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Reanalyzing for objectivity: the origin of the Mangghuer objective suffix *-ng*

To Professor Juha Janhunen

Linguistic fieldwork consists of many pleasures, including not just the joys of analysis and discovery, but also the joys of interacting with fascinating people. One source of richness in my own experiences in northwest China has been repeatedly crossing paths with Professor Juha Janhunen. From packaged biscuits in a hotel room to freshly-slaughtered mutton, from trains to busses to taxis, from strolls along river valleys to hikes along mountain pasturelands, from conference halls to banquet rooms to the humblest living quarters, I have always found Professor Janhunen a most amiable companion with whom to share the adventures of the field. It is with fondness and thanks that I dedicate this small academic offering, in the spirit of his extensive work among the Shirongolic languages and language contact in the Amdo region, to the celebration of his 60th birthday.

1. Introduction

Mangghuer is one of several Mongolic languages of the Shirongolic group which have innovated versions of the subjective/objective distinction, a grammaticized encoding of the involvement or perspective of the speaker. This distinction has been described in some detail by Slater (2003: 194–220) for Mangghuer, by Fried (2010: 186–93) and Wu (2003: 340–41) for Baoan Tu, and by Georg (2003: 302–3) and Åkerman (In preparation) for Mongghul. From a cross-linguistic viewpoint, the subjective/objective distinction is clearly related to the so-called “conjunct/disjunct” systems found in Bodic languages (Hale 1980, DeLancey 1992, Tournaudre 2008, inter alia) and in several other language families around the world.

Most of the morphological material used to mark the subjective/objective distinction in Mangghuer is shared with related languages. Most notably, Mangghuer, Mongghul and Bao’an Tu all share a distinction between *i*, which is the nuclear vowel for all forms indicating the subjective category in finite declaratives, and *a*, which is the nuclear vowel in the corresponding objective forms.

Mangghuer, however, has uniquely added a marker *-ng*, of unknown provenance, to all of its finite declarative forms which are marked for the objective category. In this paper, I show that *-ng* represents a reanalysis and extension of the inherited Mongolic *narrative* suffix.

2. Objective Marking in Mangghuer

Table 1 illustrates the overall system of subjective and objective marking in Mangghuer declaratives. Notice that all of the finite declarative and copular objective forms end in the segment *ng* (phonetic [ŋ]). To my knowledge, no one has suggested a source for this etymon.

		Subjective	Objective
Finite endings	Perfective	-ba	-jiang
	Imperfective	-la bi	-lang
	Future	-ni	-kunang
Copulas	Positive	bi	bang
	Negative Equational	puzhi	puzhang
	Negative Attributive	gui	guang

Table 1. Mangghuer finite declarative verb endings and copulas

Apart from the forms in Table 1, there is an additional objective marker, consisting only of the sequence *-ang*, which optionally appears only in negated predicates with first person subjects. This is illustrated in example (1), taken from a folktale in Chen et al (2005: 153):

- (1) *Bi huguer=ni lai kerli-ang.*
 1:SG cow=ACC NEG want-OBJ
 ‘I don’t want the cow’

Both elicitation and natural texts show that the suffix *-ang* can be omitted in constructions like (1), with no other changes needed. Thus, the final verb of (1) could equally well be simply *kerli*, with no suffix at all (Slater 2003: 202).

In my previous work (Slater 2003: 202) I suggested that this suffix should be considered a marker simply of the objective perspective, with no tense/aspect component to its meaning. This analysis struck me as incomplete, though, because in all other contexts the objective meaning co-occurs with some sort of tense/aspect meaning. But the homophony of this suffix with the endings of all the other objective forms could not be missed. And since I could not identify an etymological source for the objective suffix, I was unable to account for its presence here, in what appeared to be a context with no associated tense or aspect value.

It turns out that this suffix did originate with a tense/aspect form, namely the Mongolic narrative suffix. This suffix did not participate in the spread of the *i/a* distinction in the Monguor languages, and it continues to be a form which is “neutral” with respect to the subjective/objective distinction in Mongghul (Åkerman In preparation, Georg 2003: 299) and Bao’an Tu (Fried 2010: 187).

In Mangghuer, however, the Mongolic narrative was reanalyzed as simply a marker of objectivity, and then spread by analogic extension to all objective declarative contexts, as Table 1 shows.

3. The source morpheme

Janhunen (2003b:24) reconstructs the Proto-Mongolic narrative as a finite ending of the form **-m/U* (where the slash indicates that *-m* is the basic stem and the archiphoneme *U* is an “unstable morpheme-boundary segment;” according to the “Technical Notes” provided in the preface to this volume (Janhunen 2003a:xxii)).

