
A theory is only as good as the data: casting a wide net in Kabardian and Ahtna documentation

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**A theory is only as good as the data:
casting a wide net in Kabardian and Ahtna documentation**

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1. INTRODUCTION

The documentation available for any particular language can heavily influence the scope of linguistic theory. As such, comprehensive documentation must capture a variety of types of language use. In this paper we consider two ‘genres’ of documentary data: those based on elicitation or prompted speech, and those consisting of spontaneously occurring connected discourse. We present case studies from two unrelated polysynthetic languages, in which only a combination of documentation techniques facilitates meaningful contributions to typology and language description.

Our first case study is from Kabardian, a North West Caucasian language, spoken predominantly in the Russian Federation and Turkey. In Kabardian, many grammatical roles may be relativized, including obliques like place and instrument (Colarusso 1992). However, the frequency of occurrence of the oblique roles roughly follows the Keenan-Comrie (1977) accessibility hierarchy, which means that many hours of spontaneous narration may not contain a single example of relativization of, for example, instrument. When these forms are elicited, however, speakers judge such constructions to be quite natural. Without elicitation, a description of relative clauses based only on Kabardian narrative data would be incomplete.

Our second case study is from Ahtna, an Athabascan language of Alaska. A recent study of Ahtna motion events based on the elicited (or ‘prompted’) narration of so-called Frog Stories (Mayer 1969; see e.g., Slobin 1996, 2004) reveals that narrators tend to make use of only a small portion of the grammar of path and location available to them. Speakers telling Frog Stories do employ a set of spatially-oriented verb prefixes, but they tend to underutilize the many other ways Ahtna encodes spatial relationships. The ubiquity of these other systems, which include riverine directionals, postpositions, and near-paradigmatic toponymy, only becomes apparent when we turn to Travel Narratives, a genre of spontaneous connected speech that is more familiar to Ahtna speakers. It seems that elicited Frog Stories are not the most authentic setting for studying the full range of Ahtna grammar about spatial relationships, and they only provide a glimpse into the ways these relationships are expressed in actual discourse.

2. KABARDIAN: SPONTANEOUS NARRATION IS NOT ENOUGH

Kabardian, like all Northwest Caucasian languages, expresses relative clauses with participial verb forms. Relativization is marked on the non-finite verb by /z(ə)-/ for ergative and oblique arguments and either zero or /jə-/ for absolutive arguments. Many arguments of the Kabardian verb may be relativized, including all core arguments, and oblique arguments such as instrumental, place, time, objects of preverbs (comitative, benefactive, etc.) and reason. However relativization of some grammatical roles occurs only rarely in naturally occurring data, and hence must be elicited if adequate numbers of examples are to be found.

Kabardian data quoted here are drawn from a corpus of 58 minutes of narratives and 12 minutes of conversation, augmented by elicitation where naturally occurring data were not available. The distribution of genre is as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Distribution of genre in the Kabardian Corpus

Type of Relative Clause or Grammatical Role Relativized	Narrative	Conversation	Elicited
Absolutive (S)	13	6	4
Agent (A)	5	2	4
Absolutive (P)	2		4
Preverb Objects	2		12
Indirect Object	2		4
Where	14	4	4
When	15	3	4
Reason	5		4
Instrumental			6
Possessive		1 (S)	4(A) and (P)
Multiple Relativization			10
Reduced Relative Clause		4	48
Total	60	17	112

Grammatically accepted phenomena, such as relativization on instrumental, the possessive of agent or the patient and multiple relativization did not occur in the natural data, as seen in Table 1. These forms can be elicited and when elicited they are considered natural by the speakers.

2.1. *Multiple relativization (present in elicited data)*

Multiple relativization is a typologically rare feature of relativization found in Northwest Caucasian languages. An entity in the main clause may be relativized multiple times if it occupies multiple syntactic roles in the relative clause (Lander, 2006a). Although multiple relativization, when elicited, is natural to the speakers, it does not occur in the narrative data. In example (1) the ‘father’ /*adɐ*/ is relativized in two roles: as possessor on the head noun [*q^wɐ*] and as agent on the verb /*ɬɛy*/ ‘see’.¹

- (1) (Speaker: NV)
- | | | | | | | |
|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--|
| <i>adɐ</i> | - <i>wɐ</i> | <i>zə-</i> | <i>j-</i> | <i>q^wɐ</i> | - <i>r</i> | |
| father | - <i>prd</i> | <i>rel-</i> | <i>pos-</i> | <i>son</i> | - <i>abs</i> | |
| | | | | | | |
| <i>zə-</i> | <i>ɬɛy</i> | - <i>a</i> | - <i>r</i> | <i>ma-</i> | <i>k^wɐ</i> | |
| REL- | see | -ASP | ABS | 3SG- | go | |
- ‘being a father, the one who saw his own son is going’

2.2. *Relativization of place (present in all genres)*

Although relativization of place was present in narrative and conversation data, the elicited forms reveal more variation. In narrative data the marker for relativization on place is /*zə-*/. In the elicited data we see an alternation of the relativization marker with /*∅-*/. This alternation is unique to Kabardian among the Northwest Caucasian languages. In West Circassian the marker would be /*z-*/. Example (2) below, from narrative data, shows the relative index for a place being /*zə-*/. However the elicited data in Example (3) shows an alternation of the relative index with /*∅-*/.

