

Information structure and syntax of Uralic languages: A foreword

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Acknowledgements: The authors would like to express deep gratitude to Gerson Klumpp and Jeremy Bradley for their valuable comments.

DOI: 10.31857/0373-658X.2024.5.60-64

Информационная структура и синтаксис уральских языков: предисловие

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DOI: 10.31857/0373-658X.2024.5.60-64

This issue includes papers by specialists working on Uralic languages spoken in Russia from both descriptive and typological perspectives. Uralic languages as the second largest language family in Europe have been attracting the interest of linguists for several centuries already [Stipa 1990], but the level of their description differs greatly. On the one hand, there are long-standing grammaticography traditions for national languages like Finnish, Hungarian, and Estonian, partly with their own slightly idiosyncratic terminology [Bakró-Nagy et al. 2020]. On the other hand, for minority languages modern typological grammars are scarce, although in recent years there has been a rise in theoretical research on them, see, e.g., the recent volumes on Moksha Mordvin [Toldova, Kholodilova (eds.) 2018] and Hill Mari [Kashkin (ed.) 2023] published at the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics of the Lomonosov Moscow State University as a result of numerous field trips, continuing the tradition established by A. E. Kibrik, see [Fedorova et al. (eds.) 2014]. Extensive data on these languages is also analyzed in the recent handbooks on Uralic languages [Bakró-Nagy et al. (eds.) 2022; Abondolo, Valijärvi (eds.) 2023].

The majority of papers in this issue represent what has been called “an information structural turn in Uralic studies” [Blokland et al. 2023: 241]. A striking feature of some Uralic languages is the significant influence of information structure on the expression of grammatical categories, such as voice, object agreement, and non-possessive uses of possessive markers. Of course, many older grammars took note of these phenomena, introducing different descriptive terms for them (e.g. “logical stress”, “definite conjugation”, “possessive suffixes as definite articles”, etc.). Nevertheless, the systematic study of the way Uralic languages use morphosyntactic means to express information structure started only after the development of the general information structure theory (see, e.g., [Lambrecht 1994; Krifka 2007; Aissen 2023]). In fact, it follows the more general tendency: from the definition of a linguistic sign as a form-semantics pair through the triangle of form, semantics, and function to the more recent understanding of it as a combination of form, semantics, syntactics, and pragmatics. Otherwise, a definition of, e.g., voice cannot be seen as complete if it is defined only as a rearrangement of syntactic functions and semantic roles, as it was done in the 1970s, without an explanation of its function.

The aforementioned “information structural turn” in Uralic studies began with the Ob-Ugric languages, as they present a unique case of grammatical systems heavily governed by information structure. The idea of pragmatic sentence organization with topichood as a central notion first appears in [Nikolaeva et al. 1993], followed by [Nikolaeva 1999], though foundations for it were laid out already in [Rombandeeva 1979] and [Kulonen 1989]. It is claimed that in Khanty and Mansi varieties a whole range of phenomena is largely determined by the information-structural status of the core situation participants. Among them are voice [Kulonen 1989; Skribnik 2001; Filchenko 2006; Virtanen 2015; 2023; É. Kiss 2019; Urmanchieva, Plungian 2021; Muravyev, Zhornik 2024], object agreement [Nikolaeva 1999; Koshkareva 2002; Skribnik 2004; Virtanen 2015; É. Kiss 2019; Klumpp 2023], differential object marking [Virtanen 2015; Klumpp 2023], syntax of ditransitive constructions [Virtanen 2015; Bíró, Sipőcz 2017], use of possessive markers in non-possessive functions [Janda 2015; 2019], and constituent order [Virtanen 2023]. This systemic combination of morphosyntactic means was aptly defined as “communicative sentence paradigm” in [Koshkareva 2002], see also similar notions in [É. Kiss 2019; Klumpp, Skribnik 2022].

This approach was promptly applied to other branches of Uralic. For Samoyedic, research on Enets ditransitive constructions [Khanina, Shluinsky 2020], Nganasan passive [Leisiö 2006], Nenets object agreement [Dalrymple, Nikolaeva 2011; Nikolaeva 2014] and passive [Stenin 2023] was carried out. An interesting attempt to combine a generativist approach with the information structure theory is presented in [Däbritz 2021], which analyzes the data of five North-West Siberian languages, three of them Uralic (Nganasan, Enets, Khanty).

Regarding Mordvin languages, studies on differential object marking (DOM) [Toldova 2017] (see also a more general work on DOM in Finno-Ugric [Serdobolskaya, Toldova 2017] and another one on the information structure of direct object in general [Serdobolskaya, Toldova 2016]) and passive in Moksha Mordvin [Stenin 2018] were performed. For Mari languages, we find recent works on DOM [Serdobolskaya 2015], discourse particles [Kozlov, Zakirova 2023], and possessive marking in non-possessive function [Khomchenkova 2022]. For Komi and Udmurt, publications appeared on the interaction of DOM with information structure and other parameters, see [Klumpp 2012; 2014] for Komi and [Serdobolskaya 2020] for Beserman Udmurt.

As for the Western-most Finno-Ugric languages, pragmatic sentence organization has long been considered relevant for Hungarian and Finnish grammaticography, mainly in connection to constituent order, cf. the characterisation of Hungarian as a “discourse configurational language” [É. Kiss 1995] and the description of “discourse conditioned word order” in Finnish [Vilkuna 1989]. However, as far as we know, such systemic descriptions are still lacking for Fennic and Saami languages of Russia.

Three papers presented here continue this approach. Nikita Muravyev’s article discusses the influence of internal possessors on information structure in Northern Khanty. The study deals with a number of contexts in Northern Khanty, in which the presence of an internal possessor

in the noun phrase of one of the core arguments influences the choice between active and passive voice; three hypotheses explaining this behavior are considered. The paper by Daria Zhornik considers different grammatical categories that are influenced by information structure in Northern Mansi, giving an overview of the previous research on them and suggesting additional parameters to complement the existing information-structural approaches to these phenomena. Johannes Hirvonen in his paper provides a first descriptive overview of information structure in Meadow Mari, focusing on the types of morphosyntactic marking which interact with the information structural notions of focus, topic, and contrastive topic. The results of this research confirm previous claims about Meadow Mari information structure but at the same time show a more varied picture of the available information structure marking strategies.

This issue also contains articles on Uralic syntax. Irina Khomchenkova's article is dedicated to conditional and concessive constructions with Russian conjunctions *esli* 'if' and *xotja* 'although' in Hill Mari speech. The author examines the possibility of duplication of the Russian conjunctions with the corresponding Hill Mari conjunctions and shows that it is possible for the conditional conjunctions, which exhibit incomplete structural congruence, but not for the concessive one. Finally, the issue includes Natalia Serdobolskaya's review of "Clause linkage in the languages of the Ob-Yenisei area: Asyndetic constructions" [Behnke, Wagner-Nagy (eds.) 2024], a recent collection of articles dealing with clause linkage in Ob-Ugric and Samoyedic languages, among others, with focus on constructions with non-finite dependent clause. This special issue continues the recent series in *Voprosy Jazykoznanija*, following the issues № 5/2022 and № 6/2023.

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Получено / received 26.06.2024

Принято / accepted 24.09.2024