

**EVIDENCE AGAINST MONOSTYLISM IN LANGUAGE LOSS SITUATIONS:  
SUBJECT FOCUS CONSTRUCTIONS IN AMERICAN LITHUANIAN**

Jolanta MACEVIČIŪTĖ-ARITZ

**Introduction**

The present paper addresses the issue of monostylism in cases of language attrition<sup>1</sup>. On the basis of written American Lithuanian data I argue that the process of language loss does not result in monostylism, as argued by Dressler (1982, 1988). Rather, it exhibits variation which is parallel to the one in healthy language varieties but is much more restricted as a result of the decreased number of function that the reduced language serves. I further argue that superstratum interference is not adequate in explaining changes taking place in language loss situations. In particular, the influence of English, a primarily SVO language, does not explain the retention of subject focus constructions in the form of OVS in American Lithuanian. The analysis of subject focus constructions further supports the hypothesis that in the case of language attrition, a reduction in speakers' range of communicative activities plays a major role in language change (Dorian 1981, 1994).

**Data and methodology**

The language under investigation is Lithuanian, represented by two varieties: Full Lithuanian (FL), a healthy variety spoken natively by its speech community in the Republic of Lithuania, and American Lithuanian (AL), a variety used in a contact situation with English in the United States by first-generation Lithuanian immigrants. Previous studies of American Lithuanian demonstrated that linguistic changes at the phonological and morphological level (Pažūsis 1970) and discourse level (Macevičiūtė 2000; Macevichius 1998, to appear) constitute changes typically ascribed to attrited languages (cf. Dorian 1981, Sasse 1992, Seliger and Vago 1991ab, Andersen 1982). Therefore, we can conclude that American Lithuanian used in a contact situation with English in the US is in fact undergoing the process of attrition.

---

<sup>1</sup> I use the term "language attrition" to refer to incomplete language competence or loss of first language abilities.

The data for this study were collected from two major Lithuanian newspapers, *Draugas* ('Friend') published in Chicago by the Lithuanian immigrant community, and *Lietuvos Rytas* ('Lithuanian Morning') published in Vilnius, Lithuania. To match the topics and purposes the register for reporting local news was chosen for the analysis. In both newspapers local news serves similar functions, i.e. to inform readers about events of local significance. Most writers for the Lithuanian immigrant paper are first-generation American Lithuanians who learned Lithuanian as their first language and still use it as their primary language.

### Analysis

In languages like Lithuanian that permit subject-verb inversion, non-topical subject NPs can appear in post-verbal position. In other words, when a subject is introduced into a discourse for the first time and its referent is new and inactive, it may be placed after the verb in the position normally taken by the object and become part of the focus construction. In a two-argument construction when the subject is new and the object already has an identifiable referent, the object takes the syntactic position normally occupied by the subject in the proposition. As a result, the syntactic positions of subject and object are switched in order to match the pragmatics of the utterance, and the ultimate word order becomes OVS. Such subject focus is a common feature in the newspaper register of Full Lithuanian, as illustrated below in an excerpt from FL:

- |  |        |
|--|--------|
| Text 1.  | FL (N) |
| 1. [...] <i>G. Verpetinsk-o firm-a gavo [...] akcij-ų.</i>   | SVO    |
| G. Verpetinskas-GEN company-NOM:SG received shares:GEN:PL 'Verpetinskas company received some shares.'                               |        |
| 2. <i>O jas dosnūsis pusbrol-is [...] perleido V. Šimulienei.</i>  | OSV    |
| and them:ACC:PL generous cousin-NOM:SG gave over to V. Šimulienė-DAT<br>'And the generous cousin gave them over to Šimulienė.'       |        |
| 3. <i>Dal-į akcij-ų neva perleid-ęs ir pats G. Krutulis.</i>   | OVS    |
| part-ACC:SG shares-GEN:PL supposedly gave over-PAST:PART and<br>Krutulis himself<br>'Krutulis himself gave over part of the shares.' |        |
| 4. <i>Tačiau teism-e jis tok-io fakt-o ne-prisimin-ė.</i>  | SOV    |
| but court-LOC:SG he such fact-GEN:SG NEG-remember-PAST<br>'But in court he did not remember such a fact.'                            |        |

The direct object NP *dalį akcijų* 'part of the shares' has been activated by the previous discourse (lines 1 and 2); it constitutes old information and is therefore placed pre-verbally as part of the topic. The subject NP, on the other hand, constitutes new information and is placed post-verbally as part of the focus construction. The relations dictated by the pragmatics of FL at the information structure level are achieved via this syntactic reorganization.

