In this study we are going to look at the semantics and syntax of Hill Mari (<Finno-Ugric) constructions with an elative postposition əgə. The data was collected by elicitation in fieldwork (Kuznetsovo and some nearby villages in Mari El, 2017) as well as by corpus analysis.

In addition to standard elative contexts (such as Source in (1)) the postposition əgə has some typologically predicted uses (see (Ganenkov 2002a: 82‒108)) such as Information source, Set from which something is selected (2), Material, Standard of comparison etc.

(1) tədə šərgə əgə tol-ən
    he   forest EL arrive-PFV
    ‘He came from the forest’.

(2) vəc tärelkä əgə ikta-žə əpədən
    five plate EL one-POSS.3SG break-PFV
    ‘One from the five plates was broken’.

At the same time, the postposition əgə has a completely unexpected meaning which is just the opposite of its elative-based uses – it is Contact point. Some typological studies summing up the main data about locative expressions (e.g. (Creissels 2006)) do not consider such meaning. D. Ganenkov (2002b) mentions that the meaning of Contact point typologically arises from Path or similar contexts, but əgə does not occur in the latter.

There are some semantic and syntax restrictions for əgə in constructions with Contact point. It is only compatible with transitive verbs which assume physical contact between Agent and Patient (‘to kiss’, ‘to beat’, ‘to pat’, ‘to catch’, ‘to hold’, ‘to bite’ etc., but not ‘to throw’, ‘to shoot’, ‘to cover’). Moreover, the direct object and the PP with əgə should be connected with a possessive relation. A construction with a PP requires a possessor to be the direct object of a verb:

(3) pi pet’a-n/ *pet’a-n əgə pərəl-ən
    dog Petya-ACC Petya-GEN hand(-POSS.3SG) EL bite-PFV
    ‘A dog bit Peter's hand’.

We argue that the meaning of Contact point expressed by əgə arises from the encoding of Selection from the set with this postposition (2). The Contact point is thus categorized as a part selected from the whole entity (which is referred to by a direct object). Our assumption is supported by the set of possessive relations possible for əgə-constructions: ‘Possessor-Body part’, ‘Possesor-Possessed’ (only for the relation ‘clothes on the Patient’ that is also separated in (Haspelmath 1999)), ‘Whole-Part’, but not family or social relations.

Elative marker can encode Contact point in some other Uralic and Altaic languages (however it tends to be just briefly mentioned in traditional grammars without any theoretical account). In our talk we will compare our data with this intragenetic background and propose a formal analysis for Hill Mari əgə-constructions as possessor extraction, following the approach suggested in (Deal 2013).

Abbreviations
EL - elative, GEN - genitive, PFV – perfective (2th past tense), POSS - possessive, SG - singular

References