

Locative position in Chechen

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1. Introduction

Chechen is a Northeast Caucasian SOV language where the word order can vary. The language can be categorized as "discourse configurational", since word order is tied with the information structure of a sentence (Kiss 1995). When the object is focused OVS and SOV orders appear, and when the subject is focused SVO and OSV orders appear (Komen 2007a).

Attempts to come up with a derivation and resulting syntactic structure have been done in the framework of minimalism (Chomsky 1995, Hornstein et al 2005). Questions arising are for instance whether the assumed focus phrase FocP is above or below the inflectional phrase IP. One of the reasons why it has been difficult to come up with conclusive answers has been the lack of "fixed" syntactic objects in a clause.

One relatively fixed syntactic object has been argued to be the auxiliary as an overt realization of the head of the inflectional phrase I^0 (Komen 2007b). When looking at sentences containing a transitive verb in one of the compound tenses – a tense which is expressed by putting the main verb in a participle form and adding an auxiliary to the clause – the idea that the auxiliary is an overt realization of the inflectional phrase has shown that Chechen can best be regarded as having mixed directionality. That is to say: all lexical projections have a left branching specifier and a right branching head, but some functional projections, the focus and topic phrase, have a left branching head.

In general adverbs are regarded as having a fixed position within the sentence (Cinque 1999). Initial research on Chechen adverbs, however, suggested that in general they appear completely clause initial, and only sometimes in a clause second position (Komen 2007a:33).

In this paper I show the results of looking more carefully at one particular class of adjuncts, namely locatives as expressed in postpositional phrases.

2. Locative phrases

I have taken the simple clause in (1), taken from an article in the Chechen newspaper Dajmuoxk, as basis. The clause is simple in the sense that it consists only of three elements: (a) a noun phrase *xarc aaxcha xilaran bilgaluonash* 'marks of being counterfeit money' serving as subject, (b) an auxiliary *jara* 'was' serving as main verb, and (c) a postpositional phrase *caarna t'iehw* 'on them' serving as locative adjunct.

1) Xarc aaxcha xilaran bilgaluonash jara caarna t'iehw.
false money-ABS be-NML-GEN sign-PL J-PST 3P-DAT on
They bore marks of being counterfeit money.

Da jmuoxk 2005, #60

Since earlier research (see introduction) revealed a general tendency for adverbial phrases to appear clause initial I was wondering why the postpositional phrase in this case surfaced clause final. My initial guess was that the subject was focused, for which reason the verb and the subject had moved upwards above IP, while the locative phrase had been "left behind" adjoined to the IP.

In order to investigate that idea I have asked the native speaker's opinion about all possible six configurations of the Subject – Auxiliary – Locative in (1). Since my idea was that focus might influence the possible word orders, I have also asked the native speaker's opinion about the six possible configurations where the subject contained a question word,

since earlier research showed that question words in Chechen have a focus feature by default (Komen 2007a). A model for this second set of configurations is shown in (2).

2) Hun aaxcha xilaran bilgaluonash jara caarna t'iehw?
 false money-ABS be-NML-GEN sign-PL J-PST 3P-DAT on
They bore marks of being what money?

The results of the native speaker's evaluation are shown in Table 1. The column marked "Word order" shows which particular permutation of subject (S), auxiliary (Aux) and locative postpositional phrase (Loc) was presented to the native speaker. Notice that in the second set of clauses the S_q indicates a subject containing a question word. The column marked "Eval" shows "ok" for a passable configuration, but "*" for a rejected configuration.

Table 1 Native speaker evaluation of locative existential clauses

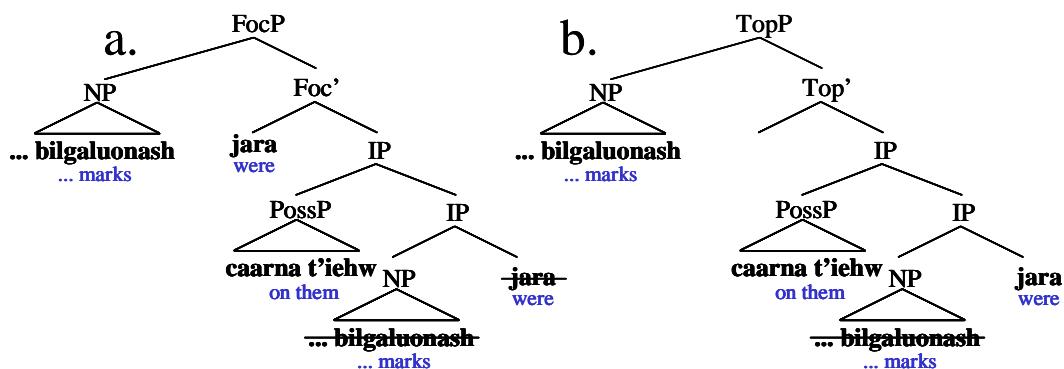
#	Word order	Eval	Ref	#	Word order	Eval	Ref
a.	S Aux Loc	ok	1)	g.	S_q Aux Loc	ok	2)
b.	S Loc Aux	ok	1)	h.	S_q Loc Aux	*	2)
c.	Loc S Aux	ok	1)	i.	Loc S_q Aux	ok	2)
d.	Loc Aux S	ok	1)	j.	Loc Aux S_q	*	2)
e.	Aux Loc S	*	1)	k.	Aux Loc S_q	*	2)
f.	Aux S Loc	*	1)	l.	Aux S_q Loc	*	2)

