Prefixal Particles in Abkhaz

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1. Introduction

Abkhaz, a language in the North-West Caucasian linguistic family, has several prefixal particles which express a variety of nuances for an action or a mood. Though in standard literary Abkhaz these prefixal particles are rare, they are often found in folktale texts. Grammatically, these particles are not necessary to the building of verbal complexes. Since they are placed before the verbal root and resemble the preverbs which specify the direction or location of a verbal action, some investigators regard the particles themselves as preverbs. However, the preverbs cannot be dropped. In this regard there is a distinct difference between prefixal particles and preverbs. These particles have seldom been described in detail in the Abkhaz grammars and dictionaries. This may be because it is difficult to define their subtle meanings and most of them are only to be found in the colloquial speech of the folktale texts. However, in order to understand a language such as Abkhaz more deeply, we should know how a grammatical category such as a particle is used in a sentence, and what nuances it gives to a sentence. This paper’s aim is to investigate particles in the Abkhaz folktale texts and to describe their meanings.

The sample sentences cited below are from the texts "Сергеи Зыхуба (ed.), Аджсуа лакукыа, Акъа, Алашара, 1997". Interpretation of the texts was facilitated by my Abkhaz consultant, Mrs. Ana Tsvinaria, a native speaker of the Abzhywa dialect of Abkhaz.

2. The features of the verbal complex

Abkhaz, like the other North-West Caucasian languages, is a 'polysynthetic language'. It can have a considerable verbal complex, resulting from the affixing of markers expressing the class-person and grammatical categories such as negation, the causative, the version,
potentialis, unvolitionalis, tense-aspect, etc. Most of the affixes in the verbal complex are prefixes. Thus, Abkhaz is a language having a system of 'actant slots' which are placed before a root. In this paper, the class-personal prefixes occupying the actant slots will be referred to as 'columns' (hereafter marked as C), following Hewitt (1989). Abkhaz does not have a case marking system, but uses an alternative strategy for the distribution of columns indicating the relation of both the subject and the object in the verbal complex. Abkhaz has three basic columns. Column I (hereafter marked as C₁) represents both an intransitive subject (S) and a transitive object (O), and is placed in the first actant slot. Column II (hereafter marked as C₂) represents an indirect object (Oi) of both intransitive and transitive verbs, and is placed in the actant slot between C₁ and C₃. The appearance of C₂ depends on whether or not the verb can take the actant. Column III (hereafter marked as C₃) represents a transitive subject (A), and is placed in the actant slot before a root. Since S is thus treated in the same way as O, and differently from A, Abkhaz is a morphological ergative language. Some examples are provided below.

one-place intransitive:

(1) dā-pa-wa-jt'
    he/she(C₁)-jump-DYN-Fin
    "he/she (S) jumps"

two-place intransitive:

(2) d-lō-s-wa-jt'
    he/she(C₁)-her(C₂)-hit-DYN-Fin
    "he/she (S) hits her (Oi)"

two-place transitive:

(3) dō-l-ši-wā-jt'
    him/her(C₁)-she(C₃)-kill-DYN-Fin
    "she (A) kills him/her (O)"
three-place transitive:

(4) d-lő-s-ta-wa-jt’
   him/her(C1)-to her(C2)-I(C3)-give-DYN-Fin
   "I (A) give him/her (O) to her (Oi)"

If a transitive verb has a "preverb" (hereafter marked PREV), C3 is placed between the preverb and the verbal root, e.g.

(5) j-pá-s-q’a-ø-jt’
   it(C1)-PREV-I(C3)-cut-(Aor.)-Fin
   "I (A) cut it (O)"

On the other hand, if a two-place intransitive verb has a "preverb", C2 is placed between C1 and the preverb, e.g.

(6) d-lő-x’a-pš-wa-jt’
   he/she(C1)-her(C2)-PREV(at)-look-DYN-Fin
   "he/she (S) looks at her (Oi)"

This difference in the positions in which the preverb and the actants appear is one of the important criteria for transitivity in Abkhaz.

