

## On morphosyntactic properties of Uralic relational nouns

Riku Erkkilä

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München /

University of Helsinki

riku.erkkila@helsinki.fi

All Uralic languages possess a group of words that is used to express a spatial relation (or, less frequently, a temporal relation) between two entities. Traditionally, these words are called postpositions, and an example of such a word is *vuol-* (SaN), *al-* (Fi), *al-* (MdE), *ul-* (Ud), *ɲil-* (NeT) ‘under(side)’. (Grünthal 2022: 961, 965–967.) However, Uralic languages have also a second group of words subsumed under the term postposition (cf. Grünthal 2022: 965–967), namely words expressing the syntactic or semantic function of their dependent. These two groups have been distinguished in Beserman Udmurt based on a number of criteria (Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva 2015), and a formal analysis of the distinction in Hill Mari is put forward in Burukina (2023) and Плешак & Давидюк (2018). In this paper I intend to expand their analysis to cover other Uralic languages as well.

The main proposal put forward by Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva (2015: 128–130) and argued for in this paper is that the group of words traditionally called postpositions and expressing a spatial relation between two entities should be separated from the words traditionally called postpositions and expressing the function of their dependent. The former group is called relational nouns (following Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva 2015), and the latter group postpositions. I argue that relational nouns of Uralic languages should rather be considered a subgroup of nouns (cf. also Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva 2015: 128–130).

The basis of the analysis is a semantic distinction, namely that relational nouns are used to express a relational area in relation to a referent (i.e., the dependent of the relational noun). A relational area is a region that is defined in respect to a referent. (Carlson 2010: 115–118.) This definition should be understood to include also cases, where there are two or more referents, and the area is defined in respect to all of them, i.e., elements expressing ‘between’ or ‘among’. According to this analysis relational nouns form a coherent group distinct from other types of words.

The region expressed by a relational noun is not absolute, but rather varies based on the properties of the reference object. For example, in *dvořecent' ikel'e* ‘in front of the palace [palace.GEN.DEF front.LOC]’ (MdE) the relational area is presumably larger than in *t'el'evizor ikel'e* ‘in front of a television [television front.LOC]’ (MdE). (Cf. Carlson 2010: 126–134.) Nonetheless, in both cases *ikel'e* ‘in front of [front.LOC]’ expresses a relational area. The first example can be contrasted with *čerkuvant' pačk* ‘through the church [church.GEN.DEF through]’ (MdE), where *pačk* ‘through’ marks the referent *čerkuva* ‘church’ as the route of a movement, i.e., indicates its locative role as ROUTE (cf. Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva 2015: 107). No area, relational or other, is specified by *pačk* ‘through’.

A category of spatial expressions that have common properties with nominals has been proposed also in typological literature (e.g., DeLancey 1997: 64–67 for Tibetan and Burmese; Grenoble 2014: 122–125 for Evenki). The aim of this paper is to define a category of relational nouns in Uralic languages in general. I apply morphological and morphosyntactic criteria

proposed by Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva (2015: 107–112, 114–115). These criteria include, among others, the locus of plural and possessive marking in relational noun and postpositional phrases. Not all of the criteria can be applied to all Uralic languages, however.

The morphological criterion proposed by Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva (2015: 107–112) for relational nouns in Beserman Udmurt is their ability to take case inflection (cf. Grünthal 2022: 965–967). This criterion applies also to other Uralic languages. The case paradigm of relational nouns is usually restricted to only (a subset of) spatial cases of the language, or it can consist of cases otherwise obsolete in the language. This criterion is not, however, decisive in Beserman Udmurt (Arkhangelskiy & Usacheva 2015: 107), nor in many other Uralic languages. Therefore, the morphosyntactic criteria must be used in addition.

Combined the morphological and morphosyntactic criteria yield guidelines for defining a category of relational nouns. The specific criteria can vary from language to language, as Uralic languages differ in their specific morphosyntactic properties. Moreover, the category of relational nouns is not necessary clear-cut, because categories in languages in general do not have clear boundaries. This does not, however, mean that relational nouns could not be defined in enough detail.

In this paper, I demonstrate the application of the abovementioned criteria with a variety of Uralic languages, but no comprehensive analysis is attempted here. The paper is intended to present the properties that can be used to define a category of relational nouns in Uralic languages, which can be elaborated further by specialists in each language. The data comes from various grammatical descriptions of Uralic languages.

## References

- Arkhangelskiy, Timofey & Usacheva, Maria. 2015. Syntactic and morphosyntactic properties of postpositional phrases in Beserman Udmurt as part-of-speech criteria. *SKY Journal of Linguistics* 28. 103–137.
- Burukina, Irina. 2023. On the syntax of postpositional phrases in Mari. Choosing between two structures. *Journal of Uralic Linguistics* 2(2). 158–193.
- Carlson, Laura. 2010. Parsing space around objects. In Evans, Vyvyan & Chilton, Paul (eds.), *Language, cognition and space. State of the art and new directions*, 115–137. London: Equinox.
- DeLancey, Scott. 1997. Grammaticalization and the gradience of categories. Relator nouns and postpositions in Tibetan and Burmese. In Bybee, Joan, Haiman, John & Thompson, Sandra A. (eds.), *Essays on language function and language type. Dedicated to T. Givón*, 51–69. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Grenoble, Lenore A. 2014. Spatial semantics, case and relator nouns in Evenki. In Suihkonen, Pirkko & Whaley, Lindsay J. (eds.), *On diversity and complexity of languages spoken in Europe and North and Central Asia*, 109–132 (Studies in Language. Companion Series 164). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Grünthal, Riho. 2022. Adpositions and adpositional phrases. In Bakró-Nagy, Marianne, Laakso, Johanna & Skribnik, Elena (eds.), *The Oxford guide to the Uralic languages*, 961–969. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Плешак, Полина Сергеевна & Давидюк, Татьяна Игоревна. 2018. Структура именной и послеложной групп в горномарийском языке. In Беликов, В. И. & Сумбатова, Н. Р.

(eds.), *Малые языки в большой лингвистике. Сборник трудов конференции 2017.*  
Москва: Буки Веди.