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On syntactic definition of finiteness: Evidence from Nivkh

It is my pleasure and honour to present this article to Professor Juha Janhunen on his 60th birthday. On this occasion, I would like to thank him for introducing me to the world of Finnish linguistics almost twenty years ago.

The article discusses the major problems involved in the study of the category of finiteness, based on data from the Nivkh language. After outlining the general data on Nivkh, the paper discusses the syntactic approach to finiteness, according to which this category displays a three-way distinction of verb forms. The article then consecutively analyses Nivkh basic verb forms belonging to different classes, with special attention to their morphological properties. In conclusion, I present some generalizations concerning different approaches to finiteness.

1. General data on Nivkh

Nivkh (isolate, Paleosiberian) is a moribund language currently spoken in several dialects on Sakhalin Island and in the Amur region of Russia. Typologically, it is a polysynthetic head-final nominative language. The East Sakhalin dialect, whose data is analysed in this paper, displays also some analytical features. The canonical word order is SOV. Nivkh has no adjectives, the relevant semantic function being performed by qualitative verbs. An attribute together with a head nominal as well as a primary object together with a head verb form a polysynthetic complex (in the examples, the parts of polysynthetic complexes are separated by a dash). The basic structure of a verb form may be represented as follows:

OBJECT-ROOT-TRANSITIVITY-ASPECT-CAUSATIVITY-ASPECT/
TENSE-MODALITY-NEGATION-MOOD-NUMBER-FOCUS

In a single predicate-sentence, the verb almost invariably occurs sentence-finally. The minimal verb form is represented by a root and a mood suffix, cf. (1a). Nivkh has several moods, i.e. indicative, cf. (1), imperative, cf. (2), categorical, dubitative, preventive, etc. The language has two tenses, i.e. non-future, cf. (1a),

and future, cf. (1b). There are several aspects, i.e. inchoative/progressive, complete/intensive, resultative, etc.

- (1) a. *Ñi ra-d.*
 I-[NOM] drink-IND-[SG]
 ‘I drink/drank.’
- b. *Ñəŋ ra-i-d-γun.*
 we:EXCL drink-FUT-IND-PL
 ‘We (without you) will drink.’

A multiple-predicate sentence is represented by a chain of syntactically dependent forms (= converbs) interlinked by various semantic relations (temporal, conditional, concessive, cause, purpose, manner, etc.), which is closed by an independent verb form, cf. (2) with a temporal converb *um-inəŋ-anke* ‘before getting angry’, conveying posteriority, a temporal converb *k‘əmlə-roř* ‘after thinking’, indicating anteriority, and an independent imperative verb form *it-ja* ‘say’.

- (2) *Um-inəŋ-anke urguř k‘əmlə-roř it-ja.*
 be.angry-INT-CONV:TEMP well:2SG think-CONV:TEMP:2SG say-IMP:2SG
 ‘Before getting angry, after thinking well, say.’

2. The syntactic approach to finiteness

According to the traditional view, the category of finiteness is treated as a morphological category that divides verb forms into two major classes, i.e. finite forms that are characterized by person, number, tense, mood, etc. and non-finite verb forms (such as infinitives, participles and converbs) that are typically not marked for these categories. In addition to morphological criteria a syntactic criterion was used, based on the assumption that (i) only finite verbs are able to form an independent utterance, (ii) each independent utterance must have one and only one finite verb, and (iii) non-finite verbs occur predominantly or exclusively in dependent contexts. Distributional and inflectional criteria definitely correlate with each other but may also conflict with each other, cf. Nikolaeva (2007: 2–3).

Searching for a valid definition of finiteness, I came to the conclusion that the traditional morphological approach to this category is hardly applicable to the analysis of Nivkh data, since in this language the morphological form of the verb is not a suitable criterion for establishing its finite/non-finite nature. As will be seen from the following discussion, some of Nivkh converbs (presumably non-finite forms) appear, from their morphological properties, to be “equally finite” or even “more finite” than, for instance, indicative verb forms that are traditionally considered as finite. At the same time, the syntactic interpretation of finiteness, defined in terms of the syntactic functions performed by different verb forms, allows us to draw quite a clear distinction between finite and non-finite verb forms in Nivkh.

