

Three Rara from Nganasan

Nganasan (Uralic > Samoyedic) is already known as a source of unusual facts and counterexamples to typological universals — cf. Kozinsky (1980) on Nganasan as a language where personal pronouns do not inflect for case while nouns do; Helimski (1998) on its complicated morphophonological system; Daniel (2005) on the grammeme of “irreal destinative”. Here we present three more Nganasan morphemes, one of which is interesting for the way it is attached to the stem (though its semantics, too, is not very common for an affix) and the others for their use.

1. The Exclamative marker

The exclamative marker, very frequent both in colloquial speech and in narrative, can express any type of emotion — joy, grief, surprise etc., and can be used as well when addressing someone; in particular, it is frequent in imperatives. Though such an “emotional” meaning is not very typical for an affix, from the formal point of view this is a “full” suffix, which is also subject to the vowel harmony. The most interesting is the way it is attached: if the form ends with a vowel it is placed after it; if the form ends with a consonant the exclamative suffix is placed before this consonant, sometimes breaking another affix. Here are some examples:

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| (1) <i>nənsu-ŋa-ndi-əi</i>
stand.up-IMP-2DU.S-EXCL
'stand up (you two)!' | (2) <i>d'ujkal-əu-ʔ</i>
wrap.up-EXCL-IMP.2SG.S
'wrap (something) up!' |
| (3) <i>hursi-ŋi-ndi-əi-ʔ</i>
turn-IMP-2PL.R-EXCL
'turn back (you all)' | (4) <i>mində-ti-mi-əi-ʔ</i>
stand-PRAES-1PL.S-EXCL
'we are standing (are not wandering)' |

We see that in the first example the Exclamative suffix *-əu/-əi* is attached after the personal ending, while in the second example it is placed before it. In the last two examples *-əi-* is inserted inside another affix (resp. *-ndi* ‘2Pl.r’ and *-mi* ‘1Pl.s’).

2. The Interrogative Renarrative

Nganasan has a full set of affixes to express a reported information: there exist dedicated suffixes for declarative, imperative and interrogative Renarrative (or Reported, using the term from Aikhenvald 2004). Here we deal with the Interrogative Renarrative suffix *-ha*, which can be used in two ways: it either expresses the information source of the addressee (it is assumed that the questionee himself knows about the fact from the hearsay) or is used to ask a question on behalf of another person. Cf. the following examples:

- (5) *Kunini ŋilj-b'a?* — *Moskva-tənu nilj-b'əŋh̄i.*
where live-INTERRRENARR — Moscow-LOC live-RENARR
'Where is he said to live? — He is said to live in Moscow.'
- (6) [the truce envoy, which is sent to the insurgents, asks them:]
Kaδ'au, bəinair-mün-də kərbu-ba-ruʔ?
INTERJ fight-VNTEMP-LAT want-RENARRINTERR-2PL
'Hey, (I am sent to ask you) do you want to fight?'

(Naturally, the truce envoy acts on behalf of his commander.)

Aikhenvald in her survey of the typology of evidentials (Aikhenvald 2004: 244-249) mentions only the first type of use of reportative forms in questions — to reflect the information source of the addressee (or of the speaker or of the third party). Nganasan is an example of another type, where it is the illocutionary force that is reported. (Moreover, we are aware of no other language which would have a dedicated reportative interrogative affix.) Note, however, that for reportatives in commands, on the contrary, reporting the illocutionary force (i. e. someone else’s order) is the most usual meaning (Aikhenvald 2004: 250-253), so we would expect to find a language with a similar use of reportatives in interrogatives clauses.

3. The universal placeholder

There are several discourse strategies in Nganasan which the speaker follows when he is looking for the next topic to speak about or for the next word to say. Here we consider the word *ənti* (that could be translated into English as *sort of* or *how do you call it*), which the speaker uses when he can’t find a better way to refer to a person, to an object or to an event. This word functions as a placeholder — it takes the syntactic position and the morphological encoding of the word it is substituting (in example (7) the word *ənti* is used instead of a noun

and in example (8) instead of a verb). After having used this word, the speaker either finds an appropriate word to refer to the subject he is speaking about or leaves everything as it is (in the last case the meaning of the sentence is usually clear from the context — see example (9)).

- (7) *Ənti-δi-čə, kolj-δi-čə təδa-ʹa-m.*
 sort.of-DEST-PL.ACC2PL fish-DEST-PL.ACC2PL bring-PF-1SG.S
 ‘I brought you... how do you call it... some fish’.
- (8) *Mij-gümü-nə ənti-gu-δ-əu-m, babi-ʹ d’a basa-ku-δəm.*
 I-EMPH-1SG sort.of-IMP-1SG.S-EXCL reindeer-GENPL ALL go.to.hunt-IMP-1SG.S
 ‘I’ll... how do you call it... go and hunt for reindeers.’
- (9) *Susujkia ni-ni maa ənti-mimbⁱa-hi-ti?*
 hummock[-GEN] on-LOCADV what sort.of-HABIT-INTERRPRAET-3SG
 ‘What was she doing on this hummock?’

It is known that such placeholders can use the stem of the interrogative pronoun *what* (it is so, for example, in Besermyan (Uralic > Permic) and in Nanai (Altaic > Tungusic)), but this is not the case in Nganasan. The word *ənti* has no other uses and we can only suppose that it is somehow connected with one of the demonstrative pronouns (*əmti*).

References

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