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

Ayla Bozkurt Applebaum

and

Andrea L. Berez

University of California, Santa Barbara

(Many thanks to Stefan Schnell!)

Introduction

- Comprehensive documentation must capture a wide range of language use
- We consider two genres of data:
  - elicitation/prompted speech
  - spontaneous connected discourse
- In two unrelated polysynthetic languages.

Introduction - Kabardian

- Kabardian is a Northwest Caucasian language spoken primarily in:
  - the Kabardino-Balkar Republic of the Russian Federation
  - a large diaspora in Turkey and
  - small diasporas in the Middle East.

Introduction - Kabardian

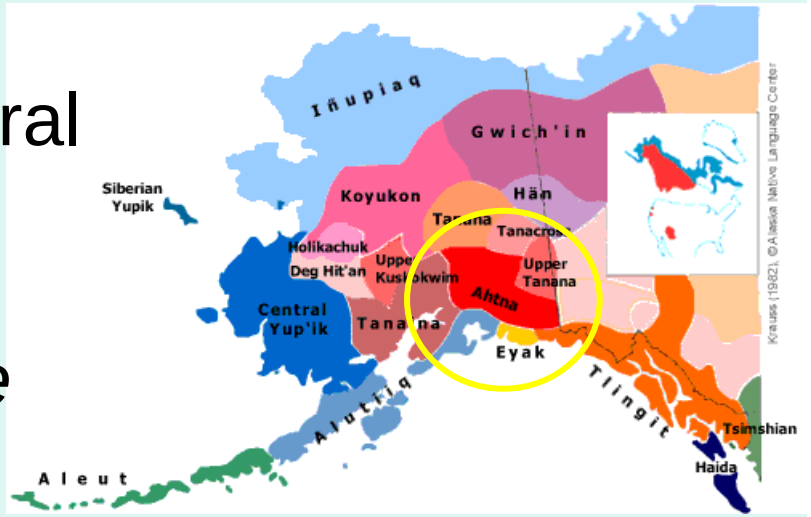
- Many grammatical roles may be relativized including oblique - e.g. place, instrument (Colarusso 1992)

  However, the frequency of occurrence of the oblique roles is highly non-uniform and roughly follows the Keenan-Comrie (1977) accessibility hierarchy.

  Which means that many hours of spontaneous narration may not contain a single example of a rare form, such as relativization of instrument.

Introduction - Ahtna

- Ahtna (Athabascan)
- ~50 speakers in southcentral Alaska
- Study here based on prompted *Frog, Where Are You?* (Meyer 1969)
- *Frog* storytellers underutilize grammar of path and spatial relationships



Introduction - Ahtna

- Ahtna's
  - riverine directionals
  - postpositions
  - paradigmatic toponomy

...are only apparent in "Travel Narratives"

  - a familiar, spontaneous genre of connected speech

Kabardian - Relativization

- In Kabardian, relativization is marked on the non finite verb by
  - /z(ə)-/ for ergative and oblique arguments
  - Zero or /j(ə)-/ for absolutive arguments.
- Many arguments of Kabardian may be relativized, including
  - all core arguments and
  - oblique arguments such as instrumental, place, time, comitative, benefactive, reason etc.

Kabardian - Corpus

- 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.

Kabardian – Relativization of roles not observed in natural data

- Many grammatically accepted phenomena did not occur in the natural data, as shown in Table 1 *[see paper].*

  (Examples: Multiple relativization, Relativization on Instrument, Relativization on the possessor of Agent or Patient)

- These forms can be elicited, and when elicited they are considered natural by the speakers.

Kabardian – Multiple Relativization

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 speakers, it does not occur in the narrative data.
- In Example (1) *[see paper]* the 'father' /adɐ/ is relativized in two roles:
  - as possessor on the head noun [qʷ'ɐ] and
  - as agent on the verb /ɬɐɣ/ 'see'.

Kabardian – Relativization of Place

- 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 /ø-/.
- This alternation is unique to Kabardian among the Northwest Caucasian languages.

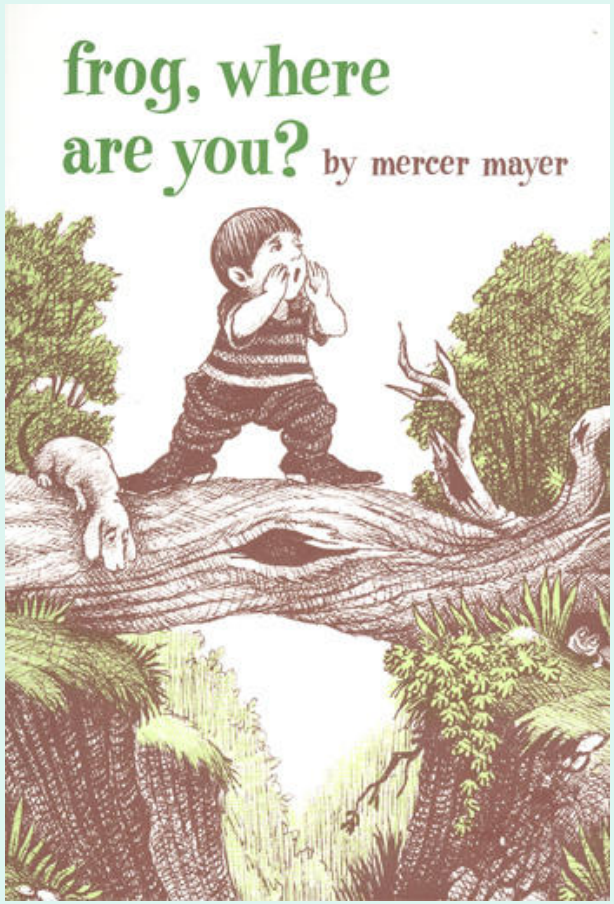
Kabardian – Reduced Relative Clause

- 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 /qʷˈɐʒɐ/ and the relative clause /zədɐkʷˈar/ ‘where he went’.

