

Balti Syntax

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Language Documentation: Field Methods

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the syntax of Balti. I will first discuss the basic word order, followed by adpositions, yes/no questions, *wh*-questions, copular clauses, possessive clauses, and any mysteries that remain. All examples elicited were documented by me unless otherwise noted.

1. Basic Word Order

The general word order is SOV. This applies in both statements and questions:

- (1) dju Ali In
this Ali COP
'This is Ali.'

- (2) jaŋ piʃini zo-s-a
2sg lunch eat-PST.Q
'Did you eat lunch?'

Exceptions occur with passive verbs that make the typical subject dative, such as the phrases for 'like' or 'appear'. In these cases, the order typically favors the pronoun being first and thus the order is OSV, as seen here:

- (3) ŋa-la t̂sʰo rgaf̂a ʃjɛs-ɛt
1sg.DAT lake beautiful make-PRS
'I like the lake.'
(Lit. 'The lake is making beautiful to me.')

- (4) ŋa-la ni tsʰoː tʰoŋ-s m-ɛt
1sg.DAT 1sg-POSS grandson appear-PST NEG.COP
'I have not seen my grandson.'
(Lit. 'My grandson has not appeared to me.')

Exceptions also occur with focus and topic. When different word orders were tested with the speaker, he would say "That is fine too, but not often used." When asked when the phrases would be used, he would say "for emphasis." In these cases, the subject and object would switch places in the sentence, along with any adjectives relating to them.

- (5) η a bilo zo-s
 fish cat eat-PST
 ‘The cat ate the fish.’
 (Vanessa Ho; 2020/03/26; CM)

However, in general, the word order is pretty free with not much meaning attached. The following examples indicate the same thing with the same words stressed, and are both common:

- (6) k^h a η -pa \int joxmo η a-s pjo χ -pi In
 2sg-than fast 1sg-ERG clean COP
 ‘I bet I can clean faster than you!’
- (7) η a-s k^h a η -pa \int joxmo pjo χ -pi In
 1sg-ERG 2sg-than fast clean COP
 ‘I bet I can clean faster than you!’

If one wants extra emphasis on the action taken, the sentence takes on a more topic-comment-like structure:

- (8) η a zo-s bilo-s
 fish eat-PST cat-ERG
 ‘The cat *ate the fish!*’

Except for in cases of emphasis, the verb cannot be moved from the end of the phrase, however. If it is being moved at all it typically does not appear as the first word in a sentence either:

- (9) * \int j ϵ s- ϵ t azok^h \int unbo η a-la
 (Intended: ‘The azok^h is tasty.’)

In my next paper I will delve more in-depth on the topic of word order with respect to focus and topic as well, as there seem to be several levels of change that can occur with respect to topic and focus.

2. Adpositions

Adpositions are generally postpositions on the object of the sentence. With every postposition the object takes on the genitive marker, but there are some cases for which this does

not initially seem to apply. For those that I have not given an explanation for in this section, please refer to Mysteries 7.3. For parts of this section I will be using other people's sentences, as there are some words I personally had not come across in elicitation sessions.

2.1 'From' - [na]

[na] is typically used for 'from', although it is also used for 'and' as well:

- (10) ηəja-la jɛri-η-na ɪʃin lɔp-s
 2pl.DAT 2sg.GEN.from very learn-PST
 'We learned a lot from you.'

2.2 'On', 'With' - [k^ha]

[k^ha] is used for 'on' consistently:

- (11) mju ri-i-k^ha soŋ-s
 man mountain-GEN.on go-PST
 'The man went on the mountain.'

It is also used for 'with':

- (12) jaŋ-la ηəja-k^ha qalas rgaʃa ʃjɛs-ɛd-a
 2sg.DAT 1pl-with class pleasing know-PRS.Q
 'Do you like being in class with us?'

[jaŋbo] is also used for 'with' - however, its placement does not seem set in stone and is more used as an adjective instead of a typical adposition. As such, nothing takes on the genitive marker with relation to it as seen here, and I take it that it means something more like 'together':

- (13) ηa jaŋ na **jaŋbo** market-i-η soŋ-s
 1sg 2sg and together market-GEN.to go-PST
 'I went to the market together with you.'

[drɛsɛ] is also used for some kind of with, but again I do not think that it is the same as the preposition [k^ha]. Here I think it is again functioning as an adjective as another "together" but this time there is a distinction of the other person (in this case 'him'), and there is a dative marker instead:

- (14) ηa k^ho-η-la **drɛsɛ** baxtən bjɛs na tʃɪ
 1sg 3sg.MASC.to-DAT together marriage do if what

na gik^h
 if go-COND
 ‘What will happen if I marry him?’
 (Vanessa Ho; 2020/04/02; GM)

2.3 ‘On top’ - [toktu]

(15) k^hju nuŋ-i **toktu** jöt
 dog house-GEN on top COP
 ‘The dog is on top of the house.’
 (Vanessa Ho; 2020/04/09; GM)

2.4 ‘Under’ - [oktuk]

(16) k^ho kar-i **oktuk** jöt
 he car-GEN below COP
 ‘He is beneath the car.’ Context: in a car crash
 (Vanessa Ho; 2020/04/09; GM)

2.5 ‘Through’ - [kεrε]

This does not take on the genitive marker for some unknown reason, touched upon in Mysteries 7.3.

(17) k^hju tunnel-i di tŭŋa **kεrε** ε tŭŋa
 dog tunnel-GEN this side/border through other side
 tənimən drul-s
 until.arriving walk.PST
 ‘The dog walked through the tunnel.’ Lit. ‘The dog walked from this side through until arriving at the other point of the tunnel.’
 (Vanessa Ho; 2020/04/09; GM)

2.6 ‘Near’ - [tʃɛnɪŋ]

(18) jɛnɪfər kuri kus-i **tʃɛnɪŋ** sɛkənd

 Jennifer 3sg.FEM.POSS chair-GEN next.to second
 tʃɪk^h-la duk-s
 one-DAT stand-PST
 ‘Jennifer stood next to her chair for a second.’
 (Greta Schatz; 2020/04/17; GM)

2.7 ‘Towards’ - [ɾola]

- (19) *khju ni tʰable-i rola oŋ-s*
 dog 1sg.POSS table-GEN towards come.PST
 ‘The dog came to my table.’
 (Vanessa Ho; 2020/04/09; GM)

2.8 ‘To’, ‘In’ - [-ŋ]

[ŋ] is used as a preposition for ‘to’ and ‘in’, just associating the subject with being in the same location as the object.

- (20) *ŋa naŋ-i-ŋ naniŋ soŋ-s*
 1sg home-GEN.to last year go-PST
 ‘I went to my house last year.’

2.9 ‘Until’ - [mən]

This is another example of something that we consider an adposition in English but in Balti does not seem to function in the same manner.

- (21) *spaq-po tʰsʰo: gwe-i mən tab-i kʰa zoq*
 curry-DEF hot go-PRS until stove-GEN on put
 ‘Boil the curry until it’s hot.’ (literally: ‘put the curry on the stove until it’s hot.’)
 (Greta Schatz; 2020/04/12; GM)

2.10 ‘Before’ - [duŋla]

This is another seeming adposition where nothing takes on the genitive marker, to be discussed later.

- (22) *di qal rijax-po pa duŋla ŋa piʃin-i zan*
 this call start-the PST before I lunch-GEN meal
^ˆtso^ˆ-ɛn jʊt-pa
 make-PTCP COP-PST
 ‘Before I came to this call, I was making lunch.’

3. Yes/No Questions

Yes/no questions are formed by adding the marker *-a* onto the verb at the end of a phrase, after all other endings are added. The response is typically the verb with which the question was originally formed if affirmative, and the same but with *ma* added if it is negative.

- (23)
 (a) *mo-s jaŋ-la ɕlta-s-a*

1sg.FEM.ERG 2sg.DAT see-PST.Q
 ‘Did she see you?’

(b) ɔlta-s

see-PST
 ‘She saw me.’
 (Lit. ‘Saw.’)

(c) $\text{ma } \text{ɔlta-s}$

NEG see-PST
 ‘No, she did not see me.’
 (Lit. ‘No saw.’)

4. *Wh*-Questions

The construction of *wh*-questions is typically that the *wh*-word appears after the subject and object and before any words describing the verb. When these are used the question marker is not needed because the presence of a question is already indicated. *Wh*-words take on case marking as well, it appears, but I will discuss it further in 4.2 and in Mysteries 7.1. Because the *wh*-word appears in the middle of the sentence, Balti can be considered a *wh-in-situ* language.

4.1 *Wh*-word examples

4.1.1 Who - ‘su’

(24)

(a) $\text{di } \text{ʃokʃok}^{\text{h}}\text{-po } \text{su-i } \text{fila } \text{In}$
 this letter-DEF who-GEN for COP
 ‘Who is this letter for?’

