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  
  mī-x’or-am  
  IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG  
(b) Tat  
  mā-xor=um  
  EVT-eat.PRS-1SG  
(c) Bashkardi  
  a-xvar-om  
  IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG

The Tat form in (1b) historically corresponded to (1a) in usage (and, like the Persian prefix mī-, mā- 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 bā- (with its allomorphs ba-, bi- and ba-) in Upper Şirvan MT, mī- (variants ma-, mo- 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  
  ba-xost-an=um  
  IPFV-do.PST-INF=COP1SG  
  ‘I am doing.’
(b) Central MT  
  mī-x’āh-am  
  (ke) be-nešin-i
(c) Northern Bš  
  a-kerd-en=um  
  IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG
(d) Southern Bš  
  be-kerd-en=in

Like the Bš prefixes, the prefix bā- 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) Upper Şirvan Tat  
  ba-xost-an=um  
  IPFV-eat.PST-INF=2SG
(b) Persian2  
  mī-x’āh-am  
  (ke) be-nešin-i

Persian3  
  ke bi-niš=i

‘I want you to sit down.’

(4)  
(a) North Bš  
  be-yār-ie  
  ke gwar=e  
  hamie kabāb-ōn  
  a-xwar-om
  SBJV-bring.PR-2PL  SUB side=SZ  DEM meat-PL  IPFV-eat.PRS-1SG
(b) Persian2  
  biy-ār-īd  
  ke bā  
  in kabāb  
  be-x’or-am
  SBJ-bring.PR-2PL  SUB DEM meat

‘Bring [the bread] so that I might eat it with the meat.’

However, the phonetic behaviour of bā- 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

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 Širvan Tat

(5) (a) bā-kiš’t-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 bā (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 Širvan Tat

(a) na-bi-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 derives 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 containing 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. Jeremiáš describes verbal prefixes as the most widespread way of marking the imperfective (Jeremiáš 1993:103). Upper Širvan 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 bā, and the similarity between the two markers is coincidental.

References:

