

Relative clauses and passive in Armenian

The data in this study come from a database of 1885 relative clauses in colloquial spoken Armenian, mainly elicited using the ‘mini-stories’ method of Hamburger & Crain, and a small corpus of oral narratives containing 2208 clauses. Armenian has both finite (postnominal and correlative) and non-finite (prenominal participial) RCs. Semantic and pragmatic factors, including the semantic properties of the verb as well as the relativized element (RE), and the information status of the relativized element in the main clause and in the relative clause, are relevant factors in the choice of strategy.

A typical clause in Armenian contains a ‘predicate’, with the main sentential stress on the initial element, that includes the verb, any preverbs or VP adverbs, non-topical arguments such as indefinite/non-specific objects and unaccusative subjects, also any element receiving narrow focus. Armenian has often been described as having OV order, but actually the order is flexible, and postverbal objects (and other arguments) are not uncommon. As Armenian has pro-drop of subjects and objects, many clauses consist simply of this predicate. If there are overtly expressed agent/experiencer subjects or definite/specific objects, elements that could be described as topical, these generally precede the predicate, but can also follow it. When this type of element is modified by a finite relative clause, the whole constituent (RE + RC) nearly always precedes the main predicate. When the relativized element is part of the predicate (non-topical and/or narrow focus), finite RCs are either extraposed to follow the verb, or the relativized element itself appears in postverbal position together with its RC. Participial RCs always precede RE, and cannot be separated from it.

Many languages show a strong tendency to articulate topical elements as syntactic subject. Passive constructions often function to articulate topical elements that are not thematic subject as syntactic subject. Thus passive subjects are generally topical in nature. Indeed, all the instances where RE is MC passive subject in the database are MC topics, and RE + RC precede the predicate. However, they are not numerous (12 examples), partly because of the design of the elicitation task (none of the contexts contained passive verbs or aimed to elicit them), and partly because in Armenian, topic status and syntactic subject status are not as closely linked as in a language such as English, because there are separate means for articulating these properties (word order for topic status, case for syntactic subject status), thus topics that are not thematic subject can be identified by their position, without the need to promote them to syntactic subject by passivization. The Armenian passive is in fact better described as mediopassive, as many examples of its use are actually middles rather than passives (such as ‘dress/wash oneself’), and thus their use is not connected with information structure. The Armenian passive is not used for impersonal constructions as in Turkish and some other languages.

Within RC itself, RE always has topic status, though it may not be the only topic. For this reason, there is a general crosslinguistic tendency to articulate it as RC subject regardless of its semantic role, especially if it also has other typical subject properties (e.g. animacy). In many languages, including English and German, passive is frequently used for this purpose. In Armenian, this sometimes occurs, but is not the most frequent strategy for promotion to subject (change of verb and causativization are more common). Another strategy that could be described as ‘promotion to subject’ is the use in colloquial speech of the subject participle for REs that are primary topics but not thematic subject. For the other main participle used in relativization, the resultative participle, its usage is mainly defined by semantic (affected patient/theme role, perfectivity) rather than pragmatic (topicality etc.) features. The resultative participle is often associated with transitive objects, and stative intransitive subjects, but there are some exceptions, revealing that semantics, rather than grammatical relations, are key: it is rarely used for DOs that do not have patient/theme role, and used fairly often for the subject of ‘go’ (not stative, but affected theme). Crosslinguistically, resultative participles are often associated with passive constructions, as passive transitive constructions often focus on the result, active constructions

on the action, but in relativization, this is reflected by the fact that in transitive constructions the participle usually refers to DO rather than subject, rather than by the use of passive morphology.