According to Rybatzki (2003b:75), the narrative suffix *-m* is attested in Chinese- and Arabic-script sources of Middle Mongolian (13th-15th Centuries). Phonological variants *-mU* and *-mUi* are also attested in documents preserved in the Uighur script, the Tibetan-derived *vPhags.pa* script, and in the Secret History of the Mongols, which was composed in Uighur script but preserved for us in Chinese characters, representing the work of the early Ming Dynasty (just after the fall of the Mongols’ Yuan Dynasty in China). (For more details, see Rybatzki 2003b:58–61.)

One of the functions of the narrative suffix, in both Mongghul and Bao’an Tu, is to mark the main verbs of negated propositions. For example, Åkerman (In preparation) gives the following example from Mongghul:

- (2) *Bu ii you-m*
1:SG NEG go-NARR
‘I will not go’

Similarly, in Bao’an Tu, Fried (2010: 224) gives the following example:

- (3) *coŋjisa atcaŋla ələ odə-m*
originally 3:PL NEG go-NARR
‘They usually don’t go.’

I will not explore all of the details of how and when these forms are used; readers should consult Fried (2010) and Åkerman (In preparation) for more discussion. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that these examples are comparable to (1). They show that, where comparative evidence leads us to expect the narrative form *-m* in Mangghuer, we find *-ang* instead.

The explanation for this is found in the phonological history of Mangghuer. As I have described elsewhere (Slater 2003), Mangghuer has adapted its phonological system such that the segmental and phonotactic (syllabic) patterns very nearly match those of the Northwest Mandarin dialects which surround it.

One result of this restructuring is that syllable-final *m*, which is disallowed in Mandarin phonology, is also missing in Mangghuer, where it appears to have systematically (or at least in many cases) become *ng*. Thus, for ‘together’ we find Shira Yugur *χamtə* and Mongghul *xamdə* (Z. Sun 1991: 324), Mangghuer has *hangtu* (Chen et al 2005: 26). Similarly, Poppe (1955: 210) reconstructs the 1:SG Dative/Locative pronoun for Common Mongolian as **namadu(r)*, and gives the corresponding lexeme as *namda* in both Dagur and Buriat, but this form has become *nangda* in Mangghuer (Slater 2003: 83).

Thus, the change in the phonetic form of the narrative suffix from [m] to [ŋ] is actually an expected development for Mangghuer.

This change from *m* > *ng*, though, accounts for the consonant of the objective suffix *-ang*, but does not explain the vowel. For that we need to note one further development.

After speakers reanalyzed the narrative *-ng* as a marker of the objective, and spread it to all objective declarative contexts, it came to be associated with the vowel *a*, which was already present due to the *i/a* distinction that had previously been generalized. Thereafter, the objective *-ng* was *usually* associated with a preceding *a*; its appearance in negated contexts constituted a small minority of its total uses. Speakers then regularized the objective in negatives, by adding the vowel *a* to make it match what seemed to be its more complete form, even though it would not have been present in this context originally.

I mentioned above that the objective *-ang* is optional in negations like (1). This is probably a result of the fact that it has been reanalyzed as a marker of objectivity, and therefore its original motivation in the negative constructions has been removed. In fact, there is significant variation in the texts of Chen et al (2005), regarding the morphology that appears with negated events and first person subjects. Exploration of this variation, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

4. Contact considerations

The use of the Mongolic narrative suffix to mark all declarative objectives is unique to Mangghuer, and this could represent purely an internal change. However, there is a strikingly similar situation in at least some nearby Amdo Tibetan dialects which suggests that the Mangghuer development may be contact-induced.

Haller (2000: 178) analyzes Themchen Amdo Tibetan verbal categories in terms of a binary distinction between events that are “directly perceived by the speaker” and those that are not. In Haller’s presentation, there is a single

morpheme, *-zəç*, which is added as a suffix to every verb form that indicates non-direct perception. J. Sun (1993: 953), describing a different Amdo dialect which has the same morpheme, suggests that it represents an extended use of the indefinite article morpheme, with which it is homophonous. The semantic shift which Sun proposes is “referential indefiniteness > evidential indirectness.”

Because Mangghuer has a history of significant contact with Tibetan, it seems likely that familiarity with this Amdo “indirect evidential” provided the motivation for the extension of the narrative to mark all objective declarative forms in Mangghuer.

However, the Themchen dialect is spoken some distance away from the current Mangghuer area; in fact Mongghul lies in between Themchen and Mangghuer. And the Sichuan dialect which Sun describes does not seem to use the “indirect” form nearly as pervasively as does Themchen. We do not know how prevalent the “indirect” form was in the Amdo Tibetan lects which would have influenced Mangghuer.

