SLUICING-LIKE PHENOMENA AND THE LOCATION OF CP IN OSSETIC

In this paper, I show that Ossetic has sluicing in the proper sense and argue on this basis for the low (preverbal) position of complementizers in the Ossetic clause structure. The classical sluicing occurs in wh-fronting languages, and it is only the wh-phrase(s) that is retained:

(1) *Anne invited someone, but I don’t know who.* Merchant (2001: 40)

Sluicing-like constructions, however, are also attested in languages that either lack wh-movement or show non-canonical patterns thereof. The issue how to analyze such structures is controversial, see, e.g. the polemics between Ince (2012) and Hankamer (2011) on the proper analysis of Turkish sentences of this type.

In Ossetic, wh-phrases, (2), and certain complementizers, (3), are obligatorily preverbal, no matter where the verb is situated in the clause, and only certain items may intervene between the wh-phrases/complementizer and the verb. It is an obvious challenge to theories of “left periphery” to analyze such a structure: even if the preverbal placement of wh-phrases might be explained away as focusing, it can be hardly done so for complementizers.

(2) Preverbal placement of wh-phrases

a. Affirmative sentence
   soslan k’ere baχʷardta
   S. pie s/he.ate
   ‘Soslan ate a/the pie.’

b. Interrogative sentence
   k’ere ka baχʷardta?
   pie who s/he.ate
   ‘Who ate a/the pie?’

c. Wh-phrases do not stay in situ
   *ka k’ere baχʷardta?
   who pie s/he.ate

(3) Preverbal placement of complementizers

a. tɐrsgɐ kɐnun [χɐpsɐ mistɐbɐl ɐppundɐr ke ne=wwnduj]
   afraid.CVB I.do frog mouse.SUP at.all CPL NEG=believes
   ‘I am worried that the frog does not believe the mouse at all.’

b. *ke χɐpsɐ mistɐbɐl ɐppundɐr ne=wwnduj]
   CPL frog mouse.SUP at.all NEG=believes

Items that may intervene between wh-phrases and the verb in Digor are comparative degrees of adverbs, (4a) and various negative items, (4b).

(4) a. ka fuldɐ baniwaza?
   who more s/he.would.drink
   ‘Who would drink more?’

b. ka neči baχʷardta?
   who nothing s/he.ate
   ‘Who ate nothing?’

Despite the unusual patterns of wh-placement and complementation, Ossetic shows a construction that is at least superficially similar to sluicing:

(5) [soslan čidɐr baχʷardta] [[fal ne=zonun] [či]]

Soslan something ate but NEG=I.know the what.
‘Soslan ate something, but I don’t know what.’

Analogously to “classical” sluicing, this type of ellipsis can go backwards (6a), is unbounded (6b), and is not sensitive to islands, (6c):

(6) a. [ne=j zonun [cebɛl]]
   NEG=ACC.3SG I.know what.SUP
   [Medine cɛbɛlдер ke cɛbdɛj] je]
   M. something.SUP CPL plays CORR
   ‘I don’t know what, but I believe Madina plays something.’

b. soslan čidɐr baχʷardta ena [gurʊʂɜ ke cɛbdɛj] [Medine]
   S. something ate and suspicion I.do
   kenun
   ‘Soslan ate something, but I don’t know what.’

1 The following abbreviations are used in glosses: ABL ablative; ACC accusative; CORR correlate; CPL complementizer; CTR contrastive topic; CVB converb; EMP emphatic clitic; INF infinitive; NEG negation; PL plural; SUP superessive.
That Ossetic (pseudo)-sluicing is indeed an independent type of ellipsis, and not a subvariety of stripping [as argued for Turkish pseudo-sluicing in Hankamer (2011)], follows from the fact that, unlike sluicing, stripping is ungrammatical in dependent clauses (7 a-b), and cannot go backwards, (7 c-d):

(7) a. *medine fendur-ŋj cərduj [ema enəel den
M. fandoor-ABL plays and guess am
[zeline=der ke cərduj] (woj)]
Z=EMP CPL plays (CORR)
‘Madina plays fandoor, and I hope that Zalina plays it too.’

b. *medine fendur-ŋj cərd-uj [ema [enəel den
M. fandoor-ABL plays and guess am
[zeline=der (ke) cərduj]]
Z=EMP CPL plays

(8) alan kiwunuŋute kesun warzuj ema medine=der
Alan books read.INF loves and Madina=EMP
‘Alan likes to read books and Madina does so too.’

d. *Medine(=der) ema alan kiwunuŋute kesun warzuj
Medina(=EMP) AND Alan books read.INF loves

Another potential analysis of pseudo-sluicing, reduced cleft, is ruled out because the copula cannot be inserted in sluices, cf a similar argument in Toosarvandani (2008: 682-684) for Persian. Thus it is natural to analyze Ossetic (pseudo)-sluicing as the classical sluicing, i.e. as deletion of the material below C. However, in the light of examples like (3), we would expect that pre-complementizer material may be retained. This prediction is borne out:

(9) a. *[alan soslan] ɐžinɐ  fənnadta [fal  ne=zonun
Alan Soslan.ACC yesterday beat.up but NEG=I.know
[ačibon ka] (woj)]
today who (CORR)
‘Alan beat up Soslan yesterday, but I don’t know who did so today.’

Furthermore, in such “extended sluices”, the wh-phrase is normally final in its clause, and what is able to follow it are only the items that may separate wh-phrases/complementizers and verbs, compare (9b) and (4).

(9) b. [medini bere ləq“ɛnte warzuncə] [[fəl=ši ka fulder]
Medina.ACC many boys they.love but=ABL.3PL who more
woj=ba ne=zonun]
CORR=CTR NEG=I.know
‘Many boys love Madina, but I don’t know who of them does so most.’