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Source: *Iran & the Caucasus*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2008), pp. 307-323

Published by: [BRILL](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25597377>

Accessed: 13/06/2014 16:15

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Iran and the Caucasus 12 (2008) 307-323



Are Verbs Always What They Seem To Be?

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Abstract

The North West Caucasian language-family is noted (notorious) for the polysynthetic nature of its verbs. If one couples this with fact (a) that morphemes typically take the shape C(V) and fact (b) that the language has a minimum of 58 consonantal phonemes (sc. in its literary dialect) and that homonymy is widespread, one might expect that, for ease of encoding/decoding, verb-forms would shew great regularity and structural transparency. On the whole, this is indeed the case. However, there are instances where analysis presents some problems.

In Abkhaz the causative marker is 'r' prefixed to the verbal root (sometimes to the preverb). Since the procedure for causative formation is clearly of the synthetic type, one would expect that all verbs containing this marker would have to be transitive, and yet the verb /s-'pəʃwə-r-tʃtʃa-wa-jt'/ 'I smile' has only the one argument, represented by the initial fricative for the 1st person singular, and is intransitive. The verb /jə-'sə-kʷ-nə-psə-jt'/ 'I came out in a rash' looks to be monovalent and yet has three arguments and is ditransitive, just like its counterpart in the unrelated but neighbouring language Georgian /(muts'uk'-eb-i) ga-mə-m-(a)q'ar-a/ 'I came out in a rash (of spots)'. From its form the Mingrelian verb /ə-rt-u-k/ looks to be an intransitive form (by virtue of ending in /-u-k/), and yet, if we place the verb in a sentence /si mu-s ə-rt-u-k/ 'What are you doing?', one might be excused for taking it to be a proto-typical transitive (cp. the exact equivalent in the sister-language Georgian /jen rə-s jvr-eb-i/). The paper examines a range of such apparent inconsistencies and some consequential misanalyses.

Keywords

Abkhaz, Circassian, Verbal Morphology

The general pattern of verbal agreement in the small North West Caucasian language-family may be assumed to be (reasonably) well-known to caucasologists. In summary the system operating in one member of the family, Abkhaz, is as follows. With no case-marking to differentiate between a verb's arguments, the language relies on three, morphologically

2. a.ʒ^w a.χə ø.la.na.r.q^wə.ə.jt'
 the.cow its.head it1.PREV.it3.CAUS.low.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'The cow lowered its head'

which demonstrates that in the verb the root is /-q^w-/, whilst /-la-/ functions as preverb, /-na-/ being selected as the allomorph for the 3rd person non-human singular agent-affix because of the presence of the preverb, and of the three affixal sets only an affix belonging to Set 3 can stand between preverb and root.

Given this expression for 'lowering the head', one might expect that it would figure in the expression 'lower one's head before X = bow down before X', but consider the following:

3. a.ph^wəs a.ntɛ^wɑ d.j.aj.χə(.)r(.)χ^wɑ.ə.jt'
 the.woman the.god she1.him2.PREV.bow-down.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'The woman bowed down before God'

Clearly, this is a different verb, but how is it to be analysed? Whilst the question is easily posed, the answer is more complicated.

Apart from affixes of Set 3, two other elements may stand between preverbs and the verbal root: these are the causative affix and the negative marker /-m-/ (sc. in those forms where the negative precedes rather than follows the root). If we causativise the example in (3), we get:

- 3'. a.ph^wəs a.ntɛ^wɑ d.j.aj.sə.r.χə(.)r(.)χ^wɑ.ə.jt'
 the.woman the.god her1.him2.PREV.I3.CAUS.bow-down.PAST.FIN
 (-AOR)

'I made the woman bow down before God'

According to this test, then, we cannot treat the element /-aj-/ as anything other than a preverb, leaving /-χə(.)r(.)χ^wɑ-/ to function as the root. But before we examine the structure of this root, we have to note that, if we negate the verb in (3), our expectations about affixal ordering are frustrated, as shown by:

- 3". a.ph^wəs a.ntɛ^wɑ də.j.m.aj(.)χə(.)r(.)χ^wɑ.ə.jt'
 the.woman the.god she1.him2.not.bow-down.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'The woman did not bow down before God'

for, according to this test, it would seem that there is no preverb and that the root consists of /-aj(.)χə(.)r(.)χ^wɑ-/. In fact, it is possible to adduce a number of similar examples which suggest uncertainty on the part of native speakers as to the precise structure of the verb-form in question. Take the verb for 'shove, jostle', which it would seem reasonable to derive from the bivalent intransitive root /-s-/ 'hit', as seen in:

'I pulled the blanket nicely around myself' vs 'I made him/her skirt round the hill'

But now consider the following:

15. $h.nəq^{w'}a(.)ra$ $ø.χ.hā.r.k^{w'}(.)şa.ø.jt'$
 our.walk it1.PREV.we3.CAUS.circle.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'We wound up our walk'

Here we see fusion into a complex root of the basic preverb, which together with the original simplex root provides the notion of 'circling round', whilst the new preverb seems to retain more of its original nominal force than is attested in either of the second verbs seen in (14) and (14'), so that a literal rendition here would be something akin to 'we caused our walk to come round to a head' or 'we rounded off our walk'. One morphological analysis, then, applies to the literal meaning of 'making go round (the surface)', whilst quite another applies to the metaphorical meaning of 'making come to a head = winding up/completing'.

The following example of an interplay with a causative verb is of a different type again from those examined so far. Let us start with the non-causative expression:

16. $s.tʃ'ə$ / $s.χə$ $s.a(.)h^{w'}(.)ʃa$ $l.aχ'$
 my.face my.head my.sister her.towards
 $jə.χa.w.p'$
 it1.direct.STAT.FIN-PRES
 'I am on my way to my sister's'

Literally, this is 'my face/head is directed towards my sister', or even more literally 'my face/head is headed towards my sister', for the root of the Stative verb here could well in origin be cognate with the noun for 'head'; comparison with Abaza /qa/ 'head' indicates that the form in proto-Abkhaz-Abaza had the open rather than the close vowel⁵. If we want the Dynamic equivalent 'turn in some direction', we use the causative form of this root, to give:

- 16'. $s.tʃ'ə$ / $s.χə$ $ø.na.sə.r.χa.ø.jt'$
 my.face my.head it1.PREV.I3.CAUS.direct.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'I turned thither'

This expression can also mean 'I set off (thither)', but the more usual way of indicating the start of motion is to fuse the first external NP with

⁵ The parallelism with English, where 'heading for' is synonymous with 'moving in the direction of', is obvious.

the verb-form so that it occupies the slot normally taken by the Set 1 pronominal affix, to give:

- 16". s.tʃ'ə.na.sə.r.χa.ø.jt'
my.face1.thither.I3.CAUS.head.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
'I set off (thither)'

[N.B. Though this paper is not concerned with reflexivisation, Abkhaz has two ways of forming a reflexive pronoun: (a) some verbs employ the free standing nominal root for 'head' (coupled with the appropriate possessive prefix), which variant is obligatory if the reflexive functions as anything other than the verb's direct object; (b) /-tʃ(ə)-/, coupled with the appropriate possessive prefix (although the possessive is absent in Abaza), occupies the slot normally taken in the verbal complex by the Set 1 pronominal prefix. This latter reflexive must surely derive from /a.tʃ'ə/, the body-part noun seen in the last few examples⁶—the sister-languages have no cognate form as their reflexives.]

Now that we have produced a verb exemplifying incorporation, we have a synonym for (16"), which is:

- 16". s.tʃ'ə.na.s.χa.ø.jt'
my.face1.thither.I3.direct.PAST.FIN(-AOR)

which variant contains no Causative. Since the last two examples are entirely synonymous, all that the Causative marker is doing in (16") is underlying the verb's basic transitivity. This is a function of the causative which is not unknown elsewhere in the Caucasus⁷, whereas no parallels (from South Caucasian, at least) with the sort of examples examined earlier in this paper come to mind.

The next set of cases, in most of which the causative again figures, also illustrate a phenomenon with which I am not familiar elsewhere.

⁶ Another verb in which this nominal root is incorporated into the verb to stand (without any possessive accompaniment) in place of the normal Set 1 pronominal prefix is the word for 'call, shout', as in:

a.χ ^w tʃ'ə	tʃ'ə.j.tə.ø.jt'	vs	a.rbəw'
the.child	mouth.he.ʔgive.PAST.FIN(-AOR)		the.rooster
tʃ'.na.tə.ø.jt'			
mouth.it.ʔgive.PAST.FIN(-AOR)			
'The child cried out' vs 'The cock crowed'			

Is the root here linked to that for 'giving' (= /-ta-/?). Though the incorporated element is occupying the Set 1 affixal slot, it is also interpreted as a preverb, which accounts for the presence of /-na-/ as subject-affix in the second verb here.

