The Polish Construction *iść w sołdaty* and the Category of Depreciativity in Polish

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Abstract

This paper deals with the Polish construction *iść w sołdaty*, which is grammatically atypical: it is not clear what the value of its noun constituent’s case is. The point of departure for the analysis is Igor Mel’čuk’s paper about the parallel Russian construction. (The Polish construction was borrowed from the Russian during Russian rule on Polish territory.) The solution is similar to that for Russian: *sołdaty* in this expression is an atypical (non-virile or depreciative) accusative form.

Keywords

Polish, grammatical case, virility, depreciativity.

1 Introduction

In contemporary Polish there exist constructions of the type *iść w dyrektory* ‘to start to be a director’, lit., ‘to go into directors’, which are especially used in some circles in informal situations. For example, in universities there is a jargon expression *poszedł w rektory* ‘he started to be the president (of the university)’. Recently such constructions, which have not been previously analyzed in Polish linguistics, have attracted the attention of some researchers.\(^1\) It is worth looking at the Russian parallel for their interpretation.

2 On the Russian Construction *идти в солдаты*

The parallel Russian construction *идти в солдаты* (‘начать быть солдатом’ = ‘to start to be a soldier’, lit., ‘to go into soldiers’) has been discussed by Igor Mel’čuk (Mel’čuk, 1995,

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\(^1\) In recent months three colleagues, Marek Łaziński, Mirosław Bańko, and Adam Przepiórkowski, began – of their own initiative – to discuss them with us.
The main problem of that paper was the case of the noun in this expression. Let us look into the matter more closely.

The construction of the type идти в солдаты is built according to the model: Y в X-ы, where: Y denotes one of several hundred verbs (e.g., идти ‘go’, брать ‘take’, рваться ‘be dying for’) and several nouns (e.g., кандидат ‘candidate’); and X — as Mel’čuk writes — is “any noun (= S), denoting a creature and obligatorily occurring in the plural form [...] In this position all possible designations of people (ranks, names, nationalities, professions, social positions, ...), in particular — all anthroponyms (first names, nicknames, surnames of people), names of inhabitants [...], neologisms of the type хиппи ‘hippie’ [...], designations of the deceased [...], and also names of animals and zoonyms are acceptable” (Mel’čuk, 1995, 537).

The main question can be solved in three ways:

- X is in the nominative (Nom.)
- X is in the accusative (Acc.)
- X is in another — special — case.

The third answer — as Mel’čuk claims — involves a multiplication of entities, something that is generally useless and only complicates the problem. A new case would be created exclusively for the need of this construction. Thus such a solution is excluded by the author, who analyzes two other hypotheses. The choice between them is not easy.

The Russian солдаты (and other noun forms occurring in our construction) is a standard, regular form of the nominative plural. The accusative of all animate nouns in the plural in Russian has a special form (one not occurring with inanimate nouns) equal to that of the genitive case:

\[ \text{form(Acc. pl)} = \text{form(Gen. pl)} \]

The possible accusative endings for animate nouns are:

- Ø брать-я не (солдат)
- ов (-ев) вижу лётчик-ов
- ей имею друз-ей

If we take into account the purely morphological relations, we should accept as possible the construction идти в солдат. Thus the morphological analysis suggests interpretation of the case of the noun солдаты in the considered construction as the nominative (Nom. pl).

Syntactic relations suggest another solution. The Russian preposition в governs the accusative (Acc.). The case of the noun in the collocation идти в школу ‘go to school’ is — without any doubt — the accusative. Moreover, if we misheard something, we would ask spontaneously for the noun in the construction идти в солдаты with interrogative pronouns in the accusative: В кого? Во что? — and the correct, natural reaction is в солдаты, although this textual unit is not labeled Acc.pl.