In the first six permutations the focus status of the subject is unclear. In that case all four non word-initial orders are allowable. But as soon as it is clear that the subject is focused, as in the second set of clause permutations, only two word orders are allowed.

3. Syntax implications

If the assumption holds, that a locative phrase is normally left adjoined to the IP in Chechen, then the passable configurations from Table 1 can be explained as follows. The word order S-Aux-Loc (see lines a and g) is one where the subject is focused and the locative left behind, as shown in (a) of Figure 1. The crossed-through subject and auxiliary copies are the syntactic elements, which are not pronounced at spell-out due to chain reduction (only the highest copy of them is pronounced). The word order S-Loc-Aux (see lines b and h) is one where the subject is the topic, and so has moved to a topic phrase above IP. This situation is shown in part (b) of Figure 1. The locative has stayed behind left adjoined to the IP, and the head of IP (expressed as the auxiliary) has stayed in its place too.

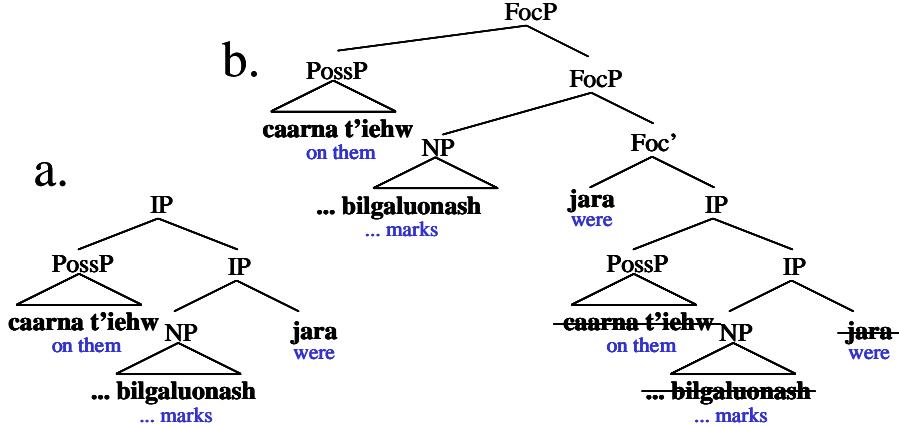
Figure 1 Focused or topicalized subject in locative existential clause



The word order Loc-S-Aux (see lines c and j) falls into two possibilities. When no focus is at play, then this is the unmarked word order: the subject, locative and auxiliary are in the places they are base-generated. No movement has taken place. This situation is shown in part (a) of Figure 2. But when the subject is focused, it should find itself in the focus phrase. In that situation the locative should be even above the focus phrase. I suggest that this situation is only possible if there is double focus: there is a secondary focus on the locative. I

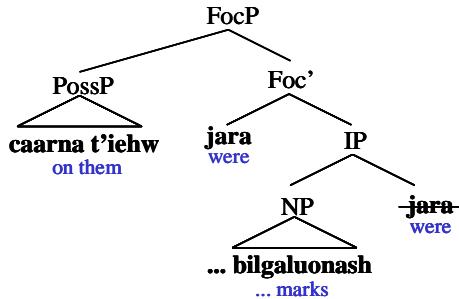
have shown the syntax of such a situation in part (b) of Figure 2. More research would be needed to verify the claim of double focus, though.

Figure 2 Unmarked and focused adjunct in locative existential clause



Finally, the word order Loc-Aux-S (see lines *d* and *j*) is one where the locative contains a focus feature. For that reason it is *not* base-generated as adjunct to IP, but it is base generated straight in the focus phrase. This is shown in Figure 3. There only has been head movement: the IP head (the auxiliary) was copied to adjoin to the phonologically empty focus head Foc⁰ in order to fulfill a language specific requirement that the head of the focus phrase should be filled lexically (Komen 2007a).

Figure 3 Focused adjunct in locative existential clause



4. Conclusions

The claim was made that the locative adjunct, a postpositional phrase, in Chechen is base-generated left adjoined to the IP. For existential clauses it has been shown that this claim is only partly true. When the locative adjunct itself contains a focus feature, it is base-generated as specifier of a focus phrase. But apart from this situation, the locative adjunct without focus feature seems to provide a fixed landmark within the Chechen clause, keeping its place while other constituents move around. This knowledge can be used to verify word-order variations in non-existential clauses.

5. References

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