

# From Converb to Complementizer

## On the Syntactic Flexibility of *dep* in Kazakh

Aidan Sharma & Ariela Ye

Rutgers University

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# Language Background

## Kazakh:

- a Turkic language with 12 million native speakers (Dotton & Wagner 2018).
- primarily spoken in Kazakhstan in addition to China, Mongolia, southern Russia, and other parts of Central Asia (Mukhamedova 2015).



**Figure 1** Political map of Central Asia.

Image from McCollum & Chen (2021)

# Data in this Presentation

- Data in this presentation comes from elicitations done in the summer of 2025 with 11 Kazakh speakers.
- All elicitations were done in Almaty with college age speakers from various parts of Kazakhstan.



Image available at <https://www.britannica.com/place/Almaty-Kazakhstan>

# Say-Complementation

- *Say*-complementation involves embedded clauses introduced by elements related to the verb ‘say’.
- This raises the question as to whether these elements are synchronically functioning as complementizers or as verbs.

(1) *Murat [Aidyn-dy qula-p qal-dy **dep**] bil-e-di.*  
Murat Aidyn-ACC fall-CNVB AUX-PST **DEP** know-PRES-3

‘Murat knows that Aidyn fell.’

# Say-Complementation Cross-linguistically

- (2) *Yuēhàn juéde [shuō míngtiān huì xiàyǔ].*  
John think **say** tomorrow will rain  
'John thought that it would rain tomorrow. (Ye 2025: 304) Mandarin
- (3) *â:-ngén [â:-lé Ø-rú-è Kibê:t].*  
1SG-know 1SG-**say** 3-sleep-IPFV Kibeet.NOM  
'I know that Kibeet is sleeping.' (Driemel & Kouneli 2025: 223) Kipsigis
- (4) *Min [ehigi-(ni) bǔgūn kyaj-yax-xyt di-en] erem-mit-im.*  
1SG 2PL-ACC today win-FUT-2PL **say-CNVB** hope-PTPL-1SG  
'I hoped that you would win today.' (Baker & Vinokurova 2010: 595) Sakha
- (5) *Mahinur [Tursun-(ni) göshnan-ni et-t-i de-p] oyla-y-du.*  
Mahinur Tursun-ACC meatbread-ACC make-PST-3 **say-CNVB** think-NONPST-3  
'Mahinur thinks that Tursun made meatbread.' (Major 2024: 1126) Uyghur

# Say-Complementation Cross-linguistically

- ▷ There are 3 kinds of analyses in the literature:
- C head analysis: Kinande (Baker 2008), Lubukusu (Diercks 2013), Ibibio (Duncan & Torrence 2017)
  - Lexical verb analysis: Uyghur (Major 2024), Kipsigis (Driemel & Kouneli 2025)
  - Binary analysis depending on the preceding predicate: Kipsigis (Bossi 2023),<sup>1</sup> Sakha (Yue 2023), Mandarin (Ye 2025)

We argue for a binary analysis of Kazakh *dep*:

- 1 *dep* is a complementizer following non-communicative verbs (e.g., *know*, *think*, *show*, *fear*; Anand et al. 2019)
- 2 *dep* is a verb following communicative verbs (e.g., *mutter*, *complain*)

<sup>1</sup>But see Driemel & Kouneli (2025) for criticism of the analysis in Bossi (2023).

# Kazakh Data

▷ Kazakh ‘say’: *de-u* (say-INF) / *de-p* (say-CNVB)

- (6) *Murat birnárse de-di*  
Murat something say-PST

‘Murat said something.’

matrix verb

- (7) [*Aisha birdeńe de-p*], *ket-ip qal-dy*.  
Aisha something say-CNVB leave-CNVB AUX-PST

‘(After) saying something, Aisha left.’ (Ótött-Kovács 2023: 109)

converb

- (8) *Murat [Aıdyn-dy qula-p qal-dy dep] bil-e-di*.  
Murat Aidyn-ACC fall-CNVB AUX-PST DEP know-PRES-3

‘Murat knows that Aidyn fell.’

complementizer?/converb?

