

“Placeholders” in Agul and Udi spontaneous narratives

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*I forget the word for "fan" or "window", and it might take me a couple of stammers to get the right word out - usually I end up saying something like: "Can you turn off[f] the **THING** - the **WOTSIT** - the air blower?".*

http://wisewitch.blogspot.com/2006_09_01_archive.html

1. Introduction

What are placeholders?

Placeholders are hesitation markers which signal production difficulties on the side of the speaker (such sorts of devices have been also called “preparative substitutes” in literature).

Typologically, such elements as

- a) demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite or universal pronouns,
- b) generalized nouns like ‘thing’,
- c) lexicalized combinations like “how-you-call-it”

— are most often used as placeholders (see Podlesskaja 2006a).

Cf. examples from Podlesskaja 2006a; 2006b; Xuršudjan 2006:

(1) English

*What happened to a, **WHATCHACALLIT**, to a potential contributor to your community?*

(2) Russian (*etot* — demonstrative pronoun ‘this’)

A vy segodnja nas povedete v **ETOT**... v trenazhernyj zal?
and you today us will.lead to **THIS** to gym
*And will you bring us today to **THIS**... to the gym?*

(3) Armenian (*ban* — a generalized noun ‘thing’)

Kar-as ban-ov gas ink^hnat^hir-ov
may-PRS:2SG BAN-INS come:SBJV:PRS:2SG airplane-INS

*You may fly by **THING**... by airplane.*

The goal of this talk is to describe placeholders in Agul and in the Nizh dialect of Udi (both: Lezxic < East Caucasian).

Our data are based on a corpus of spontaneous narratives collected in 2004—2006 (for Agul) and 2002—2006 (for Nizh Udi)¹.

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NB: To the best of our knowledge, placeholders in these languages have not been noticed before, which was motivated by the partly artificial nature of texts used in most descriptions of East Caucasian languages. Such texts often do not represent spontaneous speech, but are written down by the linguists or the native speakers, with a subsequent normalization of some sort (like avoiding “redundant words” and adjusting “incorrect forms” and “wrong word order”). We will show by the example of the hesitation function of pronouns that spontaneous narratives present us with a number of features that deserves special attention from both purely descriptive and typological points of view.

2. First acquaintance

Placeholders in Agul: *fiš* ‘who’, *fi* ‘what’:

(4) Agul (Fite dialect)

sa jaβ.a, xibu-d-pu fi.ti-s, jaβ.a-s, un-ar aq'.u-ni aβat'i p:aluba.di-l-di
 one day:ERG three-A-ORD **what-DAT** day-DAT sound-PL do.PF-PFT CIT deck-SUPER-LAT
One day, on the third WHAT... day, he called (him) to the deck.

Placeholder in Udi: *he* ‘what, which’:

(5) Udi

iz uq:en-χo gir-b-i he-t-u bap-i, mešik:-ä...
 REFL:GEN bone-PL gather-LV-AOR **what-NMZ-DAT** pour_in-AOR **sack-DAT**
Having gathered her bones and having put them into WHAT... into the sack...

In both Agul and Udi, the basic function of items serving as placeholders is the **interrogative function**:

Agul (Huppuq' dialect)

(6) *fiš* ‘who’

ket'.u-na, fiš e mi-sa-? a-je-f, fiš e mi-sa-? a-je-f,
 wake_up.PF-CONV **who** COP DEMM-LOC-IN {IN}be-PART-A **who** COP DEMM-LOC-IN {IN}be-PART-A
 fiš e mi-sa-? a-je-f, č'al=la β.a-j-dewa.
who COP DEMM-LOC-IN {IN}be-PART-A speech=& say.IPF-CONV-COP:NEG
Having waken up (he says): «Who's here, who's here, who's here?» – but there is no answer.

(7) *fi* ‘what’

- a. ti-č ŋ.a-guna fi meŋni q'.a-a?
 DEMT-LAT go/come.IPF-TEMP **what** song do.IPF-PRS
And what song they sing when they go there (to bring the bride)?
- b. hun, mahmi-št:i, hal sara fi β.a zu wa-s?
 PTCL RDP:DEMM-ADV now more **what** say.IPF I you(Sg)-DAT
So, what else shall I tell you now?

Udi

(8) *he* ‘what’

he-t-ajnak: = en har-e memija?
what-Nmz-Ben=2Sg come-Perf here
What for have you come here?

The typology of placeholder uses:

Nominal placeholder – replaces a noun or a noun phrase:

(9) Agul (Huppuq' dialect)

gi p:ara uxt:an-di fi qat:q'.a-f-ij, bic'i čin, šünük:-ar, gi-n
DEMG(ERG) much beautiful-ADV **what** tell.IPF-A-COP:PST litte we:EXCL child-PL DEMG-GEN

q:al.a-w uq'.u-na x.a-f-ij.
side-APUD sit_down.PF-CONV become.IPF-A-COP:PST

She told WHAT (= tales and legends) very well, and we, little children, were sitting near her.

