

Typological quirks in Tundra Yukaghir

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1 Introduction

Tundra Yukaghir (TY), spoken in the north-eastern part of the Russian Federation, boasts more than one typological feature that make this language stand out, e. g. an elaborate system of morphological focus marking (Krejnovič 1958, 1982), the ergative case, which is less formally marked than the absolutive case (Schmalz 2013), and a semantically, rather than syntactically, driven switch-reference system (Schmalz 2016).

A number of other typologically interesting, if not unique, phenomena can be identified in TY on all levels of grammar, which make this language a very attractive object of study and raises the question of whether TY occupies a special position among the languages of the world by virtue of its exceptional richness in typological oddities. This squib presents two further spectacular instances of such phenomena from the domains of phonology and syntax. The data stem from the TY language documentation project carried out by Cecilia Odé, from my own field work on this language, performed during my doctoral studies under Kees Hengeveld's supervision, and from Kurilov (2001).

2 Phonology: long epenthetic vowel

Epenthesis is “[i]nsertion of transitional sounds without etymological motivation” or, more specifically, “a phonological insertion rule” (Bussmann 1998: 370). In TY, a morphonological rule requires an insertion of /i:/ between a consonant-final verb stem and the itive suffix:

- (1) a. *sisayas-ii-če-k* [tear-0-ITV-IMP.SG] ‘go to tear’ < *sisayas-* ‘to tear’
b. *pun’-ii-če-r* [kill-0-ITV-CIRC] ‘having gone to hunt’ < *pun’-* ‘to hunt’
(Kurilov & Odé 2012: 100, 178)

It may be objected that this is not a genuine instance of epenthesis since the insertion of /i:/ is not required by a phonological rule. After all, the heterosyllabic consonant cluster [sč], which would obtain in (1a) without

epenthesis, is attested in TY, as is evidenced by (2), while the unattested cluster [n'č] is avoided in TY without having to resort to epenthesis as a result of the alternation [j ~ d' ~ č], whose second member is selected after stems ending in sonorants, as (2) demonstrates as well.

- (2) *n'amuče-s-če* [be.red-CAUS-PTCP] 'making [sth.] red' ~ *n'amučen-d'e*
[be.red-PTCP] 'red' < *n'amučen* 'to be red'

However, in one of the most recent treatments of vowel epenthesis, Hall (2011: 1576), focusing on “the heterogeneity of epenthetic processes” and defining vowel epenthesis broadly as “any process in which a vowel is added to an utterance”, demonstrates on the basis of evidence from Scots Gaelic that “there are some cases where epenthetic vowels [...] have no apparent function in terms of phonotactics, metrics, or any other structural requirements” (Hall 2011: 1579). Hence, /i:/ in (1) can indeed be interpreted as an instance of epenthesis.

Now, Hall (2011: 1582) asserts, with a reference to Bosch & de Jong (1997), that the epenthetic vowels in Scots Gaelic “are often longer than lexical vowels in the same position”. Indeed, Bosch & de Jong (1997: 7) state that “epenthetic vowels are systematically longer than their non-epenthetic counterparts” occurring under the same phonological conditions. Are then long vowels in TY, which could be recognized as epenthetic under the broad definition given by Hall (2011), at best typologically unusual, but by no means unique? Bosch & de Jong (1997: 5–6) provide evidence from which it follows that the epenthetic vowels despite their being longer than non-epenthetic ones in the same position, are not quite as long as to be equated with genuinely long vowels in Scots Gaelic. While even the shortest etymologically long vowel of the first syllable of a word, where they normally occur, lasts well over 0,1 sec. longer than the vowel of its second syllable, where the locus of epenthesis is situated in this language, the longest epenthetic vowel surpasses in its length the vowel of the first syllable by clearly less than 0,1 sec, thus not even overlapping in its relative length with long vowels, let alone matching them. This indicates that epenthetic vowels are not on par with long vowels in Scots Gaelic. For this reason, I deem it justified to speak of the unique status of the TY long epenthetic vowel /i:/.

3 Syntax

There can be some apparent confusion in the assignment of the syntactic functions to constituents, judged by the intended meaning, which always seems to affect the expression of possession. The following example illustrates this in the predicative domain.

- (3) *Tude en'ielek pandind'enden ewrejli amaagi ewlikiel'eldaya.*
tude en'ie-lek pandin-je-n'-den ewre-jli
 3SG.POSS mother-INS cook-NMLZ-VBLZ-SIM live-1PL.INTR
amaa-gi ewlikie-l'el-daya
 father-3.POSS disappear-NVIS[GER]-3SG.DS
 '(I herded for a year with your aunt Dasha.) Her mother cooked for us
 when her father died.'
 "We lived having her mother for a cook ..."
 (Schmalz 2013: 173)

Predicative possession is encoded in TY by suffixing the verbalizing suffix *n'* to the possessed item, which, based on the translation in (3), would have to be the noun *en'ie* 'mother'. Against expectation, the function of the possessive predicate is assigned to the noun *pandind'e* 'cook', eventually surfacing as a converb. Similarly, the secondary predication, encoded by the instrumental case ending, presumably paralleling here the Uralic essive, is not embodied by the noun 'cook' to produce the meaning 'as a cook' but by the noun with the meaning 'mother'. This formal realization of the first dependent clause makes the utterance appear to have the meaning 'We lived having a cook for the mother .../We had a cook as [our] mother ...'

