

The absence of finite/nonfinite distinction as a morphological problem

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Many languages do not make any distinction between finite and non-finite verb forms: a form can function as noun modifier and verbal noun, combining with case markers. These features make the authors classify it as participial and non-finite in spite of the fact that it functions equally well as main clause predicate, having person markers attached to it. (If it were a non-finite form indeed, one would expect some supportive item here – a copula).

Nanai (Tungusic)

- (1) mi nōani garpa-**xam-ba-ni** ičāde-**xām-bi**
I he shoot-**PART.PF-ACC-3SG** watch-**PART.PF-1SG**
I watched him shoot (Avrorin 1961:72).

The fact that the same form can be attached both nominal (case) and verbal (person) category markers with no intermediate derivation poses various kinds of problems as to inflection/derivation, noun/verb distinction and has been hard to give a sound interpretation. Grammars usually adopt one of the three solutions on this point:

- a) the participial suffix and the tense suffix are homonymous;
- b) the finite form is derived from the “participial stem” (the root plus participial suffix) by means of person suffixes;
- c) the finite form can historically be traced back to the participle.

Point c) is obviously wrong, since the participle and the finite form have not become synchronically separate forms yet. As for point a), homonymy is usually a result of occasional coincidence, but the phenomenon under analysis can be encountered in a vast variety of languages, for instance, Turkic (Yakut, Bashkir, Khakas etc.), Mongolian (Buryat, Kalmyk), Dagestanian (Lak and Dargin), Dravidian (Telugu), North-West Caucasian (Kabardian). Point b) can be boiled down to the statement that inflection (verbal or nominal) shows class-changing itself and can be considered the case of word-class changing inflection (Haspelmath 1996). Word-class changing character of inflection in those languages can be further confirmed by the behaviour of nominals: in all listed languages nominals when functioning as predicates receive person and tense markers:

Nanai (Tungusic)

- (2) (mi) naj-**i**
1SG man-**1SG**
I am a man. [Sunik 1947: 181]

Kabardian (North-West Caucasian).

- (3) luash₁xä dädi unap’ä-**t**
mountains our home-**PAST**
Mountains were our home [Yakovlev 1948: 367]

However, this solution is not uncontroversial and leads to a question which is hard to answer: is the original lexeme verbal or nominal? Does the nominal inflection change the class of an originally verbal lexeme or vice a versa?

The situation looks very much like that in languages like Tongan, where the same lexeme occurs freely in the context of both “verbal” and “nominal” markers.

Possible views on noun-verb distinction in Tongan are analyzed in [Broschart 1997]. The first one is conversion hypothesis: the distinct lexical word classes noun and verb are only identifiable in the phrasal context. This is for instance the view adopted in [Hewitt 1989], where Abkhaz predicate nominals with tense and person markers are considered to be a subclass of stative verbs. But the fact that verbal slots are occupied by nominal phrases and not just single nominals is found by Broschart to be counterexample to conversion hypothesis, since the nominal, having been “verbalized”, retains its nominal morphology markers (such as number) or syntax: possessives or adjectives. This is exactly the case in languages in question: in Kabardian (3) the nominal with the tense marker still has a dependent possessive pronoun. Another example is from Lak (Dagestanian):

- (4) rasul tu-l ars-ri
 Rasul [1SG.OBL-GEN son]-3sg
 Rasul is my son. [Kazenin 1997: 86]

In other words, the use of a tense or person marker “does not lead to the conversion of the item predicated” [Broschart 1997: 141].

Another solution suggested by Broschart is the nominal vs. verbal syntax hypothesis, which assumes that there is a distinction between nominal and verbal categories in syntax. My suggestion is, following Broschart, to separate morphological and syntactic levels of analysis and say that verbal and nominal categories are expressed at the level of syntax. However, instead of calling them nominal and verbal I would search for some functional, cognitive motivation, permitting the expression of these categories both on nouns and verbs. For instance, in Abkhaz, Lak and Dargin person (and tense in Abkhaz) actually mark discourse categories – new information, focus, but not a certain lexical category. In Turkic and Mongolian languages some case markers also serve as adverbial clause markers, and this allows to view them as denoting a certain type of semantic relation – either within or outside a clause.

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