- (2) (Speaker: RB)
- | | | | | | | |
|--------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| <i>ʒanak</i> | - <i>ha</i> | <i>zə-</i> | <i>ʃə-</i> | <i>ləzɐ</i> | <i>qalɐ</i> | - <i>m</i> |
| ʒanak | -PL | REL- | PLC- | work | city | -OBL |
- ‘the city where ʒanaks are working’
- (3) (Speaker: RB)
- | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-------------|------------|
| <i>profosor</i> | - <i>əm</i> | <i>∅-</i> | <i>ʃə-</i> | <i>ləzɐ</i> | <i>qalɐ</i> | - <i>m</i> |
| professor- | -OBL | REL- | PLC- | work | city | -OBL |
- ‘the city where the professor is working’

¹ The abbreviations used in this paper are 1 = first person, 3 = third person, SG = singular, PL = plural, SUB = subject, REL = relativizer, pos = possessive, A = agent, ABS = absolutive, ASP = aspect, DECL = declarative, ERG = ergative, HITH = hither, OBL = oblique, NEG = negation, SI = subject of intransitive, P = patient, PLC = place, POSS = possessive, PRED = predicative.

2.3. *Reduced relative clause (present in conversation and elicitation)*

In narrative and elicited data Kabardian relative clauses are almost exclusively head final. However, in casual speech the relative clause may be postposed to follow its head noun and prosodically fused with the head noun, forming a so-called ‘reduced relative clause’. Such forms are difficult to elicit, but can be heard in casual speech (Colarusso, 1992:190 and 2006:60). Example (4) from conversation data shows the result of the prosodic word resulting from fusion of the head noun /q^w’eʒe/ and the relative clause /zədək^w’ar/ ‘where he went’.

- (4) (Speaker: NV)
- | | | | | |
|----------------------|---------|----------------|------|------|
| q ^w ’eʒe- | zə.də- | k ^w | a | -r |
| village | REL.PLC | go | -ASP | -ABS |
- ‘the village where s/he went’

2.4. *Relativization on the possessor of S, A and P*

Relativization on the possessor of the absolutive argument (S) was present in conversation data (but not narrative data). However, relativization on the possessor of the agent or patient were not found in either conversation or narrative data.

Relativization on the possessor of S is marked by /zə-/ on the noun and zero on the verb. In contrast, relativization on the possessor of A is marked on the verb with /zə-/ and relativization on the possessor of P may be marked /zə-/ or /jə-/ on the noun and marked [ø] on the verb. Both forms are reported to be natural and acceptable by the speakers.

Narrative data revealed relativization marked on the noun (on the absolutive subject). The elicited data revealed relativization on the possessor of the agent marked on the verb. The elicited data further revealed the alternation of the relativization marker between /jə-/ and /zə-/ on the noun when the possessor of the patient relativized. As example (5) from conversation data shows, relativization on the possessor of the absolutive can be marked with /zə-/ on the noun and /ø-/ on the relative clause.

- (5) (Speaker: NV)
- | | | | | | | | | |
|------|------|-----|-----|--------------------|-----|------|-----|------|
| zə- | j- | ha | -r | q ^w ’ed | -ʒ | -a | ʔə | -m |
| rel- | 3pos | dog | abs | lost | -re | -asp | man | -erg |
-
- | | | | | | |
|------|-------|-------|------------------|------|-------|
| wə- | qə- | j- | ʔəx ^w | -a | -s |
| 2sg- | hith- | 3erg- | look | -asp | -decl |
- ‘the man whose dog is lost called you’

Example (6) from elicited data shows relativization on the possessor of the agent. Relativization is marked with /zə-/ on the verb, not on the noun.

