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"Placeholders" in Agul and Udi spontaneous narratives

In this paper we discuss some discourse-specific uses of pronominal elements in two Lezgic languages, Agul and Udi. In both languages certain pronouns can function as hesitation markers which signal production difficulties on the part of the speaker (such have been called "preparative substitutes", or "placeholders" in literature, see Podlesskaja 2006); cf:

(1) Agul

sa	jaR.a,	xibu-d-pu	fi-ɫ.i-s,	jaR.a-s,	un-ar	aq'.u-ni
one	day:Erg	three-A-Ord	WHAT-A-Dat	day-Dat	sound-Pl	do.Pf-Pft

aRat'i paluba.di-l-di
Cit   deck-Super-Lat
'One day, on the third WHAT… day, he called (him) to the deck.'

(2) Udi

ko	beš	samǯi	he=ne=j,	variant'=e=j.
that	our	first	WHAT=3Sg=Pst	variant=3Sg=Pst

'This was our first WHAT, variant.'

To the best of our knowledge, these uses have not been noticed before, an omission motivated by the partly artificial nature of texts used in most descriptions of Northeast Caucasian languages. Such texts often do not represent spontaneous speech, but are written down by native speakers, linguists with some subsequent normalization (like avoiding "reduntant words" and adjusting "incorrect forms" and "wrong word order"). We will show, using the example of the hesitation function of pronouns, that spontaneous narratives, on the other hand, present us with a number of features that deserves special attention from both purely descriptive and typological points of view.

The item serving as a placeholder in Udi in our texts is used for the most part as an indefinite pronoun with predicative function (similar to English *one*):

(3) Udi

durut'-aXun	häzir-ba-j	sa	he=ne
log-Abl	be.prepared-Lv-Aor	one	WHAT=3Sg

'…(this is) something made from the log'

From the diachronic perspective, however, the Udi placeholder is an apparent cognate of interrogative pronouns in most Northeast Caucasian languages (cf. Nikolaev & Starostin 1994: 491-492). This links it with Agul placeholders, whose basic function is that of interrogative pronouns. In general, in Agul the pronoun 'who' is used as a placeholder for human nominals, and 'what' for non-human nominals. Notably, however, the Agul 'what' can also be used for humans as a sort of "default" placeholder for NPs (4). Together with the fact that the Udi placeholder is not specified for such features as animacy, this suggests that this "metalinguistic" function of pronouns may favor the lack of specification.

(4) Agul

qa-j	x.u-ne	p̄ačah.di-q	sa	ru...	fi,	sa
Post:be-Conv	become.Pf-Pft	king-Post	one	dau(gther)	WHAT	one

ruš,	bat'ar	ruš]
daughter	beautiful	daughter

'The king had a dau… WHAT, a daughter, beautiful daughter.'

In both Udi and Agul nominal placeholders take any morphology required by the context. Moreover, in this function placeholders may even have syntactic dependents (5), which is at least not typical for interrogative pronouns and can be considered a piece of evidence in favor of the claim that the placeholder function leads to more morphosyntactic freedom.

(5) Udi

o,	vi	he	maja	išq'ar
hey	your	WHAT	here+Q	man

'Hey, where is your WHAT, husband?'

A further consequence of the distributional freedom of placeholder is that together with the roots 'do' and 'be' they may form a kind of "pro-verb" replacing VPs (6-7), which in some Agul dialects even display phonological reduction. Interestingly, in Agul the pro-verb derived from the transitive root 'do' turns out to be intransitive.

(6) Agul

zu	wun	fi	q'.a-s-t̄awa,	pašman	aq'.a-s-t̄a...
I	you(Sg)	WHAT	do.Ipf-Inf-Cop:Neg	sad	do.Ipf-Inf-Cop:Neg

'I will not DO SO with you, offend…'

(7) Udi

meč-a	čapaӡaR-en=jan	čIak'...he-b-sa,	k'ac'-e.
nettle-Dat	knife-Erg=1Pl	press WHAT-do-Prs	cut-LV:Prs

'With a knife we press the nettle… DO SO, cut.'

Thus, in both languages some pronominal items have undergone pragmatization accompanied by an increase in combinatorical possibilities and occasionally even by phonological reduction, a development which in the literature is sometimes subsumed under the general concept of grammaticalization.

However, there are further uses of placeholders that may somewhat disturb the picture. Thus, in both languages placeholders also participate in the "similative plural" construction (meaning 'X and such'; see Daniel & Moravcsik 2005); cf. (8). Given the fact that a similar construction is found with pro-verbs (9), it is more likely that this function is derived from that of signaling hesitation. This, however, seems to provide an instance of depragmatization.

(8) Udi

eX=jan=st'a	k'rafink'-oR-o,	ӡürdäk'-X-o,	he-t'-u
take=1Pl=LV+Prs	carafe-Pl-Dat	jug-Pl-Dat	WHAT-Nmz-Dat

ba-p-i	la=jan=X-sa	q'onaR-in	beIš,	uI=ne=R-sa.
put_into-LV-Aor	put.on=1Pl=$-Prs	visitor-Gen	in_front_of	drink=3Sg=$-Prs

'We take it, fill carafes, jugs AND SUCH (with it), put (it) in front of the visitor – and he drinks (it).'

(9) Udi

ä,	jan	mema usen	jöni	jäšäjnš-e=jan,	he-b-e=jan.
hey	we	so_many	year	well	live-Perf=1Pl	WHAT-do-Perf=1Pl

'Hey, we lived AND SUCH well so long!'

To conclude, in Agul and Udi we observe a development of interrogative/indefinite pronouns which resulted in a new metalinguistic hesitation function. The details of this development are partly motivated by the grammatical peculiarities of these languages, yet in general it follows evolutionary tendencies observed cross-linguistically. Consequently, we expect that similar phenomena can be found in other Northeast Caucasian languages as well.

References
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