From a syntactic perspective, finiteness is considered as the possibility that a verb form can be used as the only or the matrix predicate, regardless of markedness for different morphosyntactic categories. Non-finiteness is therefore understood as the impossibility of a verb form to appear in these syntactic functions, cf. Koptjevskaja-Tamm (1994: 1245) and Nedjalkov (1998: 421). Similar definitions are known to be used, for instance, for differentiation of independent and dependent verb forms, see e.g. Hengeveld (1998: 339)

Furthermore, in a number of recent studies finiteness is analysed not as a binary but as a scalar phenomena dealing with different degrees of finiteness in terms of implicational-hierarchic scales, cf. Givón (1990: 853–854) and Hengeveld (1998). The syntactic approach to finiteness developed in this article also implies the existence not only of a set of two absolute values, ‘finite’ vs. ‘non-finite’, but of a hierarchy of finiteness. Such a compromise theoretical solution to the representation of linguistic categories, which allows a continuum space both within and between categories, is known to be a basis, for instance, for the prototypical (‘flexible’) categorial distribution presented in Givón (1984: 16).

I treat the category of finiteness as a scale comprising two polar areas, ‘finiteness’ and ‘non-finiteness’, whose members display functional characteristic properties that were set earlier, and an in-between area. The in-between area, whose members share the features of the two polar areas, represents in turn a continuum whose members gravitate towards one or another pole. The degree of closeness/remoteness of a particular verb form to/from the ‘finite’ or ‘non-finite’ pole is determined by its prototypical, i.e. most common and textually frequent, and non-prototypical, i.e. less common and textually frequent, syntactic functions, see e.g. the definition of (proto)typicality in Givón (1986: 78–79) and Croft (1990: 125).

Thus, relying on the given syntactic definition of finiteness, verb forms can be divided into the three classes: (1) finite forms, (2) non-finite forms, (3) in-between forms. The number of forms belonging to each of the three classes in Nivkh is roughly equal.

In order to ground this syntactic approach to finiteness, I shall demonstrate that syntactic distinctions between finite, non-finite and in-between forms in Nivkh do not strictly correlate with their morphological properties, usually associated with finiteness/non-finiteness. The forms entering into one or another class will be ranked according to their ability, first of all, to agree with the subject in person and number and, secondly, to be marked for tense and aspect. The highest position in a hierarchy is occupied by a form that displays the largest number of morphological properties associated with finiteness.

3. Nivkh finite verb forms

The finite forms that represent a polar class of the syntactic category of finiteness occur as predicates in single-predicate sentences or in matrix clauses of multiple-predicate sentences and cannot be used in other syntactic functions. Nivkh “pure” finite forms can be ranked as follows: assumptive negative forms (agreement in person and number, tense) > preventive forms (agreement in number) > interrogative forms (tense, aspect) > categorical forms, dubitative forms, etc.

Assumptive negative forms are typically used in the future and indicate that the situation will not take place, because it usually does not occur under similar circumstances. In the non-future, these forms are used in rhetorical questions. These forms are derived with the suffix *rlo/tlo* that occupies the same position as the mood suffixes. The forms demonstrate a limited differentiation of person and number of the subject, cf. Table 1, and are inflected for tense but not for aspect, cf. (3):

- (3) a. *Jaŋ ra-i-rlo.*
 he-[NOM] drink-FUT-NEG:ASS:3SG
 ‘He will not drink.’
- b. *Ñi ra-i-tlo.*
 I-[NOM] drink-FUT-NEG:ASS:1SG
 ‘I shall not drink.’

Preventive verb forms denote a speaker’s attempt to prevent undesirable consequences of the situation by means of appealing to a hearer. In Nivkh, these forms are attested only in the second person. They are specified by the number of the subject (cf. Table 1) but are not marked for tense and aspect. Nivkh distinguishes two types of preventives: (i) visual and (ii) assumptive.

Visual preventives are used when a speaker observes some action performed by a hearer and tries to prevent the possible harmful consequences of this action. For instance, when the hearer(s) is/are going along a slippery road and may fall, the speaker uses the forms given in (4):

- (4) a. *Kuŋ-inəŋra!*
 fall-PREV:VIS:2SG
 ‘Do not fall down! [you:SG]!’
- b. *Kuŋ-inəŋta!*
 fall-PREV:VIS:2PL
 ‘Do not fall down! [you:PL]!’