(6) (Speaker: NV)

<i>jə-</i>	<i>tʰə</i>	<i>-r</i>	<i>mə-</i>	<i>tçəʔ</i>	<i>-ər</i>	<i>ø</i>	<i>zə-</i>	<i>tç</i>	<i>-a</i>
3POS-	man	ABS	this-	book	ABS	3SG-	REL	write	-ASP

<i>fəz</i>	<i>-ər</i>	<i>ma</i>
woman	- ABS	3SG -

‘the woman, whose husband wrote this book, is going’

Relativization on the possessor of the patient may be marked /zə-/ or /jə-/ on the noun and marked /ø/ on the verb. Examples (7) and (8) from elicited data show relativization on the patient. Relativization is marked on the noun: with /jə-/ in Example (7) and with /zə-/ in Example (8). Both forms are reported to be natural and acceptable by the speakers.

(7) (Speaker: NV)

<i>jə-</i>	<i>ha</i>	<i>-r</i>	<i>sə-</i>	<i>wəkʲ</i>	<i>-a</i>	<i>tʰə</i>	<i>-r</i>
3POS	dog	ABS	1SG -	hit	- ASP	man	ABS

‘the man whose dog I killed’

(8) (Speaker: NV)

<i>zə-</i>	<i>j-</i>	<i>ha</i>	<i>-r</i>	<i>sə-</i>	<i>wəkʲ</i>	<i>-a</i>	<i>tʰə</i>	<i>-r</i>
REL -	3POS	dog	ABS	1SG -	hit	- ASP	man	ABS

‘the man whose dog I killed’

Examples from each of the three distinct genres reveal additional information. Without any one of these genres the description of relative clauses in Kabardian would be incomplete.

3. AHTNA: ELICITED NARRATION IS NOT ENOUGH

Let us now turn to the Ahtna grammar of path and location, which exemplifies the opposite data collection quandary from that of Kabardian. Recently the second author worked with speakers of Ahtna to record Frog Stories as part of a larger investigation into the use of path descriptors in motion events in discourse. The Frog Story paradigm is familiar to researchers by now: speakers are shown a textless book of drawings called *Frog, Where Are You?* (Mayer 1969) and are asked to recite the events depicted in their native tongue. Frog Story data have been used to study a range of linguistic topics, among them – and of interest here – the way languages encode the notion of *path* and *location* in motion events (see e.g. Berman & Slobin 1994, Strömquist & Verhoven 2004).

Because Frog Stories provide longer samples of speech than elicitation normally does, they potentially provide researchers with a view not just of

grammatical systems in isolation, but presumably of how the systems work in concert in spontaneous speech. We find, however, that Ahtna Frog Stories only reveal a subset of the grammar of path and location available to speakers. Instead we must turn to an indigenous genre of Ahtna oral literature known as *travel narratives* to get a more complete picture. Travel narratives are a virtual ‘guided tour’ in which the speaker discusses all the meaningful locations along a given footpath or dogsled route. A single narrative may cover over one hundred miles of river or trail and is often interspersed with personal memories and descriptions of how each site was used seasonally for camping and hunting (Kari 1986, Kari & Fall 2003, Kari & Tuttle to appear).

Below we compare the genres of Ahtna Frog Stories with travel narratives in terms of their presentation of an inventory of path and location descriptors. We find that while adverbial path prefixes are used by speakers in both genres, only travel narrators reveal the ubiquity of the directional system.²

3.1. Adverbial prefixes: present in both genres

Near the left edge of the Ahtna verb are the ‘derivational/thematic’ prefixes. These morphemes are adverbial in function and describe (among other things) path and location. Narrators in both genres make extensive use of path-describing derivational/thematic prefixes. 73 of the 77 motion verbs in the data contain at least one adverbial path prefix. The prefixes occur with statistically uniform density across genres: 44 of 46 motion verbs in the Travel Narratives contain at least one path or location describing prefix, as do all 32 motion verbs in the Frog Story data. Examples of the use of adverbial prefixes are shown in (9-10).

(9) (Frog Story, Speaker: MP)

Dligi kaghiyaa,
squirrel 3SG.go.**up**
‘A squirrel comes up,’

lic’ae ngga’ t’ox nadighic’etl’i gha’itse.
dog upland nest 3SG.hang.**down**.REL 3SG.bark.at
‘the dog barks at the nest that is hanging (there).’

² Toponymy and postpositions are two other grammatical systems that are used extensively in travel narratives and are nearly completely absent from Frog Stories, but we compare only adverbial prefixes and directionals here because of space limitations. See Kari (2008).

(10) (Travel Narrative; Speaker: AS)

K'a xona yet hwts'en xona na'stetnaesi,
 then there from.area then 1PL.travel.nomadically.**back**

ohh dahwtneIdak.

oh 3S.be.steep

‘Then as we moved back from there, oh it (the canyon) was steep.’

Nilk'aedze' dahwtneIdak xona,
 both.sides 3SG.be.steep then

saanetah kats'enaes.

barely 1PL.SUB-travel.nomadically.**up**

‘It was steep on both sides and then we could barely move up.’

