

Polysynthesis in Georgian

One of the most salient features of Georgian is the baroque complexity of its verbal system. Compared to even most highly synthetic languages, the Georgian verb excels in the density of categories that may be marked or cross-referenced on the verb (Table 1). It is therefore striking that outside of the Caucasological community Georgian's polysynthetic properties have not received wide attention. In this talk, I will examine the historical development of polysynthetic properties in Georgian in the light of the typology of Baker (1996) and conclude that, although modern Georgian clearly can be called 'polysynthetic' in the traditional 'fuzzy' sense of the word, data from Old Georgian show that this development cannot be captured by a macroparametric analysis such as Baker's, and instead suggests a nondirectional series of independent grammaticalizations and calcifications of morphosyntactic structures. Table 2 shows 14 different criteria which form Baker's macroparameter and to what extent Modern and Old Georgian participate in them. I will examine two of these subparameters: nominal definiteness and noun-incorporation, and show how these two subparameters evolved in opposite directions, contrary to the view that they form part of a single macroparameter. In the case of nominal definiteness, the nominative case marker *-i* and narrative case *-man* in Old Georgian still had deictic force and were lacking on (inherently definite) proper names (1) (Harris 1985). This was subsequently lost in Modern Georgian [(2)], suggesting a movement toward polysynthesis. In contrast, Old Georgian also had all four kinds of noun incorporation in the sense of Mithun (1984), and this too was subsequently lost. As this change suggests a movement away from polysynthesis in Baker's sense, Baker's macroparametric analysis in toto is called into question.

In the second part of this talk, I will look at the particular social histories of Caucasian communities and examine how socioeconomic structures influence (though do not determine) language contact situations, which in turn constrain how quickly or slowly languages adopt and jettison complex morphosyntactic structures. This will provide an interesting background for the larger discussion of the morphosyntactic properties of all three Caucasian families which, though unrelated, tend to share high degrees of morphological complexity (Nichols 1992). Despite extensive research on the archaeology of Caucasia, relatively little has been done to relate this work to language contact. This talk will nevertheless attempt to tread in this direction.

Table 1: the Georgian verbal template. (Aronson 1990)

1a	1b	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Preverbs	<i>mo-</i>	Subj. prefix	Obj. prefix	Preradical vowel	ROOT	II. Conj.	Thematic suffix	Causative	Imperfect, Cond., Conj.	Screeve marker	3rd Person	Plural

- (1) (506 A.D.; Bolnisi Insc.)
 k[rist']e d[avi]t ep'ik'op'osi k'rebowlitowrt... [š'ic'q'alēn]
 Christ, David bishop=NOM crowd-INST=along.with [have mercy]
 'Christ, have mercy on David the Bishop along with his congregation...'
- (2) Davit-i tavis tav-s sark'e-ši xed-av-s
 David-NOM self head-DAT mirror-in see-TH-3SG
 'David sees himself in the mirror.'
- (3) Vin aka šina tawq'an-is-x-c-es ġ[mertma]n
 Who.NOM here inside worship-GEN-3SGIO-give-3PL God-ERG