Kabardian – Relativization on Possessor of S, A and P

- Relativization on possessor of agent or patient did not occur in discourse data. Relativization on possessor of absolutive subject was present in conversation data (but not narrative data).
- Narrative data revealed relativization on possessor of the absolutive subject is marked on the noun.
- Elicited data revealed relativization on the possessor of the agent is marked on the verb. The elicited data further revealed an alternation between /jə-/ and /zə-/ of the relativization marker on the noun when the possessor of the patient is relativized.

Ahtna:
Elicited narration is not enough



- *Frog Stories* research paradigm for path in motion events
- Subjects shown a textless book of drawings, asked to recite story in own language
- Long samples of speech presumably show how different grammatical systems work in concert
- Instead we find only a limited use of these systems

Ahtna:
Travel Narratives

- Indigenous genre of oral literature
- “Guided tour” of Ahtna territory
  - large distances
  - personal memories, site use descriptions
- We compare 2 grammatical systems of path/location in both genres
  - Adverbial prefixes (found in both genres)
  - Directionals (found only in travel narratives)

Ahtna adverbial prefixes: Present in both genres

- Adverbial prefixes near left edge of verb describe path & location (+other things)
- Narrators in both genres use these extensively
  - 73 of 77 motion verbs in data have at least one path/location adverbial prefix
  - Uniformly distributed

(9) (*Frog Story*; Speaker; MP)

22 *Dligi* ***ka****ghiyaa,*
squirrel 3SG.go.**up**
'A squirrel comes up,'

23 *ɬic'ae ngga' t'ox* ***na****dighic'etl'i* *gha'itse.*
dog upland nest 3SG.hang.**down**.REL 3SG.bark.at
'the dog barks at the nest that is hanging (there).

(10) (*Travel Narrative*; Speaker: AS)

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

128 *ohh dahwtneɬdak.*
oh 3S.be.steep
'Then as we moved back from there, oh it was steep.'

129 *Niɬk'aedze' dahwtneɬdak xona,*
both.sides 3SG.be.steep then

130 *saanetah* ***ka****ts'enaes.*
barely 1PL.travel.nomadically.**up**
'It was steep on both sides and then we could barely move up.'

Ahtna directionals: Not revealed in *Frog Stories*

Prefixes	Stems	Suffixes
da- ‘near’	*-nae’-* ‘upriver, behind’	*-e* ‘to’
na- ‘intermediate’	*-daa’-* ‘downriver’	*-dze* ‘from’
’u- ‘distant’	*-ngge’-* ‘upland’	*-t* ‘at a point’
ts’i- ‘directly, straight’	*-tsen-* ‘downland’	*-xu* ‘in a general area’
P+gha- ‘from P’	*-tgge’-* ‘up vertically’	
n- ‘neutral’	*-igge’-*, yax ‘down vert.’	
hw- ‘area’	*-’an-* ‘away, off’	
	-nse’- ‘ahead’	

- Morphology allows high precision
- Found “piled up” in discourse for even more precision

(11) (*Travel Narrative;* Speaker: JT)

25 *Niɬdenta ɬu’*
sometimes EVID

26 *yet*
there

27 *Tl’ahwdicaax Na’,*
headwaters.be.valuable stream.POS

28 ***’u-daa’a***
distant-downriver

29 ***’u-naa daa’a*** *ts’itsedeɬ dze’ dae’,*
distant-across downriver 1PL.go.out thus

30 *Nts’ezi Na’ hwts’e’*
N. stream.POS from.area

31 *tes ninats’edeɬ.*
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’etzi’s Stream’.’

Ahtna directionals: Not revealed in *Frog Stories*

- Far more frequent in Travel Narratives than Frog Stories (48 vs. 5)
- Reason is clear: Travel Narratives describe real landscape, Frog Stories do not.
- Sole reliance on Frog Stories hides ubiquity of directionals
- Reveals the constrained, elicited nature of the Frog Storytelling task
- The indigenous genre allows speakers to more fully exploit grammar of path & location

Conclusion

- Documenting only a narrow range of usage may cause
  - common phenomena to present as rare
  - rare phenomena to not show up at all.
- Casting a wide net in language documentation makes a variety of data sources available to researchers
  - making typological observations
  - writing grammatical descriptions.

Acknowledgements

Ayla Applebaum's research is supported by ELDP Grant No. IGS0071. Many thanks to Nedret Vatanartiran and Haji Aslan Rauf.

Andrea Berez's research is supported by grants from the University of California Pacific Rim Research Program, the American Philosophical Society and the Jacobs Fund. Many thanks to Markle Pete, Adam Sanford, Jake Tansy and Jim Kari.