The analysis of two language varieties for a total corpus of 20,000 words shows the following results in the distribution of such OVS subject focus constructions. The results in total numbers are given in Table 1 and percentages are shown in Figure 1 below.

Table 1. Distribution of subject focus constructions in a corpus of written local news (N) in Full Lithuanian (FL) and American Lithuanian (AL)

	OVS	Total
FL (N)	46	290
AL (N)	65	317

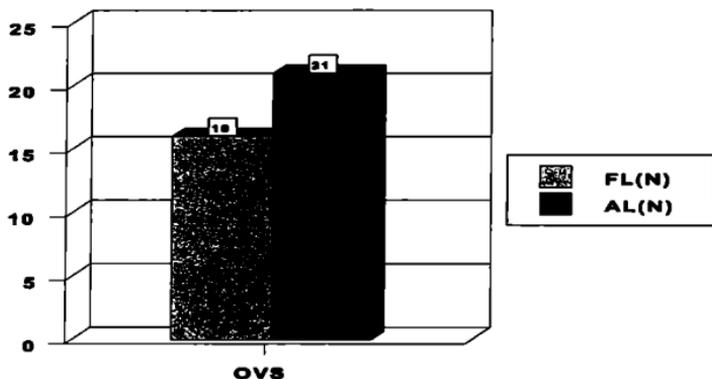


Figure 1

American Lithuanian local news writing shows more subject focus constructions (OVS) than the same register in Full Lithuanian (21% vs. 16%). A closer analysis reveals the more interesting point that subject focus constructions in the form of OVS serve three different pragmatic functions in Full Lithuanian:

Function 1: predicating information about the topic:

- (1) *Jį ištko baltoji karštinė. (Lietuvos Rytas) OVS*  
 him-ACC:SG happened/occurred D.T.'s-NOM:SG  
 'He got the D.T.'s (delirium tremens)'

Function 2: providing a contrastive focus:

- (2) *Juos domino ne tik alus, bet ir kraštotyra. (Lietuvos Rytas) OVS*  
 Them-ACC:PL interested not only beer-NOM:SG but also ethnography-NOM:SG  
 'They were interested not only in beer, but also in ethnography.'

Function 3: introducing a new agent:

- (3) *Konferenciją atidarė Violeta Kelertienė. OVS*  
 Conference-ACC:SG opened Violeta Kelertienė-NOM:SG

'The conference was opened by Violeta Kelertienė.'

Full Lithuanian local news writing shows that OVS structures are used for all three functions:

Function 1: 7 instances out of 46 (15%) FL (N)

Function 2: 10 instances out of 46 (22%)

Function 3: 29 instances out of 46 (63%)

By contrast, American Lithuanian local news writing shows the following distribution of pragmatic functions of OVS constructions:

Function 1: 1 instance out of a total of 65 (1.5%) AL (N)

Function 2: 1 instance out of a total of 65 (1.5%)

Function 3: 63 instances out of a total of 65 (97%)

That is, in AL (N) 97% of all instances of OVS constructions are used in function (3), i.e. to introduce new participants into the written discourse. The written American Lithuanian evidently is losing the two less salient pragmatic functions of OVS constructions, namely predicating information about the topic and providing a contrastive focus, and overgeneralizing the more pragmatically salient and most frequent function to introduce a new agent. As a result, written American Lithuanian almost always uses OVS constructions to introduce new participants into the discourse.