If a verb has a causative marker, it immediately precedes the root. Compare the example given in (5) above and the causative form in (7) below:

(7) jo-s-p-lɔ-r-q’á-ø-jt’
   it(C1)-me(C2)-PREV-she(C3)-CAUS-cut-(Aor.)-Fin
   "she made me cut it"

When a relative adverbial clause is formed, the relative adverbial marker is inserted after C1 of the verbal complex, e.g.
(8) Sará ja-z-dár-wa-ji' Amra d-axβ-n-xa-wá a-j'nó.

I it-I-know-DYN-Fin Amra (f.) she(C1)-where-PREV-live-DYN.Non.Fin the-house

"I know the house where Amra lives."

When a relative adjective clause is formed, the relative adjective marker (hereafter marked Rel) functions as well as the operation of columns. If the relative corefers with the same referent as C1, the relative marker takes j(e)-, while if the relative corefers with the same referent as C2 or C3, the relative marker takes -z(e)-.

(9) Ašk'öl-axj j-ca-wá áče'lk'wén do-z-dóř-wa-ji'.

the-school-to Rel(C1)-go-DYN.Non.Fin the-boy him-I-know-DYN-Fin

"I know the boy who is going to school."

(10) Wará we-z-la-cáž'a-wa sará ja-s-xá-št-x/a-ji'. (AAD)

you (m.) you-Rel(C2)-PREV-talk about-DYN.Non.Fin I it-me-PREV-forget-Perfect-Fin

"I have forgotten what you talked about."

(11) á-xš'sw φ-zo-dó-ž-k'al-a-wa áče'lk'wén

the-medicine [it]-Rel(POSS)-SV-Rel(C3)-take-DYN.Non.Fin the-boy

"the boy who takes the medicine"

3. The position of particles in the verbal complex

If a verbal complex has the prefixal particle (hereafter marked PAR) in question, it is inserted after C1. Compare the example of a one-place intransitive (12) and that of a three-place transitive which contains C1, C2 and C3 (13):

(12) a-d'k'án do-n-d'šl-c'-wa-ji' a-ph'žba [Text 3]

the-store he/she(C1)-PAR-PREV(outside)-go-DYN-Fin the-girl

"the girl goes out of the store at once/ gladly"
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(13) ṣwṣ-3yab d-aa-s-ṣw- mə-r-bá-r, ...
   your-daughter her(C1)-PAR-me(C2)-you(C3)-CAUS-see-if
   "if you show me your daughter, ..."

Furthermore, if there is both a prefixal particle and a relative adverbial prefix in a verbal complex, the particle is placed after the relative adverbial prefix, e.g.

(14) A-jwne' d-axj6_ne-jwna-la-z awáa racwa-jwne' j-ajk'wša-nó
    the-house he-where-PAR-PREV(into)-enter-Non.Fin.P1. people many-Hum. they-surround-Abs.
    j-š-t’wá-z [∅]-j-bá-∅-jt’.
    they-how-sit-Non.Fin.Past [it]-he-see-(Aor.)-Fin
    "He saw that in the house where he entered rapidly many people were sitting around."

(15) A-dawé da-šl-nó d-axj-k’a-žkš-z
cq’lá
    the-ogre he-be killed-Abs. he-where/that-PREV-be thrown down-Past.Ind.N.F. well
    j-anó-la-j-xw’a-pš, c’aborgóngb j-lómhk’x a ak’ó
    they-when-PAR-him-PREV-look at.Aor.N.F. indeed his-ear-PL one
    φš-á-ma-mə-z φ-r-bá-∅-jt’.
    [Text 1]
    [it]-how/that-it-have-NEG-Non.Fin.Past [it]-they-see-(Aor.)-Fin
    "As soon as they looked at the ogre who was killed and was thrown down, they noticed
     that he did not have one of his ears."