⁷ For example, in Georgian if /da.rb.i.s/ is the intransitive 'X is running', we have the transitive equivalent (at one level of causation) /Ø.a.rb.ən.s/ 'X runs Y = makes Y move quickly', which is a dialectal form, and then the normal morphological causative built on this gives us /Ø.a.rb.ən.in.əb.s/, which does not mean 'X makes Y make Z run' but is rather the simple transitive 'X makes Y run' or 'X conveys X at a run'.

Before adducing any examples it is necessary to introduce a new item of verbal morphology. This is the complex reciprocal marker /-(a)j(.)ba-/, which is found in transitive verb-forms and (usually) takes the place of the anticipated Set 3 pronominal prefix (though, where the reciprocity holds between transitive subject and indirect object, the affix sometimes replaces the latter), e.g.

17. d.a:ba.øjt' vs h.aj(.)ba.ba.øjt'
 him/her₁.we₃.see.PAST.FIN(-AOR) us₁.REC.see.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'We saw him/her' vs 'We saw one another'

Naturally, it is possible to associate the reciprocal and causative to produce a verb with the anticipated meaning, e.g.

- 17'. d.h.aj(.)ba.r.ba.øjt'
 him/her₁.us₂.REC.CAUS.see.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'We got one another to see him/her' or 'We shewed him/her to one another'

But the following is not so straightforward and introduces us to the peculiarity to be discussed:

18. a.ʃ.kʷa zagə ø.y.a.ts'əj(.)ba.r.q'ə.øjt'
 the.horse.PL all them.PREV.it.from-under.REC.CAUS.shoot.
 PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'The horses all made one another shoot off (<= shoot out from under the start)'

Whilst this is a perfectly grammatical sentence, one might ask for clarification as to the precise meaning. In fact, the meaning is little more than 'the horses all shot off together', where the notion 'together' is a function of the association of reciprocal with causative. I have amassed a number of similar examples:

19. a.la.kʷaj a.kʷədʒmaj ø.aj(.)ba.r.kʷəmpəla.øjt'
 the.dog.PL.& the.wolf.& them₁.REC.CAUS.roll.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'The dogs and the wolf rolled over together in a bundle'
20. a.kʷtʃ'.ara.kʷa ø.aj(.)ba.r.χ'əwsəw.wa
 the.chick.PL.PL them₁.REC.CAUS.whimper.DYN(-PRES-NON-FIN)
 j.a.la.ga.øjt'
 they.it.into.move.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'The chicks started whimpering all at the same time'
21. r.na(.)p'.kʷa ø.aj(.)ba.r.k'.ə.nə
 their.hand.PL them₁.REC.CAUS.hold.PAST.ABS
 jə.kʷaʃa.øjt'
 they₁.dance.PAST.FIN(-AOR)
 'They danced holding one another's hands'

- mɔ.ø.ø.u.q'v.a
 PREV.it_B.him/her_B.OV.relate.(s)he_A(-AOR)
 'The traveller related the news to the person listening to him/her'
27. ma(.)sts'avl(.)eb(.)el.i da(.)χmar(.)eb(.)a.s mɔ(.)ts'ap(.)ε.s
 teacher.NOM_A help.DAT_B pupil.DAT_B
 da.ø.h.p'ir.d.a
 PREV.it_B.him/her_B.promise.SUFF.(s)he_A(-AOR)
- vs
- 27'. ma(.)sts'avl(.)eb(.)el.ma da(.)χmar(.)eb(.)a mɔ(.)ts'ap(.)ε.s
 teacher.ERGA help(-NOM)_B pupil.DAT_B
 da.ø.h.p'ir.d.a
 PREV.it_B.him/her_B.promise.SUFF.(s)he_A(-AOR)
 'The teacher promised the pupil help'

To understand the structure, we need to note that Georgian has two sets of pronominal agreement-affixes, set out below:

Table 2			
Agreement-pattern A in Georgian			
	Singular	Plural	
1st person	v-	v-	-t
2nd person	ø(/χ)-	ø(/χ)-	-t
3rd person	-s/a/ɔ	-(a/ε)n/εs/nεn ⁸	

Agreement-pattern B in Georgian			
	Singular	Plural	
1st person	m-	gv-	
2nd person	g-	g-	-t
3rd person	ø(s/h)-	ø(s/h)- (-t)	

The agreement-relations in the examples above are indicated by subscript capital A vs subscript capital B. The language additionally (and unlike Abkhaz) makes use of cases to indicate nominal functions. There are a number of classes of verb, of which those in Class 1 are prototypically transitive and, for the Aorist Indicative, take an Ergative subject with Set A agreement, a Nominative/Absolutive direct object with Set B agreement, and, if appropriate, a Dative indirect object with again Set B

