The typology of Erzya nonverbal predication

Erzya Mordvin is one of the minor Uralic languages spoken in Central Russia. In Erzya the nonverbal (adjectival, nominal and locational) predicates can be inflected for person and tense by predicative suffixes. The present tense suffixes are person agreement markers identical to those of verbal conjugation, and the past tense suffixes are, from a diachronical point of view, fused copulas. The Erzya nonverbal predication system is interesting also because of rich variation of predication strategies: the use of predicative suffixes is claimed to be optional in the present tense, and the past tense constructions can be replaced with analytical copula constructions.

This study is based on my forthcoming doctoral thesis. I have used as data mostly written sources, but also questionnaires and recorded conversations. The database consists of about 5500 Erzya nonverbal predicate clauses. This presentation focuses on the typology of Erzya nonverbal predication, and especially on the conditions of using person agreement markers in nonverbal predicate clauses.

Stassen (1997), one of the major studies on nonverbal predication, includes typological classification of Erzya intransitive predication as well, which I think needs to be revaluated. I think that in Erzya there are three predication strategies instead of two as suggested by Stassen. In the clauses 1a, b, c and d predication is made by predicative suffixes. Stassen labeled the predicative suffixes of the present tense *nominal PNG-markers*, but the past tense suffixes (d) are not taken into account in his study. The second strategy, not mentioned in (Stassen 1997), is simple juxtaposition in the present tense constructions, like in the clauses 2a and b. The third strategy makes use of a copula verb in the future and past tense constructions like in 3a and b.

Further, I state that the predicative suffix construction of Erzya fulfills all the criteria, also the negation criterion, to be concerned as a verbal strategy - and not as a nominal strategy like argued by Stassen (i.b.). This leads to a situation, in which Erzya forms a counter example to Stassen’s typology: Erzya is a tensed language in which nonverbal predicates are encoded by verbal strategy.

The zero strategy (2a and b) is hardly ever mentioned in the grammatical descriptions of Erzya, but as shown by my data, it is used quite often. I have found as well morphological as semantical criteria for the use of zero strategy. The part of speech affects the use of person agreement markers: adjectival predicates agree obligatorily in person, and free variation between person agreement marking and zero strategy is typical only to nominal predicates. Further, nouns inflected with definite and possessive suffixes, as well as personal pronouns as predicates never agree in person. Zero strategy is thus more likely to be used in clauses in which the predicate is a definite (pro)noun. What follows from this is that in Erzya, encoding of adjectival predicates is more similar to the encoding of verbal predicates than the encoding of nominal predicates. I have found further evidence to this statement in the negation systems as well: the adjectives are more likely than the nouns to be negated with the same negation particle as the verbs. The fact that Erzya adjectives form an intermediate territory between verbs and nouns is totally in accordance with the time stability scale by Givón (1984), as well as Stassen’s typology of intransitive predication.
References


Examples

1.a *Mon mazi-jan.*
I beautiful-SG1
' I am beautiful’

1.b *Min paro jalga-tano.*
We good friend-PL1
'We are good friends.’

1.c *Mon t'e-sa-n.*
I this-INE-SG1
' I am here’

1.d *Mon to-so-l'-iń’.*
I that-INE-2.PST-SG1
'I was there.’

2.a *Mon tonavt'niča.*
I student
'I am a student.’

2.b *Ki-t' tiń?*
who-PL you(PL2)
‘Who are you?’

3.a *Min-ś ul' –ń-i-ńek azor-t.*
we-EMPH be-FREQ-1.PST-PL1 landlord-PL
‘We were landlords.’

3.b *Mon-gak ul' –ń-i-ń to-so.*
I-PART be-FREQ-1.PST-SG1 that-INE
'I was there also’

3.b *Ton pokš čora-ks ul'-a-t.*
you big man-TRA be-SG2
'You will be a big man.’