Khanty relative pronouns and the clauses that contain them

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In this talk we examine relative pronouns in the endangered Surgut Khanty language (SOV, Ob-Ugric, Finno-Ugric).

In the earliest texts (late 19th century) Khanty relative clauses are categorically prenominal, non-finite, and employ the gap strategy; there is no relative pronoun in the language (Gulya 1966, Honti 1984, Nikolaeva 1999).

Currently almost 100% of Khanty speakers are Khanty-Russian bilinguals. Under strong contact with Russian, Khanty started an OV to VO change. It is well known that the order of the object and the verb is a strong predictor of the order of the noun and its relative clause modifier. The shift towards VO has a strong effect on relative clauses in Khanty. In addition to the original relative clause type described above, two new types have emerged: the postnominal non-finite and the post-nominal finite. These were first mentioned in Csepregi (2012) but were not investigated in detail.

Csepregi found that the original prenominal participial relatives can now appear postnominally, and they can feature a relative pronoun that has grammaticalized from the distal demonstrative *t'u* (that). In addition, postnominal relatives can now also be finite. These feature an obligatory relative pronoun that is form-identical to a wh-word. Several questions remained open, however: i) can either type of relative pronoun appear in pre-nominal relatives, ii) can *t'u* also appear in finite relatives, iii) can relative pronouns form-identical to a wh-word appear in non-finite postnominal relatives, iv) can anything precede the relative pronoun within the relative clause, and v) if so, what are the implications?

On the basis of new fieldwork data, we can now answer these research questions. Neither *t'u* nor relative pronouns form-identical to a wh-word appear in prenominal non-finite relatives. This is consistent with the cross-linguistic observations about prenominal relatives (Downing 1978).

T'u only appears in postnominal non-finite relatives, while relative pronouns form-identical to a wh-word are restricted to finite relatives. Finiteness thus influences the choice of the relative pronoun. At the same time, we have found cross-speaker variation that was not reported by Csepregi. Specifically, in headed (finite) relative clauses not all speakers allow relative pronouns that are identical to wh-words; even though such relative pronouns are grammatical for the same speakers in correlatives.

Both *t'u* and relative pronouns form-identical to a wh-word can be preceded by topicalized relative-clause internal material. This has implications for formal models of relative clauses. One strand of research (e.g. Kayne 1994) holds that the head of the relative clause and the relative pronoun form a (Noun Phrase) constituent to the exclusion of all other relative-clause internal material. Our data show that this cannot be correct: this approach wrongly predicts that topics (or foci) cannot insert

themselves between the head and the relative pronoun. While our data leave it open whether the head and the pronoun form a constituent at an early point in the derivation, they clearly show that there is no such constituency at the final stage of the derivation.

References

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