

On the relationship of two Uralic copula verbs in Mari and beyond

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In many Uralic languages, the syntactic position of copula is occupied by successors of two different Proto-Uralic verbs of ‘being’, **le-* and **wole-* (UEW 1: 243–244, 580–581). The relationships between the verbs are complex, including both supplementation (see Honti 2013a; 2013b) as well as divergence, where similar conjugation forms of the different stems are not uniform by their meaning. Although merely counting as an exceptional phenomenon cross-linguistically, the causes behind the copular variation are not targeted in the current literature. This presentation sheds light on the topic by serving a TAME-supported syntactic analysis on the etymologically corresponding copula verbs *lijaš/liäš* and *ulaš/âlaš* in Meadow Mari and Hill Mari and pointing out parallels in other Uralic languages.

In modern Mari languages, the paradigm of *ulaš/âlaš* is incomplete, being fulfilled by forms of *lijaš/liäš* in marked TAME-categories. If conjugation is available, the most productive or even the only possible person form of *ulaš/âlaš* is the 3rd person singular. This includes the familiar cases of the Meadow Mari paradigms of simple past tenses I and II (*âle* and *ulmaš*, respectively) and the Hill Mari counterfactual form (*âlyecə*) (e.g. Alhoniemi 1985: 111, 123), but also the paradigm of desiderative mood (with the form *ulneže/âlnežə*) shows similar restrictions.

When used in a sentence, these forms are attached after another finite expression to modify the TAME-interpretation of the utterance. An example of this are the analytic past tense constructions as in (1), where the petrified 3rd person singular past tense form is attached after a present expression for relocating the temporal interpretation of the utterance to its actual interval past from the speaker:

(1) Meadow Mari (Alhoniemi 1985: 121, shortened)

tuðo poem-âm luð-eš âle.
3SG poem-ACC read-PRS.3SG be-PST1.3SG

‘He was reading a poem.’ (Literally: [he is reading a poem] + [(so it) was])

As the example shows, the conjugation form of *ulaš/âlaš* can be understood as a secondary predication that contains a TAME-marked stative event with an embedded empty subject that refers to the preceding clause. This explains also the semantic peculiarities that characterize the conjugation forms of the verb. As revealed by a corpus study, the desiderative form *ulneže/âlnežə*, which is built on a presumably Proto-Uralic modal marker **-ni-* (Aikio 2022: 18), does not express volition, as expected, but counterfactual or aspectual meanings related to the internal potentiality of an event to become actualized. This is because volition and other modal expressions of subjective stance require a conscious subject person, which, in turn, is not included in the predications with *ulaš/âlaš*. In contrast, *lijaš/liäš* forms independent predications with normal subjects and behaves thus morphosemantically like any other verb in Mari. As will be seen, similar distribution characterizes the successors of **le-* and **wole-* also elsewhere in Uralic, where the **wole-*-based verbs are often supplemented by corresponding **le-*-based forms when conjugated with successors of **-ni-*.

In addition to the supplementation, however, there seem to be also functional overlappings between the two copular stems. This is seen in the case of Meadow Mari simple past tense I. Even though often replaced by the simple past tense II forms of *lijaš*, the person conjugation

of *ulaš* in the simple past tense I is also regularly attested in usage. The semantically highly similar forms are illustrated in corpus examples (2) and (3):

(2) Meadow Mari (Onchyko 4/1997: 120)

tunam latnâl ijaš âl'â-m.
then fourteen years.old be.PST1-1SG

'I was fourteen years old at that time.'

(3) Meadow Mari (Onchyko 4/1996: 5)

ikšâβε-βlak γâč̣ en kuyu-žo mâj lij-ân-am.
child-PL from SUP big-POSS3SG 1SG be-PST2-1SG

'I was the oldest of the children.'

I shall demonstrate that the division of labor between the two verbs is not random but based on clear TAME-related distinctions. Crucially, the variation is identical with that between the simple past tenses and the analytic ones (see Spets 2023). I suggest that *âl'e* has been abstracted off from the analytic structures, which ultimately enabled it to gain person conjugation. Syntactically, this kind of re-finitization is easily conducted: the *âl'e* clause is in loose juxtapositional relationship with its lexical head, which made it possible to interpret the element as an independent TAME-marked copula verb. Thus, both semantics as well as possibilities of syntactic re-analysis must be considered when reconstructing the development of the two ancient copula verbs and the syntax of Proto-Uralic.

References

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