**Our puzzle:** Is *dep* in sentences like (8) a bi-morphemic converb or a mono-morphemic complementizer?

# Kazakh *-(l)p* Converbs

- The converbial suffix *-(l)p* is productive in Kazakh and is used for adverbial (9) and for multiverb constructions (10).
- When adverbial *dep* clauses lack an overt subject, they are interpreted as having the same subject as the matrix clause.

(9) *Búgin men [mýzyka tyńda-p] úı jumys-y-n zhasa-dy-m.*  
today 1SG music **listen-CNVB** home work-3POSS-ACC do-PST-1SG.

‘Today I did my homework while listening to music.’

(10) *Áli oına-p jatyr-syń ba?*  
still play-CNVB AUX-2SG Q

‘Are you still playing?’ (Mukhamedova 2015: 130)

- Major (2021, 2024) has proposed for closely related Uyghur that despite *dep* usually being translated into English as the complementizer, its morphological form should be taken at face value and *de-p* should be treated as a verb.

# Against a Single V Analysis of *dep*

- In a verbal analysis of *dep* (cf. Major 2024), a sentence like (11) is better translated as “Murat knows something, saying Aidyn fell.,” consistent the usual adverbial converb use of *dep*.

(11) *Murat [Aidyn-dy qula-p qal-dy dep] bil-e-di.*  
Murat Aidyn-ACC fall-CNVB AUX-PST **DEP** know-PRES-3

‘Murat knows that Aidyn fell.’

- However, we present the following diagnostics indicating *dep* does not behave like a verb with respect to the following:
  - Event modification (Ótrott-Kovács 2023)
  - Agent-oriented modifiers (Ótrott-Kovács 2023)
  - Case marking of causees (Ótrott-Kovács 2023)
  - Restrictions on subject hood (cf. Yue 2023)
  - Insertion of “redundant” temporal modification (cf. Yue 2023)
  - Interpretation of matrix negation

# Event Modification with *again*

- Ótrott-Kovács (2023) argues that a verbal *dep* would have to introduce an event which could be targeted by *again*, which is not borne out.

(12) *Aisha (qaitadan) [(qaitadan) men (qaitadan) Almaty-ǵa bar-dy-m*  
*Aisha again again 1SG again Almaty-DAT go-PST-1SG*  
*dep] ait-ty.*  
**DEP** say-PST

‘Aisha said (again) that I<sub>SPEAKER/Aisha</sub> went to Almaty (again).’

**Not:** ‘Aisha told (the news) saying *again* that I<sub>SPEAKER/Aisha</sub> went to Almaty.’

(Ótrott-Kovács 2023: 111-112)

# Agent Oriented Modifiers

- Similarly, Ótrott-Kovács (2023) argues that agent oriented modifiers should be able to target the subject of a verbal *dep*, contrary to fact.

(13) *Aisha [(megafon/kórshi/sabyr-men) men (megafon/kórshi/*  
*Aisha megaphone/neighbor/patience-INSTR 1SG megaphone/neighbor/*  
*sabyr-men) Almaty-ğa bar-dy-m dep] ait-ty.*  
*patience-INSTR Almaty-DAT go-PST-1SG DEP say-PST*

‘Aisha said that I<sub>SPEAKER/Aisha</sub> went to Almaty with the megaphone/together with the neighbor/patiently.’

**Not:** ‘Aisha told (the news) *saying with a megaphone/saying together with the neighbor/saying patiently* that I<sub>SPEAKER/Aisha</sub> went to Almaty.’

(Ótrott-Kovács 2023: 113)

# Case Marking on Causees

- Ótott-Kovács (2023) also shows that *dep* clauses pattern like direct object arguments in forcing causees to surface with dative rather than accusative case.

(14) a. *Men sen-i/\*saǵan jumys.iste-t-ti-m.*  
1SG **2SG-ACC/\*2SG.DAT** work-CAUS-PST-1SG

‘I made you work.’

b. *Men \*sen-i/saǵan suraq-ty sura-t-ty-m.*  
1SG **\*2SG-ACC/2SG.DAT** question-ACC ask-CAUS-PST-1SG

‘I had you ask the question.’ (Ótott-Kovács 2023: 116)

(15) *Men \*sen-i/saǵan [jańbyr jaý-dy ma dep] sura-t-ty-m.*  
1SG **\*2SG-ACC/2SG.DAT** rain rain-PST Q DEP ask-CAUS-PST-1SG

‘I made you ask whether it rained.’ (Ótott-Kovács 2023: 117)

# Restrictions on Subjecthood

- *de-u* requires human subjects.

