

Tolerance of underspecification

Evidence from Karachay-Balkar

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Abstract. In this paper we discuss the microhistoric variation in the Chereq dialect of the Karachay-Balkar language. We argue that a number of differences between the language of two generations is due to a tiny structural change on the interface between syntax and PF. Two types of evidence are discussed: possessive constructions and number mismatch on bound pronouns.

Keywords. microhistoric variation, possessive constructions, number match, φ -features, underspecification, Turkic languages

1. Setting the scene

The question of how does language change has been around for some time (King 1969, Campbell 1998). Many studies of specific instances of language change offer a perspective of at least 2-3 centuries. The great part suffers from the same weakness: lack of negative evidence. It is impossible to say for sure which structures were impossible for the ancients, the question itself was formulated less than a century ago (Chomsky 1957). In this squib we offer a case study of a microhistorical structural change between two generations of speakers. It is the minimal “distance” at which a difference can be observed. We present novel data from an understudied minor Turkic language, where the change is rather drastic. We argue that a number of differences can be reduced to a structural change on the interface between syntax and PF.

In the Cherek dialect of the Karachay-Balkar language (Turkic, Kypchak) there is a bundle of differences between the language of the old generation (G_1) and of the young one (G_2). Due to space limit, we discuss in detail two differences coming from the nominal structures: syntax of possessive constructions and number agreement on bound pronouns. We argue that the syntactic structures remain the same in G_1 and G_2 , what has changed is the rule of the Spell-Out of underspecified structures. In a nutshell this change can be stated as follows:

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1. Tolerate nominal structures with underspecified φ -features for Spell-Out. (G_1)
2. Do not tolerate nominal structures with underspecified φ -features, leave it unpronounced. (G_2)

We start with the discussion of the phenomena, then we show how our proposal can be applied to the facts, we end with speculations about the actuation problem.

2. Syntax of possessive constructions

Both the system of G_1 and G_2 have two possessive constructions. The first is the construction with a referential possessor (PC I, see (1)); the other features a non-referential (i.e. generic) possessor (PC II, see (2)). PC I looks the same way in both G_1 and G_2 , while PC II differs, cf. (2) and (3).

- (1) Alim-ni surat-i
Alim-GEN picture-3
'Alim's photo' (G_1 & G_2)
- (2) sabij bolnica-si
child hospital-3
'children's hospital' (G_1)
- (3) sabij bolnica
child hospital
'children's hospital' (G_2)

For G_2 presence of the referential possessor implies presence of the referential possessor in the interpretation, cf. (4) where the first interpretation is impossible for G_2 .

- (4) tiširiu zǎjriř-i
woman dress-3
'a women's dress' $^{ok}G_1$ *G_2
'the women's dress owned by someone' $^{ok}G_1$ $^{ok}G_2$

In both G_1 and G_2 the referential possessive marker agree with the possessor in person (5), while the non-referential one in G_1 always stands in the form of the 3rd person.

- (5) meni kitab-im
my.GEN book-1
'a women's dress' $^{ok}G_1$ *G_2
'the women's dress owned by someone' $^{ok}G_1$ $^{ok}G_2$

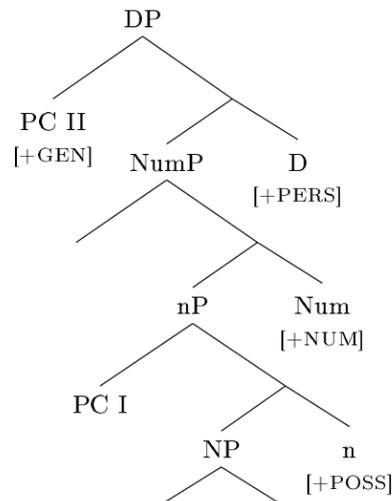
Adopting the standard view on the organization of person features² (Zwicky 1977, Noyer 1992 *i.a.*), this can be seen as the case of underspecification. In other words, G_2 lacks the underspecified marker of possession.

One more thing we need to say about possessives is that the plural marker always precedes the possessive marker in both G_1 and G_2 (6-7).