(b) $\text{di } \text{ʃoksok}^{\text{h}}\text{-po } \text{mo-i } \text{fɪla } \text{In}$
 this letter she-GEN for COP
 ‘This letter is for her.’

4.1.2 What - ‘ $\text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{fi}$ ’

(25)

(a) $\text{k}^{\text{h}}\text{aŋ } \text{t}^{\text{h}}\text{fi } \text{In}$
 you what AUX
 ‘What are you?’

(b) $\text{ŋa } \text{ba } \text{In}$
 I cow AUX
 ‘I am a cow.’

4.1.3 When - ‘nan’

(26)

- (a) k^han-i do nan bε-s
 2sg-ERG that when do-PST
 ‘When did you do that?’
- (b) na-s haskε do bε-s
 1sg-ERG yesterday that do-PST
 ‘I did that yesterday.’

4.1.4 Where - ‘gar’

(27)

- (a) k^han gar jət
 you where AUX
 ‘Where are you?’
- (b) na di-i-k^ha jət
 1sg here-GEN-on AUX
 ‘I am here.’

4.1.5 Why - ‘t^hfa’

(28)

- (a) k^han na t^hon-sε t^hfa ʃər-εt
 you I appear-ADV why run-PRS
 ‘Why do you run from me?’
 (Lit. ‘Why are you to me appearing to run?’)
- (b) na jan-la jik-s
 1sg 2sg.DAT scare-PST
 ‘I am scared of you.’

4.1.6 How - ‘t^hfibjεsε’

(29)

- (a) k^han-i do t^hfibjεsε bε-s
 you-ERG that how do-PST
 ‘How did you do that?’
- (b) na-la rtaspa m-εt
 1sg.DAT know NEG.COP
 ‘I do not know.’

4.2 Subject vs. Non-subject question formation

To differentiate between the subject- and non-subject-questions, the *wh*-word takes on the dative marker and occasionally the ergative marker to indicate whether the response should be the subject or object, as shown.

Subject question:

(30)

(a) su-s jaŋ-la ʃokʃok^h-po mIn-s
 who-ERG 2sg.DAT letter-DEF give-PST

‘Who gave you the letter?’

(b) jesika-s mIn-s
 Jessica-ERG give-PST

‘Jessica gave it to me.’

Non-subject question:

(31)

(a) jaŋ-i ʃokʃok^h-po su-la miŋ-ɛn jüt
 2sg.GEN letter-DEF who-DAT give-PTCP AUX

‘Who are you giving the letter to?’

(b) ŋa-s ʃokʃok^h-po mo-la miŋ-ɛn jüt
 1sg.ERG letter-DEF 3FEM.sg.DAT give-PTCP AUX

‘I am giving it to her.’

5. Copular clauses

All of the following cases use either the copula [jüt] or [In]. Both of these take on tense and negation markers with the same structure as described in the Balti Morphology paper.

5.1 Locative predicates

Locative predicates are typically using the copula [jüt]. The word order follows the same SOV structure as previously shown.

(32) jo keti xnAm-po k^har-i-ŋ jüt
 (Surprise) Katie blue-DEF basket-GEN-in COP

‘Oh! Katie is in the blue basket!’

(33) ali-s keti ʃtsal-s keti marfo k^har-i-ŋ
 Ali-ERG Katie find-PST Katie red basket-GEN.in
 m-ɛt

NEG.COP

‘Ali did not find Katie in the red basket.’

5.2 Adjectival predicates

In both cases of adjectival predicates, the adjective being referred to by the copula is placed after the noun it is describing.

To stress habitual aspect in adjectival predicates, the copula [jʊt] is used.

- (34) xarimajon* ʔtsamtʔsɛ rɔaʃa jʊt
 yellow bird very beautiful COP
 ‘The yellow bird is very beautiful.’
**regional bird, no direct translation*

- (35) hɛðɛr-i namo ɪʃin qulqul jʊt
 Heather-GEN husband very slow COP
 ‘Heather’s husband is very slow.’

For stative adjectives, the copula [ɪn] is used.

- (36) mɛndoq marfo jʊt
 flower red COP
 ‘The flowers are red.’
 (Sophia Strachan; 2020/03/11; GM)

A mystery that will be discussed in Mysteries 7.2 is [dʊgɛd]. This is referred to by several people as a third copula but I personally have not come across it, and seems to be used in reference to universal truths.

