Argument Selection and DOM in Ossetic

Serdobolskaya, Natalia. Institute of linguistics RAS, serdobolskaya@gmail.com
Tuzhik, Olga. Institute of linguistics RAS, National Research University Higher School of Economics, tuzhik@iling-ran.ru

The Ossetic language demonstrates the phenomenon of Differential Object Marking (DOM): DOs can take the genitive marker or remain non-marked, see (1) and (2). This paper is aimed at providing a model of Ossetic DOM based on the Argument Selection principle formulated in Ackermann, Moore (2001). The data has been collected via elicitation sessions in Iron Ossetic, corpus queries in the Ossetic National Corpus (ONC; available at ossetic-studies.org) and experiments driven by the authors.

The existing literature on Ossetic DOM claims that it is regulated by two parameters, animacy and referential properties (Gagkaev 1956, Abaev 1959; Akhvlediani 1963, Bagaev 1965): human and definite DOs are more likely to take the genitive (1), while non-animate and indefinite DOs most often occur non-marked (3). This distirubtion yields to a typologically wide-spread pattern, see Aissen (1998), Sinnemäki (2016). However, recent research has revealed the relevance of another parameter, which is the semantic role of the DO (Tuzhik 2024; Serdobolskaya, Tuzhik 2024): in a nutshell, DOs who exhibit properties of agents, are more likely to take the genitive than DOs exhibiting properties of patients, see 4(ab) and 5(ab) (similar distribution is argued to be found in the Spanish DOM, see Primus 2012; García García 2018). For example, the participant that is the stimulus of auditive perception verbs is often likely to produce some noise or cause it, while the same participant of visual perception verbs is not specified for causing any event. Accordingly, the former is more likely to take the genitive in Ossetic even if indefinite (4b), while the latter may be non-marked in this case (4a).

The semantic role parameter is mostly relevant for non-human animate DOs. We test this parameter on various lexical classes of verbs (63 transitive verbs in sum) and model the distribution of case marking in terms of the Argument Selection principle based on Proto-Agent and Proto-Patient properties, see Dowty (1991). Proto-Agents are characterized by volitional involvement, sentience (perception), movement and being causers of the event. By contrast, Proto-Patients are defined as undergoers, they can be incremental themes, are causally affected by another participant, stationary relative to movement of another participant and often do not exist independently of the event, or not at all (Dowty 1991: 572). While Dowty's approach is aimed at predicting subjects and objects with a given verb, Ackermann and Moore (2001) propose to apply this principle to DOM in several languages, including Spanish and Balto-Finnic languages: with the same verb, the argument with more proto-patient properties is more likely to be marked as a DO, while the argument with less proto-patient properties is more likely to be marked as oblique (Ackermann, Moore 2001: 68).

We show that the Ossetic DOM yields to this rule and explain the difference in DOM with the examined verb classes based on the Proto-Properties of their second participant. The difference between the examples (4a) and (4b) is modelled in the following way:

	Sentient (PA)	Stationary (PP)
fenən/wənən	<x1,	x2>
'see'	SUBJ	DO-nominative

	Sentient (PA)	Causer (PA)
(fe)qušən	<x1,	x2>
'hear'	SUBJ	DO-genitive

Scheme 1. Proto-properties of the DOs in (4ab).

The second argument in (4a) only exhibits a property of the Proto-Patient, thus, it may take the nominative when indefinite. By contrast, the same participant has a property of a Proto-Agent,

therefore, it takes the genitive even if indefinite. Similar contrast is observed in (5ab): 'catching up with' presupposes that the second participant will be running to escape the event, thus, it causes the event of running and is more likely to take the genitive (5a). The situation of buying, on the contrary, does not involve any action from the part of the patient, thus, it is more likely to take the nominative as in (5b). The genitive case in Ossetic has many functions beyond encoding modifiers in an NP, and can thus be interpreted as an oblique marker. The use of the oblique for non-prototypical DOs is in line with Ackermann, Moore (2001)'s rule formulated above.

Therefore, we show that the choice of DO marking in Ossetic is regulated by the ratio of Proto-Agent and Proto-Patient properties of the relevant participant:

◆ if the DO has more or the same number of Proto-Agent properties than those of Proto-Patient, it is more likely to the genitive.

◆ if the DO has more Proto-Patient properties than those of Proto-Agent, it is more likely to take the nominative.

Examples

(1) *lɜg   wadtəməɣ-ə   rɜštɜg   ləɣd   qɜd-ə;   bɜlaš a-xawd-i*
     man   storm-INESS   time   run[PST.3SG]   wood-INESS   tree PV-fall-PST.3SG
     *ɜmɜ   **lɜ͡ʒ-ə**   /   ***lɜg** a-mard-ta.*
     and   man-GEN   man PV-kill-PST.3SG
'A man was running through the wood in the storm. A tree fell down and killed **the man**.' (ELIC)

(2) *binon-tɜ   a-sə   rɜštɜg   arxajd-toj   **bɜlc:on**   ɜrba-xon-ən   fəng-mɜ*
     family-PL   this-DET   time   try-PST.3PL   traveller   PV-invite-INF   table-ALL
'Families at this time strived to invite a **guest** to the dinner'. (ONC)

(3) *a-sə   xɜzar   am   dɜš   az-ə   dɜrɣə   lɜwwəd,   fɜlɜ   =jəl*
     this-DET house   here 10   year-GEN   during   stand[PST.3SG]but   it.SUPER
     *žnon   žang   š-xɜsəd   ɜmɜ   a-sə   **xɜzar** / * **xɜzar-ə**   fe-šaft-a.*
     yesterday fire   PV-catch[PST.3SG]   and   this-DET house   house-GEN   PV-destroy-PST.3SG
'This house has been here for 10 years, but yesterday a fire destroyed this house completely.' (ELIC)

(4a) *ɜvip:ajdə   wəj   wən-ə   birɜɣ-ə   /   birɜɣ*
     suddenly   that   see-PRS.3SG wolf-GEN   wolf
'(Ivan the tsar's son was walking through the wood looking for Kaschej's death.) Suddenly he sees **a wolf**.'
(4b) *walənmɜ   Ivan   quš-ə   arš-ə /   *arš*
     meanwhile   Ivan   hear-PRS.3SG bear-GEN   bear
'(Ivan the tsar's son was walking through the wood looking for Kaschej's death.) Suddenly he hears **a bear**.'

(5a) *a-sə   fəjjau   alə   **fəš-ə** /   ***fəš**=dɜr   ba-jjaf-zɜn.*
     this-DET shepherd   every   sheep-GEN   sheep=ADD PV-catch_up-FUT.3SG
'This shepherd will (can) catch up with every **sheep**.'
(5b) *asə   fəjjau   alə   **fəš-ə** /   **fəš**=dɜr   ba-lxɜn-zɜn.*
     this-DET shepherd   every   sheep-GEN   sheep=ADD PV-buy-FUT.3SG
'This shepherd will (can) buy every **sheep**.'

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