When past tense isn't past: Morphosyntactic duality of negation in Avar

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Background and problem: This paper examines a tense-based split in the expression of sentential negation in Avar, an understudied Northeast Caucasian language (Charachidzé 1981). In this language, non-past clauses, exemplified by present tense in (1), are negated by adjoining the suffix *-ro* to the tensed form of the verb (2):

(1) Murad w–ač'-una
  M.ABS M–come-PRS
  'Murad comes.'

(2) Murad w–ač'-una-ro
  M.ABS M–come-PRS-NEG
  'Murad doesn't come.'

When it comes to negating a past-tense clause (3), *-ro* cannot attach to a past-tense verb form (4), and a different marker, *-č'o*, is employed instead. Like *-ro*, it is incompatible with past-tense marking (6), and attaches to a nominalized form of the verb (5) to express negated past tense.

(3) Murad w–ač'-ana
  M.ABS M–come-PST
  'Murad came.'

(5) Murad w–ač'-**in**-č'o
  M.ABS M–come-**NMLZ**-NEG
  'Murad didn't come.'

(4) * Murad w–ač'-ana-ro
  M.ABS M–come-PST-NEG
  ('Murad didn't come.')

(6) * Murad w–ač'-ana-č'o
  M.ABS M–come-PST-NEG
  ('Murad didn't come.')

Rudnev (2015) sketches an analysis whereby *-č'o* is a negative existential copula which combines with a root-based nominalization denoting a set of events, capturing the pattern in (5). Crucially, his analysis postulates the negative copula to be marked for the present tense, yet no evidence is provided in its support, nor is there an explicit discussion of the semantic mechanisms responsible for a past-tense interpretation. The present paper fills this gap.

Claim: This paper claims that past tense under negation in Avar is expressed indirectly via the predicative negation in the present tense. Put differently, it is the negation marker *-č'o*, rather than the nominalised form of the verb, which carries both negation and tense specification in a portmanteau fashion. This view receives empirical support from a close examination of Avar verbal paradigms.

Negative participles: Participle formation in Avar displays a tense-based split as well: the non-past participle marker *-e-* attaches to the non-past form of the verb, whether affirmative (7a) or negative (7b), whereas affirmative past participles use *-ra-*, which combines with the past tense stem (8a). Both participle markers are followed by a noun class marker.

(7) a. w–ač'-un-e–w
    M–come-PRS-PTCP–M
    'he who comes'

  b. w–ač'-una-r-e–w
    M–come-PRS-NEG-PTCP–M
    'he who doesn't come'

To form a negative past participle, however, the non-past participle marker *-e-* must be employed (8d); all other options are ruled out:

(8) a. w–ač'-a-ra–w
         M–come-PST-PTCP–M
         'he who came'

  c. * w–ač'-a-č'o-ra–w
         M–come-PST-NEG-PTCP–M
         ('he who didn't come')

  b. * w–ač'-inč'o-ra–w
         M–come-PST.NEG-PTCP–M
         ('he who didn't come')

  d. w–ač'-in-č'-e–w
         M–come-NMLZ-NEG-PTCP–M
         'he who didn't come'

Negated past tense, therefore, behaves like present tense for the purposes of participle formation.

Negative simultaneity clauses: Clauses of simultaneity in Avar are headed by deverbal adverbs (Mallaeva 2007). In the affirmative, the simultaneity marker *-go* attaches to the present-tense finite form (9). In order to form a negative simultaneity clause, however, *-go* must attach to the purportedly past-tense *-č'o* form (11), rather than the expected finite negated *-ro* form (10):

(9)   w–uk'una-go
      M–be.PRS-SIM
      'while being'

(10) * w–uk'una-ro-go
      M–be.PRS-NEG-SIM
      'while not being'

(11) w–uk'in-č'o-go
      M–be.NMLZ-NEG-SIM
      'while not being'

Thus, it would seem sensible, at least for reasons of paradigm uniformity, to treat negated past tense *-č'o* forms as present tense.

Analysis: Adopting but modifying Rudnev (2015) and Salanova (2007), I propose that syntactically, negated past tense clauses (5) are negative existential clauses consisting of a nominalized clause *Murad wač'in* and a portmanteau negative copula in the present tense *-č'o*.

(12) /-č'o/ ↔ ⟨COP, T, Neg⟩

(13) [$_{TP}$ [$_{nP}$ [$_{vP}$ Murad wač'-] in-] -č'o]
      $[\![$murad wač'in$]\!]$ $= \lambda e.\,\text{come}'(e, m)$
      $[\![$-č'o$]\!]$ $= \lambda P_{\langle vt \rangle}.\,\neg \exists e.\,P(e)$
      $[\![$-č'o$]\!]([\![$murad wač'in$]\!])$ $= \neg \exists e.\,\text{come}'(e, m)$

This negative existential clause will then have the interpretation of *It is not the case that there is an x in y*, where *x* is an event denoted by the nominalization (Salanova 2007), and *y* a locative restriction of the existential that will be filled by an interval or point in time (*now* in the case of finite clauses and the main clause time in the case of negative simultaneity clauses). This syntax fully parallels the default Avar syntax for existentials, which require no expletive:

(14) allah   w–ugo
      god.ABS M–be.PRS
      'God exists.'

Crosslinguistic relevance: The current analysis, whereby past tense negation is realized as a present tense negative existential structure, is in line with the overall resultative, or perfective, character of the past tense in Avar, which in Caucasiological literature is frequently referred to as aorist (Mallaeva 2007). Crosslinguistically, the coexistence of two negation strategies is not restricted to Avar alone, as similar analyses for tense and aspect based negation splits have been proposed for Bengali (Ramchand 2004) and the Salish languages (Davis 2005).

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