In fact, the function of introducing the participants who took part in different American Lithuanian activities being reported in local news articles is very important in American Lithuanian culture. It is important for the reporter to mention the names of different people who took part in the activities and to acknowledge their contribution to the local American Lithuanian community as a way of recognizing them and making the community aware of its most active and involved members. To illustrate this point, I provide a continuous excerpt from the local news in the American Lithuanian newspaper *Draugas*:

Text 2: AL (N)

1. *Suvažiavim-q atidarė Algirdas Ostis, tarybos pirmininkas.* OVS

Meeting-ACC:SG/Obj opened Algirdas Ostis-NOM:SG/Subj, chairman of the Council

'The meeting was opened by Algirdas Ostis, chairman of the Council.'

2. [...] *mald-q prieš susirinkimą kalbėjo Vaclov-as Momk-us.* OVS

prayer-ACC:SG/Obj before meeting said Vaclovas Momkus-NOM:SG/Subj

'The invocation before the meeting was given by Vaclovas Momkus.'

3. *Mirusiųjų pagerbimui, žvak-ę uždegė Edmundas Korzonas.* OVS

Deceased honor-DAT:SG candle-ACC:SG/Obj lit Vaclovas Momkus-NOM:SG/Subj

'To honor the deceased, the candle was lit by Edmundas Korzonas.'

4. *o mirusiųjų pavardes perskaiūt Ramona Steponavičiūtė.* OVS

and deceased names-ACC:PL/Obj read Ramona Steponavičiūtė-NOM:SG/Subj

'And the names of the deceased were read by Ramona Steponavičiūtė.'

5. *1997 metų laikotarpyje mirė 105 LF nariai.* VS

1997 year period-LOC died 105 LF members-NOM:PL/Subj

'During the year 1997, 105 members of LF [Lithuanian Foundation] passed away.'

The text is a good example of the significant role that the OVS construction plays in American Lithuanian text. All of the OVS constructions in the above text are used to introduce new participants into the discourse. In lines 1 through 4, the subject NPs are placed post-verbally as part of the focus construction. The people introduced in this AL text are central participants in the events being described in the local news. The activities reported in the news are well-known and therefore secondary in their importance, and the object NPs referring to them are placed preverbally as part of the topic (and therefore given, familiar information), while the main focus and therefore prominence is reserved solely for the participants of the event.

This local news register in AL is different from that of FL in that it focuses solely on the participants in the events and takes many of the American Lithuanian activities for granted. By doing so, written AL often ignores the necessary condition of referent activation in order for an object NP to appear in preverbal position as part of the topic in OVS constructions required in FL texts. In these instances the OVS constructions in written AL news are deviant from what would be expected from the perspective of the written register of Full Lithuanian in that the referent for the fronted object NP cannot be easily established for a reader of the article who was not part of the event being reported. The explicit links between referents characteristic of the written register in Full Lithuanian are missing in the same register of AL. The result is that, from the perspective of FL, the ratio of well-formed to ill-formed subject constructions in AL is somewhat erratic. That is, if the referent of object NP in an AL sentence happens to be active or accessible via the previous discourse, there is no deviation in the subject focus construction, where the object NP meaning 'meeting' can be inferred from the title of the article, "The Lithuanian Foundation Members' Meeting". But if under the same function of introducing new participants into the discourse the object NP is new, then subject focus is deviant. For example, the background information in AL Text 2 does not create a frame from which the object NP *malda* 'the invocation' in line 2 or the object NP *žvakę* 'the candle' in line 3, or even *mirusiujų pavardės* 'the names of the deceased' in line 4, could be accessible. The referents of such object NPs have not been mentioned in the text before, there is no frame created in the text from which they could be inferred, and therefore the referent NPs of 'the invocation' or 'the candle' or 'the names of the deceased' are not active and therefore would not be topicalized in the FL written register, which requires explicitness of expression.

American Lithuanian, however, puts emphasis on the participants in the event and positions them as the right-most elements in the text. With the emphasis falling on the most right-most elements in the sentence, the people mentioned become the most important elements in the event, the events themselves being secondary. The expectation of someone saying a prayer before the Foundation meeting is high

among members of the American Lithuanian community, who are familiar with the routine of this annual event, as is the expectation of honoring deceased members by lighting a candle and reading their names. As a result, such events are taken for granted by the writer and the readers in the American Lithuanian community, and pragmatic accommodation is made in American Lithuanian on the basis of situational rather than textual accessibility.

