

Morphology Revisited

Some peculiarities of the Abkhaz verb

N.B. In this article schwa is indicated by ɨ, glottalisation by ʔ, palatalisation by ʲ, labialisation by ʷ, the voiceless palato-alveolar fricative by ɟ, the voiceless retroflex fricative by ɕ, the voiceless alveolar affricate by tʃ, the voiced alveolar affricate by dʒ, the voiced palato-alveolar affricate by ʝ, the voiceless retroflex affricate by ɕ.

Introduction

One of the first features of Abkhaz to strike the learner is the regularity of its albeit highly complex verb-forms. However, even Abkhaz has some tricks up its sleeve. In a short article from 1982 I drew attention to certain dummy-affixes within some verbal complexes and, specifically, how in the expression for 'the lamp is lit', viz.

1. a-lampʰa (∅-)a-(r-)kʰɨ-w+pʰ
the-lampɨ (itɨ-)it-(CAUS-)seize-STAT.PRES

where the first (zero-)affix must be agreeing with 'lamp', a shift in coreferencing must have occurred. This becomes clear if we compare agreement here with that operating in variant (2), namely,

2. a-lampʰa a-mca (∅-)a-(r-)kʰɨ-w+pʰ
the-lampɨ the-fireɨ (itɨ-)itɨ-(CAUS-)seize-STAT.PRES

which must surely lie closer to the underlying origin of the first variant, namely,

3. a-lampʰa a-mca (∅-)a-sɨ-r-kʰɨ-(∅-)ytʰ
the-lamp the-fire (it-)it-I-CAUS-seize-(AOR-)FIN
'I lit the lamp (= I made the lamp seize the fire)'

This paper addresses some further oddities.

Potentials

In the story 'The wolf and the fox' presented by G. Charachidzé & T. Esenç (1992-93), a wolf stuck his head through a narrow slit into the stomach of a dead horse to have a feed and then:

4. y-a-z-kʰɨlɨ-m-xɨ-(∅-)ytʰ 'It couldn't get it out (of the gap)'
it-it-POT-PREV-not-extract-(AOR-)FIN

Actually, the text has *y-a-z-k'ɪl-m-xɪ-(∅-)yt'*, but this is clearly a misprint. In the note appended to this form Charachidzé comments: 'I was obliged for once to "correct" the form of my own master, plainly "faulty", which Zülküf had given me:

5. *yɪ-z-k'ɪl-na-m-xɪ-(∅-)yt'* (starred by Charachidzé),

where the internal neuter subject**-na-* is absolutely proscribed, since it is a question of a potential: that for which the process is possible (or impossible) is marked by a possessive of the corresponding person combined with the particle *-z(ɪ)-* "for"... I am unable to explain this "error" of my master: I have never come across another'.

I too expected Charachidzé's 'corrected' form to be the only one admissible, given the usually accepted rule for forming potential verbs, namely: if the verb is intransitive, simply insert the *z*-particle, e.g.

6. *dɪ-ca-(∅-)yt'* vs *d-zɪ-m-ca-(∅-)yt'*
 (s)he-go-(AOR)-FIN vs (s)he-POT-not-go-(AOR)-FIN
 '(s)he went' vs '(s)he couldn't go'

(potentials, of course, are commoner in negated or interrogative verbs, hence I use the negative forms throughout), but if the verb is transitive, then instead of the column-3 agent-affix of the non-potential form, use the appropriate column-2 (Charachidzé's possessive) affix in combination with the potential *z*-particle, e.g.

7. *yɪ-q'a-r-c'a-(∅-)yt'* vs *yɪ-r-zɪ-q'a-m-c'a-(∅-)yt'*
 X-PREV-they-do-(AOR)-FIN vs X-they-POT-PREV-not-do-(AOR)-FIN
 'they did X' vs 'they couldn't do X'

This latter pattern was observed by Charachidzé's informant with a 3rd person feminine singular agent, to give:

8. *d-k'ɪl-l-xɪ-(∅-)yt'* vs *d-lɪ-z-k'ɪl-m-xɪ-(∅-)yt'*
 him/her-PREV-she-extract... him/her-she-POT-PREV-not-extract...
 'she extracted him/her' vs 'she couldn't extract him/her'

(Again in both forms Charachidzé mistakenly has the preverb's second schwa printed as the open vowel.) And so, I took this verb and checked it with my in-house informant (Zaira Khiba) and some other members of her family during a 1995 visit to Oчамchira (Republic of Abkhazia) in the expectation of hearing approval for Charachidzé's "correction" -- my expectation was not borne out! There was general

agreement that, though the variant in (4) was tolerable, the Abkhaz for 'it couldn't get it out (of the gap)' should preferably be:

9. y-a-z-k'ɪl-na-m-xɪ-(Ø-)yt'
it-it-POT-PREV-it-not-extract...

