

CHANGE AND CONTINUITY IN THE SUBCATEGORIZATION OF INDO-EUROPEAN MIDDLE-PASSIVE VERBS

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This work is an analysis of the change that affected the selectional properties of the Ancient Greek and Old Slavic middle-passive verbs denoting fear with respect to the case marking of their objects.

The data

Ancient Greek (Gk) middle verbs of fear (e.g. *fobeisthai* ‘to be afraid’), as Indo-European (IE) deponents in general, seem not to undergo Burzio’s Generalization [3] in its strong version, according to which verbs that lack an agentive external argument should block accusative assigning on their complement. On the contrary, Gk middle verbs of fear take accusative objects (ex. 1, structure A). In this respect, Gk seems to have replaced with a plain accusative complement the Proto-Indo-European (PIE) ablative case of “departure” or “source”, usually reconstructed for the objects of the verbs of fear [2, 6, 8, 9], as seen in Sanskrit, Avestan, Baltic, and Slavic (ex. 2). On the other hand, Old Church Slavonic (OCS) and other Slavic languages (Old Russian) conserved the PIE ablative case (its uses were conflated with the ones of genitive case in Greek and Slavic) on the objects of the verbs of “fear” (e.g. *bojati se* ‘to be afraid’), observing Burzio’s Generalization, which predicts that verbs that lack an agentive subject, cannot assign accusative case to their objects (ex. 3, structure B). Finally, both languages have innovated with respect to PIE in that they made occasional use of the mechanism of replacing the PIE ablative-genitive case with a PP headed by an overt preposition [1, 6] (ex. 4).

The hypothesis

The difference in subcategorization of Greek vs. Slavic non-active verbs lies in different structures. I propose that Burzio’s Generalization applies only in case the sentence is really “passive”, i.e. contains a null or overt reflexive pronoun in the position [Comp, V], which is the one that blocks accusative case assigning. This is the OCS pattern, where passive verbs are new formations created by adding the reflexive accusative pronoun *se* to the active voice [10, 11] (ex. 3, structure B). In the absence of this pronoun, we are not dealing with passives, but with something we can denominate (stative) middles, typical of Gk. and PIE [5, 8] (ex. 2, structure A).

The analysis

Some differences between old IE middles and new IE passives have been previously detected in the literature [4, 5]: (i) the former used to have the semantic value of an active verbal action in benefit of oneself, while the latter are real passive verbal actions; (ii) middle Gk morphemes are old, direct inheritors of PIE, different from the new IE passive formations, such as the Slavic ones. In addition, I discuss two more differences: (iii) Burzio’s Generalization applies to new IE passives but not to old middle ones; and (iv) null / overt pronouns can be detected in [Comp, V] position in new passive formations, but not in middles.

The change from the PIE ablative-genitive pattern into an accusative pattern in the Gk verbs of fear was made according to a process that took place at different stages in IE languages, which consisted in replacing lexical *bare* cases with non-lexical ones (structural or configurational) and/or with overt PPs [2, 6]. This change was possible in Gk. as Burzio’s Generalization did not apply to these structures.

In Slavic, such a change did not take place because of Burzio’s Generalization. Only much later, when the passive morpheme (the originally reflexive pronoun) wore out phonetically and was perceived as a middle-deponent morpheme was Burzio’s Generalization overridden (e.g. Present-day Colloquial Russian, where the originally passive morpheme *-sja* (<*sę*) is probably interpreted as a middle or deponent suffix, as it is not an obstacle to license accusative case any more) [7].

Examples

- (1) Tis ára di’ autèn hymōn fobeĩtai tèn mēllousan, oukhi dikaian ékhei. (Gk: Thucydides, 2: 87)
 who part. because her of-you fears [the future]_{AC} not truth has
 ‘Those of you who are afraid of the future (battle) because of the last one are not right.’
- (2) a. Vísvam bibhāya bhúvanam mahāvadhāt. (Sanskrit, *Rig-veda*)
 whole fears world of-the-mighty-weapon _{ABL}
 ‘The whole world is afraid of that with the mighty weapon.’
 b. Vaikaĩ dažnaĩ bijo tamsōs. (Lithuanian)
 children often fear darkness _{GN}
 ‘Children are often afraid of darkness.’
- (3) Boite že sę pače mogōšćaago i d[u]šq i tělo pogubiti. (OCS: *Codex Marianus*, Mt. 10: 28)
 fear part. refl. _{AC} able _{GN} and soul and body destroy
 ‘You’d better be afraid of the one who can spoil both the soul and the body.’
- (4) a. Dídakson, ei didaktón, eks hótou fobē. (Gk: Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 671)
 explain if explainable from what _{GN} fear
 ‘Explain, if you can, what are you afraid of.’
 b. Nъ ne boi sę otъ mōkъ. (OCS: *Codex Suprasliensis* 8b: 7)
 but not fear refl. _{AC} from tortures _{GN}
 ‘But do not be afraid of suffering.’

Structures

- (A) [TP [DP *tis* [uF] +θ “experiencer”] [VP ~~*tis*~~ [VP *fobeĩtai* [DP *tèn mēllousan* [uF] +θ “theme”]]]] (Gk)
 who _{NOM} fears the future one _{AC}
- (B) [TP [DP *vŷ* [uF] +θ “theme”] [VP ~~*vŷ*~~ [VP *boite* [_{pro} *sę*] [VP [DP *mogōšćaago* +θ “separation”]]]]]] (OCS)
 you _{NOM} fear -self_{AC} the one who can _{GN}

References

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