Pashto “anti-impersonal” verbs: a typological and diachronic analysis

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Syntactically, Pashto verbs fall into three classes: intransitive; transitive; and “anti-impersonal”. However, while the categories of transitive and intransitive verbs are quite common, the third group is more complex to understand: in some languages that have a non-homogeneous actantial configuration (whether Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Caucasian, etc.) we observe that there is a category of verbs which, in the past tense, have an obligatorily expressed agent and an inexplicable object. It is necessary to distinguish between anti-impersonal verbs (the verb class) and the anti-impersonal construction, for three main reasons: 1) the scope of the anti-impersonal construction in Pashto extends beyond that of verbs of the same name; 2) this anti-impersonal construction is simply a variant of the actantial split that opposes ergative constructions to accusative constructions; and 3) this construction is found whenever the object is “dismissed” (see De Chiara and Septfonds 2019: 22).

Consider the following two examples to explain this construction:

1. *saṛay* *žāṛi*
   man.D cry.PRS.3SG
   ‘The man cries’

2. *saṛi* *žaṛəl*
   man.OBL cry.IPV.PST.3MPL
   ‘The man was crying’

The rather heterogeneous group of the anti-impersonal verbs includes 25 verbs, encompassing the semantic fields of animal cries, semi-voluntary physiological manifestations, movements, aiming, bathing, and grazing (see Lazard 1995: 228 and Septfonds 1997: 287). Although the topic has been studied in the past (see also Septfonds 1985), many elements remain obscure, and above all, this group of verbs has never been analyzed from a diachronic perspective, even though some of these verbs exhibit similar morphological irregularities (as, for instance, the opposition *-ā-: -a-* between the present and the past radicals in the verbs *žaṛəl* ‘to cry’, *xandəl* ‘to laugh’, *ɣapəl* ‘to bark’, etc.).

In my presentation, after having compiled a comprehensive inventory of these verbs and shown the transformation dynamics observable today in Pashto dialects (see De Chiara and Septfonds 2019 and 2022), I will address the etymologies and functions of this verbal class, also paying attention to the similarities in behavior with respect to other verbal categories of Pashto and attempting to draw conclusions regarding the interpretation of the data.

References

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