This form differs from the one quoted by Charachidzé as coming from his informant insofar as Zülküf was evidently treating the verb as an intransitive (i.e. inserting the z-particle without further alteration), whereas our example (9) has double marking of the argument stated to be incapable of carrying out the verbal action, viz. the anticipated agent-marker *-na-* PLUS its column-2 equivalent *-a-* dependent on the potential z-particle. Since this was the universal model given by Ochamchira informants, it may be that Zülküf's form should have been quoted exactly as in (9), but not necessarily, as we shall see. Other examples given in Ochamchira of this strange phenomenon are the following:

10. y-a-zɪl-na-m-xɪ-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't get X out (from in = -l-)'
 11. y-a-z-t-na-m-xɪ-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't get X out (from in = -t-)'
 12. y-a-z-ʃ^o-na-m-xɪ-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't take (clothing) X off'
 13. y-a-z-ʃ^o-na-m-c'a-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't put (clothing) X on'¹
 14. y-a-z-ɪk^o-na-m-c'a-(Ø-)yt' p'at'ɪw
 it-it-POT-her-on-it-not-put-(AOR-)FIN honour
 'it couldn't honour her'
 15. y-a-z-x-na-mɪ-r-q^oç'+aa-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't bite/snap X off'
 16. y-a-zɪ-my^oa+p-na-m-ga-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't conduct X'
 17. y-a-z-a-k^o-na-mɪ-r-ʃ^oa-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't (make X) hit it (target)'

For this last the 'prescribed' variant seemed equally acceptable, namely:

- 17'. y-a-z-a-k^o-mɪ-r-ʃ^oa-(Ø-)yt'

¹Notice how in neither of these last two forms is there a repetition of the column 2 affix that is coreferential with the notional subject of the verb, such as we have in ordinary, non-potential forms, viz.

- 12'. y-a-ʃ^o-na-xɪ-(Ø-)yt' 'it took (clothing) X off'
 13'. y-a-ʃ^o-na-c'a-(Ø-)yt' 'it put (clothing) X on'

This lack of the coreferential affix before the preverb is not restricted to cases where the agent is 3rd person non-human singular, e.g.

- 12''. yɪ-sɪ-z-ʃ^oɪ-m-xɪ-(Ø-)yt' 'I couldn't take (clothing) X off'
 13''. yɪ-sɪ-z-ʃ^oɪ-m-c'a-(Ø-)yt' 'I couldn't put (clothing) X on'

Then, coming across some time later another 'prescribed' form, namely:

18. y-a-z~~1~~-f~~1~~t~~1~~-m-k'+aa-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't assimilate X'

in a published text we were preparing for inclusion in our then-forthcoming 'Abkhaz Newspaper Reader' (publication-date late 1997), my wife-cum-informant immediately 'corrected' it to her preferred model, namely:

18'. y-a-z~~1~~-f~~1~~t~~1~~-na-m-k'+aa-(Ø-)yt'

The phenomenon of double actant-marking is only possible when the relevant argument is 3rd person non-human singular -- so, for example, 'I couldn't bite/snap X off' can only be:

19. y~~1~~-s~~1~~-z-x-m~~1~~-r-q°'ç'+aa-(Ø-)yt'

And what all of the enigmatic forms have in common is that the agent-affix is *-na-*, which naturally results from the presence of the preverb. Suspecting that the presence of the preverb might be the determining factor in this double-marking, I checked the potential forms in a trivalent but preverbless transitive, which is the other conditioning factor for the use of the *na-* prefix, the verb being 'give', as in the pair of examples In a 1979 article I quoted briefly in footnote 22 the following:

20. y~~1~~-s-na-ta-wa-yt' 'it gives X to me'

X-me-it-give-DYN-FIN(PRES)

21. y-a-z-s~~1~~-ta-wa-m 'it cannot give X to me'

X-it-POT-me-give-DYN-not(FIN.PRES)

or in the past:

22. y-a-z-s~~1~~-m-ta-(Ø-)yt' 'it couldn't give X to me'

