

Bi-absolutive construction in Nakh-Dagestanian: Unity and diversity
(oral)

Introduction. Nakh-Dagestanian (ND) languages are characterized by ergative alignment, i.e., subjects of intransitive clauses pattern with patient arguments of transitive clauses with respect to case marking and agreement, with agent arguments getting ergative case.

Bi-absolutives in Nakh-Dagestanian. Almost all ND languages have a bi-absolutive (BA) construction, in which both arguments of the transitive clause are marked with the absolutive case (ABS), as in (1); in such a construction, the agent corresponds to the ‘higher’ ABS, and the patient to the ‘lower’ ABS. The ergative counterpart can be found in the same context (2), though the difference in case marking is associated with subtle differences in meaning. It has been observed that BA sentences are only found with verbs in non-perfective aspect. In this paper we present diagnostics of syntactic structure of the BA construction in ND, which reveal that despite surface similarities (as discussed in Forker 2012), there are structural subtypes among ND BA constructions requiring different analyses.

Possible Analyses. Syntactic properties of the BA construction have received at least two analyses: (a) pseudo-noun-incorporation (Forker 2010, 2012), and (b) bi-clausal structure, with the lower clause corresponding to a non-finite clause (Kazenin & Testelec 1999, Kazenin 2001). Despite accounting for some facts in some languages, neither analysis can be applied to ND languages across the board (cf. Forker 2012). We propose that the two analyses may be still viable, but only for some ND languages. We also propose a third analytical possibility for BA constructions: (c) restructuring or clause union (Wurmbrand 2004). Under the restructuring analysis, the BA construction is monoclausal with several functional heads above VP.

We discuss the diagnostics that distinguish between the three analytical possibilities. Under (a) ‘pseudo’-noun incorporation (Massam 2001), the lower ABS cannot be expressed by a pronominal or demonstrative; the order of the patient argument and the verb must be fixed (patient-V); gapping constructions must be impossible (if patient and verb form a constituent, it should be impossible to omit just the verb in one of the clauses, given the structural parallelism requirement on gapping); the word order Agent_{ABS} Patient_{ABS} IO V must be impossible. To differentiate between (b) and (c), further structural tests are needed. The bi-clausal analysis presupposes that the patient argument and the lexical verb belong to a separate clause, to the exclusion of the agent argument. We can therefore expect that the patient cannot be bound by the agent (unless a language has logophors); separate clausal negation should be possible on the lexical verb; the causative derivation should be impossible, and topic/focus particles should be possible in the patient-verb clause. None of these characteristics are expected under restructuring. To illustrate the differences between three analyses, we present and compare data from three ND languages: Bagwali (analysis (a)), Chechen and Lak (b), and Tsez (c).

- (1) Rasul qata bullali-sa-r. (2) Rasul-lul qata bullali-sa-r.
Rasul.1.ABS house.3.ABS 3.build:DUR-PART-3 Rasul-ERG house.3.ABS 3.build:DUR-PART-3
‘Rasul is building a house.’ (Lak; Kazenin 1999: 101)