If a verbal complex has both a reflexive prefix and a particle, the latter is placed after the former, e.g.

(16) a-čš-n-t-na-šb-n
    [Text 1]
    its-self-PAR-PREV-it-dip-Past.Ind.
    "it dipped itself and ..."

If a prefixal particle is used in a relative adjective clause, it is placed after the relative adjective marker which functions as C1, e.g.
(17) j-áa-h-aw-[w]a
Rel(C1)-PAR-we-receive-DYN.Non.Fin
"all that we receive"

Compare example (17) above and example (18) below, wherein the relative adjective marker functions as C2:

(18) də-n-z-ah-ta-wá, waxá də-ps-wá-jt' 
her(C1)-PAR-Rel(C2)-we-give-DYN.non.Fin tonight he-die-DYN-Fin
"the person to whom we will give her (in marriage) will die tonight"

4. The usages and meanings of prefixal particles in Abkhaz folktale texts

The prefixal particles used in Abkhaz folktale texts are as follows: n "at once", "gladly", "in good humor", l "quickly", "at once", aa "at once", "quickly", jw "instantly", "at once", jwa "quickly", na "quickly", and "instantly". As mentioned above, these particles are not always grammatically necessary to the building of a sentence. Therefore, though it is difficult to describe their meaning, their primary purpose would appear to be to lend greater intensity to an action. Furthermore, they can be used to indicate that an action has started quickly or has been rapidly completed, but they do not represent a perfective tense-aspect as a grammatical category (expressed by a perfective suffix -xa). When the particles in question are used in folktale texts, the forms of the verbal complex in which they are used usually have Absolutes (which resemble English participles) which are marked by -nə, Past Indefinite in -n, and a finite form of Aorist in -φ-jt' or non-finite form of Aorist in -φ. These particles are remarkably similar in meaning and often interchangeable, e.g.: ə-lə-j "na-la-ji" or ə-nə-j "na-la-ji" (he/she-PAR-PREV-enter-Fin) "he/she enterd at once". The following are examples:

(19) A-šarpaz a-čámazajn də-n-tá-ha-ənə də-čw-ə-φ-ji'. (AAD)
early morning the-sick person he/she-PAR-PREV(in)-fall-Abs, he/she-sleep-(Aor.)-Fin
"In the early morning the sick person fell asleep soundly."

(20) A-xwëč'ió á-mba d-na-[a]-k'ió-so-ən šítaxq'á də-čw-ə-φ-ji'.
the-boy the-goal he-PAR-it-PREV-touch-Past.Ind. back he-run-(Aor.)-Fin
"As soon as the boy touched the goal, he ran back."

(21) Nas áfərhʷa j-čʰ-ⁿᵃ⁻TEGER⁻encodeURIComponent(xa-n), anój j-ẓə-d-gəla-z
then quickly his-SV-ᕷ(pre)-he-start-Past.Ind. that they-Rel-PREV(by)-stand-Non.Fin.P.I.
a-jʷⁿ dəw d-lō-jʷⁿᵃ⁻encodeURIComponent(la-φ-jt'.
the-house big he-PAR-PREV-enter-(Aor.)-Fin

"Then he quickly set out and (at once) entered that big house by which they stood."

(22) Je-bzōja-wp', s-áb, jō-w-hʷᵃ-z φ⁻s⁻a⁻há⁻φ-jt', — j-hʷá-n,
it-good-stat.pres. my-father Rel-you-say-Non.Fin.P.I. [it]-me-to-hear-(Aor.)-Fin he-say-Past.Ind.
də-jʷ-čóžʷ-la-n j-čʰ d-á-s-nə d-cá-φ-jt'.
he-PAR-PREV-mount a horse-Past.Ind. his-horse he-it-hit-Abs he-go-(Aor.)-Fin

"It is good, my father, I see what you said, — said he, and he (quickly) mounted his horse, and having struck it (with the whip), he went away."