After careful analysis, Mel’čuk accepts the accusative hypothesis. He explains the non-standard form of the accusative referring to the category of the animacy in Russian, which he divides into two constituents: morphological and syntactic. Morphological animacy manifests itself only in the form of the substantive (the declension); syntactic animacy is visible in the
form of the lexemes governed by the noun (the accusative): their case and animacy values agree with those of the noun. Syntactic animacy can be full or partial (when one syntactic dependent of the noun takes the animate inflectional form and another one takes the inanimate one; examples will be given below). In the construction идти в солдаты the noun form does not have the feature of morphological animacy, because it occurs in the accusative position in the form characteristic of the nominative — a typical attribute of inanimate nouns in Russian. Their accusative has a form identical to that of the nominative:

form(Acc. pl) = form(Nom. pl)

Moreover, this form exhibits features of weak syntactic animacy. This means that immediate adjective dependents show inanimate agreement with the head (e.g., идти в русские [*в русских] солдаты [*солдат], lit., ‘to go into Russian soldiers’), but more distant dependents, such as relative pronouns, require the animate form (e.g. которых я люблю, lit., ‘whom I love’).

3 From the History of the Polish Construction iść w sołdaty

The Russian construction discussed by Mel’čuk should be treated as atypical or strange. Such phenomena demand a special analysis. Similar features are characteristic, mutatis mutandis, of Polish constructions parallel to the Russian ones. Their occurrence in Polish is distinctly more limited. Their rarity is not strange, however, because in all likelihood they were borrowed from Russian (many educated Poles who know Russian relatively well are conscious of this fact). Their origin is revealed in one of the oldest examples of its use:

Ten wasz przyjaciel dał nam się we znaki: ‘This friend of yours gave us a hard time:
Buntował nam lud… A dziś na Kaukazie He incited our people to rebel… and now in the Caucasus
Bije się… w proste posłany sołdaty. He is fighting… sent into common soldiers.’

Those are words of a Russian major in the play Fantazy, written in 1840 by the great Polish romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki. We find in it the word sołdat, an obvious Russianism in Polish, which refers first of all to Russian (and later Soviet) soldiers. The man described in the passage was drafted by force into the Russian army after the Polish November Insurrection of 1830, probably as an officer. Later, after further adventures, he is sent farther, as a private. In the continuation, this Polish rebel (in the posthumous edition of the play of 1860 he is introduced as ‘Jan, zesłany na Sybir w sołdaty’ ‘Jan, sent to Siberia into soldiers’) appears on the stage and speaks:

Więc się tobie zwierzę, ‘So I shall reveal to you,
Pod tajemnicą jakoby spowiedzi, under the secret of confession,
Żem szlachcic – w proste zesłany żołnierze that I am a nobleman,
Za rewolucją… sent into common soldiers because of the revolution …’

Now instead of the marked sołdat we have the neutral and Polish żołnierz ‘soldier’. The poet used a linguistic calque for artistic effect. As we will see later, these means were used also by other authors.
We should add that the major, an important (and very sympathetic) character in the play, speaks a great deal – in Polish. Słowacki, educated in the Eastern region of the former Polish Commonwealth and knowing eastern Slavic languages quite well, has stylized his speech by using numerous Russianisms. The Major is a Russified “Cherkes captive taken as a child from a village” (“czerkieski plennik, porwany kiedy dzieciakiem z aułu”). In his later life he became a liberal, the closest friend of the executed Decembrist Sergey Murav’ev-Apostle, and a participant in the conspiracy and insurrection on Senate Square. He describes the most important event of his life thus:

Taj zadrzał... widząc w gwiaździstym szeregu ‘And I shuddered ... seeing in the star-spangled row
Cara... i główny sztab w tęczowych lentach, The tsar ... and the general staff in iridescent ribbons,
Taj lont... syczący przyłożył do śniegu, And I put the hissing match into the snow,
Uczuł strach w sercu i w głowie i w piętach, I felt fear in my heart, my head, my heels,
Taj paszol w durnie – And I went into fools (= I became a fool) – ‘

And here we have another example of the construction under consideration! However, we have serious doubts as to whether we may include it in our material. We do not know in what language it is formulated. The last phrase contains elements of three languages, but as a whole it is not in Polish, in Russian, or in Ukrainian.

The oldest example of our construction in Polish also comes from Słowacki’s work, from his famous tragedy Kordian (1832):

Starą matkę wziął z chałupy, ‘He took his old mother from the cottage,
Król frejlinę ją mianował, The king nominated her a lady-in-waiting
A plebana pożałował And designated the parson
W biskupy. Into bishops (= designated him a bishop).’