Assumptive preventives are employed when the speaker does not directly observe any potentially harmful actions carried out by the hearer, but proceeding from the previous negative experience he or she assumes that in the future these actions will take place. The forms presented in (5) are used in a situation where the speaker is giving a toy to the hearer(s):

- (5) a. *Zosq-jaŋra!*
 break-PREV:ASS:2SG
 ‘Do not break [it] [you:SG]!’
- b. *Zosq-jaŋta!*
 break-PREV:ASS:2PL
 ‘Do not break [it] [you:PL]!’

Interrogative verb forms basically do not show any subject agreement but take tense and aspect markers. They are derived either by the suffix *l/lo* occupying the same order as the mood marker, cf. (6a), or by the postfix *la/lu* which is attached to the indicative form, cf. (6b). The last forms may optionally take the plural suffix indicating the plurality of the subject (see section 5.1).

- (6) a. *Jaŋ vi-l?* b. *Jaŋ vi-i-d-la?*
 he-[NOM] go-INTER he-[NOM] go-FUT-IND-INTER
 ‘Did he go?’ ‘Will he go?’

Categorical forms with the mood suffix *ɣitlo/kitlo* emphasize that the speaker is confident about the statement, cf. (7a). Dubitative forms with the suffix *jakna*, on the contrary, indicate that the statement is doubtful or uncertain, cf. (7b). Neither categorical nor dubitative forms agree with the subject and they are not inflected for tense and aspect.

- (7) a. *Jaŋ vi-ɣitlo.* b. *Jaŋ vi-jakna.*
 he-[NOM] go-CATEG he-[NOM] go-DUBIT
 ‘He certainly went.’ ‘He probably went.’

4. Nivkh non-finite verb forms

Another polar class of the syntactic category of finiteness is represented by “pure” non-finite verb forms that cannot occur as predicates in single-predicate sentences or in matrix clauses of multiple-predicate sentences. Nivkh non-finite forms can be ranked as follows: coordinated forms (agreement in person and number, tense, aspect) > participles (agreement in number, tense, aspect) > supine forms.

Coordinated forms appear as predicates of coordinated clauses at least in pairs and therefore cannot be single or matrix predicates. Each coordinated form takes the same set of suffixes *ra/ta/na* whose variants are chosen according to the person and number of the subject and the tense/mood of verb forms, cf. Tables 1 and 2. The chain of coordinated forms may be closed by the auxiliary verb *ha-* ‘do so’ which is optional in the indicative and obligatory in other moods, cf. (8a–c). Coordinated forms freely take aspect markers.

- (8) a. *Jaŋ əřk pil-ra vesqar-ra*
 he-[NOM] already be.big-COORD:3SG be.strong-COORD:3SG
 (*ha-d*).
 do.SO-IND-[SG]
 ‘He is already big and strong.’

5. Nivkh in-between verb forms

In-between verb forms share the features of both finite and non-finite verb forms, i.e. they can be used either as the single or the matrix predicates or in other syntactic functions. These forms may be divided on the basis of their functions into the following two sub-classes: (a) in-between forms that are used prototypically as finites and non-prototypically as non-finites and (b) in-between forms that are used prototypically as non-finites and non-prototypically as finites.

5.1. In-between forms used prototypically as finites and non-prototypically as non-finites

These forms can be ranked as follows: imperative forms (agreement in person and number, aspect) > indicative forms (optional agreement in number, tense, aspect).

As finites, imperative forms are used as single or matrix predicates. These are the only forms in Nivkh that display a full differentiation of person and number, cf. (12). Furthermore, imperative forms may be marked for aspect.

(12)	2SG	<i>Ra-ja!</i>	‘Drink [you:SG]!’
	2PL	<i>Ra-ve!</i>	‘Drink [you:PL]!’
	1DU	<i>Ra-nate!</i>	‘Let us [I & you:SG] drink!’
	1PL	<i>Ra-da!</i>	‘Let us [I & you:PL] drink!’
	3SG	<i>Ra-варо!</i>	‘Let him/her drink!’
	3PL	<i>Ra-варваро!</i>	‘Let them drink!’

As non-finites, second person singular imperative forms may indicate concessive meaning, cf. (13), where the forms *pil-ja maŋki-ja* have the meaning ‘whether big [or] small’. In this function, imperative forms are not inflected for any categories.

