

## A morphological outlier? The verb paradigm in the Northern Talyshi of Azerbaijan

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One of the well-known hallmarks of the Iranian morphological system is the division of the verb paradigm into two formal zones, each employing its own inflectional stem to which further prefixes and suffixes may be added. This phenomenon, attributable to developments dating back to the early Middle Iranian period, is ‘a remarkably stable characteristic, one of the deepest traces of genetic unity across the family’ (Haig 2008: 9f.), and as seen in Modern Persian (e.g. *mikonam* ‘I am doing’ vs. *mikardam* ‘I was doing’), in a given paradigm the choice of one stem or the other may be the only difference between two existing verb forms.

In view of this, it is striking to observe that recent treatments of Northern Talyshi (NT), an Iranian language of the south-eastern Caucasus, generally describe it as having more or less abandoned this two-stem system. Stilo (2008: 372) claims that the so-called *present* and *past* stems have fallen together ‘in all but about eight rather common verbs’ in the NT varieties of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and he is followed in this by Paul (2011: 104), who treats it as a distinguishing feature of NT in opposition to the other Talyshi varieties of Iran, where verbs retain both of their inherited stems. Meanwhile, NT is the only modern West Iranian language in the index to Cheung (2007) whose verbs are listed by one stem only.

According to Schulze (2000: 45), this development in NT, so unusual for an Iranian variety, is associated with a more general trend towards agglutination seen in the language, whereby ‘the lexical domain becomes structurally (and formally) separated from the inflectional domain’. It is natural to link such a move in the direction of agglutinative morphological structure with the external circumstances of NT: a geographical outlier in Iranian, its speakers are practically all bilingual in Azerbaijani, which like Turkish can be taken as a canonical example of an agglutinative language. Stilo (1981) and Windfuhr (1987) have both argued that the Talyshi varieties in general are taking on Turkic features as a result of Azerbaijani influence; indeed, Paul (2011: 328) proposes that the counterbalancing superstrate influence of Persian should be recognized as a factor in the *survival* of the conservative two-stem system in Central and Southern Talyshi, implicitly supposing that otherwise they too might have followed the same trajectory as has been described for NT.

However, in this paper I want to suggest that in NT itself the Iranian two-stem system is by no means as moribund as has been claimed – and that the assumption that NT verb forms can generally be analysed as sequences of invariant morphemes, in accordance with the agglutinative ideal, is liable to lead to mistaken interpretations of their internal structure. Several of the glosses provided by Schulze for the sample text which accompanies his grammatical description of NT illustrate this point. To give one instance, his analysis of the preterite form *nəznaše* ‘he could not’ identifies the *-a-* as an isolable unit signalling perfect tense (rather it is part of *zna-*, one of the two stem allomorphs employed in the paradigm of *zəne* ‘know, be able’, which thus remains a two-stem verb, cf. Kaye 2013: 203-7); and apparently as a result of examples such as this, his p. 24 gives a general morphological template for the negative of the perfect which is never in fact instantiated in NT.

This paper will thus aim to show how a more representative profile of NT verb morphology must involve features which are unfavourable for a concatenative approach: concretely, I will illustrate some of the points at issue by considering the difficulties which arise in the process of glossing the published text collection which is currently the focus of my own research (Əboszodə et al. 2004). It emerges that most verbs in NT retain two stems, whose distribution over the paradigm is fundamentally an ‘arbitrary’, morphology-internal question and which can interact in unpredictable ways with adjacent material – typological characteristics which are far from exotic in the context of Indo-European inflectional morphology.

## References

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