

Person agreement in Akhvakh

This paper deals with the unusual typological features of person agreement in Akhvakh, and proposes to explain them as the result of grammaticalization processes different from those commonly assumed to be the origin of person agreement.

Akhvakh is a North East Caucasian language belonging to the Andic branch of the Avar-Andic-Tsezic family, spoken in a group of villages situated in the western part of Daghestan and in the village of Axax-därä near Zaqatala (Azerbaijan), founded by migrants from Daghestan one century and a half ago. The data analyzed has been collected in Axax-därä. The variety of Akhvakh spoken in this village differs only slightly from the Northern Akhvakh dialect presented in Magomedbekova 1967.

Akhvakh has ergative case marking (A in the ergative case, P and S in the absolute case), and verb agreement in number and gender following also ergative alignment (verb morphology reflects the gender and number of the core argument in the absolute case, in transitive as well as intransitive clauses). But in addition to ergative gender-number agreement, Akhvakh has person agreement following accusative alignment, as illustrated by the sentence *waşode kitabi b-exa-ri* ‘The boy bought the book’, in which *waşode* is the ergative case of *waşa* ‘boy’, the prefix *b-* in the verb form *b-exa-ri* indicates that the absolutive term is singular non-human (compare with *waşode kitabar-exa-ri* ‘The boy bought the books’), and the suffix *-ri* indicates that the ergative term belongs to the third person (compare with *dede kitabi b-exa-da* ‘I bought the book’, *mede kitabi b-exa-da* ‘You bought the book’).

Person agreement is absent from Karata and Bagvalal, which are the closest neighbours of Akhvakh. More generally, person agreement is rare among the North East Caucasian languages, and is considered a recent and isolated innovation of the few languages which have it. In this context, if person marking in Akhvakh resulted from the grammaticalization of bound pronouns (which constitutes by far the commonest source of person agreement –see Siewierska 2004), verbal person should be a multi-valued feature closely reflecting the person-number distinctions expressed by independent pronouns, and person markers should still show some formal similarity with independent pronouns, as for example in Udi (Hewitt 2004). But this is not the case: in Akhvakh, verbal person is a strictly binary feature (1st/2nd person vs. 3rd person, without any distinction of number), and consequently, there would not be much sense in looking for similarities between the verb formatives involved in person agreement and the corresponding independent pronouns.

A diachronic explanation is suggested by the fact that the verb forms used with 1st/2nd person A/S are homonymous with participles (for example, ‘the book bought by the boy’ and ‘the book bought by me’ are rendered in Akhvakh resp. as *waşode b-exa-da kitabi* and *dede b-exa-da kitabi*, to compare with the sentences given above). Therefore, a plausible scenario is that Akhvakh first developed a contrast between finite verb forms and participles in predicate function. One can assume that, originally, this contrast was used to express aspectual distinctions, independently from person. Subsequently, the aspectual distinction between finite forms and predicative participles blurred, which is a very common development. Usually, such situations of synonymy lead to the elimination of one of the two competing forms. The peculiarity of Akhvakh is that the formal distinction was maintained with a new function: one of the two competing forms (the participle in predicate function) specialized with 1st/2nd person A/S, and the other (the ancient finite form) specialized with 3rd person A/S.

References

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