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Alignment variation in Southern Tâleši (Mâsâl area)

Tâleši (North-West Iranian, Tatic) is, literally, the language of Tâleš, a Caspian area politically split between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan (Asatrian & Borijan 2005). The term indicates a diverse dialectal spectrum, usually divided into three main clusters (Northern, Central, Southern) according to lexical, phonological and grammatical factors (Stilo 1981 and to appear). Among the latter, a prominent role is played by alignment (Nichols 1992), i.e. the morphosyntactic coding of grammatical relations, with emphasis on core arguments (S=intransitive subject; A=transitive subject; P=transitive object). In this talk, the investigation of alignment focuses on Mâsâli, a southern dialect that, despite its prestigious role across Tâleš, remains largely understudied (Nawata 1982). My fieldwork-based data (December 2006) include both narratives and elicitations of grammatical forms. Alignment is considered in its interdialectal variation, in the different coding strategies of Mâsâli grammar, and in the linguistic divergences among Mâsâli speakers.

All Tâleši varieties display binary noun declension (direct [DIR] vs. oblique [OBL]), with singular DIR unmarked. In the verbal domain, they exhibit the typical set of past forms (preterit, perfect, pluperfect) historically derived from perfect-participle (PfP) constructions. PfP-forms of transitive verbs generally show a fossilised P-marker in the third person singular (°3SG); when marked, A-agreement relies on mobile clitics liable to float from their verb-internal slot to post-A positions. As for alignment, Tâleši presents two common Iranian features: (a) differential object marking (DOM), with DIR singular expressing non-specificity and OBL selected in highly transitive contexts, i.e. for specific/topical P-arguments (Hopper & Thompson 1980, Bossong 1985), and (b) morphological split in the PfP-environment. In central Tâleši (Yashater 1996), PfP-induced ergative morphology (A=OBL; S, P=DIR) is thought to block DOM; in some northern dialects, by contrast, DOM is increasingly accepted (Guizzo 2003). In Mâsâli and southern dialects (Lazard 1978), DOM has fully extended to the PfP-environment, producing a wide range of structures (see ex. 1-3). In highly transitive environments, the expected double-oblique system can be found (ex.1a), which progressively gives way to accusative alignment (ex. 2a-c) among younger speakers. Formally ergative constructions can only occur when A-clitics are hosted by P-arguments (ex. 3a; ungrammatical ex. 3b would be accepted in some central/northern Tâleši dialects).

In order to explain such variation, the hypothesis here suggested is that a clitic hosted by a singular direct P-argument works as [+DOM] and is therefore in complementary distribution with the singular oblique marker (see ex. 1c). Both historical investigation and comparative research on “ergative” Tâleši dialects may support this claim. On the one hand, A-clitics originate as oblique pronouns, which may still have, beyond the anaphoric orientation to oblique-marked A-subjects, a possessive, i.e. determining, function. On the other hand, A-clitics show a tendency to attach to new information, which is often expressed as the P-argument – especially if it is highly topical and referential (pronouns and specific nouns). This tendency may have stabilised as DOM function in southern dialects, which also spread the oblique P-marking strategy from non-PfP environments. The result would be double: (a) conflict between the singular oblique suffix and the A-clitics in P-position, and (b) possibility of identical oblique marking for A and P. Both phenomena would have consequences on agreement marking and clitic movement. The sources of ambiguity which arise in the clitic-marked ergative system (possessive vs. anaphoric interpretation of A-clitics) and in the double-oblique system (A/P oblique merging and anaphoric opacity of A-clitics) will be considered as grammar-internal reasons liable to explain, on a par with external factors (language contact, literacy), the increasing preference for a generalised accusative system.

Examples

- (1a) *xərdan-i asb-i vel â-du-a*
child-OBL horse-OBL loose PRV-give:PST-°3SG[P]
- (1b)? *xərdan-i asb-i vel â-du=š-a*
child-OBL horse-OBL loose PRV-give:PST=3SG[A]-°3SG[P]
- (1c)* *xərdan-i asb-i=š vel â-du-a*
child-OBL horse-OBL=3SG[A] loose PRV-give:PST=°3SG[P]
- (2a) *xərdan asb-i vel â-du-a*
child horse-OBL loose PRV-give:PST-°3SG[P]
- (2b) *xərdan-i asb-i vel â-du=š-a*
child-OBL horse-OBL loose PRV-give:PST=3SG[A]-°3SG[P]
- (2c) *xərdan-i asb-i vel=əš â-du-a*
child-OBL horse-OBL loose=3SG[A] PRV-give:PST-°3SG[P]
- (3a) *xərdan-i asb=əš vel â-du-a*
child-OBL horse=3SG[A] loose PRV-give:PST-°3SG[P]
- (3b)* *xərdan-i asb-Ø vel â-du=š-a*
child-OBL horse-DIR loose PRV-give:PST-°3SG[P]

‘The child let the horse go’.

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