

Morphomic stems in Northern Talyshti

The verb paradigms of practically all Iranian languages attested over the last two thousand years are articulated in terms of a fundamental distinction between so-called ‘past’ and ‘present’ stems (e.g. Haig 2008: 9-10), which arose in the Middle Iranian period and on which secondary distinctions may be overlaid. However, within a single language it is often impossible to attribute any particular morphosyntactic value to the selection of one stem rather than the other. In Persian, for example, traditional conceptions of the two stems as encoding a split between past and non-past (or perfective and imperfective) leave some verb forms unaccounted for: Bonami & Samvelian 2009 therefore treat the two Persian stems as purely morphological objects (‘morphomic’ in the sense of Aronoff 1994), whose distribution across the paradigm cannot be explained on the basis of any extramorphological factors.

We might expect a functionally unmotivated pattern of this kind to be inherently unstable. Accordingly, it may come as no surprise to find that Juhuri (Jewish Tat), a descendant of medieval Persian spoken in the eastern Caucasus (Dagestan and Azerbaijan), seems to have rationalized the make-up of the verb paradigm by reinterpreting the formal distinction as marking a semantic opposition between ‘factual’ and ‘virtual’ forms, expressed by the past and present stems respectively (Authier forthcoming: 141). However, in this paper I present data on the two-stem system as it is reflected in another Iranian language of Azerbaijan, Northern Talyshti (NT), which suggest that there is in fact no diachronic pressure for a language to move away from a morphomic stem distribution to one which can be motivated on other grounds, even when a model for such a change already exists – and that, on the contrary, an existing stem alternation may continue to be taken by speakers as morphomic in nature even when the conditions licensing a different analysis have been met.

Thanks to several innovations distancing the NT paradigm from its ancestor in Middle Iranian (some of them apparently of areal character, cf. Stilo 2008: 373), the inherited distribution of the NT ‘present’ and ‘past’ stems is even harder to account for in functional terms than that seen in Persian; and although the only substantial grammar of NT claims that the majority of its verbs now employ a single stem (Miller 1953: 157, taken up by Schulze 2000: 45), this is contradicted by my fieldwork data and by evidence from Miller’s own texts. In particular, NT possesses a large class of two-stem verbs, the ‘a-stems’, whose existence has not been noted in the literature so far. However, the morphomic nature of stem selection in NT has not given rise to a general redistribution of the two stems along functional lines, even though sound change in the a-stems has given rise to a strong analogical model according to which this could have taken place. Indeed, the other major class of two-stem verbs (the ‘i-stems’) has recently taken on a new stem distribution which makes no more sense than the inherited distribution from an extramorphological point of view. I propose that the new i-stem distribution in fact reflects the morphomic structure which speakers still attribute to the a-stem paradigm, though on the surface it is obscured in the latter by phonological effects. These findings on the importance of morphomic patterns for inflectional morphology in diachrony, and speakers’ willingness to embrace purely morphological distributions of stem allomorphy, will be shown to support the suggestions made by, e.g., Maiden 2010, that speakers are not predisposed to prefer extramorphological over morphomic conditioning in distributional patterns.

References

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