(10) Udi

bur = e = q-sa lül-in-aun t:e he c:oroj-es-a.
begin=3SG=ST-PRS tube-O-ABL that **what** flow-LV+INF-DAT

{Describing home-brewing.} Then this WHAT (= vodka) begins to flow from the tube.

Verbal placeholder – replaces a verb (or a verb phrase?):

(11) Agul (Huppuq' dialect)

jawaš, qa-j ad.i-t:-ar... nekäh aq'.u-na bagajmi fi q'.u-ne.
wait {POST}be-CONV come.PF-A-PL nikaah do.PF-CONV morning **what do.PF-PFT**

Now wait... those who accompany... did the nikaah (islamic wedding), and in the morning they did WHAT.

(12) Udi

aruκ-o aruχ-b-i bur = jan = q-sa he-b-s-a.
fire-DAT make_fire-LV-AOR begin=1PL=ST-PRS **what-do-INF-DAT**

{Describing home-brewing.} We light a fire and begin to WHAT-DO (= to make vodka).

3. Nominal placeholder

Semantic specification:

Udi:

The placeholder can be used for referents irrespectively of their animacy:

(13) t:e he-t:-u, amdar-a eIχ-t:-i eč-al = t:un.
that **what-NMZ-DAT** person-DAT take-LV-AOR bring-FUTL=3PL

They will take that WHAT... man and bring (him).

(14) tac-i he-t:-u p:ap:-at:an, beš k:ož-a iIša ereq:luk-a p:ap:-at:an...
go-AOR **what-NMZ-DAT** reach-TEMP our house-DAT close garden-DAT reach-TEMP

I went and when I came to WHAT... when I came to the nut-tree garden near our house...

Note that as an interrogative pronoun, *he* cannot refer to human beings; in this case a special interrogative pronoun *šu* 'who' is used (the latter is not attested as a placeholder).

Agul (Huppuq' dialect):

In general, the pronoun 'who' is used as a placeholder for human nominals, and 'what' for non-human nominals. However, the Agul 'what' pronoun can also be used for humans as a sort of "default" placeholder for NPs.

fiš 'who' (in oblique cases, the stem is *na-*)

- (15) **na-s** aʁ.a-a zun, me we jazna q'ulban.a-s = na č'e
who-DAT say.IPF-PRS I DEMM your(Sg) brother_in_law Qurban-DAT=AND your(Pl)
 ge **na-s**, rahman.a-s aʁ.a-a zun, me žiga ze-f e p.u-na.
 DEMG **who-DAT** Rahman-DAT say.IPF-PRS I DEMM place my-A COP say.PF-CONV

Then I tell WHOM... your brother-in-law Qurban and your WHOM... Rahman, I tell: "This place is mine".

- (16) ha q:azi, ja q:azi, ja **fiš**, isa aʁ.a-j haraj-ar q'.u-ne
 PTCL Qazi VOC Qazi VOC **who** Isa say.IPF-CONV cry-PL do.PF-PFT
 zun ge-wur.i-s.
 I DEMG-PL-DAT

"Hey, Qazi, Qazi, hey WHO... Isa", – cried I to them.

fi 'what'

- (17) qa-j x.u-ne p:ač:ah.di-q sa ru... **fi**, sa ruš, bat'ar ruš.
 {POST}be-CONV become.PF-PFT king-POST one [daughter] **WHAT** one daughter beautiful daughter
The king had a dau... WHAT, a daughter, beautiful daughter.

Morphosyntax

Morphological distribution:

In both languages placeholders can acquire nominal morphology.

Udi

- (18) bitüm **he-t-oʁ-o**, beš bitüm **mähäl-oʁ-o** ožax bu = jaχ.
 all **what-NMZ-PL-DAT** our all **part_of_village-PL-DAT** sacred_place COP=1PL:POSS
In all WHAT... in all our parts of village there are many sacred places.

Agul (Huppuq' dialect)

- (19) me ruš.a q-uš.u-na p.u-na-a, q'eq'et'ul.di, **na-n**, haži-n sus
 DEMM girl(ERG) RE-go.PF-CONV say.PF-RES-PRS gallows(IN) **who-GEN** Hazhi-GEN bride
 q'eq'et'ul.di a-a.
 gallows(IN) {IN}be-PRS

Then this girl came back and said, on the gallows WHO's... Hazhi's wife is (hanging) on the gallows.

Syntactic distribution:

The placeholders may not only have the external syntax of noun phrases, but also take various modifiers.