But now with the *na-* examples in mind, the alternative:

22'. y-a-z~~1~~-s-na-m-ta-(Ø-)yt'

with double actant-marking was offered. And finally a third variant emerged:

22''. y~~1~~-z~~1~~-s-na-m-ta-(Ø-)yt'

which parallels the form Charachidzé quoted from his informant, whereby a transitive verb is simply being treated after the manner of intransitive verbs, in which the *z-* particle is inserted without other alterations. This, then, raises the possibility that the unexpected fluctuation has something to do not with the presence of a preverb but with the sort of verb that takes the *na-* variant for 3rd person non-human singular

possible (i.e. in transitive verbs) from the start, but for the same reasons just given the affix *-(n)a-* resisted this treatment (or was lost and then reinstated). Examples with demotion without double marking reflect the earliest stage, whilst simple insertion of the *z*-particle is a neologism, preserving the agent-affix in place and inserting the particle (as in intransitives) just to mark the feature POTENTIAL.

A third explanation (C) also comes to mind. The particle that shews unwillingness on the part of the subject *-amxa-* also behaves like the *z*-particle. And when the agent in transitive verbs is 3rd person non-human singular, it tends not to undergo demotion -- so *-amxa-* can replace *-z-* in all the earlier verb-forms². But now we have a good reason why demotion should be avoided -- the column 2 3rd person singular non-human affix is *-a-*, and this would simply merge with the initial open vowel of the particle in question. Contrast:

24. $y_1-s-amxa-x_1-r-q^{\circ}\zeta'+aa-(\emptyset-)yt'$ 'I accidentally bit/snapped it off'

with:

24'. $?y-[a-]amxa-x_1-r-q^{\circ}\zeta'+aa-(\emptyset-)yt'$ 'it accidentally bit/snapped it off'

which, because of the possible analysis and interpretation as:

24''. $[y-]y-amxa-x_1-r-q^{\circ}\zeta'+aa-(\emptyset-)yt'$ 'he accidentally bit/snapped it off'

would be best expressed as:

24'''. $y-[a-]amxa-x-na-r-q^{\circ}\zeta'+aa-(\emptyset-)yt'$ 'it accidentally bit/snapped it off'

If the column 3 agent-affix *-(n)a-* simply stays in place to avoid possible confusion when the particle *-amxa-* is used, perhaps by analogy it preferably stays in place (at least for some speakers, such as Zülküf and the Khiba family!) with the potential *z*-particle as well. There is supporting evidence for the 3rd person non-human singular agent-affix *-na-* to be fossilised: the expression *ary y-aa-na-ga-wa-y?* is literally to be glossed as 'this which-PREVERB-it-bring-DYNAMIC[PRESENT]-what.is.it', which is the Abkhaz translation-equivalent of 'what does this mean?'. As a result, one finds

²As with the examples in Footnote 1, when the particle of unwillingness is used, there is no repetition of the affix coreferential with the agent before the preverb in verbs where repetition would be expected on the basis of forms without these two particles, e.g.

$y_1-s-amxa-]_{\emptyset}^{\circ}x_1-(\emptyset-)yt'$	'I unwillingly took off (clothing) X'
$y-[a-]amxa-]_{\emptyset}^{\circ}-na-x_1-(\emptyset-)yt'$	'it unwillingly took off (clothing) X'

'the woman began to hit the man' =>

- 27'. a-ph^ois di-y-s¹-r+c // d-z¹-s¹-r+c di-z-la-ga-(Ø-)z
the-woman she-him-hit-PURP she-whom-hit-PURP she-whom-PREV-
start-(AOR-)NON.FIN.PAST.INDEF
a-xac'a
the-man 'the man whom the woman began to hit'

Or again:

28. a-^fq^o1 s-a-px'a-r+c // s-a-px'a-ra+z1 s-aa-(Ø-)yt'
the-book I-it-read-PURP I-it-read-PURP I-come-(AOR-)FIN
'I came to read the book' =>
28'. s-a-px'a-r+c // s¹-z¹-px'a-r+c // s-a-px'a-ra+z1 // s¹-z¹-px'a-ra+z1
I-it-read-PURP I-which-read-PURP I-it-read-PURP I-which-read-PURP
s¹-z-z-aa-(Ø-)z a-^fq^o1
I-which-for-come-(AOR)NON.FIN.PAST.INDEF the-book
'the book_i (for which_j) I came to read (lit. that I read it_j//which_j)'

I now wish to supplement such observations with examples from the above-mentioned 'Reader'. Firstly, let us take the tense known as the Past Indefinite. This is formally finite, by virtue of ending in *-n*, but it is peculiar insofar as semantically it inherently contains the notion of the coördinator 'and' and thus cannot complete a sentence, requiring another finite (usually) past tense verb to follow it, e.g.