This example of an obvious Russianism is very interesting. The meaning of the Polish verb pożałować ‘designate’ does not appear in any Polish dictionary, starting with the dictionary of 16th-century Polish. Nor does it appear in Linde’s dictionary, the Warsaw dictionary, or Doroszewski’s dictionary, although Kordian was one of its sources; perhaps it was disqualified by the lexicographers. Moreover, this meaning in Russian is also marginal: we do not find it in Ozhegov’s dictionary, but it is included in Dal’s dictionary and the new Kuznecov dictionary (2000).²

Those first quotations originate from literary texts that reflect, generally speaking, the standardized language of educated Poles. However, our expression – with its prototype iść w soldaty – entered Polish by a different path. Members of the Polish elite, like Jan in Fantazy, were drafted as simple privates into the Russian army by way of punishment, but Polish peasants were inducted regularly and compulsorily. In Polish lands under Russian rule there were tens of thousands of Russian soldiers. And the army was a place where language contact was especially close; where the influence of Russian on Polish, both spoken and informal,

² Cf. пожаловать – ист: возвести в какой-л. чин, звание, или назначить на какую-л. должность. Пожаловать в бояре, в дворяне.
was most visible; and where Polish commoners spontaneously used Russian. We can see this phenomenon in another literary work, the story *Szkice w gleb* ‘Coal sketches’, by Henryk Sienkiewicz. A Jewish innkeeper speaks to a Polish peasant with the words:

*No, pasiół won, ty soldat!* ‘Hey, get out, you soldier!’

This sentence is bad Russian, pronounced in Polish fashion. In the same story we find a threat:

– *Pomsta na was!* – krzyknął pan pisarz – *Pomsta na was!* Czekajcie! **pójdzie** Rzepa **w soldaty**. ‘Woe betide you! – cried the clerk – Woe betide you! Wait! Rzepa will go into soldiers.’

And a countrywoman wails:

– *Oj! moja Stachowa, tak się boję, żeby mi mego Franka **w żołnierze nie wzięli**.* ‘Oh, my Stachowa, I am so afraid that my Frank will be taken into soldiers.’

In the first example we find the marked *soldaty*, in the second one, the neutral *żołnierze*. This is the repetition in another register of Słowacki’s artistic device.

This expression gained popularity in several variants. We find it in other literary works, e.g., *Nad Niemnem* ‘On the Niemen’ by Eliza Orzeszkowa (*wzięć* ‘take’ **w soldaty, pójść* ‘go’ **w soldaty*), *Popioły* ‘Ashes’ by Stefan Żeromski (*pójdziesz* ‘you will go’ **w żołnierze*), *Słowo o Jakubie Szeli* ‘About Jakub Szela’ by Bruno Jasieński (*pójdzie* ‘he will go’ **w żołnierze*). The most interesting is its occurrence in one of the sonnets *Z chałupy* ‘From the Cottage’ by Jan Kasprowicz, written in 1887 (*wzięli go* ‘they took him’ **w soldaty*). Kasprowicz, the son of a peasant from Polish lands under Prussian rule, was well educated in German schools and universities, but he did not know Russian. ¹ The local color of the poem (and of the whole poetic cycle) is connected with the part of Poland under Prussian partition; the young man was taken into the German kaiser’s army. And Polish peasants from this region used that expression – of Russian origin (it has no equivalent in German).

### 4 Extension of the Polish Construction *iść w soldaty*

The Polish construction *iść w soldaty* has the same structural pattern as its Russian model:

*Y w X-y*.

but the extension of acceptable lexemes is distinctly more limited.

There are many examples with the prototypic *soldaty* – we have found 98 different instances, in variants, on the Internet. Possible in Polish are *iść/pójść* (‘go’) **w soldaty**, as well as *wcielać* ‘enlist’, *brać wziąć, zabierać* ‘take’, *oddać* ‘give’, *zaciągnąć* ‘enlist’, *powołać* ‘enlist’, *wlec* ‘drag’, *porwać, posłać* ‘send’, *pognać* ‘speed’, *zesłać* ‘send into exile’, *wywieźć* ‘take away’. There are also examples having a noun in the head position (Y): *zsyłka* ‘exile’ (this word in Polish is also a Russianism and adds a specific color to the whole), *wcielenie* ‘enlistment’, *kandydat* ‘candidate’ and elliptic ones (without any syntactic head). Moreover, in the position

