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Mari (Cheremis) “Pseudo-Relatives”

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Mari (Cheremis) is a Volga-Finnic language of the Finno-Ugric family and is the native language of some 540 thousand people living in scattered areas between the Middle Volga and the Urals. It is a postpositional SOV language in which the modifier precedes the modified. Like Turkic languages, Mari does not usually use finite subordinate clauses. Instead Mari subordinate clauses are formed by non-finite forms of the verb called “participles” in the standard grammar. Among them by far the most frequently and widely used is the *mE*-participle, which is the main topic of the present paper.

In general, a subordinate clause formed by the *mE*-participle differs from a finite sentence in that its subject occurs in the genitive case (*gen*) and that a possessive suffix (*px*) agreeing with the subject in number and person is attached to the head noun of a complex NP or to the participle in other cases. Examples (*pl*=plural, *PART*=participle):

- (1) tunemše-vlak tengeče Tartu ola-ške mijenət
pupil-*pl* yesterday Tartu town-to they went
‘the pupils went to the town of Tartu yesterday’
- (2a) [tunemše-vlak-ən tengeče Ø mijə-me] ola-št
pupil-*pl-gen* yesterday go-PART town-*px*
‘the town where the pupils went yesterday’
- (2b) [tunemše-vlak-ən tengeče Tartu ola-ške mijə-mə-št]
pupil-*pl-gen* yesterday Tartu town-to go-PART-*px*
‘the pupils’ having gone (that the pupils went) to the town of
Tartu yesterday’

As is shown in (2a) no element corresponding to the relative pronoun is used in Mari and the relativized NP is deleted. The subordinate clause of the type (2b) occurs as a verb complement (subject, object, or adverbial clause) or a postpositional complement. The present paper exclusively deals with cases like (2a).

A widely accepted assumption concerning complex noun phrases is that a complex NP is either a relative clause or an appositive (noun complement) clause. It is a relative clause if the embedded sentence contains one more noun phrase in underlying structure than it does at the surface—one which is identical with the head NP and is, in languages including Mari, deleted in the course of syntactic derivation. Any complex NP which does not conform to this characterization is to be regarded as an appositive clause (e.g., *the claim*

that you made a claim, an opportunity for you to read the book, cf. the claim that you made, a book for you to read). This dichotomy seems to work quite well with languages like English, where the class of nouns capable of taking an appositive clause seems to be semantically homogeneous (thus the term “content clause” used occasionally to denote appositive clauses).

In Mari, however, the construction of the structure [...V-*mE*]_S N-*px* is used in such cases as well in which major European languages would use neither a relative nor an appositive clause. A noteworthy fact is that such complex NPs in Mari have almost always their literal counterparts in Japanese. Examples (*acc*=accusative):

- (3a) [ala-kö-n omsa-m čot peraltə-me] jük-eš-əže poməžaltəm
 some-who-*gen* door-*acc* hard knock-PART sound-into-*px* I awoke
- (3b) [dareka no doa o hagesiku tataku] oto ni megasameta
 someone *gen* door *acc* hard knock sound to awoke
 ‘I was waked by the sound of someone knocking hard on the door’
- (4a) [avam-ən kol žaritlə-me] puš-əžə-m šžən, ...
 my mother-*gen* fish grill-PART smell-*px-acc* noticing
- (4b) [haha no sakana o yaku] nioi ni kigatuine, ...
 my mother *gen* fish *acc* grill smell to noticing
 ‘having perceived the smell of my mother grilling fish, ...’

Semantically, (3) and (4) are more like relative clauses than appositive or “content” clauses. (4b), for instance, denotes such a smell as is “involved in” my mother’s grilling of fish in just the same way as the relative clause *the book you are reading* denotes a book which is involved in your reading. The appositive clause interpretation would be strange here, since an appositive clause, which is supposed to express the “content” of what is denoted by the head noun, presupposes an abstract noun as its head, whereas the head noun of (4b) denotes an object of physical perception. In Japanese any noun denoting an object of physical perception can, as a rule, take a clausal modifier of the type (3b) and (4b): *oto* ‘sound’, *koe* ‘voice’, *nioi* ‘smell’, *azi* ‘taste’, *tezawari* ‘touch’, etc. As to Mari, *jük* ‘sound, voice’ and *puš* ‘smell’ are the only instances I have of nouns denoting an object of physical perception. Considering the relatively small size of my data, however, there is little reason not to expect other instances to turn up in the course of further study. The construction of this type will be referred to as “pseudo-relatives.”

