

Relativization in two morphologically ergative languages: a corpus study

18.00 – 18: 30: Dmitry Ganenkov (Institute of Linguistics, Moscow / Bamberg University)

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Lezgian and Avar are morphologically ergative languages from the Nakh-Daghestanian (East Caucasian) language family spoken in Daghestan, Russia. The present corpus study deals with frequency of relativization of the core grammatical functions S, A, and P in these two languages. The main focus of this paper is on relativization of core arguments in clauses with two-place (standard transitive, TR, and subject experiencer, SE) verbs.

Three types of data on relativization in Lezgian and Avar have been extracted from corpora yielding 11 different datasets for each language: (i) a random sample of 2000 relative clauses, (ii) a random sample of 150 core argument (subject or object) relative clauses for each of the following five TR verbs: ‘write’, ‘put, build’, ‘eat’, ‘show’, and ‘throw’, (iii) a random sample of 150 core argument (subject or object) relative clauses for each of the following five SE verbs: ‘see’, ‘hear’, ‘find’, ‘love’, and ‘know’.

Two main empirical findings of this corpus study are as follows. First, Lezgian and Avar differ with respect to frequency of relativization of A and P. Avar, as preliminarily reported earlier by Polinsky et al. (2012), shows no preference for relativization on A or P. Lezgian, by contrast, displays statistically significant preference for relativization on the absolutive P. Second, in Avar relative clauses, SE verbs do not significantly differ from TR verbs. In Lezgian, however, there is such a difference – in contrast to standard A and P, relativization of SE verbs does not provide statistical evidence for preference of the absolutive object over the dative subject, or vice versa. In addition, the difference between TR and SE verbs seems to be gradient, since some SE verbs are close to TR verbs with respect to relativization, while others are radically different.

These two points of divergence — (i) object preference in Lezgian vs. no relativization preference in Avar, and (ii) object preference with TR verbs vs. no preference with SE verbs in Lezgian — are an input for a theoretical analysis. In this paper, I argue that neither processing-based accounts nor purely semantic/thematic explanations can predict the observed distribution. In particular, I argue against the account proposed by Polinsky et al. (2012) who derive the absence of A or P preference in Avar relative clauses from dissociation of, and competition between, grammatical function and case in morphologically ergative languages where grammatical function (subject) works for the A preference, whereas morphological case (absolutive) works for the P preference. I show that the observed differences in frequency correlate with data on anaphor binding and conclude that both ultimately derive from different structural position of core arguments at earlier steps of derivation. In the end, I briefly discuss the results of this study in the context of current theoretical approaches to syntactic ergativity.