

“If you say why”: Causal clauses in flux in the Volga Region

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Among the body of Proto-Uralic vocabulary that can be reconstructed, conjunctions are conspicuously absent (Aikio 2022: 14); even today some Uralic languages largely make do without conjunctions. Those used in modern Uralic languages can be easily identified as borrowings or new formations. None are more transparent than verbose conjunctions used to introduce postposed causal clauses in languages of the Volga-Kama Region such as Mari *man-aš gân* why say-INF if ‘because (lit. if one says why)’, Udmurt *malj ke šu-ono* why if say-PTCP.NEC ‘because (lit. if one must say why)’, Chuvash *měňšën te-sen* why say-CVB.COND ‘because (lit. if one says why)’ (Šutov 2009: 391). At first glance this striking convergence between languages with little or no genealogical proximity suggests a contact linguistic interpretation. Closer investigation immediately complicates the picture, however, for two critical reasons.

Firstly, comparable constructions can be found in minority languages of Russia outside of the Volga Region, and also beyond Russia and its present and historical contact zone belonging to different genera:

- Turkic: Sakha *toyo die-teŋ-ŋe* why say-MDL-DAT, Tuvan *deerge čüge* say.NPST.PTCP-DAT why (Matić & Pakendorf 2013: 384), Old Uyghur *na üčün te-sär* what due_to say-COND (Marcel Erdal, p.c.). Notably not found in Dolgan (ibid.), Tatar, or Bashkir (own investigation).
- Tungusic: Western Even *iamj go:mi* why say-SS.COND (Matić & Pakendorf 2013: 384).
- Mongolic: Buryat *jüündeb ge-xe-de* why say-PTCP.FUT-DAT (Skribnik & Daržayeva 2016: 138).
- Northeast Caucasian: Lezgian *vučiz laya-j-t’a* why say-PRF.PTCP-COND, Tabasaran (Šutov 2009: 391), Chechen *hunda äl-ča* why say-CVB (Gerasimov 2022: 17), Ingush *hana ealcha* why say.CVB.TEMP (Nichols 2011: 530).
- Sino-Tibetan: Newari *chae-dha-e-sa* why-say-INF-if (Saxena 1988: 387), Kokborok (Gerasimov 2022: 17), colloquial Burmese (Okell & Allott 2001: 63), modern Tibetan (Eric Méléac, p.c.).
- Shina (Saxena 1988: 387), Nepali *kina-bhanē* why-say.IPFV.CVB (Gerasimov 2022: 17).
- Koreanic: Korean *wae-nya-ha-myeon* why-Q-say-COND.

Secondly, in the Uralic languages these forms seem to be extremely recent innovations, in the case of Udmurt being described as forms that only arose in the 1940s (Šutov 2009: 391).

This is to say: genealogy is not a straight-forward explanation for this convergence, given that Mari and Udmurt are only distantly related, and not related to Chuvash at all. Language contact alone is not a straight-forward explanation, given that the structure arose too late for the historically strong, but presently weak, contacts to be decisive. Shared Russian influence is not a straight-forward explanation, given that no such conjunction exists in Russian.

However, coincidence is also not a satisfying explanation, as development of a conjunction of this type, though noted in general linguistic and typological literature (Kuteva et al. 2019: 375), does not seem to be exceedingly common globally. Gerasimov (2022: 24) describes languages with SOV word order in pragmatically neutral declarative sentences as likely candidates for this particular grammaticalization, but this seems to be doubly the case for SOV minority languages of Russia.

This talk sets out to, in an admittedly speculative fashion, determine why this might be the case: It draws up a scenario on how, when and why these conjunctions appeared seemingly out of thin air over the course of the last century in Mari and Udmurt, and postulates that these languages might serve as a model; that this development occurring in Mari and Udmurt, but also other minority languages of Russia and possibly beyond, might be a case of *convergent evolution* of sorts, where given a similar starting point (SOV language with no established mechanism for postposed overt causal clauses and previously weak literary traditions), a similar set of circumstances (sudden rise in dominance of a SVO language with postposed causal clauses, sudden rise in literacy, sudden breaks in dynamics of language usage and transmission connected to political violence) can lead to a similar end point, even if the individual cases happened in isolation from one another.

Literature

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