However, any Full Lithuanian reader/speaker who is not part of the American Lithuanian community and who has seldom or never participated in such events and who is reading this article would find it strange and “ritualistic” to hear someone say ‘THE prayer in honor of the deceased’ and ‘to light THE candle’ and ‘read the names of THE deceased’ right after the meeting was opened and before members took their seats in the Presidium, since there is no prior mention in the text that the deceased members of the Lithuanian Foundation would be remembered in any way. The only attempt to create a frame from which all of the above could be inferred and therefore taken as given and rightfully placed in topic position is the subordinate clause in line 3, ‘to honor THE deceased.’ However, the NP meaning ‘deceased’ in this case, again, has no referent. The question is, “what deceased?” One can only speculate that it most likely refers to some deceased that are somehow important for this group of people, which COULD be members of the Foundation who passed away between the previous meeting and the one being reported in the news. Thus, even with these allowances in mind, there is still no explicit frame from which inferences for the events reported in lines 2 through 4 can be made.

The English translation of these sentences helps to illustrate the problem. Given that Americans are used to having even secular community functions open with a prayer or ‘invocation’ by a member of the clergy, the translation of line 2 may be given as ‘Vaclovas Momkus said THE prayer,’ or ‘THE prayer was said by Vaclovas Momkus.’ But as there is no tradition of lighting candles at such secular meetings, a translation ‘Edmundas Korzonas lit THE candle,’ or ‘THE candle was lit by Edmundas Korzonas’ would leave the non-Lithuanian American reader wondering “what candle?” Therefore, a default phrasing in the form of presentational, event-reporting SVO constructions, ‘Vaclovas Momkus said A prayer’ (line 2) and ‘Edmundas Korzonas lit A candle (line 3),’ would be appropriate in English in this case.<sup>2</sup> In this revised translation then, the referents of both the object and subject NPs are new, the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic roles are in alliance, and the focus covers the entire proposition, which has a presentational, event-reporting function. The subject NP is then not the topic, but merely one participant in the events.

---

<sup>2</sup>Event-reporting SVO constructions are different from topic-focus SVO constructions in their focus type. In the first case the whole proposition is in focus, thus sentence focus type, whereas in the second case only the predicate falls under the focus scope, thus predicate focus type. For details see Lambrecht (1994).

In AL news reports local events are taken as background information; ignored are the needs of any (e.g., FL) reader who can only access such background information via the text itself. From the point of view of AL writers and readers, the focus of these AL articles is on the participants in familiar, assumed events, and these participants thus become more important in the sense that they have performed certain activities, and therefore are taken to be more prominent in the discourse. Because of this, the introductory function of the OVS construction used by writers of AL to introduce participants violates the necessary referent accessibility condition which in FL is necessary for an object NP to be fronted to the topic position. In FL, the OVS constructions used in the American Lithuanian news reports contradict the referent accessibility condition necessary for a FL (or any) reader who is not part of the community and who is not familiar enough with the structure of such American Lithuanian activities to be able to make such pragmatic accommodation.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the data on subject focus constructions three important claims can be made. First, they show that attrited languages do retain word order variation, and this fact speaks against the theory of monostylism in attrited languages and against the leveling of word order variation in favor of transparent SVO constructions (Dressler 1982, 1988). Second, this also shows superstratum interference to be an inadequate explanation for all changes taking place in language attrition situations. Even though most of American Lithuanians living in the US are surrounded and influenced by the English language on everyday basis, the influence of English alone cannot explain the retention of OVS constructions in written AL. And, third, it supports the argument that one of the major forces in language change has to do with language use (Dorian 1981, 1994), which can explain the retention of variation in attrited language and can account for changes that occur in attrited language as compared to a full language used under the same sociolinguistic circumstances. Written American Lithuanian, in this case, retains the use of the OVS constructions but only in its most salient pragmatic function, namely, to introduce new participants in the discourse. In fact, this pragmatic function is so important in the local news register in the American Lithuanian paper that OVS constructions show a considerable increase compared to FL. Thus, this change in word order variation is functionally motivated. Apart from the retention of word order variation and functionally motivated change in usage, the written news register of American Lithuanian shows that limitations in the activities where the language is used and a high degree of reliance on familiarity with local events by members of the community require greater reliance on shared context in the written register. As a result, in contrast to the full language variety where context has to be built up and a basis of shared knowledge has to be established gradually, the written news register of AL relies more heavily on shared context and in this way is deviant from what would be expected in the same written register of Full Lithuanian language.

ARGUMENTAI PRIEŠ MONOSTILIZMĄ KALBOS NYKIMO SITUACIJOSE:  
OVS KONSTRUKCIJOS AMERIKOS LIETUVIU KALBOJE

*Santrauka*

Šiame straipsnyje yra nagrinėjama rašytinė Amerikos lietuvių kalba ir parodoma, kad kalbos nykimo procesas nesibaigia monostilizmu, bet pasižymi variacijomis, būdingomis nykimo proceso nepalietoms kalboms. Skirtingai nuo normaliai funkcionuojančių kalbų, šios variacijos yra gana ribotos dėl sumažėjusių funkcijų, kurias atlieka nykstanti kalba emigracijoje.

Aiškinant kalbos nykimo priežastis, straipsnyje yra taip pat liečiamas superstrato kalbos įtakos klausimas. OVS konstrukcijų analizė Amerikos lietuvių rašytinėje kalboje rodo, kad vien anglų kalbos įtaka Amerikos lietuvių kalbai negali paaiškinti šių konstrukcijų vartosenos pakitimų. Straipsnyje lyginamos OVS konstrukcijos rašytinėje Amerikos lietuvių kalboje su jų vartojimu rašytinėje dabartinėje lietuvių kalboje. Ši analizė rodo, kad kalbos funkcijų, kurias atlieka kalba emigracijoje, sumažėjimas yra viena iš svarbiausių priežasčių, veikiančių kalbos kitimą.

REFERENCES

- Andersen R. W.*, 1982, Determining the Linguistic Attributes of Language Attrition. – *The Loss of Language Skills* / ed. by R. D. Lambert and B. F. Freed. Rowley: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 83–118.
- Dorian N.*, 1981, *Language Death: The Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.
- Dorian N.*, 1994, Stylistic Variation in a Language Restricted to Private-Sphere Use. – *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Register Variation* / ed. by D. Biber and E. Finegan. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 215–232.
- Dressler W.*, 1982, Acceleration, Retardation, and Reversal in Language Decay? – *Language Spread* / ed. by R. L. Cooper. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 321–336.
- Dressler W.*, 1988, *Language Death*. – *Linguistics: the Cambridge Survey* / ed. by F. Newmeyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, vol. 4, 184–192.
- Lambrecht K.*, 1994, *Information Structure and Sentence Form*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Macevichius J.*, 1998, Discourse Diminution in the Newspaper Register of American Lithuanian. – *Papers in Sociolinguistics: Nwave-26 a l'Universite Laval* / ed. by C. Paradis, D. Vincent, D. Deshaies, M. Laforest. Quebec: Editions Nota Bene, 229–238.
- Macevichius J.* (To appear), The Beginnings of Language Loss in Discourse: a Case Study of Referentiality in American Lithuanian. – *Studies in Multilingualism*. Tilburg: Tilburg University Press.
- Macevichius J.*, 2000, The Beginnings of Language Loss in Discourse: a Case Study of American Lithuanian. Ph. D. Dissertation. Los Angeles: University of Southern California.
- Pažūsis L.*, 1970, Fonetinė ir morfologinė angliškų skolinių integracija Šiaurės Amerikos lietuvių kalboje: Ph. D. dissertation. Vilnius: VU.
- Sasse H.-J.*, 1992a, Language Decay and Contact-Induced Change: Similarities and Differences. – *Language Death: Factual and Theoretical Explorations with Reference to East Africa* / ed. by M. Brenzinger. Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 59–80.
- Sasse H.-J.*, 1992b, Theory of Language Death. – *Language Death: Factual and Theoretical Explorations with Reference to East Africa* / ed. by M. Brenzinger. Berlin-New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 7–30.
- Seliger H. W., Vago R. M.*, 1991, The Study of First Language Attrition: An Overview. – *First Language Attrition* / ed. by H. W. Seliger, and R. M. Vago. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3–17.