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¹ He did not learn Russian even later, although his third and last wife was Maria Bunina, the daughter of a Russian general.
of X, we find primarily nouns semantically closest to the prototype: żołnierze, rekruty ‘recruits’ (nie dajem chłopaków w rekruty ‘we do not give boys into recruits’, from Chłopi ‘The peasants’ by Władysław Stanisław Reymont), oficery ‘officers’, generały ‘generals’, and some more distant: ministry ‘ministers’, doktory ‘doctors’, profesory ‘professors’, rektory ‘presidents (of a university)’, kardynały ‘cardinals’. The most popular noun in this construction is dyrektory. We have also found examples of: to move (ruszyć), push one’s way (pchać się), drop (obsunąć się), or fly off (wyfrunąć) into directors. Intensity of movement seems to be characteristic for our construction. In one example someone prze w prezydenty ‘pushes his way into presidents’. Someone else took off not into presidents, nor into representatives, nor into senators (Nie startowalem w Prezydenty, ani Posły czy Senatory). It is possible to find the noun in quotes – meaning that the author does not treat this construction as neutral. There are also elliptic instances: może by tak w biskupy? ‘maybe into bishops? (as well as other quotations and paraphrases of Słowacki’s pożalować w biskupy).

The material quoted above includes all the lexemes, nouns and verbs found in this construction – on the Internet, in corpora and in literature. Generally speaking, there occur in Polish:

- some verbs of motion in the position of Y, e.g., iść, posłać, przejść, zesłać;
- something that a person can become in the position of X, mainly human functions and positions, especially high ones.

However, there are other important limitations. First of all, we should note that in Polish our construction cannot use proper names, especially given names or surnames, as in Mel’čuk’s example:

Ôn давно норовиò в Зализниаки.

‘For a long time he has pushed his way upwards into Zalizniaks’

Such examples are not excluded. It is possible that someone will translate a Russian text literally and will introduce a calque. However, we did not find any instance of our construction with a proper name, of the type: *iść w Kościuszki ‘go into Kościuszkos’ or *sposobić się w Clintony ‘prepare himself into Clintons’.

More importantly, Polish excludes feminine nouns in the position of X (in contrast to Russian, cf. брать в жены ‘take into wives’, прочить в балерины ‘designate into ballerinas’). A woman in Polish cannot be “taken into wives” *wzięta w żony (only za żonę – prep. za with Acc. sg.); she cannot *pójść w dyrektorki, kierowniczki or żołnierki ‘go into headmistresses, manageresses or servicewomen’ (nor *stoczyć się w ładacznice or dziwki ‘get degraded into harlots or whores’), in contrast – she can pójść w dyrektorki, kierowniki or żołnierze (stylistically better: sołdaty) ‘go into headmasters, managers or servicemen’.

The main problem of our analysis is that, as in Russian, it is difficult to decide which case occurs in this construction. These problems should be analyzed on the basis of the grammatical system of Polish. For the Russian construction the important factor is the opposition (category) of animacy, for the Polish one it is “virility” (masculinity, “męskoosobowość”).

All the examples found by us and others contain as X (the nominal part of the construction) a noun form of the virile gender. This is a special form, marked and non-standard; we call it the depreciative form. To continue our analysis it is necessary to introduce basic information about the Polish gender system.
5 Depreciative Forms in Polish

There are three subgenders of the masculine in Polish (cf. Mańczak 1956, Saloni 1976). They are discerned on the basis of the inflected adjective forms that they govern. We have three possibilities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Widzę ___ ‘I see ___’</th>
<th>Acc. sing.</th>
<th>Acc. pl.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m1 (“masc. personal”, “virile”)</td>
<td>dobręgo chłopca ‘good boy’</td>
<td>dobrych chłopców</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m2 (“masc. animal”)</td>
<td>dobręgo psa ‘good dog’</td>
<td>dobre psy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m3 (“masc. inanimate”)</td>
<td>dobry stół ‘good table’</td>
<td>dobre stoły</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The nouns soldat, oficer, etc., are virile (m1), because:

Widzę dobrego soldata/oficera. ‘I see a good soldier/officer’

Widzę dobrych soldatów/oficerów. ‘I see good soldiers/officers’

The gender classification of these lexemes is a necessary condition for deciding which case occurs in the construction we are discussing. However it is not a sufficient condition. Many non-professional but educated native speakers may have problems with locating the forms soldaty, oficerzy in the noun paradigm. The Polish version of the popular program Word marks them as incorrect, although they occur fairly frequently in Polish texts. This is caused by the situation in the nominative (and, potentially, the vocative) plural. Virile nouns have in this case, in addition to the standard, neutral and much more frequent (“personal”) form, another one, which is marked and depreciative (“non-personal”, cf. Saloni, 1988). Their opposition, both morphological and syntactic, can be shown by examples:

Byli to dobrzy specjaliści/soldaci/oficerowie. ‘They were good specialists/soldiers/officers.’

Były to dobre specjalisty/soldaty/oficery.

Interestingly enough, the “neutral” form – in terms of superficial morphology – has special features, while the depreciative one is totally “regular”, i.e., it is derived like the only nominative plural form of nouns of other genders representing the same inflectional pattern. For instance, for the noun soldat the depreciative form is soldaty (like the nom. pl. of the noun bat ‘whip’, chata ‘house’: baty, chaty) and the “neutral” form soldaci has no analogy in paradigms of nouns of other genders. It happens that both forms coincide morphologically; however we identify them by their dependents: ci (prości) żołnierze – te (proste) żołnierze (the second, depreciative, form was used by Słowacki in the quotation above).

Grammarians frequently express doubts about whether we can derive both nominative plural forms for all virile nouns. Our answer is positive, because we treat the language as productive – a system, not just a textual performance⁴. Depreciativity is for us a grammatical category.

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⁴ There are nouns for which the depreciative form is much more frequent in the nominative plural, e.g., przedszkolaczek ‘kindergarten pupil’, cham ‘boor’, and the existence of the neutral, “personal” form is debatable. As a rule, we are not sure, whether we can say ci przedszkolaczkowie and ci chami/chamowie. However it is possible to find instances of such forms in texts (especially on the Internet). The appropriate queries will be provided in the scope of work on the forthcoming grammatical dictionary of Polish.
The meaning of depreciative forms varies for individual nouns; however, as a rule they are marked. Most often they express disgust, aversion, contempt, disrespect. The typical contrast is the following: dobrzy kierowcy ‘good drivers’ may be said with approbation; dobre kierowce is unambiguously ironic. Nevertheless it sometimes happens that the depreciative is used in archaization or introduces a solemn, pathetic mood, e.g.,

Ci, co polegną – pójdą w bohatery. ‘Those who perish will go into (= become) heroes.’
Ci, co przeżyją – pójdą w generały. ‘Those who survive will go into (= become) generals.’
(J. Kaczmarski, Somosierra)

The neutral forms of both nouns above are: bohaterowie, generalowie. Both depreciative forms have been used with an evident stylistic purpose in our construction. Additionally, there is the question of what their case is. The consideration above would suggest that such forms can occur only in the nominative (or the vocative), because the opposition in the accusative is the basis of differentiating masculine subgenders. Does this statement lead us to a consistent description of Polish grammar?

6 Nominative or Accusative?

The statement that the noun in the construction iść w soldaty occurs in the depreciative form does not solve all the problems connected with its grammatical interpretation. We must decide what its case is. In our discussion we will not repeat Mel’čuk’s arguments. We will concentrate on specific features of Polish.

6.1 Nominative

This solution implies that the preposition w governs the nominative. Its standard government is the accusative or the locative. (The latter interpretation is excluded because the textual context of the locative is distinctly different from that of the nominative or the accusative). Nominative government of a standard primary preposition in Polish would be something exceptional. Superficially (on the text level), collocations consisting of the preposition w with words that can be interpreted as nominatives are frequent. This is the consequence of the syncretism obligatory for non-virile nouns: form(Acc. pl) = form(Nom. pl). So we have:

Myśliwi poszli w lasy tropem wilka. ‘Hunters went into the woods after a wolf.’
Partyzanci uszli w puszcze. ‘Partisans ran away into forests.’

and also in the singular for some genders (masculine inanimate and neuter):

Myśliwi poszli w las tropem wilka. ‘Hunters went into the wood after a wolf.’

