

The Rise and Fall of Converbs in Classical Armenian

Armenian is an Indo-European language, attested since the 5th century CE and spoken, then and now, in the South Caucasus, East Anatolia, and North Iran. By virtue of its phylogenetic origin, Armenian is not a language stereotypically expected to have a category of converbs but nevertheless exhibits one such class of forms which follow HASPELMATH's definition of converbs as a 'nonfinite verb form whose main function is to mark adverbial subordination' (1995:3). Known in the grammar of Armenian as the perfect participle (marked by the morph *-eal*), this form serves three purposes:

- (a) adnominal modification (= verbal adjective);
- (b) adverbial modification (= converb);
- (c) formation of the periphrastic perfect (with an optional copula).

Use case (b) is the most common in Classical Armenian, with an average incidence in 5th-century texts of about 52% (MEYER 2017:196). These three usages (a–c) are illustrated in examples (1–3) below; (2a) and (2b) provide evidence that the Armenian forms belong to what NEDJALKOV (1995) refers to as free-subject converbs since matrix clause and converb subject may be identical or explicitly different.

(1) Adnominal modifier

tgēt mardik xarñakut'ean zohēin y=ays bagins
 ignorant mankind confusion.DAT.SG sacrifice.3PL.PST at=DEM altar.LOC.PL
mnac'eals
 remain.PTCP.LOC.PL
 '... ignorant men [still] sacrificed to Chaos at these remaining altars.' (Ag. §809)

(2a) Converb, subjects coincide

ew amenayn əst asac'eloy patuirani=n
 and all according-to say.PTCP.GEN.SG command.GEN.SG=DET
arareal handerjeal kazmeal patrastec'in
 make.CVB prepare.CVB decorate.CVB prepare.3PL.AOR
 'And after making, preparing, and decorating, they arranged everything according to the command given.' (Ag. §760)

(2b) Converb, subjects differ

ew ankeal zawrawork'=n i sur t'snameac'=n
 and fall.CVB soldier.NOM.PL=DET into sword enemy.GEN.PL=DET
meraw k'aj'=n Mamikonean Vasak
 die.3SG.AOR valiant=DET PN PN
 'And as the soldiers engaged the enemies in battle, the valiant Vasak Mamikonean died.' (ŁP' §69)

(3) Periphrastic perfect

ew orpēs etun zroyc'ork' ənd nma ekeal ēin
 and as give.3PL.AOR news REL.NOM.PL with 3SG.DAT come.PTCP be.3PL.PST
 'And as those, who came with him, reported ...' (P'B IV.5)

This paper argues that the dominant converbial use cannot have arisen on its own (e.g. as per HASPELMATH 1995:17–20) but arises also from language contact with West Middle Iranian languages (MEYER 2017:323–32); the category crystallised during pattern replication and subsequent grammaticalization (cf. MATRAS & SAKEL 2007). This hypothesis is further

corroborated by the transient nature of the category converb; in Middle Armenian already, the periphrastic perfect is the form's only use (KARST 1901:354–5).

References

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