⁸ The agreement-suffixes for the 3rd person vary according to the tense or mood (or, in kartvelological parlance, 'screeve') of the relevant finite verb.

agreement. Class 2 verbs are prototypically intransitive and take in all their tense-mood forms a Nominative subject with Set A agreement; where appropriate an indirect object goes into the Dative case and requires Set B agreement. The verbs illustrated in (26)-(27') are anomalous Class 2 verbs with two Dative nominals, so that in origin the case-assignment given in the non-prime variants was the only one allowed. Because of the nature of the anomaly, which, by analogy with proto-typically ditransitive trivalent verbs, easily permitted one of the Dative nominals to be perceived more as a direct than an indirect object, case-assignment shifted to reflect this, so that the second variants above arose initially in imitation of the patterning of Class 1 ((di)transitive) verbs and for some (?many) speakers today has come to represent the norm. The alternative patterning was already in the language in the mid-1960s, for it was discussed by Varlam Topuria in his 'The Georgian Language and Some Questions of Orthography' (1965.92-3, in Georgian). With reference to the second construction for the two verbs adduced here (and for four others he cited) Topuria wrote: 'This error should be corrected. With these verbs there is no change of construction: the subject is always in the Nominative, the object[s] in the Dative. The Present tense-form serves as control: if the verb for the 1st and 2nd person [singular] in the Present has the ending /-eb.i/, then there is no change in the case of the subject and object[s]...'. For Georgian speakers today who do not accept Topuria's 'correct' (viz. the original) construction, there is an incompatibility between verbal morphology and clausal syntax (much as there is in English for such, entirely natural structures as 'I was given a present'—how to explain the function of 'present' with the passivised verb?). Incompatibilities are taken in their stride by native speakers, who are blithely unaware of the problems they create for the grammarian. But no linguist would surely be happy to claim that 'relate (X to Y)' and 'promise (X to Y)' are transitive verbs in modern Georgian.

If the above-verbs might initially look (to some) like transitives, even though they are really intransitive, the opposite is true in the following example, which, given that it is the translation-equivalent of 'The child came out in spots all over his/her body', looks as though we have an intransitive verb with Nominative 'spots' as subject; the analysis, however, indicates otherwise, for the verb is part of a transitive paradigm, where 'spots' functions as direct object to the verb 'scatter' with unexpressed 3rd person (singular) subject—according to the verbal morphology an indirect object is presupposed, but instead of the expected Dative /mtel t'an.s/, the locative postposition /-zε/ 'on' is employed (as it often is) to reinforce the locative notion:

28. bavfv.s muts'uk'.eb.i mtɛl t'an.zɛ
 child.DAT_B spot.PL.NOM_A whole body.on
 ga(.)mɔ.ø.ø.(a.)q'ar.a
 PREV.them_B.it_B.LV.scatter.XA(-AOR)
 'The child came out in spots over his/her whole body'

The Abkhaz equivalent also has a 3rd person (non-human) Set 3 agent-affix here:

- 28'. a.χʷtʃ'ə (jə.)jə.kʷ.na.psa.ø.jt'
 the.child it/them₁.him₂.PREV(=on).it₃.scatter.PAST.FIN(-AOR)

where we can hypothesise that originally here the now dropped agent⁹ will have been something concrete like 'the disease' or more abstract like 'Providence'.

Whilst the verb in (28) is admittedly on the margins of Georgian grammar, there is an entire class, many of whose members are extremely common, and these verbs (the Medials) have stimulated much discussion over the years as to their true nature. To limit the discussion here to their morphosyntax in the Aorist Indicative, we can say that the essence of their peculiarity lies in the fact that in most cases they are used with only an overt subject, with the result that they have been interpreted as intransitive, and yet this subject stands in the case which is normally rendered in English as the Ergative. Those who hold that the relevant verb-forms are indeed intransitive argue that the case in which their subjects stand should be interpreted not as an Ergative, since the essence of ergativity is that in languages with a formal Ergative case that case's main (and possibly only) function is to mark the subject of transitive verbs, but as an Active, whose function is to mark subjects (of either transitive or intransitive verbs) which act volitionally. Let us illustrate with two concrete examples of Medials:

29. dzaxl.ma ø.i.q'ɛp.a vs ts'q'al.ma ø.i.dux.a
 dog.ERGA ??.bark.it_A(-AOR) water.ERGA ??.boil.it_A(-AOR)
 'The dog barked' vs 'The water boiled'

Whilst one might allow that dogs only bark when volitionally inclined to do so, that semantic argument is irrelevant when it comes to water boiling. Referring to Topuria's criterion mentioned above, we can note that no Medial anywhere in its paradigms has 1st or 2nd person subjects marked by the ending /-eb.i/, which immediately raises doubts about any analysis which treats them as intransitive. Secondly, we have to ad-