(16) # *Mysyq* [o-ny tamaqtan-dyr-ma-dy] *de-di*  
*cat* 3SG-ACC eat-CAUS-NEG-PST *say-PST*

Intended: ‘The cat said you didn’t feed it.’

- But, *dep* allows non-human subjects.

(17) *Mysyq* [o-ny tamaqtan-dyr-ma-dy *dep*] *máýla-dy*  
*cat* 3SG-ACC eat-CAUS-NEG-PST *DEP* meow-PST

‘The cat meowed that you didn’t feed it.’ (e.g., the cat’s meow indicated that you didn’t feed it)

# Insertion of “Redundant” Temporal Modification

- Since *-(l)p* converbs indicate simultaneous action, inserting a modifier like *while* should have no semantic effect, which is not the case.

(18) # *Mysyq* [*o-ny*    *tamaqtan-dyr-ma-dy dep jatqanda*] *máyla-dy*  
**cat**        3SG-ACC eat-CAUS-NEG-PST    **DEP while**        meow-PST

Intended: ‘The cat meowed while saying that you didn’t feed it.’

- The addition of *jatqanda* here makes the sentence ungrammatical (cf. 17).
- This is unexpected if *dep* is a converb in both sentences, but expected if *dep* is a C in (17) and *jatqanda* here forces a converb reading.

## Insertion of “Redundant” Temporal Modification

- Similarly, (19) is infelicitous with *jatqanda*, but is a normal complementation use of *dep* without it.
- (20) shows an example where the sequence *dep jatqanda* is felicitous.

(19) # Murat [Aidyn ket-ti **dep jatqanda**] oıla-ı-dy.  
Murat Aidyn leave-PST DEP while think-PRES-3

Intended: ‘Murat thinks while saying that Aidyn left.’

(20) Murat [Aidyn ket-ti **dep jatqanda**] ne jasa-ıtyń-yń oıla-p  
Murat Aidyn leave-PST **DEP while** what do-PTCP-2SG think-CNVB  
*jat-yr.*  
AUX-PRES

‘While saying that Aidyn left, Murat is thinking about what to do.’

# Interpretation of Matrix Negation

- A verbal *dep* would have a reading where the speaker is still committed to the content of the *dep* phrase (21), but *dep* here does not (22).

(21) *Murat [Aidyn-dy mazala-ý-ğa tyrys-yp], o-ğan qara-ma-dy*  
Murat Aidyn-ACC bother-INF-DAT try-**CNVB** 3SG-DAT look-NEG-PST

✓‘Murat, trying to bother Aidyn, didn’t look at him.’

✓‘Murat didn’t look at Aidyn to try to disturb him.’

(22) *Murat [Aidyn ket-ti **dep**] oıla-ma-ı-dy.*  
Murat Aidyn leave-PST **DEP** think-**NEG**-PRES-3SG.

✓‘Murat doesn’t think that Aidyn left.’

✗‘Murat doesn’t think something, saying that Aidyn left.’

# Against a Single C Analysis

- However, not all these instances of *dep* are complementizer uses.
- One obvious verbal instance of *dep* is when it's used with an auxiliary verb.

(23) *Eńis-ten*    *tús-e*                      *ber-e*                      *áke-m:*                      “*Qablan,*  
slope-ABL    descend-CNVBII    AUX-CNVBII    father-1SG.POSS    Kablan  
*ait-ait*”                      ***de-p***                      ***qal-dy.***  
tell.IMP-tell.IMP    **say-CNVB**    **AUX-PST**

‘As we were descending the slope, my father said: “Kablan, tell me”.  
(Kilgarriff et al. 2004, 2014)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.sketchengine.eu/>

# Against a Single C Analysis

- Another obvious case consists of adjunct converb phrases clearly involving speech.

