Experiencer constructions and subjecthood in Shina and Shughni

1. Introduction. Experiencer constructions—i.e. those involving psych-predicates such as "like" and "want" or a patientive change in state, such as "fall asleep" and "shiver"—exhibit a high level of diversity in Indo-Iranian with respect to their syntax and argument-coding patterns (cf., e.g., Jügel & Samvelian 2020; Akkuş et al. 2023). This study examines such constructions in Shina (Indo-Aryan; Pakistan) and Shughni (E. Iranian; Afghanistan and Tajikistan). Our data and analyses reveal important differences in case-marking strategies between the two languages, but striking similarities in syntax and agreement patterns. By comparing two languages from distinct genetic subgroups and geographic regions, we hope to shed light on patterns and constraints in argument coding, as well as insights into the notion of subjecthood in Hindu-Kush-Karakoram languages.

2. Experiencer constructions in Shina and Shughni. In both Shina and Shughni, experiencers tend to appear clause-initially in neutral word order. However, the grammatical case of the experiencer argument varies widely and depends on the predicate at hand. This diversity is illustrated in the Shina examples in (1)–(2) and the Shughni examples in (3)–(4):

Shina

(1) **"Want" – Dative experiencer**

Ma-ṭ fala awaj-éenan.
1SG-DAT apple want-PRS.3PL
'I want apples.' (own fieldwork)

(2) **"Like" – Ergative experiencer**

Muláay-se haṇejéṭ khoš th-íin-aa.
girl-ERG eggs.DAT happy do-PRS.3SG.F-Q
'Does the girl like eggs?' (Radloff & Liljegren 2022)

Shughni

(3) **"Want" – Dative experiencer**

Mu-rd mūn fort.
1SG.OBL-DAT apple want.3SG.PRS
'I want an apple.' (own fieldwork)

(4) **"Like" – Dative experiencer**

Mu-rd mūn xuš.
1SG.OBL**-dat** apple happy
'I like apples.' (own fieldwork)

These examples show that the predicate "want" involves a dative experiencer in both Shughni and Shina (cf. 1 and 3). However, whereas in Shina the predicate "like" involves an ergative experiencer and dative stimulus (cf. 2), in Shughni we find effectively the opposite pattern, where the experiencer is dative and the stimulus argument is in the direct case (cf. 4). Nonetheless, in both languages verbal agreement only occurs with the argument in the case typical of subjects. Thus, in the Shina examples, agreement takes place with the ergative experiencer in (cf. 2) but not with the dative experiencer in (cf. 1). In the Shughni examples above, and in general throughout the language, agreement takes place only with the direct-case stimuli and never with the oblique experiencers.

3. Implications for subjecthood. Our comparison of Shina and Shughni suggests that experiencer constructions in both languages involve a partial dissociation of canonical subject properties. In both Shina and Shughni, experiencers tend to occupy the clause-initial position associated with discourse prominence and agent-like semantic roles. However, verbal agreement aligns instead with the argument coded in the language's canonical subject case. Moreover, in Shughni, the dative experiencer in constructions like (3) and (4) cannot be co-referential with the subject-oriented oblique anaphor *xu* (Parker 2023: 411–413). These patterns suggest that subjecthood in HKK languages cannot be reduced to a single morphosyntactic property but may be better understood as a kind of continuum. In any case, experiencer constructions constitute a promising line of inquiry and can be considered an important locus of variation in argument coding across the HKK region.

4. Selected references.

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