

East Caucasian relativization: descriptive categories vs comparative concepts

Oral

Theme session: Generalized Noun Modifying Clause Constructions

East Caucasian relativization is hardly subject to any syntactic constraint. Grammars have to provide long lists of syntactic positions which are all perfectly relativizable. Moreover, in some cases it is problematic to ‘reconstruct’ a finite clause corresponding to the relative one. In the following example, the noun ‘place’ cannot be inserted into the original clause to yield a grammatically and pragmatically well-formed utterance:

(1) Aghul (Maisak 2008):

jak: ug.a-je ni? ‘a smell of burning meat’
meat burn.IPF-PART2 smell

Other syntactic constraints seem to be also at loss; cf. (2) where relativized is the position in an embedded relative clause and thus violates an island constraint.

(1) Tanty Dargwa (elicited)

[dam č:ib-se k:ata b-ibš:-ib x:unul] simi r-ač’-ib
I:DAT give.PF-PRET-ATR cat N-flee.PF-PRET women bile F-come.PF-PRET
‘The woman such as that the cat that she brought to me ran away (she) became angry with me’.

Such odd syntactic behavior is sometimes considered an indication that what we deal with are not relative clauses at all, but, to use one of the approaches (see, e.g., van Breugel 2010), a more general syntactic phenomenon defined as nominal modification by a verbal constituent. The problem of the relative clause definition is used as one example in Haspelmath’s (2011) distinction between comparative concepts and descriptive categories. From the point of view of this distinction, whether we count examples above as relative clauses would probably be a purely definitional issue. Note that from the language-internal perspective (descriptive category), the constructions in question are invariably considered as relative clauses (cf. the references below).

We believe, however, that this question may (or must) be settled on empirical grounds. In the vast majority of text occurrences such clauses do not violate any constraints, looking like well-behaving relative clauses. Central arguments are relativized much more frequently than peripheral ones, in full conformity with Keenan-Comrie’s predictions. The use of resumptive pronouns, widely attested in some East Caucasian languages, is again best compatible with viewing them as relative clauses. It would be hardly feasible to posit a separate typological category (comparative concepts) basing on peripheral – even though fascinating – uses of a construction. What we deal with in East Caucasian is not a phenomenon distinct from relativization but its extension: examples such as (1) and (2) are deviations from more ‘natural’ cases of relativization rather than a special syntactic pattern and East Caucasian relativization as a whole (descriptive category) shows too many empirical parallels with the typology of relativization (comparative concept).

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