(24) *Halq-ymyz-dyń*      *ejelgi*      *dástúr-i*      *boıynsha,*      *toi*  
people-1PL.POSS-GEN    ancient    tradition-3.POSS    according.to    wedding  
*jasa-ğan*      *úi-ge*      *o-nyń*      *jaqyn-dar-y*      [*«toiǵa shashý»*  
DO-PST.PTCP    home-DAT    3SG-GEN    relative-PL-3.POSS    *“toiǵa shashý”*  
*de-p*],      *tátti*      *taǵamdar*      *ákel-e-di*.  
*say-CNVB*    sweet food      bring-PRES-3

‘According to the ancient tradition of our people, his relatives bring sweets to the house where the wedding took place, saying “toiǵa shashý” (literally: spread/shower the wedding).’ (Kilgarriff et al. 2004, 2014)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.sketchengine.eu/>

# Against a Single C Analysis

- However, there also some interesting cases where *dep* looks like it might be a complementizer, but is really a verb.
- These cases involve the use of *dep* with communicative verbs.
- We will show evidence from fronting that these uses of *dep* are different than with non-communicatives and propose structures for the two types of *dep* clauses.

# Fronting with Non-communicatives

- With a non-communicative like *believe*, the entire embedded clause can front. But, the complement of *dep* cannot front by itself and strand *dep*.

- (25) a. *Murat [Aidyn-dy qula-p qal-dy dep] sen-di*  
Murat **Aidyn-ACC fall-CNVB AUX-PST DEP** believe-PST  
‘Murat believed that Aidyn fell.’
- b. *[Aidyn-dy qula-p qal-dy dep], Murat sen-di.*  
**Aidyn-ACC fall-CNVB AUX-PST DEP** Murat believe-PST  
‘That Aidyn fell, Murat believed.’
- c. \**Aidyn-dy qula-p qal-dy], Murat [dep sen-di*  
**Aidyn-ACC fall-CNVB AUX-PST** Murat **DEP** believe-PST  
Intended: ‘Aidyn fell, Murat believed that.’

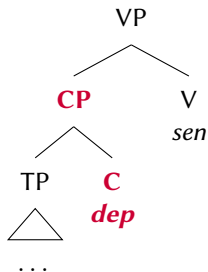
# Fronting with Communicatives

- With a communicative like *complain*, both fronting possibilities are allowed.

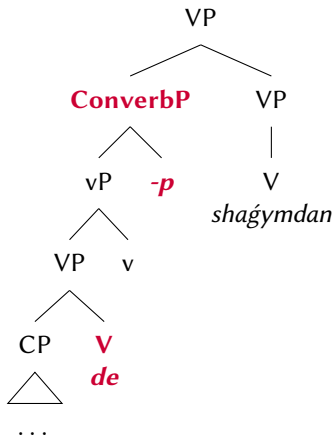
- (26) a. *Murat Aidyn-ǵa [qula-p qal-dy-m dep] shaǵymdan-dy*  
Murat Aidyn-DAT **fall-CNVB AUX-PST-1SG DEP** complain-PST  
‘Murat<sub>i</sub> complained to Aidyn that he<sub>i</sub> fell.’
- b. **[Qula-p qal-dy-m dep]**, *Murat Aidyn-ǵa shaǵymdan-dy*  
**fall-CNVB AUX-PST-1SG DEP** Murat Aidyn-DAT complain-PST  
‘That he<sub>i</sub> fell, Murat<sub>i</sub> complained to Aidyn.’
- c. **[Qula-p qal-dy-m]**, *Murat Aidyn-ǵa dep shaǵymdan-dy*  
**fall-CNVB AUX-PST-1SG** Murat Aidyn-DAT **DEP** complain-PST  
‘He<sub>i</sub> fell, Murat<sub>i</sub> complained to Aidyn.’

## Two Structures for *dep* Clauses

Structure for Non-communicatives (e.g., *believe*):



Structure for Communicatives (e.g., *complain*):



# Fronting with Non-communicatives

- The fronting possibilities with non-communicatives are consistent with a complementizer analysis of *dep*, as they conform to the no C stranding constraint (Abels 2003), cf. the following English examples.

(27) Nobody believes that anything will happen.

(28) That anything will happen, nobody believes.