- (6) qiz-ni ginži-ler-i
 girl-GEN doll-PL-3
 'the girl's dolls'
- (7) *qiz-ni ginži-si-ler
 girl-GEN doll-3-PL

We adopt Grashchenkov (2007)'s view on the syntax of possessive constructions in Turkic. According to this view, within the noun phrase two projections take care of possessors: Spec nP licenses the non-referential possessor and Spec DP assigns genitive to the referential possessor (cf. Split-NP analysis in Radford (2000) *i.a.*). Number projection NumP according to Split-NP analysis mediates nP and DP. Heads n, Num, and D bear [POS], [NUM], and [PERS] features respectively. This can be illustrated with the following tree:

Fig. 1



² In what follows all the discussed features should be read as shorthands for bundles of features, e.g. a couple of binary [SPEAKER] and [HEARER] features forms [PERS] feature.

In G_1 possessive marker can be sent to the Spell-Out with the underspecified [PERS] feature³, i.e. at the level of Num (or n, depends on our rules of linearization), while in G_2 this is no more the option.

3. Number features on bound pronouns

G_1 licenses use of a 3rd person singular pronominal with the semantically plural antecedent (8), while G_2 requires full feature match between an antecedent and its anaphor.

- (8) [eki džaščik]_i [an-ni_i egeč-i-ni] süj-e.
 two boy (s)he-GEN sister-3-ACC love-PRS
 Two boys love their sister. (G_1)

Examples like (8) speakers of G_2 accept only without coindexation of the pronoun and the noun phrase. For G_2 the only possible way to coindex them is to use morphologically plural pronoun (9), for G_1 this structure is acceptable, but dispreferred.

- (9) [eki džaščik]_i [an-nar-ni_i egeč-i-ni] süj-e.
 two boy (s)he-PL-GEN sister-3-ACC love-PRS
 Two boys love their sister. (G_1 & G_2)

As expected, both G_1 and G_2 ban the match of morphologically plural anaphor and singular antecedent (10). This suggests that examples like (8) are better to be seen as involving underspecification.

- (10) *džaščik_i [an-nar-ni_i egeč-i-ni] süj-e.
 boy (s)he-PL-GEN sister-3-ACC love-PRS

What we argue for is that the pronominal in (8) for G_1 is underspecified for number (cf. similar ideas proposed for different languages in van Gelderen 1992, Burzio 1989 *i.m.a.*).

One way to see this is to assume that the number feature here is semantically inert (Partee 1989, Kratzer 1998, 2009, Heim 2008). In line with minimal pronoun account, we have to claim that such features are purely morphological and that they are transmitted from a binder to a pronoun it binds via a PF operation (Kratzer 1998, 2009, Heim 2008).

The alternative account (Sudo 2012, Nikolaeva 2014) puts most of the burden on syntax. Under this view binder and bindee share their ϕ -features via coindexation in the syntactic module.

The proposed shift between two rules is licit under both accounts. The second theory is perfectly compatible with it, while for the minimal pronoun theory our rule should follow the proposed PF operation.

³ The relation between person features and the notion of underspecification merits discussion, but space precludes it.

4. Conclusion

We have seen two differences between two systems. The first difference is that the possessive marker which originally sufficed for both referential and non-referential (generic) possessors became 'reinterpreted' as a marker of referential possessor. The second difference is that G_2 speakers allow coindexation for two referents if all their φ -features match, while G_1 tolerate underspecification in number. The proposed solution explains both of these differences as residual effects of a general shift to more marked structures. The understandable weakness of this proposal is empirical adequacy, since the proposed general shift should have generated much more differences. Balkar is an understudied language, and due to time limits in expedition and space limits for this paper we had to discuss in detail two differences of those discovered. All we can say is that we are unaware of any contradicting cases.

One could think about various extraneous triggers for such change, it is hard to determine the real reasons in this particular case. The question we would like to address instead is how this change can be stated in terms of marked and unmarked values of the parameter, how this change affect the language itself.

One possible approach to account for this is the Subset Principle (Berwick 1985). According to this principle, the G_2 language is more marked, since it generates smaller language than the G_1 system. The motivation for this change is economy, since it reduces ambiguous structures.

5. List of glosses

1 – possessive marker of the first person; 3 – possessive marker of the third person; ACC – accusative case; GEN – genitive case; NUM – number feature; PERS – person feature; PL – plural; POSS – possessive feature; PRS – present tense.

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