

Towards a comparative concept of participle (oral/poster)

Although participles are not universal in the sense that they are present in any language, the category seems to be universally applicable, since forms traditionally analyzed as participles are found in various genetically and geographically diverse languages. However, no cross-linguistic survey based on a representative language sample has been carried out so far. This paper aims to formulate a comparative concept of participle that could then be used for such typological study.

It is claimed in Haspelmath (1994) that since participles are best defined as verbal adjectives, at least languages that lack primary adjectives will also lack participles. It turns out, though, that even languages without a distinct class of adjectives can sometimes have forms that are very similar to ‘prototypical’ participles in their behaviour.

Thus, West Greenlandic, though lacking the morphological category of adjectives, possesses verb forms that are used exclusively for modification, i.e. for relative clause formation, cf. (1a). These forms are clearly subordinate, since they cannot head independent clauses, and although tense and modality can in principle be expressed within them by separate affixes, this does not happen often, cf. van der Voort (1991). The agent in such relative clauses is expressed as a possessor, which makes West Greenlandic ‘participles’ altogether quite similar to contextually oriented participles of the Altaic type, cf. example (1b) from Kalmyk:

(1a) *angut* [naapi-ta-ra]
man.ABS meet-PTCP.PASS-POSS.1SG.ABS

(1b) [*mini xarɁ-sən*] *kün*
1SG.GEN meet-PTCP.PST man.NOM
‘the man met by me’

These forms at the same time have much in common with passive participles typical of the highly inflectional Indo-European languages. They agree in case and number with the noun they modify and the agent can be marked by some non-core case, cf. examples (2a) from West Greenlandic and (2b) from Russian:

(2a) *nanoq* [*Piita-mit toqu-taq-Ø*]
bear.ABS Peter-ABL kill-PTCP.PASS-ABS

(2b) *medved'* [*ubi-t-yj Petr-om*]
bear.NOM.SG kill-PTCP.PASS.PST-NOM.SG.M Peter-INSTR
‘the bear killed by Peter’

Taking into account such significant constructional similarities in languages that differ a lot in their morphological structure, I suggest leaving morphology aside for a while and taking syntax as a starting point in creating a comparative concept of participle, cf. constructional approach in Creissels (2009). The common feature of the abovementioned languages is that they have relative clauses demonstrating some degree of subordination by means of the verb form itself or the coding of its arguments, so in the current paper I investigate the properties of such relative clauses in 40 languages representing all major language families and linguistic areas and explore how these properties tend to cluster together delineating the class of units that should be further studied together as participles.

References

- Creissels, Denis (2009) Participles and finiteness: The case of Akhvakh. *Linguistic Discovery* 7.1, 106–130.
- Haspelmath, Martin (1994) Passive participles across languages. In: Fox, Barbara & Hopper, Paul J. (eds.) *Voice: Form and Function*. (Typological Studies in Language, 27.) Amsterdam: Benjamins, 151–177.
- Van der Voort, Hein (1991) *Relative clauses in West Greenlandic*. Master’s thesis. University of Amsterdam.