Contact-Induced Progressives in Iranian Languages:
A Typological Comparison

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The progressive manifests itself in various ways across Iranian languages. The evolution of this category, influenced to some extent by internal factors and sometimes by language contact, presents an interesting case of parallel development in related languages that are geographically very distant from each other. This presentation will demonstrate a parallel development of a specific type of synthetic progressive in two allegedly Southwestern Iranian languages: Muslim Tat (MT), spoken in northeastern Azerbaijan, and Bashkardi (Bš), spoken in southern Iran.

Both languages show forms that are identical in structure to the progressive in Modern Persian (1):

(1)　(a)　Persian　　　　(b)　Tat　　　　　　(c)　Bashkardi
　　　　mī-x^wor-am　　　　*mə-xor=um*　　　　*a-xwar-om*
　　　　IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG　　EVT-eat.PRS-1SG　　IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG

The Tat form in (1b) historically corresponded to (1a) in usage (and, like the Persian prefix *mī-*, *mə-* derives from a particle with an imperfective meaning), but its semantics has changed into a non-focal and modal function of eventuality and gnomic value (cf. Authier 2012:179). In Bš, the origin of *a-* is not known, and the alleged present tense in (1c) is also used in future and modal function (4a).

It would then come as no surprise that both MT and Bš have developed a new progressive, which is formed from the infinitive (2). The prefix is *bä-* (with its allomorphs *bə-*, *bɨ-* and *ba-*) in Upper Şirvan MT, *mi-* (variants *ma-*, *mə-* and *mu-*) in Central MT, *a-* again for Northern and *be-* for Southern Bashkardi. However, the Bš progressive, in spite of being called "continuous present" (Skjærvø 1989:846, 848), remains highly marked in usage.

(2)　(a)　Upper Şirvan MT　(b)　Central MT　　(c)　Northern Bš　(d)　Southern Bš
　　　　bə-soxt-an=um　　　　*mə-saxt-än=üm*　　*a-kerd-en=om*　　*be-kerd-en=īn*
　　　　　　　　　　　　　IPFV-do.PST-INF=COP1SG
　　　　　　　　　　　　　'I am doing.'

Like the Bš prefixes, the prefix *bä-* in Upper Şirvan MT seems to be multifunctional, as a group of change-of-state verbs show a subjunctive/imperative with prefix,[1] mirroring the Persian form (3):

(3)　(a)　　　　　　　　　　　*bə-xost-an=um*　　　　*ki*　　*bɨ-niš=i*
　　　　Upper Şirvan Tat　　IPFV-want.PST-INF=1SG　SUB　SBJV-be.seated.PRS=2SG
　　　　(b)　　　　　　　　　*mī-x^wāh-am*　　　　*(ke)*　*be-nešīn-ī*
　　　　Persian[2]　　　　　IPFV-want.PRS-1SG　　SUB　SBJV-sit.down-2SG
　　　　　　　　　　　　　'I want you to sit down.'

(4)　(a)　*be-yår-ie*　　　*ke*　*gwar=e*　*hamie*　*kabåb-ōn*　*a-xwar-om*
　　　　North Bš　SBJV-bring.PR-2PL　SUB　side=EZ　DEM　meat-PL　IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG
　　　　(b)　*biy-ār-īd*　　　*ke*　*bā*　　*īn*　　*kabāb*　*be-x^wor-am*
　　　　Persian[2]　SBJ-bring.PR-2PL　SUB　with　DEM　meat　SBJ-eat.PRS-1SG
　　　　　　　　　'Bring [the bread] so that I might eat it with the meat.'

However, the phonetic behaviour of *bä-* in Upper Şirvan MT leads us to assume that the two prefixes, viz. that of the progressive and that of the subjunctive/imperative just mentioned (which is

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[1] Other verbs would have a non-prefixed form in this function.
[2] Constructed example.

present in this dialect of Tat more than in others), are historically different morphemes. While some of the verbs that take the latter have the same form of the prefix in both categories, others show an assimilation in the subjunctive not seen in the progressive of the same verbs (5)-(6), which is all the more remarkable as the prefix is stressed (marked by ' in (5)-(6)).

Upper Şirvan Tat

(5) (a) *bä-kišt-'an=um*   (b) *'bi-kiš=um*
         IPFV-kill.PST-INF=1SG   SBJV-kill.PRS=1SG
         'I kill / am killing'   '(that) I kill'

(6) (a) *ba-burr-'an=um*   (b) *'bu-bur=um*
         IPFV-cut.PST-INF=1SG   SBJV-cut.PRS=1SG
         'I cut / am cutting'   '(that) I cut'

The progressive prefix, on the other hand, is probably the result of a grammaticalisation of the dative-locative marker *bä* (variants *ba, bə*) still found in Tat (7b). In the progressive, the construction ceased to be perceived as an inessive prepositional group and acquired regular verbal negation, preceding the prefix (7a).

(7) Upper Şirvan Tat
    (a) *na-bɨ-xost-an=um*   (b) *ba   xuna   nist=um*
         NEG-IPFV-want.PST-INF=1SG   LOC   home   NEG.EXIST=1SG
         'I don't want (that).'   'I am not at home.'

We argue, then, that the Bš prefix *be-* is the result of more than one etymon as well, agreeing with the suggestion that Middle Persian particle *bē* dervies from several origins (cf. Jügel 2013 and Cheung fthc., among others). While no differences in pronunciation are found in the prefix of the Southern Bš "continuous form" and the subjunctive, the fact that the former is based on a verbal noun already hints at the possibility of the pattern contining a preposition. The seeming identity with the subjunctive prefix could then be due to Persian influence, where *be-* is the only comparable element.

In Northern Bš, the corresponding morpheme *a-* has a less restricted function and forms like (1c) frequently have a future reference. For the general present, *a-* appears to be in competition with zero-marking (for the subjunctive, also with *be-*).

It seems that each variety has developed its own way of marking the progressive, either by extending the functions of a pre-existent morphological inventory, or by copying morphology from neighbouring languages, sometimes transforming its functions. In all cases, parallels are visible. The morpheme *be-* found in Bš seems to be a morphological borrowing from Persian whose function has been applied to the historically zero-marked imperatives and subjunctives but which (in Southern Bš) has come to mark the progressive as well. The morphemes *a-* in Bš and *mə-* in Central MT, which marked the 'old present' (originally with a progressive sense, presently used with a future connotation), has been extended to infinitive-based synthetic progressive constructions. Jeremiás describes verbal prefixes as the most widespread way of marking the imperfective (Jeremiás 1993:103). Upper Şirvan MT, which has not been in contact with Persian in recent times and may have acquired the subjunctive/imperative marker *bə-* from NW Iranian languages, has developed its own infinitive-based progressive using the preposition *bä*, and the similarity between the two markers is coincidental.

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