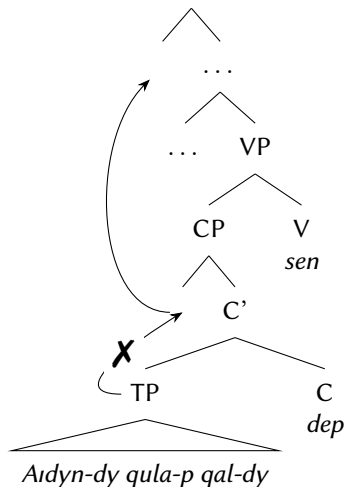
(29) \*Anything will happen, nobody believes that.

# Fronting with Non-communicatives

- Abels (2003) derives this effect from the PIC (Chomsky 2000) and anti-locality.
- Given that CP is a phase, its domain is not accessible to further syntactic operations.
- Given that anti-locality bans complement to specifier movement, TP to SpecCP movement is ruled out.

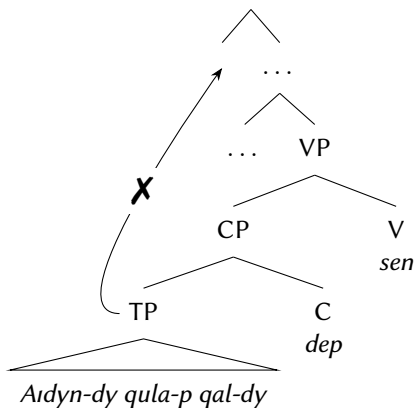
# Fronting with Non-communicatives

- So, the following derivation for TP fronting is ruled out by anti-locality.



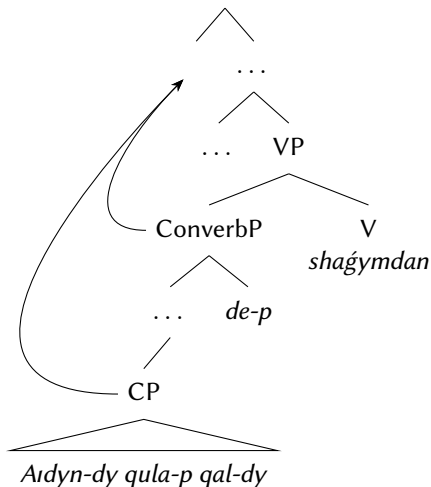
# Fronting with Non-communicatives

- The other possible derivation for TP fronting is ruled out by the PIC.



# Fronting with Communicatives

- Both fronting possibilities are allowed with communicatives, because neither moved phrase is a complement to a phase head.



# Fronting with Communicatives

- CP fronting with communicatives violates the Adjunct Island Condition (Ross 1967).
- However, other instances of extraction from *dep* adjuncts are also possible.

(30) *Almaty-ǵa<sub>i</sub> Aisha [men t<sub>i</sub> bar-dy-m dep] qorq-ty*  
Almaty-DAT Aisha 1SG go-PST-1SG DEP be.afraid-PST

‘Aisha is afraid because I went to Almaty.’ (Ótrott-Kovács 2023: 118)

- Major (2024) also reports that *-(l)p* adjuncts in Uyghur allow extraction<sup>4</sup>.
- We don’t take any stance on how this data should be analyzed, but just wish to show that this proposed fronting is not inconsistent with the status of *-(l)p/dep* adjuncts in the language (family).

<sup>4</sup>But see Ótrott-Kovács (2023) for a challenge to this claim.

# Conclusion

- This paper expands the current approaches to *say*-complementation cross-linguistically.
- This paper gives a binary analysis to the syntactic characteristics of *dep* in Kazakh:
  - when following a non-communicative verb, *dep* functions as a complementizer
  - when following a communicative verb, *dep* is a converb, serving as an adjunct to the main verb.
- Though analysis in this paper is largely consistent with that of Yue (2023); Bossi (2023); Ye (2025) overall, the status of verbal *say* in the binary analysis seems to vary.
- In Turkic languages such as Kazakh and Sakha (Yue 2023) where converbs are productive, verbal *say* is analyzed as a converb (consistent with its morphology).
- In Mandarin (Ye 2025), where V-V compounds are productive, verbal *say* is analyzed as part of a V-V compound.
- Languages with other ways of putting verbs together will presumably have different structures for verbal *say* (which is presumably also the diachronic source for complementizer *say*).

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