There is one circumstance which needs special consideration. Mari as well as Japanese uses one and the same form of the verb where English would use finite or non-finite forms or even a deverbal noun depending on the case:

- (5a) tunem-me ij
 study-PART year ‘academic (or school) year’
- (5b) [ačam-ən Tartu olase universitet-əšte tunem-me] ij-la-štə-že
 my father-*gen* Tartu town’s university-at study-PART year-*pl-in-px*

‘in the years when my father studied at Tartu University’

Mari dictionaries consider *tunem-me* used in (5a) to be an equivalent of the Russian adjective *učebnyj* ‘pertaining to studying’ (*učebnyj god* ‘academic year’). Though this treatment may be quite all right from a practical point of view, I doubt that such *mE*-forms as *tunem-me* in (5a) are to be considered different from those *mE*-forms used in constructions like (5b). Rather, I assume that there is only one *mE*-form for each verb and that it is the environment in which it occurs that makes the *mE*-form in (5a) appear less verb-like (more adjective-like) than that in (5b). I further assume that the “degree of verb-likeness” of a *mE*-form is determined by the “degree of sentence-likeness” of the modifying clause (phrase) in which it occurs. The notion of “sentence-likeness,” which is to be understood intuitively here, is probably of kin to the notion of “nouniness” proposed by John Robert Ross: it seems that the nounier the construction, the less sentence-like it is (cf. I expect *he will arrive happily*, I expect *him to arrive happily*, I expect his happy arrival). (5a) and (5b) are thus to be regarded as representing one and the same construction at the opposite extremities of sentence-likeness. In other words, (5a) is actually a relative clause and is to be interpreted as meaning something like “a year during which to study.” The same line of a gument also applies to Japanese: *ugoku hodoo* (move footpath) ‘a moving footpath,’ *sinu kakugo* (die preparedness) ‘the preparedness for one’s own death.’ Mari pseudo-relatives show different degrees of sentence-likeness too: *lüjə-mö jük* (shoot-PART sound) ‘the report of a gun,’ *šort-mo jük* (cry-PART sound) ‘a tearful voice.’

There is another class of Mari constructions of the structure $[\dots V-mE]_s$ N-*px* which fall outside the categories of relative clause and appositive clause. Japanese again has literal counterparts for them:

- (6a) [poškudo kalək-vlak dene kelšen ilə-me] kuməl (jüla)
neighbor folk-*pl* with agreeing live-PART mood (custom)
- (6b) [kinrin no syominzoku to nakayoku kurasu] seisin (syuukan)
neighbor *gen* nations with peacefully live spirit (custom)
‘the spirit (custom) of living peacefully with neighboring nations’
- (7a) [lüm mut gəč pale mut-əm əštə-me] jön
name word from sign word-*acc* make-PART means
- (7b) [meisi kara keiyoosi o tukuru] hoohoo
noun from adjective *acc* make method
‘a means of deriving adjectives from nouns’

As is shown in (6) and (7), the embedded sentence is most likely to be subjectless with this class of nouns, but there are cases in which a subject does occur. In such cases, the construction looks like a relative clause or a pseudo-relative (*subj*=subject marker):

- (8a) [Evajn-ən počelamut vozə-mo] jön-žö
Evine-*gen* poem write-PART method-*px*

- (8b) [Evain ga si o kaku] hoo-hoo
 Evine *subj* poem *acc* write method
 'Evine's way of writing poems'

The speaker of English is likely to associate this type with a construction like *his habit of getting up early* rather than with one like *the prospect of his getting up early*. The latter can be regarded as a non-finite variant of the appositive clause: compare *the fact that he gets up early* and *the fact of his getting up early*. The constructions of the type (6)–(8) will be referred to as “pseudo-appositives.” Japanese nouns capable of taking a pseudo-appositive are *kuse* ‘habit,’ *tati* ‘disposition,’ *kakugo* ‘preparedness,’ *unmei* ‘fate,’ etc. Mari has a large inventory of nouns taking a pseudo-appositive: *kuməl* ‘mood,’ *jüla* ‘custom,’ *paša* ‘work, task,’ *jön* ‘means, method,’ *negəz* ‘basis,’ etc. In addition, many recent borrowings from Russian belong to this category: *metodika* ‘methods,’ *praktika* ‘practice,’ *nauka* ‘science,’ *obrazec* ‘model,’ *opət* ‘experience,’ *politika* ‘policy,’ etc.

I have shown that there are in Mari as well as in Japanese at least two types of relative clause-like constructions, pseudo-relatives and pseudo-appositives, for which English (and other major European languages) would not use a relative clause. It is worthy of noting that pseudo-relatives and pseudo-appositives occupy a significant part of the overall system of complex NPs in Mari as well as in Japanese. A conclusion that can be drawn from this is that pseudo-relatives and pseudo-appositives are to be regarded as being on a par with relative clauses, not as something secondary to the latter. A stronger claim would be to regard the three types as showing “different shades” of one and the same construction. This claim seems to gain support from the fact that the native speaker of Japanese does not feel any syntactic difference between *sakana o yaku ami* (fish *acc* grill gridiron) ‘agridiron on which to grill fish,’ *sakana o yaku nioi* (fish *acc* grill smell) ‘the smell of (someone) grilling fish,’ and *sakana o yaku kakugo* (fish *acc* grill preparedness) ‘(one’s) preparedness for fish grilling.’ What subtle difference there is between them is felt by the native speaker only when he or she is asked to translate them into English. It should be noted that Japanese transformationalist grammarians have tended to maximize the difference between the relative clause and the pseudo-relative/pseudo-appositive in terms of tree structure. Such an analysis seems all the less appropriate because in his recent book on English syntax Andrew Radford has brought English relative and appositive clauses so close to each other that they differ from each other only in the presence or absence of one N-bar node. What is to be hoped is that some system of describing noun modifying clauses, probably more lexicon-oriented, will be devised which can differentiate the subtleties of Mari and Japanese complex NPs without having recourse to inappropriate “structural” differentiation in terms of tree structure at the underlying level of representation.