



From preverbal focus to preverbal “left periphery”: The Ossetic clause architecture in areal and diachronic perspective

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ABSTRACT

I show that a focus position may serve as a source of grammaticalization for the “left periphery”, i.e. the locus of wh-phrases and complementizers. In Ossetic, wh-phrases and certain complementizers are obligatorily placed immediately to the left of the verb, with only a specific class of lexemes being able to intervene between them. Other complementizers may occur anywhere between the left edge of the clause and the verb. I propose a scenario whereby this unusual clause architecture came into existence. The key step is that the wh-position got split from the focus. I argue that this change occurred under influences from South Caucasian languages.

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1. Introduction

While the loss of wh-movement in various languages is discussed in a number of publications, its emergence has attracted considerably less attention. The same is true for the emergence of the “left periphery”, understood here as the locus of wh-phrases and various types of subordinator, Rizzi (1997:281). Nevertheless, the phenomenon has not passed altogether unnoticed: It has been argued in the literature (see Kiparsky (1995:153–158) and references cited there) that early Indo-European had only two operator positions on the left edge of a clause, that of focus and topic, and thus the emergence of the complementizer position is a later development.

In this paper, I address internal and external factors that shaped the structure of the left periphery in two closely related language varieties of the Central Caucasus, Iron and Digor Ossetic, and propose a scenario for its development.

In Ossetic, wh-phrases must immediately precede the predicate (the few items that actually may intervene between the wh-phrase and the predicate are described in section 4.1):

- (1) a. šošlan mədine-jə waržə (Iron Ossetic¹)
 S. M-OBL² love.PRS.3SG
 ‘Soslan loves Madina.’

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¹ Iron and Digor Ossetic, see section 3.1. below, are fairly similar in what is relevant for this paper, and I will quote examples from both, putting (I) or (D) after the example. Unless a source is indicated, Ossetic examples have been elicited. The data are presented in a broad phonological transcription. I use the following non-IPA symbols š=f; ž=z; č=ʃ; c=ts. For Iron, the standard North Ossetian pronunciation is given.

When both Iron and Digor forms are cited, they are presented in this order separated with a slash: čəžg/kizgə ‘girl’. If the two forms coincide, only one word is given without additional comments: bəx ‘horse’.

² Abbreviations: 1/2/3, 1st/2nd/3rd person; II 2nd agreement class; ABL, ablative; ABS, absolutive; ACC, accusative; ALL, allative; AOR, aorist; COM, comitative; COMP, comparative degree; CPL, subordinator; CTR, contrastive topic; COP, copula; CVB, converb; DAT, dative; DEF, definite; EC, East Caucasian; EMP, emphasis; ERG, ergative; EZ, ezafe; FUT, future; GEN, genitive; IMP, imperative; LOC, locative; NEG, negation; NMZ, nominalized; NUM, numeral declension; OBL, oblique; OPT, optative; PL, plural; POSS, possessive; PRP, preposition; PRS, present; PRV, preverb; PrevWh preverbal placement of wh-phrases; PRT, particle; PST, past; [Rus] codeswitching to Russian; SC South Caucasian; SG, singular; SUB, subjunctive; SUP, superessive; [Taj] codeswitching to Tajiki.

- b. mēdinē-jə čī waržə? (I)
 M-OBL who love.PRS.3SG
 ‘Who loves Madina?’
- c. *čī Mēdinē-jə waržə?

Moreover, many subordinators in Ossetic behave exactly in the same manner (in section 4.3 I will argue that some of them are indeed complementizers, i.e. heads of CP):

- (2) a. soslan nə ba-ləderdtəj mēdinē
 Soslan NEG PRV-understand.PST.3SG Madina
ke rba-cudəj (woj) (D)
 CPL PRV-come.PST.3SG it.OBL
 ‘Soslan did not understand that Madina came.’
- b. *soslan nə baləderdtəj
 Soslan NEG PRV-come.PST.3SG
ke mēdinē rba-cudəj (woj) (D)
 CPL Madina PRV-come.PST.3SG it.OBL
 ‘Idem’ (intended)

Systems with clause-internal complementizers (i.e. those that are neither on the edge of a clause nor second position clitics) do not seem particularly common. It is a challenge for theories of the left periphery and wh-movement to explain these phenomena. As a step in this direction, I suggest an explanation (*via* typological and diachronic considerations) of how such a system came to be.

My main contention is that the extant structure of the Ossetic left periphery has been shaped in part by contacts with South Caucasian languages (which produced the preverbal placement of wh-phrases) and in part by a language-internal development: a number of subordinators got relocated into the same position. Given that originally wh-phrases were probably placed preverbally for focusing purposes, this scenario means that a focus position gave rise to that of complementizers, i.e. to a fragment of left periphery.

Obviously, the fact of external influence on the morphosyntax of a language is something that almost never can be conclusively proven: there are always too many competing possibilities. However, in the case under consideration, that is, the *obligatorily* preverbal placement of wh-phrases,³ some arguments can be marshaled to strengthen the claim. The principal argument for the contact influence is that while a considerable number of contiguous languages in the area share this feature (besides Ossetic, it is present in all South Caucasian and Nakh languages), it is absent from other languages of the Caucasus, as well as from Iranian languages other than Ossetic. Moreover, this feature is rather uncommon cross-linguistically, see the discussion in section 8. Thus, not only does the Central Caucasus host a considerable number of languages with this property, but it seems also to be the only place in the world where they occupy a contiguous area.

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, I present some important caveats when establishing the patterns of wh- and complementizer placement when working with non-elicited data. In section 3, I lay out some basic facts about Ossetic to be relevant in the further discussion. In section 4, I describe the structure of wh-questions in Ossetic, the system of subordinators there, and the interaction of the two systems, that is, constraints on the formation of embedded wh-questions and on the wh-movement out of dependent clauses. Then I argue that the preverbal position is indeed that of a C head. In section 5, I compare the Ossetic system to ones in the South Caucasian languages and argue that the Ossetic wh-movement pattern is influenced by contact with SC while the system of complementizers is a language-internal development. To do so, I first review patterns of wh-question formation and complementizer placement across the languages of the Caucasus in section 6. In section 7, I do the same for Iranian languages. There, I show that in all these languages (except Ossetic) the PrevWh is non-obligatory (albeit sometimes very frequent). I conclude that the Ossetic pattern is an innovation. In section 8, to adduce further arguments for the contact origin of the obligatory PrevWh in Ossetic I show that the Central Caucasus is apparently the only contiguous area occupied by languages showing this property. In section 9, I use observations accumulated so far to propose a grammaticalization path of wh-movement and complementizer placement in Ossetic. In section 10 I draw summary conclusions.

2. Wh-questions and complementizers cross-linguistically

Although various strategies of wh-placement (wh-fronting, wh *in situ*, clefts, and, for that matter, preverbal placement of wh-phrases) appear to be well known and perfectly well defined concepts, the picture becomes more murky when it comes

³ I will refer to this as PrevWh further on.

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