CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The present doctoral thesis examines the syntax and semantics of a number of constructions encoding operator–variable dependencies in Avar, a Northeast Caucasian language predominantly spoken in the Republic of Daghestan in the Russian Federation. In doing so it touches upon such empirical domains as reflexivity and anaphoricty, argument structure, A-movement, pronominalisation and pro-drop, as well as important theoretical notions of numeration, derivation, locality, formal features, modularity and the general architecture of the grammar.

1.1 Problem statement

Consider a regular declarative sentence of Avar

(1) was ana / *a- ra- w
    boy.abs go.pst go.pst-ptcp-m
    ‘The boy has left.’

—and the same sentence turned into a relative clause:

(2) [ a- ra- w / *ana ] was ...
    go.pst-ptcp-m go.pst boy.abs
    ‘The boy who has left...’
It can be seen from comparing these two clauses that they differ radically with respect to verbal morphosyntax: the declarative sentence features a verb in a tensed, finite form, whereas the relative clause must be headed by a participle.

The converse does not hold: declarative clauses can, under very restricted circumstances, also be headed by a participle (sentence (3), for instance, marks *was* 'boy' as being contrastively focused):

(3)  
\[
\text{was} \quad \text{in} \quad a- \quad r\alpha- \quad w \quad / \quad ^{*}\text{ana} \\
\text{boy.\text{abs}=\text{FOC} \quad g\text{o.\text{pst}-\text{ptcp-\text{m}} \quad g\text{o.\text{pst}}}
\]

'The [ \text{boy} ] has left.'

Even more strikingly, the finite verb cannot be used when asking a question (the question in (4) is a wh-question).

(4)  
\[
\text{šːiw} \quad a- \quad r\alpha- \quad w \quad / \quad ^{*}\text{ana} \\
\text{who.\text{m} \quad g\text{o.\text{pst}-\text{ptcp-\text{m}} \quad g\text{o.\text{pst}}}
\]

'Who has left?'

It is my ambition in this thesis, on the one hand, to answer the question whether there is a common semantic core underpinning the morphosyntactic contrast between the sentences above, and to draw comparisons with better-studied phenomena in better-studied languages when making the decision as to the exact syntactic structures underlying their derivation, as each of these A-constructions comes with a set of properties unique to it, in addition to those that are common to all of them.

### 1.2 The solution in brief

When looking at (2)–(4), all of which require the verb in a participial form, one of the questions that arises is which one of these sentence types serves as a base for the other ones to be built upon. The present thesis answers this question by treating (2), i.e. the relative clause, as being the structural core of the remaining types of clause.

This structural core is expanded upon to give rise to a cleft-like structure, in which the relationship between the relative clause core and the rest of the clause is mediated by either a predicador a dedicated particle. What this entails is that, rather than comparing Avar wh-questions and sentences with focus marking to (5) in a language like English, the better candidates for comparison are in fact the ones given in (6).
(5) a. [The boy] left.
   b. Who left?

(6) a. It was the boy that left.
   b. Who was it that left?

The hypothesised cleft-like structures feature question and focus particles, warranting the inclusion of Avar in the class of languages where such particles are realised overtly. These languages are as diverse as Tlingit (Cable 2010b), Sinhala (Slade 2011), Japanese (Hagstrom 1998) etc.

In the chapters to come we shall be working through the predictions of this question-particle clefting analysis and comparing the empirical coverage of the emerging analysis with that of some common alternatives.

1.3 Previous work on Avar

Avar being spoken in Russia, it is unsurprising that the absolute majority of academic work on various aspects of its grammar has been written in Russian. This includes the classic descriptive grammars von Uslar (1889) and Bokarev (1949). What is much more surprising is the immediately noticeable dearth of both descriptive and theoretical work, especially in light of other, smaller languages, having received significantly more scholarly attention (see Polinsky’s 2003 review of Kibrik 1999).

Nevertheless, Avar has been discussed in the literature, mostly in the context of (morphological) ergativity, argument structure and reflexivisation; furthermore, an edited volume appeared in 1993, having since become somewhat of a rarity, dealing with various phenomena in the nominal domain of the Andal dialect (Kibrik 1993).

A concise overview of scholarly works given in Erschler 2014 lists a total of 7 studies on Avar, accompanied by the following note:

Although it is one of the largest Northeast Caucasian languages in terms of the number of speakers, Avar is very poorly represented in the literature: even the first systematic description of Avar ever, von Uslar (1889), is still relevant to some extent. (Erschler 2014)

It should, however, be pointed out that the present study is by no means the first one to deal with A-dependencies in either Avar or the broader context of Northeast Caucasian languages, the most important empirical generalisations having been established by the late Aleksandr E. Kibrik and his colleagues at
1.4 Thesis outline

Chapter 2, entitled Framework, can be split in two parts: its first part introduces the general framework, which follows in the footsteps of Zwart (2009) in capitalising on the punctuated nature of syntactic derivations. It also introduces the necessary background to understanding the details of semantic interpretation of Avar wh-questions and sentences with focus later discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 respectively. The other, longer, part is intended as a brief introduction to the fascinating world of Avar grammar.

As briefly mentioned in §1.2 above, I analyse Avar questions and focus sentences as pseudoclefts of sorts, underlying which is a relative clause. These are dealt with at length in Chapter 3. Despite being participial constructions, Avar relative clauses are shown to have most of the properties characteristic of A-constructions crosslinguistically with the notable exception of unboundedness. I then propose that Avar relative clauses are derived via null operator movement that is interpreted by the meaning system as creating a predicate. Following Zwart (2009), I argue that Avar relative clauses are generated in a distinct derivational layer and enter any subsequent numerations as atomic elements whose internal structure is invisible to any element in that numeration.

Chapter 4 focuses on the two types of matrix constituent interrogatives in Avar, which I call, following the syntactic and semantic literature on wh-questions, the in-situ and ex-situ strategies of question formation. As the name suggests, they differ in whether the wh-item appears in its thematic position or dislocated from it. Having introduced the reader to the fundamentals of question semantics, I treat both of these strategies as truncated pseudoclefts by appealing to the analysis of relativisation from the preceding chapter and combining it with the Hamblin/Karttunen semantics for questions. The con-
necition between the gap and the dislocated wh-phrase is then argued to be established indirectly.

**Chapter 5** scrutinises the syntax and semantics of the expression of focus in Avar, mainly by contrasting the behaviour of the cleft-like particle with that of *only*, capitalising on their exhaustivity and analysing them in line with the approach to *it*-clefts in English recently put forward by Velleman et al. (2012). The chapter also strives to eliminate non-syntactic, information-structural notions of topic and focus from the narrow syntax, making the resultant analysis decidedly non-cartographic.

**Chapter 6** succinctly summarises the achievements of the thesis as well as lists potential directions for future research.