5.3 Predictive nominal predicates

For predictive nominals, [ɪn] is used as well.

- (37) dju al-i bilo keti ɪn
 this Ali-GEN cat Katie COP
 ‘This is Ali’s cat Katie.’

6. Possessive clauses

With possessive clauses, the copula [ɪn] is typically used.

- (38) dju kʰwej ɪn
 that his COP

‘That is his.’

7. Mysteries

7.1 *Wh*-word case markings

In Section 4, I had shown several examples where *wh*-words take on case markings. However, not all of them seemed to have done that and in fact most of them do not. The only ones that take on a case marking, I believe, are the ones that would have a subject or an object as the answer, which would be ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘where’. I had indicated that distinction in the forms of ‘who’, where I showed it taking on both the ergative and dative marker, and it also can take on the genitive marker seemingly to make it ‘whose’, but no other *wh*-word has that ability, perhaps because there is no way to show possession for ‘what’ or ‘where’.

(39)

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-----|
| (a) | de | ʃokʃok ^h -po | su-i | In |
| | this | letter-DEF | who-GEN | COP |
| | ‘Whose letter is this?’ | | | |
| (b) | de | ʃokʃok ^h -po | mwej | In |
| | this | letter-DET | 1FEM.sg.POSS | COP |
| | ‘This letter is hers.’ | | | |

I am wondering, however, if I have just missed several potential cases and did not test enough for situations where there may be case markings on these words. I am not sure if it would make sense to put case markings on anything else, but the whole situation confuses me.

7.2 [dʊgɛd] as a third copula

In some classmates’ data, [dʊgɛd] appears as a third copula that seemingly indicates universality.

- (40) ri-uŋ tənɲə dʊgɛd
 mountain-PL tall COP
 ‘Mountains are tall’
 (Said as universal truth about mountains)
 (Sophia Strachan; 2020/03/11; GM)

I do find it strange that we had not come across it often otherwise, unless we simply have not been asking about universal truths enough to encounter it in elicitations. Perhaps it would make sense to ask for more data on it and see, but it does seemingly indicate a third copula in the data collected. I am also not sure semantically what the boundary between a universal truth is and a regular observation - is the speaker assuming everyone knows that mountains are tall? Or do some people who have different standards for mountains not use [dʊgɛd] because they do not

personally think this is universally true? I guess this would more be a question of semantics, however.

7.3 Adpositions without the genitive marker

Certain words that have been classified as adpositions in Section 2 I would not entirely consider within the category, but I was not sure where to place them instead. Words such as ‘through’, ‘until’, and ‘before’ do not get paired (in the cases elicited) with the genitive marker, which is how the other more classical prepositional phrases seemed to work before. My hypothesis is that perhaps the phrases elicited are not traditional prepositional phrases, but rather are functioning more as transition words as none of these words are directly referring to an object but rather to an action.

- (41) η a-la η i $phaskad-i$ $bari\eta$ sa η eti-na
 1sg-DAT 1sg.POSS father tongue-POSS about also 2sg-POSS.from
 $i\eta in$ $l\o p-s$ $t^{\wedge}fa$ $z\epsilon rba-na$ $\eta a-s$ $djupa$ **du η la**
 very learn-PST why say-that 1sg-ERG ? **before**
 ηisk^ha $d\epsilon$ $bari\eta$ $i\eta in$ $samba$ $ta\eta pa$ $m-\epsilon t$ pa
 together that about very think make NEG-AUX PST
 ‘I also learned a lot about my father tongue from you because I never thought about it before.’

In this example, ‘before’ seems to be referring to the action of thinking rather than ‘before the storm’ or some other context such as that. With these words where we have not been seeing the genitive marker, it would be a good idea to elicit more typical prepositional phrases, as in English as well we can see words typically used as prepositions appearing as transition words.

8. Conclusion

Balti utilizes a subject-object-verb word order, but this becomes very malleable very quickly when adding in focus and emphasis, as well as verbs that describe more passive actions. Adpositions are seemingly straightforward but we must be careful as to the context that the word is occurring in the sentence in order to not mistakenly transcribe it as an adposition, as it may be performing a different function as a transition word. Yes/no questions are fairly straightforward, where the verb takes on a question marker, and for *wh*-questions there is no question marker as the *wh*-word already indicates that. Copular clauses seemingly follow a straightforward pattern as well. However, there is always more work to be done and many parts of syntax that have yet to be touched upon, and in my next paper I hope to clear up the confusion on focus/topic word order more specifically.