29. h-redakcia-k^oa y¹-la-r¹-y^ona-la-(Ø-)n,
our-editorial.office-PL they-PREV-them-in-enter-(AOR-)FIN.PAST.INDEF
zag'1 (Ø-)r-ga-(Ø-)yt'
everything (it-)they-take(AOR-)FIN
'they burst into our editorial offices AND took everything' ('Flame' 1993)

Consider, then, the example:

30. a-c'iyaa-k^oa ... a-psabara+t^o tag¹lazaaj¹a-k^oa (Ø-)z-naa-la-(Ø-)n
the-plant-PL the-natural condition-PL (they-)which-PREV-suit-
(AOR-)FIN.PAST.INDEF
z¹-mçxak' (Ø-)z¹-r-tbaa-(Ø-)z
whose-range (it-)which-CAUS-wide-(AOR-)NON.FIN.PAST.INDEF

'plants which the natural conditions suited AND which extended their range' (S. Ch'yтанаа 'Flame 5', 1987)

Here we have the relative form of the column 2 affix *-z-* standing in a finite Past Indefinite, which is itself embedded within a relative clause and therefore takes the relative affix, although the non-relative equivalent, namely:

30'. (Ø)-r-naa-la-(Ø-)n

is, of course, also permissible. Since the finite Past Indefinite is, as we have seen, only finite from a purely morphological point of view, the presence of the relative affix in (30) is not too surprising. But a more formidable challenge is presented by the following:

31. aps+w[a]-aa r-demografia+t^o tagalazaa{a a-r+man^oala+ra
Abkhazian-PL their-demographic situation its-improvement

(Ø)-a-l-zl-r-ç-a-p'

(it-)it-PREV-which-CAUS-be.possible.for-FIN.FUT.1

z1-s-g^oa-x^o-wa ak'1-k=y^o+ba-k'

which-I-PREV-think-DYN.NON.FIN.PRES one-1=two-1

'one or two points which I think can facilitate an improvement in the Abkhazians' demographic situation' (I. Arg^oin 'Unity 3', 1990)

First note that the speech-particle *h^oa* may optionally stand between the finite Future 1 and the non-finite verb of thinking, since the construction is one of direct speech, representing the author's actual thought. The verb of thinking is not, as it may at first sight appear, a 2-place transitive verb -- it is, in fact, a bivalent intransitive, as shewn by the negated Aorist:

32. y1-s-g^oa-m-x^oi-(Ø-)yt'

it-me-PREV-not-occur.to-(AOR-)FIN 'it didn't occur to me/I did not think it'

The major-problem here, then, is the presence of the *z*-relativiser in the form this verb takes in (31), for the relative form of the column 1 (here intransitive subject) affix should be *yl-* not *zl-*. Is it simply that the problem-affix is appearing under the influence of the parallel-affix in the immediately preceding word? But again there should not in theory be a relative affix in such a finite verb-form at all, and the Future 1 is most certainly a fully-fledged finite verb. Explanation of the structure of

(31) must combine what we have already discussed in (27'), (28') and (30). We have a complex noun-phrase containing two clauses dependent one on the other, namely:

31'. [...one or two points; [it occurs to me [one or two points; will make feasible the improvement...]]]

The most deeply embedded clause must be the sentential subject of the intransitive 'occur to/have a thought', but, because of the overall sense of relativeness, the higher of the dependent verbs incorporates as a result of raising a relative-marker in its column 1 slot, which would normally be zero from 3rd person non-human singular *yr-*, being immediately preceded by its true referent (viz. the thought-clause). This sense of relativeness is so overriding that it causes the appearance in the lower verb of the relative affix appropriate to an agent, namely *zr-*, even though the verb in question is finite -- it has been stated a number of times that a conjunctive force often develops from speech-particles construed with the original words spoken or thought, and I have drawn attention in the past to examples of this in Abkhaz itself. With (optionally omitted) *h°a* so interpreted here, we would have an extension to the optional use of the relative in such deeply embedded clauses as already observed in (26), (27') and (28'); and indeed we could have what from an Anglo-centric point of view would be the most normal variant for (31), viz. with no relative in the lower verb, namely:

31''. (y-)a-l-dl-r-ç-a-p' h°a
 (it-)it-PREV-they-CAUS-be.possible.for-FIN.FUT.1 QUOT
 y1-s-g°a-x°-wa
 which-me-PREV-occur.to-DYN(NON.FIN.PRES)
 '[which I think [they will facilitate, saying = that they will facilitate]]'

which still has a 'raised' relative marker in the higher embedded clause. And so, it would seem that the *zr-* in the lower verb of (30) has simply been copied into the higher verb in place of the expected *yr-*, which, indeed, is also possible:

31'''. (y-)a-l-zl-r-ç-a-p' h°a y1-s-g°a-x°-wa

But, the validity of this suggestion is placed in doubt by the possibility of yet another variant:

31'''. (y-)a-l-dl-r-ç-a-p' (h°a) z1-s-g°a-x°-wa

Here there is no longer a lower z-relative in the lower verb (where at least the form of the relative would be correct, even if it should not be associated with such a finite verb) to be copied into the higher one, and yet there it sits! N.B. how the speech-particle seems optional when the higher-z is present but obligatory when it is absent. Should we perhaps be looking for an explanation of this higher-z in terms of a simplification of the construction seen in (33)?

33. (y-)a-l-di-r-~~ç~~a-p' h°a (y1-)z-z1-s-g°a-x°-wa
 (it-)which-for-me-PREV-occur.to-DYN(NON.FIN.
 PRES)

'...regarding which it occurs to me that they will facilitate (it)'

Or is it simply that the *z(t)-* is a more marked relativizer than *y(t)-* (its only other pronominal use being as a variant for the 1st person singular agent-affix *-s(t)-*) and is therefore sometimes inserted in place of the more 'correct' but weaker exponent?

Riddles are typically presented in the form of a string of relatives, and in the following example the relativeness has €infected‹ the conditional clause, so that instead of the normal 3rd person singular column III non-human agent-affix *-a-* we get (obligatorily) the relative equivalent *-z-*:

34. a-31 y-a-x-~~ç~~a-(Ø-)z, a-mra
 the-water which-it-PREV-be.born-(AOR-)NON.FIN.PAST.INDEF the-sun
 y-[a-]aa3a-(Ø-)z, z-an
 which-[it-]rear-(AOR-)NON.FIN.PAST.INDEF whose-mother
 di-z-ba-r y1-ps-wa. (a-jk'a)
 her-which-see-if which-die-NON.FIN.PRES the-salt

'That which was born from water, which the sun reared, which, if it [lit. which] sees its [lit. whose] mother, dies. (Salt)'

Intrusive -y-

Bagrat Dzhanashia's 'Abkhaz-Georgian Dictionary' of 1954 contains the masdar *awra* 'receive, find, gain'. Looking at such forms as:

35. y1-s-aw1-(Ø-)yt' [yⁱso:wi:t'] vs y1-s-m-aw1-(Ø-)yt' [yⁱsmo:wi:t']
 X-I-gain-(AOR-)FIN X-I-not-gain-(AOR-)FIN
 'I got X' vs 'I did not get X'

which appears in another of our Reader's selected texts, where the negative is placed before what the author clearly regards as the root. Could the intrusive vowel simply be connected with a desire to keep the root 'receive' distinct from:

39. a-w-**ra** 'do', a-w-**ra** 'harvest', a-w**ɪ**-ra 'unbroken', a-w**ɪ**-ra 'large hammer'
[a-]aw-ra 'length'

An entirely different type of intrusive palatal semi-vowel is seen in the form:

40. y-ani-sab**ɪ**y-yi-z (Dzhuma Ah^oba)
they-when-baby-?-NON.FIN.STAT.PAST 'when they were babies'

One would expect merely a schwa between the root for 'baby' and the non-finite stative past ending. Compare from the same text of this author:

41. d-ani-sab**ɪ**y-3a-z
(s)he-when-baby-indeed-NON.FIN.STAT.PAST
'just when (s)he was a baby'

which should differ from (40) only by virtue of the use of the intensifier-suffix. It looks as though the final semi-vowel of the root has had a phonetic effect on the pronunciation of the basic schwa, making it appear as though some mysterious extra morphological element has crept into (40), when in reality it has not.

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