⁹ Note that in this example there is no word equating to Georgian /muts'uk'.eb.i/ 'spots'.

dress the question of the function of the initial element /i-/. It is true that some intransitives have an i-prefix in some of their paradigms, but those that do also have 1st and 2nd person subjects marked by the ending /-eb.i/ in their Present and Future tense forms. The i-vowel of interest to us in Medial paradigms is undoubtedly the exponent of the so-called Subjective Version, which is a means that Georgian has for indicating that transitive actions (in some tense-mood forms such as the Present, Future and Aorist) are reflexive in nature, somehow affecting the subject. Compare the Neutral Version (NV) and Subjective Version (SV) variants of the verb 'build' in the following:

30. k'ats.ma saxl.i a.ø.a.ʃɛn.a
 man.ERGA house.NOMB PREV.itB.NV.build.heA(-AOR)
 'The man built the/a house'

vs

30'. k'ats.ma saxl.i a.ø.i.ʃɛn.a
 man.ERGA house.NOMB PREV.itB.SV.build.heA(-AOR)
 'The man built himself the/a house'

If the initial i-vowel of the Medials is indeed the Subjective Version, it follows that the verbs are basically transitive and will in origin have had associated with them an object of such a kind as to motivate the Subjective Version. It has been surmised that this 'lost' object might have been either the *Ersatz-reflexive* /tav.i/ 'head; self' or an internal object, which means one built from the same root as the Medial itself. I have been looking for the presence of one or other of these elements with a Medial for over a quarter of a century and have finally found one. Amongst a selection of panegyrics of Stalin published in the book /mχat'vruli sit'q'va/ 'Artistic Speech' from 1951 and described as /χalχur.i/ 'folk' in origin is a poem entitled /st'alini, kvεq'nis beladi/ 'Stalin, Ruler of the Country' (p. 27), which contains the following verse:

dʒer k'idev dʒavri ats'uχebs	Still troubled by anger
urdʒulo mdidrebiṣaṣ,	At the infidel rich,
dʒebna sts'adian ʃurisa,	Vengeance is what he seeks,
ak̄ar idzinebs dzilsaṣ.	No longer will he sleep (the sleep).

We need concern ourselves with only the last two words. Whilst /idzinebs/ alone is normally sufficient to convey the meaning 'X will sleep'¹⁰, what we have here is verb plus direct object:

¹⁰ /idzinebs/ can either mean 'X goes to sleep' as a Present or 'X will sleep' as a Medial(-type) Future. /daidzinebs/ is the Future for 'X will go to sleep', not a prototypical Medial but a transitive verb without overt direct object whose subjective

31. \emptyset .i.dzin.ɛb.s dzil.sa.ɔ
 it_B.SV.sleep.TS.he_A(-FUT) sleep.DAT_B.SP-PART¹¹
 'He will sleep'

Clearly the verbal root /-dzin-/ is combined with the cognate nominal root /-dzil-/, functioning as internal direct object with what is conclusively demonstrated to be a transitive verb-form. Who would have thought that such a precious example would come from such a source?

And so, we see that, for a variety of reasons, verbs are not always what they might appear to be at first glance. A careful consideration of the general morphosyntactic patterning of the language in question, however, usually resolves any problems, though the results of misanalyses by native speakers which become established in a language can always present difficulties.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Absolute	N-HUM	Non-Human
AOR	Aorist	NOM	Nominative
CAUS	Causative	NV	Neutral Version
DAT	Dative	OV	Objective Version
DYN	Dynamic	PL	Plural
ERG	Ergative	PRES	Present
FEM	Feminine	PROH	Prohibition
FIN	Finite	REC	Reciprocal
FUT	Future	RES	Resultative
HUM	Human	SP-PART	Speech-Particle
IMPERF	Imperfect	STAT	Stative
LV	Locative Version	SUFF	Suffix
MASC	Masculine	SV	Subjective Version

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version is explained in the same way as that of regular Medials. 'X is asleep' is represented by the Stative Present /sdzina_vs/, a morphologically bipersonal intransitive whose sole surface-argument stands in the Dative; its usual Future form is /edzine_{ba}/, another morphologically bipersonal intransitive form with sole surface-argument in the Dative.

¹¹ One can either interpret this as the speech-particle, which serves to mark the original words spoken or thought, and translate it as 'it is said' or see it as a vowel added (as is /-a/ sometimes) to make up the requisite number of syllables.