Attributive possession in TY can be marked on the head or on the dependent, or it remains formally unmarked. In (4) the first of the three options is employed. However, the formal treatment of the possessive construction is incompatible with the translation. Rather, the pattern of marking the possessive relation in (4) implies the translation indicated between double quotation marks, which is nonsense because Nyronmuokha is the name of the lake, and not the designation of the process of catching a particular type of fish.

- (4) *N'oronmuoqa n'oril' muoqaruolgi.*
n'oronmuoqa n'oril' muoqa-r-ηol-gi
 Nyronmuokha pool broad.whitefish-VBLZ-be[GER]-3.POS
 'Nyronmuokha is the pool where broad whitefish was caught.'
 *"Nyronmuokha is [the broad whitefish's being caught] of the pool."
 (Kurilov 2001: 328)

For more clarity one can paraphrase the translation as 'N. is a pool of having obtained broad whitefish' since the verbalizing suffix *r-* implies acquisition of the referent denoted by the morphological host. This is thus a non-verbal equation clause (X is Y), whose predicate consists of a possessive construction. According to the paraphrased translation, the possessum, or the head of this construction, is *n'oril* 'pool', which is modified by the possessor attribute

muoqaruolgi ‘of having obtained the broad whitefish’. Now, this goes against TY being a consistent head-final language. Besides, and more importantly perhaps, this interpretation is in conflict with the fact that *muoqaruolgi* ‘of having obtained the broad whitefish’ carries the suffix *gi-*, whose function is to identify its host as being possessed, or the head. However, judging by the intended meaning of the utterance in (4), it cannot be possessed by *n’oril* ‘pool’. The sentence does not mean ‘N. is the having obtained broad whitefish of a pool’. There is also no implicit alternative possessor. At this point, two admittedly far-fetched assumptions must be made to explain the presence of the possessive suffix in (4). Firstly, the possessor and the possessive suffix are within the same word. Remember, however, that the suffix *-gi* is not a kind of genitive case marker meant for identifying a possessor, but a device for indicating heads of possessive constructions, possessa, that is. Yet it is hosted by the possessor! The second assumption follows from the fact that the possessor and the possessum are part of the same word, which is not a compound whose parts are in a possessive relation with each other but contains only one lexical root. This entails that while the possessor can be rather safely assumed to be represented by *muoqa* ‘broad whitefish’, the possessum, or the head, is the combination of the bound morphemes *rηol* with the covert (!) nominalizing gerund suffix, carrying the meaning ‘the having obtained’, the entire presumed one-word possessive construction having the meaning ‘the having obtained of broad whitefish’. The conclusion that a morpheme (cluster) can act as the head of a noun phrase, puzzling in itself, makes the boundary between morphology and syntax virtually disappear. The perplexing outcome of this kind of reasoning is further enhanced by the insight that the noun *n’oril* ‘lake’ remains stranded under this analysis, with no discernible syntactic status because the translation excludes its interpretation as an apposition, which otherwise would be worth considering.

To make the confusion complete, the expression ‘the pool of broad whitefish’ translates in Tundra Yukaghir as *muoqa n’oril’gi*, perfectly complying with the rules for forming possessive phrases. Despite this, an attempt to construct on the basis of this construction a sentence with the meaning of (4) by applying the same derivational morphology as in (4) to the possessor *muoqa* to produce the meaning ‘the having caught/obtained broad whitefish’ yields the ungrammatical equivalent in (5):

- (5) **N’oronmuoqa muoqaruol n’oril’gi*.
n’oronmuoqa muoqa-r-ηol n’oril’-gi
 Nyoronmuokha broad.whitefish-VBLZ-be[GER] pool-POSS
 ‘Nyoronmuokha is a pool where broad whitefish was caught.’

4 Conclusion

Not only does TY exhibit numerous typologically (highly) remarkable properties, some of which challenge the contemporary theory and call for its update, but there are instances of data in this language that defy common sense and seemingly evade an interpretation that would not have to resort to highly speculative, unorthodox assumptions. It is worth investigating whether TY is indeed a special case among the languages of the world or whether comparably strange phenomena in better or even well-studied languages, such as Dutch, German or English have simply gone unnoticed or have not received due treatment to attract fellow linguists' attention.

Uncommon abbreviations

CIRC circumstantial converb
 DS different subject
 INCH inchoative
 ITV itive
 NVIS non-visual mood
 OBLG obligative
 SIM simultaneity converb
 VBLZ verbalizer

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