Udi

The placeholder with a quantifier

- (20) bitüm **he-t-OK-o**, beš bitüm **mähäl-OK-o** ožak bu = jaχ.
all **what-NMZ-PL-DAT** our all **part_of_village-PL-DAT** sacred_place COP=1PL:POSS
In all WHAT... in all our parts of village there are many sacred places.

The placeholder with a possessive pronoun

- (21) ho, mo-t-OK-on k:al = e = ne, o, vi **he** maja, **išq:ar?**
yes this-NMZ-PL-ERG call=3SG=LV:PRS PTCL your(SG) **what** where:3SG:Q **husband**
Now, they are calling: “Hey, where is your WHAT... your husband?”.

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

The placeholder with a possessive pronoun (cf. also example (15) above)

- (22) ha-ge uč.i-n **fi**, t’eʒem degiš x.u-na-dawa ge xit’.a-n.
ha-DEMG REFL-GEN **what** taste <change> become.PF-RES-PRS:NEG DEMG water-GEN
And its WHAT... this water’s taste haven’t changed.

NB: Such combinatorics is in principle not typical of interrogative pronouns.

Conclusion:

- Nominal placeholders show semantic underspecification.
- Nominal placeholders show more combinatoric possibilities than their ancestors (interrogative pronouns).

4. Verbal placeholders

In both languages, verbal placeholders are based on combinations of a non-human/universal nominal placeholder ‘what’ with the least semantically marked roots ‘do’ and (more rarely) ‘be’. These combinations take the necessary verbal morphology:

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

- (23) aχp:a **fi** **q’a-j-e**, χ.a-j-e guni – xed.
then **what** **do.IPF-CONV-COP** carry.IPF-CONV-COP bread water
Then they DO WHAT... they bring bread and water.
- (24) aχp:a gi p.u-na-a, q’ulʔan.di jeri ajat ag.ar-q’.u-na-a gi,
then DEMG(ERG) say.PF-RES-PRS Quran(IN) seven ayah see-do.PF-RES-PRS DEMG(ERG)
ha-ge jeri ajat p.u-na-a lik’ p.u-na-a bic’i q’ul-ar.i-l,
ha-DEMG seven ayah say.PF-RES-PRS write(IMP) say.PF-RES-PRS little plank-PL-SUPER
ha-ge q’ul-ar.i-l lik’.i-na ha-le Hür.i-n mulk i-de-χildi har
ha-DEMG plank-PL-SUPER write.PF-CONV ha-DEML village-GEN territory COP-PART-xildi every
žiga.ji-l sa-sa-d lix.i-na **fi** **q’e** p.u-na-a.
place-SUPER one-one-A {SUPER}put.PF-CONV **what** **do-IMP** say.PF-RES-PRS

Then he said, he showed seven ayahs from the Quran and said: “Write these seven ayahs on little planks, and after you write on little planks, put one plank on a separate place around the village, and DO WHAT”, he said.

Udi

- (25) tɛ vaxt:-in amdar-χo-n očIal-a bist:un-un, ez-sun-un, kašI-sun-un
that time-GEN man-PL-ERG ground-DAT plant+MSD-GEN plough(-LV)-MSD-GEN dig(-LV)-MSD-GEN
därden gele vädä penec:-aun = t:un he-b-e, äš-b-e.
for much period plow-ABL=3PL what-do-PERF work-LV-PERF

People of older times in order to plant (crops), to plough and to dig, for a long time with a plow DID WHAT... worked.

- (26) häviž-ä = l čäk: = jan = ne, šik:lām-a = l k:ac: = jan = ne, šik:lām-a = l
coriander-DAT=FOC choose=1PL=LV:PRS onion-DAT=FOC cut=1PL=LV:PRS onion-DAT=FOC
he = jan = b-sa, čäk: = jan = ne.
what=1PL=do-PRS choose=1PL=LV:PRS

{From a culinary recipe.} We also select (good) coriander, cut onions, then DO WHAT onions... select them.

Evidence for lexicalization of the combinations PLACEHOLDER+VERB:

– Verbal placeholders based on the root ‘do’ can combine with direct objects (i.e. placeholders do not necessarily replace the direct object):

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

- (27) zu wun fi q’.a-s-t:awa, pašman aq’.a-s-t:a...
I you(SG) WHAT do.IPF-INF-COP:NEG sad do.IPF-INF-COP:NEG
I will not DO WHAT with you, offend...

Udi

- (28) meč:-a čapažax-en = jan čIak:... he-b-sa, k:ac:-e.
nettle-DAT knife-ERG=1PL [press] what-do-PRS cut-LV:PRS

{From a culinary recipe.} The nettle we press... DO WHAT, cut with a special knife.