However, elementary substitutions can lead us to an unambiguous interpretation:

Myśliwi poszli w gęstwinę (Acc. sg.) tropem wilka. ‘Hunters went into a thicket after a wolf.’
Partyzanci uszli w puszcę (Acc. sg.). ‘Partisans ran away into the forest.’

The preposition requires the accusative. The correctness of the substitution is obvious for any Pole.
There are also phraseological units containing *w with the accusative, similar to our construction, e.g., *iść w ślady ojca ‘follow in his/her father’s footsteps’, *postać w diably ‘send to the devil’, *iść/*postać w kamasze ‘send to the army’ (kamasze ‘soldier’s boots’). These nouns are of genders other than virile (in Polish *diabel ‘devil’ is optionally non-virile).

After the preposition *w it is not possible to use the neutral, non-depreciative form (non-syncretic with any other case) of a virile noun. This fact relates to both our construction and other expressions. Expressions of the type *postać w soldaci/dyrektorzy/biskupi are unanimously treated as impossible in Polish; we did no find any example in texts.

The hypothesis that what occurs in the construction *iść w soldaty is the nominative, should be treated as failed because of its very limited scope: it concerns only virile nouns and only their depreciative plural form.

6.2 Accusative

If we accept this hypothesis, the construction *iść w soldaty is analogous to *iść w ślady ojca, *postać w kamasze or *postać w diably, where the preposition governs the accusative of the noun. This analogy is obvious even for speakers who have an elementary knowledge of grammar.

Let us repeat that for virile nouns we have this relationship: form(Acc. pl) = form(Gen. pl).

If we accept, without limitation, the hypothesis that in the construction *iść w soldaty the noun is in the accusative, we could be in danger for two reasons: we would need to accept sentences like *poszli w soldatów, and we would need to accept depreciative forms in the accusative.

The first solution would not be approved by speakers of Polish: they do not accept the form *soldatów in this context in this meaning. However, the reason for this objection is not grammatical. The phrase *w soldatów (Acc.) is correct when considered outside our construction, e.g., when *w + Acc. is governed by a verb, e.g., *wierzy w soldatów ‘he believes in soldiers’. Moreover, the expression *On poszedł w soldatów can be acceptable – on the condition that it is not a manifestation of the construction under consideration, but a loose collocation of words, whose meaning is simply a combination of its constituents: ‘he went among soldiers’.

The second solution will have only theoretical consequences for our grammar: if we define *soldaty as accusative, we could need to say that there are two forms of this case. But we have distinguished the virile gender on the basis of the opposition in the accusative plural and have accepted only one form of this case. We also formulated tests for differentiating the masculine subgenders.

However, we can accept the hypothesis with limitations. First, we can say that in this construction a virile noun looses its virility and behaves like a non-virile one. Such a solution would be analogous to Mel’čuk’s for Russian. We propose another solution: our construction is stabilized, almost a phraseological unit. What distinguishes it from other phraseological units is its grammatical, not its lexical character. So we can treat it as an atypical expression having its own properties and demanding a special, depreciative (non-virile and equal to the
nominative) form of the accusative. There are atypical forms occurring in other phraseological units, e.g., in the phrases wyjść za męż ‘to marry (a husband)’ or na kon! lit., ‘to horse!’ (a traditional military command), both analogous to Russian examples analyzed by Mel'čuk. In both, a nominal form that is not in the regular accusative occurs after a preposition governing the accusative (it should be: za męża, na konia).

Thus we can classify our construction as a two-argument grammatical operator with very strict limits on both constituents. The main restriction is the requirement of a special noun form.

Bibliography


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5 The similar construction (or the operator) consisting of the preposition *nad* and two forms of the same noun of the type *pan nad pany* ‘the master above all others’ has been discussed with us by Robert Wołosz. The first form is in singular (any case), the second in plural, but it is not clear in what case: it can be interpreted as either the accusative (deprecative) or the instrumental (archaic). In the feminine, where these cases are distinguished, both are possible, e.g. *pani nad panie/paniami* ‘the mistress above all others’.