In fact, although contact seems a likely motivation for the adoption of this feature in Mangghuer, we cannot be entirely sure which direction the influence went. It is possible that Amdo speakers added a consistent marker to their indirect/objective forms as a result of contact with Mangghuer, after Mangghuer had reanalyzed and generalized the narrative suffix for this purpose.

It is clear that the markers of indirect/objective in both Mangghuer and Amdo Tibetan are relatively recent innovation. Mangghuer does not share this feature with any of the other Monguor languages, which cannot have been separated from it for very long. Furthermore, the system is entirely regular in Themchen Amdo, as it is also in Mangghuer; if it had a long history we might expect to see some erosions of it in at least some contexts.

Thus, we cannot say with certainty which language innovated the system first. But since Mangghuer is spoken by a small population (about 30,000), in a limited geographic area, while we have evidence for the use of the indirect marker across multiple, widely separated Amdo Tibetan dialects, it seems most reasonable to assume that the Amdo development is the earlier one.

Because of the homophony of the Amdo Indirect Evidential with the indefinite article, we need also to consider the possibility that Mangghuer borrowed not only the function to which it assigned *-ang*, but in fact the semantics as well. That is, we need to examine whether the objective *-ang* might actually have developed from an indefinite article in Mangghuer, rather than from the Mongolic narrative suffix. This would be possible if the development was motivated by bilingual speakers who were aware of the homophony of the Indirect Evidential and the indefinite article in Amdo Tibetan.

It is possible, in fact, to describe a historical sequence consistent with this hypothesis, but it violates the normal phonological developments of Mangghuer and therefore is not likely to be correct.

Mongghul has *-nge* as the singular indefinite marker (Geog 2003: 295), and Mangghuer has *ge* (Slater 2003: 99–102). Both are reductions of an original

form *nige* (still present in both languages as a numeral meaning ‘one’). If Mangghuer objective *-ng* were a reflex of *nige*, we would have to posit the historical sequence *nige* > *-nge* > *-ng*, in which the final vowel was deleted. However, Mangghuer has word-final stress and does not typically delete final vowels. Instead, it tends to delete word-initial vowels, as in fact the singular indefinite marker *ge* (< *nige*) illustrates.

Furthermore, Mangghuer already employs the singular indefinite marker *ge* in an event-modifying (adverbial) function. In this function, it appears before a main verb and indicates that an event happened “once” or “a little bit” This is illustrated in (4) (Slater 2003: 150):

- (4) *bi ge langla-ya*
 1:SG once walk:around-VOL
 ‘I’ll walk around a bit.’

If Mangghuer speakers had modeled their objective marking on the Amdo pattern, aware that the Amdo indirect marker was homophonous with the indefinite article, we would expect the objective suffix to copy this event-modifying *ge*.

In short, it seems unlikely that the Mangghuer system is modeled semantically on the Amdo system.

5. Discussion

Double marking of objective

The addition of the reanalyzed narrative *-ng* to Mangghuer objectives is fascinating because it means that, from a historical point of view, Mangghuer double marks its objective category. And in fact, it appears that the objectives were synchronically double marked, as well, because we have seen that the subjective/objective distinction was already clearly indicated by means of the *i/a* distinction before this final innovation, and this vowel opposition remains clear even up to the present. It appears that Mangghuer speakers should have had no need to add further marking to indicate this category.

However, Mangghuer speakers did so, by means of reanalyzing the Mongolic narrative suffix and extending it.

Genetic relationships

The presence of the narrative suffix in Mangghuer may have some value for the genetic classification of the modern languages; Rybatzki (2003a:381) includes retention of “the simple narrative in **-m*” as one of the linguistic features relevant for classifying the Mongolic languages. Rybatzki says that only three lan-

guages of the family—Moghol, Mongghul, and Bao'an—retain the use of this form for its original function. As we have seen here, the reflex of the narrative suffix is still found in Mangghuer, as well, but due to the reanalysis I have described, the functions of this morpheme have shifted rather dramatically, and it has been spread to a much wider range of contexts than is found in any related language. Nonetheless, we may add Mangghuer to Rybatzki's list of modern Mongolic languages which preserve this suffix.

Having said that, we should note that this form alone will not add much to our understanding of genetic relationships. Its retention in the Monguor languages—Bao'an, Mongghul and Mangghuer—is worth noting, but if those three languages are to be grouped into a single branch at some level of a Mongolic family tree, that branch would need to depend on shared innovations, not simply shared retentions.

Abbreviations

ACC	Accusative case
SG	Singular number
NARR	Narrative
NEG	Negation
OBJ	Objective perspective
PL	Plural number
VOL	Voluntative

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