NB: In Agul, however, such verbal placeholders can occasionally be used intransitively with their subjects in nominative:

- (29) qa, k:anešna žabar adad k’.i vaxt:una ha-te = ra
qa of_course Džhabar uncle die.PF time(TMR) ha-DEMT=&
fi q’.u-naje-f-ij sara.
what do.PF-PART2-A-COP:PST PTCL

Yes, of course, when uncle Džhabar died, she (NOMINATIVE) also DID WHAT.

– In some Agul dialects, the combinations PLACEHOLDER+VERB occasionally display phonological reduction. For example, in the Tsirkhe dialect the PLACEHOLDER+VERB combination frequently occurs in such reduced forms like *fi-r’qari* (Imperfective Converb), *fi-rq’aria* (Present), *fi-rq’afe* (Generic Present), etc., whereas the full forms should be *fi ar’qari*, *fi arq’aria*, *fi arq’afe*. The reduced forms like *fi-r’qari* are not possible in the interrogatives contexts.

5. The similative plural construction: one more function of placeholders

Like in many other languages, in Agul and Udi the items serving as placeholders can also be used in the function of the approximate nomination:

Udi

- (30) jöni oc:-k:-i q:äšäng č:äk = jan = ne, žIe he nu = bak-a = ne iz boš.
 good wash-LV-AOR beautiful pick_out=1PL=LV:PRS stone what NEG=be-SUBJ=3SG REFL:GEN inside
{From a culinary recipe.} We wash everything well, and sort out everything, so that there be no stones or SOMETHING inside.

Agul (Huppuq' dialect)

- (31) ŷ.a-jde req:ü ča-s har žüre.ji insan-ar, har
 go/come.IPF-PART3 road(IN) we:EXCL-DAT every sort(GEN) person-PL every
 žüre.ji welijat-ar fi-p:ur ag.u-ne ča-s.
 sort(GEN) country-PL what-PL see.PF-PFT we:EXCL-DAT
On our way we saw all sorts of people and also countries AND ALL THAT.

In Agul, this use of placeholder is quite marginal, since there are other means to express the similative meaning (e.g., nominal plural or a special construction with *zat* 'thing', which are not used as placeholders).

The similative plural construction refers to a set of objects via the direct reference to one of them (the focal referent) to which other members of the set are similar (cf. Daniel & Moravcsik 2005).

The structure of the similative plural construction:

The placeholder follows immediately the designation of the focal referent and copies its inflection (including person markers, if any).

- (32) čäpär-mäpär-aχun žup-i ta = ne = sa, zijan = e tasta
 fence-RDP-ABL jump(+LV)-AOR go=3SG=ST+PRS harm=3SG give+PRS
 q:onš-ok-o he-t-u.
 neighbour-PL-DAT what-NMZ-DAT

It (a cow) jumps over the fence and runs away, doing harm to neighbours and ALL THAT.

- (33) beI = t:un = B-sa aq:saq:q:al = e he = ne, sa šej ava = ne, šo-t:-o
 look=3Pl=ST-Prs old_man=3Sg what=3Sg sa thing knowing=3SG that-Nmz-Dat
 hajzer-i č:äk: = jan = ne tamat:a.
 stand_up-Aor choose=1Pl=LV:Prs toast_master

{At the feast.} Then they look: he is an old wise man OR SOMETHING, he knows much, so after he stands up and they elect him the toast-master.

In Udi, the similative plural construction is found with placeholder verbs as well:

- (34) neχ = e = ki, ä, jan mema usen jöni jäšajnš-e = jan he-b-e = jan.
 say:PRS=3SG=COMP VOC:M we so.many year well live(-LV)-PERF=1PL what-do-PERF=1PL
He says: "Hey, we were living (together) well and WHAT-DO for so many years.

6. Concluding remarks: theoretical implications

The history of placeholders in Agul and Udi can be considered an instance of pragmaticalization, a process similar to (or even subsumed under) grammaticalization.

Pragmaticalization (as is understood here) is the development of lexical items into discourse-structuring devices, primarily discourse markers.

Evidence for pragmaticalization:

- semantic bleaching manifested in semantic underspecification of placeholders;
- the increase in scope of use manifested in the fact that placeholders have more combinatorial possibilities than interrogative pronouns;
- lexicalization of some patterns (e.g., verbal placeholders);
- metatextual function: pronouns here do not necessarily provide an information on the attitude of the speaker towards the proposition, but only tell that the speaker has not in mind an appropriate designation.

NB: Note that pragmaticalization does not necessarily meets such criteria of grammaticalization as obligatorification, phonological attrition etc.

On the other hand, if the similative construction indeed has developed from placeholder uses, then this is an instance of de pragmaticalization:

- placeholders get more concrete semantics ('and the like');
- they get a fixed position defined by (presumably) grammatical rules;
- lexicalized items like verbal placeholders admit the analytical interpretation based on the rule of inflection copying;
- the metatextual function turns into the intratextual one, providing it with context-independent semantics.

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