(23) Je-bzōja-wp', s-áb, jō-w-hʷᵃ-z φ⁻s⁻a⁻há⁻φ-jt', — j-hʷá-n,
waj-gə, j-čʰ d-á[a]-a-s-nə d-cá-φ-jt'.
this-also his-horse he-PAR-it-hit-Abs he-go-(Aor.)-Fin

"It is good, my father, I see what you said, — said he and having struck it (quickly) (with the whip), he went away."

From the examples given above (and those provided below as well) it will be seen that in many cases these particles are used in the forms of the Past Indefinite and Absolutives. Since Abkhaz lacks a coordinate conjunction, the Past Indefinite and Absolutives provide clause linkage. For this reason, in order to express the various nuances of an action in clause-chaining, the particles are mainly used in the Past Indefinite and Absolutives.

We find that two different particles can be used in one sentence, e.g.

(24) Je-bzjáa-wp', — j-hʷá-n, áhʷa φ⁻áa⁻šlto⁻encodeURIComponent(xa-n)
it-good-stat.pres. he-say-Past.Ind. [the]-sword [it]-PAR-PREV-he-pick up-Past.Ind.
It is good, — the "boy" said, and he picked up the sword at once and quickly entered the king's house."

(25) Nas arój «á-č'k'jwëj» j-šjóba j-aa-tó-ń-xə-n a-dawó j-lónma

Then this the-boy his-pocket it-PAR-PREV-he-take out-Past.Ind. the-ogre his-ear
φ-na-ga-nó r-ápxla j-nó-kw-j'c'a-φ-jt'.

"Then as soon as this "boy" removed an ear of the ogre from his pocket, he took it thither and put it in front of them."

(26) A-hwrál j-aa-j-z a-laxánk'a j-a-nó-z a-zó

the-dove Rel-PREV-come-NonFin.PI. the-washtub Rel-it-be on-Stat.Past.N.F the-water
a-čš-n-t-na-šó-n a-mc'wάżx'jwa-k'ə φ-an-á[a]-a-rašwaš, its-self-PAR-PREV-it-dip-Past.Ind. the-wing-PL [them]-when-PAR-it-wave.Non.Fin.Aor.
á-rpəzba pšá-k', á-rpəzba zamána-k' d-aa-tsc'-φ-t'.

"The dove which had come here dipped itself into the water on the washtub, and as soon as it waved its wings, it turned into a beautiful and fine young man."

(27) A-dawó wa jọ-psó φ-aa-j-xéc'ə-n,

the-ogre there his-soul [it]-PAR-him-cross-Past.Ind. (= he breathed his last)
ág'arah'a d-a-l-k'á-ha-φ-jt'.

in a heap he-PAR-PREV-fall-(Aor.)-Fin

"The moment the ogre breathed his last there, he fell in a heap."

(28) Arój a-dawó d-ə-zšjó-c'yq'la-z «á-č'k'jwëj» d-ə-l-d'wél-c'ə-n

this the-ogre him-Rel(C3)-kill-Indeed-Non.Fin.P. the-boy he-PAR-PREV(outside)-go-Past.Ind.
j-čš a-xwšc-k'ə φ-a[a]-aj-dš-ja-k'sala-n, ...

his-horse its-hair-PL [them]-PAR-one another-PREV-he-bump-Past.Ind.
"As soon as the «boy» who had indeed killed this ogre went out, he rubbed his horse's hair, ..."