The uniform density and frequency of path adverbial prefixes in motion verbs in both genres suggests that a reasonable analysis of how Ahtna speakers describe path and location could be based upon the prompted narrative data of Frog Stories alone. However, Frog Stories do not tend to reveal the use of other path describing systems that are present in Ahtna discourse. For that we must look at travel narratives.

3.2. Directionals: not revealed in Frog Stories

Like other Athabascan languages, Ahtna has a lexical class of riverine directionals with a tripartite morphological structure: a stem expressing orientation, an optional prefix expressing relative distance, and an optional suffix that expresses either a point-versus-area distinction or a path toward or away (Kari 1985, 1990; Leer 1989; Moore & Tlen 2007 on Athabascan directionals). See Table 2.

The morphological structure of the directionals allows speakers to be very precise in describing paths and locations, and the syntactic structure of Ahtna discourse allows even more specificity. Speakers can ‘pile up’ directional terms to carefully describe changes in trajectory or to precisely pinpoint a destination. In (11), the speaker uses multiple directionals, in addition to verbal path prefixes and deictic demonstratives, to describe a complex path with several trajectory changes (out—downstream—across—downstream—back).

Table 2
Tripartite morphology of Ahtna directionals

Prefixes	Stems	Suffixes
<i>da-</i> ‘near’	<i>nae</i> ‘upriver, behind’	<i>-e</i> ‘to’
<i>na-</i> ‘intermediate’	<i>daa</i> ‘downriver’	<i>-dze</i> ‘from’
<i>'u-</i> ‘distant’	<i>ngge</i> ‘from water, upland’	<i>-t</i> ‘at a point’
<i>ts'i-</i> ‘straight, directly’	<i>tse</i> ‘toward water, lowland’	<i>-xu</i> ‘in a general area’
<i>ka-</i> ‘next to’	<i>naan</i> ‘across’	
<i>P+gha-</i> ‘from P’	<i>tgge</i> ‘up vertically’	
<i>n-</i> ‘neutral’	<i>igge</i> , <i>yax</i> ‘down vertically’	
<i>hw-</i> ‘area’	<i>'an</i> ‘away, off’	
	<i>nse</i> ‘ahead’	

(11) (Travel Narrative; Speaker: JT)

Nildenta lu,
sometimes EVID

yet,
there

Tl'ahwdicaax Na,
headwaters.be.valuable stream.POS

'u-daa'a,
distant-downriver

'u-naa daa'a ts'its'edef dze' dae',
distant-across downriver 1PL.go.out thus

Nts'ezi Na hwts'e,
N. stream.POS from.area

tes ninats'edef.
pass 1PL.go.back.to.a.point

‘Sometimes then, we come out downstream and across and downstream of “Valuable Headwaters Stream” and we come back to a pass at “Nts'ezi's Stream”.’

Directionals occur far more frequently in travel narratives than in Frog Stories (48 tokens versus 5 tokens respectively). The difference is likely due to the deictic nature of the directional system, as well as to the dissimilar goals of the

storytellers. Travel narrators are taking their listeners on a verbal tour through real space with no visual aids or maps to assist them. The paths between locations are described with a literal interpretation of the riverine directionals: they describe physical geographic locations in relation to a real river. Frog Story narrators, however, are describing a fictitious landscape with the aid of pictures, so they presumably have less need to move characters through the story with directionals.

Regardless of how self-evident the cause of the difference may be, the fact remains that had we relied solely upon Frog Stories data for a description of Ahtna grammar of path and location, the richness and frequency of the directional system would have remained hidden. When compared to travel narratives, Ahtna Frog Stories seem artificial, and the constrained elicited nature of the Frog Storytelling task becomes apparent. While longer stretches of speech do allow speakers more flexibility to reveal grammatical phenomena than direct translation or elicitation, in this case it is the indigenous genre of discourse that allows speakers to more fully exploit the grammar of path and location available to them.

4. CONCLUSION

In the Ahtna study, elicited narration alone cannot provide sufficient data for an adequate description of motion events; we must also look to spontaneous natural discourse to provide a complete picture. In the Kabardian study, the reverse is true: spontaneous discourse does not reliably reveal all possible relative clause forms, and the researcher must turn to elicited data to fill in the gaps. These findings have implications for language documentation: documenting only a narrow range of language use types may cause a common phenomenon to present itself as rare, while a rare phenomenon may not show up at all. We argue that typological theories and descriptions are only as good as the data upon which they are based. We support casting a wide net in language documentation so that a variety of data sources are available to researchers making typological observations and writing grammatical descriptions.

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