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Endoclitics and the origins of Udi morphosyntax

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DON'T PANIC. This phrase from the cover of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* might serve to reassure fieldworkers who might be frightened by the title of this book.

While the title suggests this book would be of interest to a limited audience, Harris covers a range of topics that should be helpful for many field linguists. In this review, I will highlight a number of these areas. Before that, however, I begin with a general overview of Harris’ main argument.

Udi, a North East Caucasian language spoken primarily in Azerbaijan, has a set of person-number agreement markers. One of these can be seen in the Udi equivalent of ‘Once upon a time’: *ban eksa, tene baksa* ‘it is, it is not’. The third singular marker *ne* is suffixed to the negative morpheme *te* in the second clause, but is infixed within the verb root *bak* in the first clause. Harris claims these markers are clitics; the *ne* occurs as an endoclitic in *baneks*, since it occurs within the root. This is a problem for the Lexical Integrity Hypothesis, which claims that syntactic processes (including those accounting for clitics) should not have access to the morphological structure of words (Bresnan and Mchombo 1987, Di Sciullo and Williams 1987).

After two introductory chapters, Harris establishes in chapter 3 that these clitics mark focus, using Lambrecht’s (1994:213) definition of focus: “The semantic component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition.” This is followed by a discussion of verb composition, arguing (among other things) that roots like *bak* are simple roots. In chapter 5, Harris justifies the clitic status of these markers. Together, chapters 4 and 5 form the core of Harris’ argument: If the verbs into which the agreement markers are infixed are simple roots, and if the markers are clitics, the Lexical Integrity Hypothesis cannot be correct.

One of the problems with previous analyses of Udi clitics is that their distribution is quite complex, and no one had ever exhaustively accounted for this distribution. In chapter 6, Harris presents a set of seven rules (most of which have two or three subpoints) to exhaustively account for the surface distribution of the clitics. This is followed by an Optimality Theory analysis which accounts for the surface distribution with eight constraints on alignment in chapter 7.
In the remaining five chapters, Harris explains the diachronic development of Udi morphosyntax. In chapter 8 Harris reconstructs aspects of proto-North East Caucasian including case marking, agreement, and the origins of the agreement markers. This is followed by a discussion of the development of the Udi verb in chapter 9 and of the use of agreement markers to mark focus in chapter 10. In chapter 11 Harris analyses changes in case marking. Finally, in chapter 12 Harris accounts for how the multiplicity of positions of the agreement markers developed.

It should be evident from this brief summary that this book touches on a great number of aspects of linguistic theory. And that its breadth is what should make it of interest to many field linguists. In the rest of this review, I will mention a few areas of particular interest.

First, Harris begins the presentation of Udi data with a 21-page grammatical sketch. In that short sketch, Harris covers the basics of case marking, the structure of the verb, the TAM system, agreement markers, and word order. Obviously, Harris is not able to cover any of these topics in depth, although a number of them are covered in more detail later in the book. Enough information is given, however, to make it possible for readers not versed in Caucasian languages to follow the numerous interlinear examples. The sketch is instructive in showing how to include a grammatical overview without burdening the reader with extraneous information.

Second, Harris argues for the clitic status of the agreement markers by working through every property listed for clitics by Zwicky and Pullum (1983), Klavans (1985), and Scalise (1984), and properties ascribed to clitics in Romance languages. This makes chapter 5 a handy reference guide for commonly used tests for clitic status. Harris also shows how each property can be applied to a given set of data.

Third, Harris’ treatment of focus is well-argued. It is easy for analyses of focus to become circular: We know morpheme X marks the focused element, and we know a particular element is focused because it takes X. To avoid circularity, it is necessary to identify the focused element independently of the structures used to mark focus. Much of chapter 3 is spent dealing with “the practical problem of identifying focus” (p. 45). Harris’ discussion of the universals of focus, as well as the application of these universals to the Udi data, should be helpful to those struggling to identify focus in other languages.

Fourth, Harris makes extensive use of texts from other scholars to supplement material collected during fieldwork. Some of these texts are almost 150 years old, and they represent a variety of speakers in different contexts. This is especially important for languages that, like Udi, have major dialect divisions and have been influenced over the years by a number of languages of wider communication. The insights Harris is able to draw from the analysis of these texts shows in a concrete way how important it is to provide a good set of texts in addition to a grammatical write-up. Although numerous scholars have written grammars of Udi, none have systematically analyzed the agreement markers. The breadth of Harris’ analysis was only possible due to the primary documents left by these scholars in the form of the texts themselves.

Fifth, as noted above, the last five chapters of the book represent a case study in historical syntax. While good examples of the historical development of phonological systems abound in the literature, there are far fewer examples of the development of syntactic structures. Harris uses
a variety of tools to explain quite a wide range of syntactic phenomena. In chapter 8, the comparative method is used to establish inherited case marking and gender-class agreement, internal reconstruction is used to argue for the source of the question marker, and both are used to account for the development of person markers. Similar combinations of the comparative method and internal reconstruction are used in subsequent chapters to establish the historical forms of the verb and focus constructions. Harris’ evaluation of multiple hypotheses accounting for the development of the synchronic state of affairs serves as a workshop in how to do historical syntax.

In conclusion, this is a book that should be of interest to far more field linguists than the title suggests.

References