(29) «A-č’k’jwom> de-1-taw-ka-w xara-n’t’wó
the-boy he-PAR-PREV(out of horse)-jump-Past.Ind. the-ogre-PL far-from
d-an-ró-xwó-pσ, n6-la-k’wá φ-x-t’-nó [jó]-j-bá-n,
he-when-them-PREV-look at.Non.Fin.Aor their-eye-PL [they]-PREV-open-Abs [it]-he-see-Past.Ind.
d-ló-š’ta-sa-n a-xákh φ-mc’ar’rs-nó dáo-j’-φ-t’. [Text 1]
he-PAR-PREV-touch the ground-Past.Ind. the-stone [it]-PREV-snatch-Abs he-run-(Aor.-Fin
"When the «boy» quickly jumped down off the horse and looked at the ogres from afar, he saw that their eyes were open. And at once he lay down on the ground, snatched the stone and started to run."

Here is an example where two verbs with a similar meaning have different particles :

(30) A-ncwó j-cah-páx’a-jó-r-s’a-z, k’w’t’ó-k’ φ-h-áw-r-gő,
God Rel-us-PREV-he-CAUS-come into-Non.Fin.Past.Ind. hen-one [it]-we-receive-if-even
j-ajq’ara-nó j-l-ajj’-áh-sa-wa-jt’, k’ap’ék’ φ-h-áw-r-gő
it-equally-adv. it-PAR-PREV-we-divide-DYN-Fin kopeck [it]-we-receive-if-even
ajq’ara-nó j-a[a]-ajq’-ha-ré’c’á-r-a-wp’. [Text 2]
equally-adv. it-PAR-PREV-we-divide-must-be-Stat.pres.
"Whatever God gave us — even if we receive one hen — , we shall divide it equally, even if we receive a kopeck, we must divide it equally."

We can also provide an example of different particles with the same roots:

(31) anáx’-aráx’i d-aa-náq’wá-a-n, d-ló-k’pσ-j’wó-k’pσ-a-n,
thither-hither he-PAR-walk-Past.Ind. he-PAR-watch-PAR-watch-Past.Ind.
awáá-g’i φ-j-bá-φ-jt’ ...
people-also [them]-he-see-(Aor.-Fin
"
"he walked thither and hither, looked around, and he also saw people ..."

5. Conclusion

The prefical particles n, l, aa, jw, jwa, na, which are often found in the Abkhaz folktale texts, are not preverbs but a unique grammatical category. Grammatically, Abkhaz can do without these particles when building a sentence, therefore, in standard literary Abkhaz they are rarely found. They are inserted after C1 or the relative adverbial prefix in the verbal complex, and they are mainly used in the forms of Past Indefinite and Absolutives. The basic purpose of the particles used in these forms is to connect more than two clauses closely by intensifying an action. From this basic purpose several individual meanings then stem, e.g. quickness of an action, rapid completion of an action, a mood of contentment as the result of an action, etc. However, most of the examples in the folktale texts indicate that an action has been performed quickly.

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Note

1. According to Chirikba (2003:43), preverbs which do not make up a part of the verbal stem can be called 'free preverbs', cf. d-aa-xoścə-φ-ji 'he thought a bit' vs. d-xoścə-φ-ji 'he thought' (stem xoścə 'to think'). On the other hand, the preverbs which are a part of the stem (a-p+q'ə-rə 'to cut', the stem p+q'ə) can be called 'stem (or bound) preverbs'. We do not use the term 'free preverbs' for the prefixal elements which do not make up a part of the verbal stem. This is because, though preverbs and prefixal particles have the same origin, they are not functionally equivalent.
Abbreviations

A = Agent
Abs = absolutive
Aor. = aorist
C1 = the first column
C2 = the second column
C3 = the third column
CAUS = causative
DYN = dynamic (verb)
Fin = finite
Hum. = Human
Ind = indefinite
NEG = negative
Non.Fin / N.F. = non-finite
O = direct object
O₁ = indirect object
OV = objective version
PAR = particle
Past.Ind. / P.I. = past indefinite
perf. / PERF = perfect
POSS = possessive
PL = plural
pres. = present
PREV = preverb
Rel = relative prefix
Stat. = stative
SV = subjective Version

References


Texts

