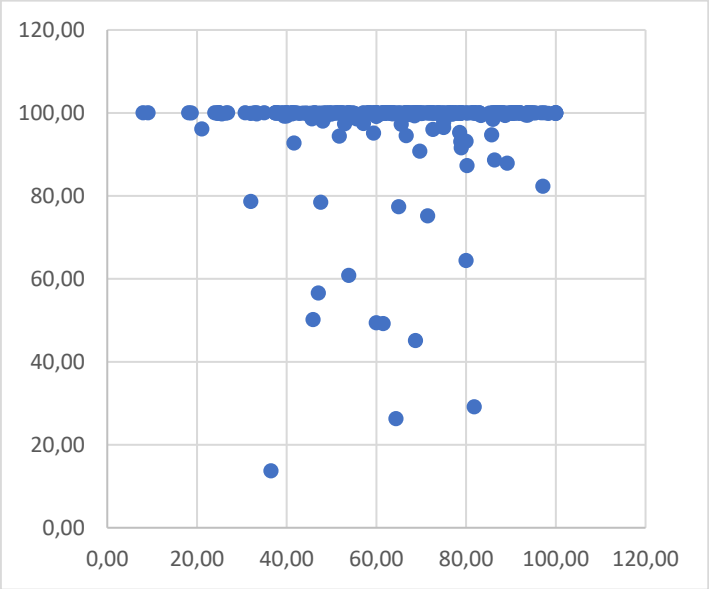

Fig.1

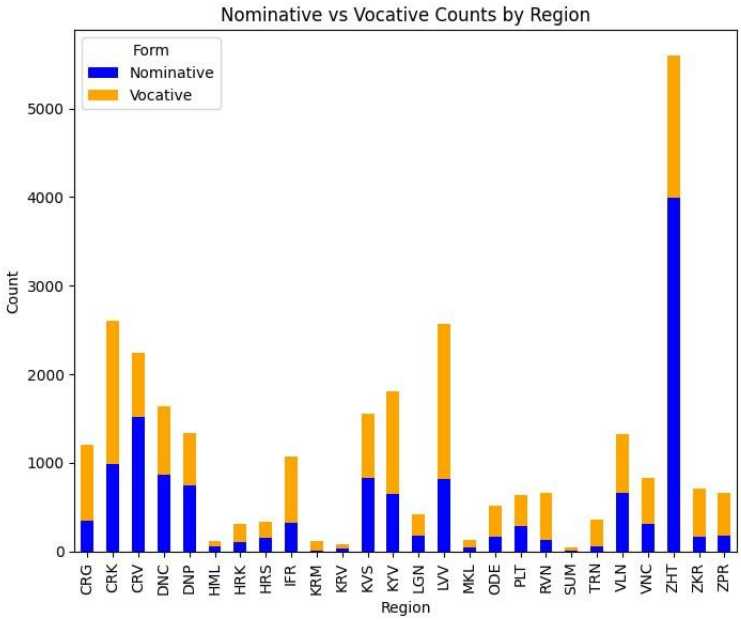

Fig. 2