

Semantic Shift and Morphosyntactic Convergence of Tense-Aspect-Mood Categories in Alazan Persian

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“Southwestern” Iranian languages spoken in the Caucasus have long been known to be represented solely by Tat varieties (Grjunberg 1963, Hacıyev 2009, Authier 2012, Suleymanov 2020). A field mission undertaken in summer 2021 in the Alazan Valley, in the very north of the Republic of Azerbaijan, revealed a hitherto undescribed Iranian variety spoken in the area. Unlike Tat, which, albeit closely related to Persian, is not mutually intelligible with it and shows significant grammatical differences, the Iranian variety of the Alazan Valley can be safely classified as a New Persian dialect. The speech community inhabits half a dozen villages scattered across the Districts of Balakən and Qax (and possibly also found in neighbouring Georgia) and claims descent from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants from Persia. There are at least two distinct but mutually intelligible sub-varieties of Alazan Persian (one per district), and the villages maintain active contact with one another.

All Alazan Persian (henceforth AlzP) speakers in Balakən and Qax are bilingual in Azeri, the majority language belonging to the Turkic family and the official language of Azerbaijan. Although there is some tendency for syntactic restructuring as a result of contact, e.g. gradual loss of prepositions (more so than in Tehran Persian), personal clitics reduced to possessive function only, partial suppletion of the paradigms of the verbs *bidān* (cognate of Standard Persian *budan* ‘to be’) and *šidān* (cognate of Standard Persian *šodan* ‘to become’), AlzP does not show novel contact-induced tense-aspect-mood (TAM) categories as do some other Turkic-influenced “Farsic” varieties (Soper 1987). This may certainly be due to a shorter period of contact in comparison to Azeri–Tat and Uzbek–Tajik contact situations.

Instead, AlzP demonstrates different patterns of morphosyntactic convergence of inherited grammatical TAM categories across the two varieties, as seen in (1–2).

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|---|---|
| (1) Balakən sub-variety | (2) Qax sub-variety |
| <p>a. <i>mān kitab bu-xun-um.</i>
I book IPFV-read₁-1SG
‘I am reading a book. / I read books.’</p> <p>b. <i>ägär xeyli güp bi-zän-um</i>
if much word IPFV-hit₁-1SG
<i>mān=ä jərimä bu-kun-id.</i>
I=DDO fine IPFV-do₁-3
‘If I talk too much, he is (definitely) going to fine me.’</p> <p>c. <i>ägär vaxt=im bi-šid</i>
if time=POSS:1SG IPFV-be_{1.3}
<i>kitab=ä mu-xun-um.</i>
book=DDO EVT-read₁-1SG
‘If I (hypothetically) have time, I will read the book.’</p> | <p>a. <i>nun=mun=ä mu-xor-än.</i>
bread=POSS:1PL=DDO IPFV-eat₁-3PL
‘They eat / are eating our bread.’</p> <p>b. <i>umru borun bə-riz-id.</i>
today rain MOD-flow₁-3
‘Today it is going to rain.’</p> <p>c. <i>ayri bi-šin-äd</i>
separate MOD-sit₁-3
<i>ayri mi-šin-äd.</i>
separate IPFV-sit₁-3
‘If he lives apart, he lives apart (and if he does not live apart, he lives with us).’</p> |

The field data illustrates both varieties having a definite/prospective future (1b & 2b), which contrasts with an indefinite/hypothetical future (1c & 2c, glossed as EVT for “eventual”). The prospective category is identical with the subjunctive (shown in conditional contexts in the examples but found elsewhere in the same form), both having the form <bi- + present stem>. In addition, in the Balakən sub-variety, this same category has extended into the present domain (1a), marginalizing the inherited present-future construction <mi- + present stem> into the domain of indefinite/hypothetical future. The Qax sub-variety shows both present and future uses of <mi- + present stem>, similar to Standard Persian, but the latter use is only limited to indefinite/hypothetical future. The typologically common phenomenon of presents grammaticalizing into modal categories such as subjunctives or futures, is not rare in West Asia, including the Iranian Plateau and the South Caucasus (Haspelmath 1998). The eventual vs. prospective future split exists, notably, in most Tat varieties, and, similarly to the Balakən sub-variety of AlzP, in all of them the old present (cognate of the Persian <mi- + present stem> construction) today acts mainly

as a future tense. Cases of subjunctives developing into futures are not uncommon either, with Latin being a notable example (Clackson & Horrocks 2011: 24–25).

In the case of AlzP, the processes by which the constructions <mi- + present stem> and <bi- + present stem> have come to be aligned as they presently are deserve an analysis with a focus on diachrony.

The stability of <mi- + present stem> as a hypothetical future construction is unsurprising given that the semantics it originally conveyed in Persian had largely ceased to be associated strictly with progressivity by the late nineteenth century and became generalised as the gnomic present, yielding also an indefinite/hypothetical future reading (both referring to what “generally expected to happen”). The Balakən sub-variety preserves the latter use while Qax sub-variety preserves both.

The behaviour of <bi- + present stem> is less obvious. Lenepveu-Hotz (2014) traces the development of the verbal prefix bi- from being a mood-independent marker of rhematicity to becoming a modal (subjunctive) marker, change which she dates to the late nineteenth / early twentieth century, i.e. to the time when modern AlzP speakers claim their ancestors left Persia. The rhematic property of bi- could thus quite easily account for the development of <bi- + present stem> (originally conveying a focal action / state in the present) into a prospective category, especially in light of similar semantics being attested in Classical Persian (Jahani 2008: 160) and found in modern languages of the Central Iranian Plateau as a “close future” (Korn 2020: 479, Täheri 2021). Furthermore, AlzP, or at least its Qax sub-variety, seems to have reinterpreted the focal nature of bi- as “perfective”, which is Haspelmath (1998: 55) considers a common property of futures and subjunctives, allowing it to extend <bi- + present stem> to both the prospective/definite future and subjunctive domains.

The remarkable use of <bi- + present stem> for the general present tense in the Balakən sub-variety represents perhaps a slightly different development process. One can hypothesise that bi- never developed into an aspectual marker in this sub-variety and remained purely focal. When the function of <mi- + present stem> as a present category starting weakening and the construction started drifting towards marking the indefinite/hypothetical future (as it happened in Tat), there arose a need to replace it with a more semantically dynamic construction, and a rhematic construction <bi- + present stem> made for a good replacement. In this respect, the semantic distinction between the present, the prospective future and the subjunctive was irrelevant, and the situation, at least by the time of the earliest speakers’ arrival in the Alazan Valley, resembled very much that of pre-modern Persian.

The scope of this paper is limited to presenting and briefly analysing (including within a broader regional context) preliminary data from a peculiar variety of Persian developing outside of its traditional area. A separate study aimed at tracing the origin of AlzP and the movement of its earlier speakers could offer additional clues regarding these changes.

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