

Prototype and periphery in the Kist Chechen TAM-System

A quantitative outlook based on Dahl's (1985) questionnaire

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The conceptualization of tense-aspect-mode forms (henceforth TAM-forms) and their cross-linguistic comparison remains a difficult task as the underlying categories prove to be evasive and subject to pragmatic and situational influence. One possibility to get to an evidence-based understanding that is viable, especially for languages with few resources, is the application of questionnaires. One of these is Dahl (1985), which seeks to identify those verb forms that are central to the functioning of languages.

This presentation utilizes the questionnaire to outline the main TAM-forms of Kist, a dialect of Chechen which is spoken in the Pankisi Gorge in Northern Georgia. While interference with the Georgian language has left its mark on Kist Chechen (Aliroev, 1962: 65-67) due to close cultural and political ties (Sanikidze, 2007), the variety is still being transmitted uninterrupted and proficiency remains high amongst all generations (Forker and Botkovei, 2024; Pareulidze, p.c.), which makes inquiries into its grammar valuable for the Caucasus Studies in general. One of the key issues in Kist (and indeed Vainakh) linguistics is the description of periphrastic TAM-forms, as Standard Chechen is known to have up to 49 of these forms (Nichols and Molochieva, 2018). While for the latter variety there is a monograph about verbal semantics that also includes periphrastic constructions (Molochieva, 2010), the three fundamental descriptions of Kist Chechen (Aliroev 1962; Arsachanov 1969; Pareulidze, 2010) focus rather on the morphology of the synthetic verb forms. It is necessary to investigate their semantics as well, as Kist Chechen is no less complex than other Vainakh varieties.

In order to identify the major TAM-forms of Kist Chechen, three native speakers were given visual stimuli that corresponded to the questions in Dahl's questionnaire. Systematic congruences and divergences between the accumulated responses of these native speakers revealed what TAM-forms can be considered prototypical and which need to be understood as peripheral.

It is revealed that the major TAM forms of Kist Chechen seem to be the Simple and Durative-Progressive Present tense on the one hand and the Perfective, the Remote and Recent Witnessed Past tenses on the other – employing the traditional terminology taken from Standard Chechen (Molochieva 2010). A closer look, however, shows that their semantics do not behave quite like the traditional labels suggest.

While the Durative-Progressive Present tense behaves as expected from a progressive tense, the Simple Present tends to occur in habitual-generic contexts – in fact, it could be said that the Kist Chechen Simple Present tense matches Dahl's prototypical Habitual-Generic tense quite well. This sets it apart from the Remote Witnessed Past, which approximates a default past tense. Contrary to its traditional name and similar to the same verb form in Standard Chechen as well as the Georgian aorist, it is in fact neutral towards evidentiality and can be used for unwitnessed situations and situations that went on for some time. The Durative Progressive Past is much more restricted than the Recent Witnessed Past (matching Dahls prototype of a Past-Imperfective quite well) and occurs more seldom than its present counterpart. The Imperfective Past is tied to the explicit mentioning of duration; however, it can be used to express past habits, too.

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