Participial systems in Uralic languages

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This paper is a micro-typological study of participial systems focusing on the Uralic language family. Uralic languages are a perfect genealogical unit for a research of this kind, since their participial systems are very rich and well developed, and most members of the family make extensive use of participles in various subordinate structures. In addition, Uralic languages demonstrate a very high degree of variation in their participial systems.

The variation is especially peculiar in the domain of participial orientation, i.e. the range of participants that a single participle is able to relativize, cf. Haspelmath (1994: 153). For instance, western Uralic languages (e.g. Finnish and Hungarian) exhibit the contrast between active and passive participles, which are usually restricted to subject and direct object relativization respectively, while eastern Uralic languages (e.g. Meadow Mari and Khanty) possess participial forms that can be used to relativize a wide range of participants. This study aims at analyzing the systems that diversely oriented participles form in Uralic languages, and discussing possible explanations of the development of these systems.

The sample used in the study currently comprises nine languages, at least one from every major traditionally recognized subgroup within the Uralic language family (cf. e.g. Salminen 2002), namely Tundra Nenets (Samoyedic), Hungarian and Khanty (Ugric), Komi-Zyrian and Udmurt (Permic), Meadow Mari (Mari), Erzya (Mordvinic), North Saami (Saamic) and Finnish (Finnic). The data comes mainly from descriptive studies, such as Nikolaeva (2014) on Tundra Nenets, or Brykina & Aralova (2012) on Meadow Mari, Komi-Zyrian and Udmurt, but also from language consultants (Erzya, Hungarian) and personal knowledge (Finnish).

The analysis reveals several factors that might be relevant for participial orientation in different Uralic languages. For example, the aforementioned split between western and eastern Uralic languages clearly reflects their different contact histories. For several centuries, western Uralic languages have been in contact with Slavic, Germanic and Baltic varieties, while eastern Uralic languages have been influenced by northern Eurasian languages, such as Turkic and Yeniseian. As a result, the western ones belong to the Standard Average European type with respect to participial orientation, cf. Haspelmath (2001), while the eastern ones make use of prenominal participial relative clauses, which are a well-known areal feature in North Asia, cf. Pakendorf (2012). In addition to that, the orientation of participles appears to be connected with the temporal meaning of the forms and their ability to function as action nominalizations, as well as with the availability of other relativization strategies in the language. In my talk, I will discuss these and some other factors in detail and propose possible mechanisms of their influence on the formation of Uralic participial systems.

As a micro-typological study, this paper adds primarily to our knowledge about Uralic languages and their syntax. However, it can also provide valuable insights for the overall typology of participles and help us understand the role of different factors in the development of subordinate structures in general.

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