(13)	<i>Tamla—t’o</i>	<i>p’řə-ŋan</i>	<i>pil-ja</i>	<i>maŋki-ja</i>
	so.much—fish-[SG-NOM]	come-CONV:TEMP	be.big-IMP:2SG	be.small-IMP:2SG
	<i>sək</i>	<i>p’u-t</i>	<i>t’o—nə-d-γu.</i>	
	all-[NOM]	come.out-CONV:MAN:3PL	fish-[SG-NOM]—make-IND-PL	
	‘When so much fish come, everyone, whether big [or] small, comes out to process the fish.’			

Indicative forms are also prototypically used as finites. In this function, they demonstrate an optional agreement with the subject in number, so that the unmarked singular, cf. (1a), is opposed to the plural with the suffix *kun/γun/gun/xun*, cf. (1b). Indicative forms may also attach tense, cf. (1b), and aspect markers.

As non-finites, indicative forms function as verbal complements of modal, phase, cognition or utterance verbs. The subjects of the dependent and independent verbs may be coreferential, cf. (14), or non-coreferential.

- (14) *Řaŋg* *ʔ'o—ñi-d—esqa-d.*
 woman-[SG-NOM] fish-[SG-NOM]—eat-IND—hate-IND-[SG]
 'The woman hates to eat fish.'

5.2. In-between forms used prototypically as non-finites and non-prototypically as finites

This group is represented by converbs that are prototypically used as predicates of non-matrix clauses in multiple-predicate sentences. Nivkh has about twenty-five different converbs.

As non-finites, converbs can have the same or a different subject as the finite verb form or admit both possibilities. In (15), the temporal converb *orbot-vul* 'when [I] worked' indicates an action simultaneous with that of the finite verb *xiz-d* '[I] put on'. Both forms have the same subject. In (16), the conditional converb *kə-ʋaj* 'if [it] rains' and the finite verb *hunv-i-d-γun* '[we] shall be' have different subjects.

- (15) *Ñi* *orbot-vul* *vamk-xun—xiz-d.*
 I-[NOM] work-CONV:TEMP mitten-PL-[NOM]—put.on-IND-[SG]
 'When I worked, I put on the mittens.'

- (16) *Ləx* *kə-ʋaj* *ñin*
 rain-[SG-NOM] fall-CONV:COND we:EXCL-[NOM]
taf—p 'i-n *hunv-i-d-γun.*
 house-[SG-NOM]—stay-CONV:MAN:1PL:FUT be-FUT-IND-PL
 'If it rains, we shall be staying at home.'

Most converbs do not take any subject agreement but are characterized by aspect. The exceptions are represented by the manner converb in *ř/t/n* and the temporal converb in *roř/tot/non* that agree with the subject of the finite (= independent) verb. The agreement follows a pattern similar to that of coordinated verbs: it takes place according to the person and number of the subject and the tense/mood of the finite verb, cf. Tables 1 and 2. In (17a), the temporal converb *xu-roř* 'after catching' and the manner converb *γe-ř* 'taking' agree with the third person singular subject *jaŋ* 'he'. The finite verb *vi-d* 'went' occurs in the non-future indicative form. In (17b), the same converbs agree with the first person singular subject *ñi* 'I', whereas the finite verb appears in the same form as in (17a). In (17c), the converbs agree with the first plural subject *ʔ'in*, while the finite verb is used in the imperative form *vi-ve* 'go [you:PL]!'.

- (17) a. *Jaŋ tʰo—xu-roř*
 he-[NOM] fish-[SG-NOM]—kill-CONV:TEMP:3SG:NFUT
kʰə—ye-ř *vi-d.*
 axe-[SG-NOM]—take-CONV:MAN:3SG:NFUT go-IND-[SG]
 ‘After catching fish, taking the axe, he went.’
- b. *Ñi tʰo—xu-tot*
 I-[NOM] fish-[SG-NOM]—kill-CONV:TEMP:1SG:NFUT
kʰə—ye-t *vi-d.*
 axe-[SG-NOM]—take-CONV:MAN:1SG:NFUT go-IND-[SG]
 ‘After catching fish, taking the axe, I went.’
- c. *Tʰin tʰo—xu-non*
 you:PL-[NOM] fish-[SG, NOM]—kill-CONV:TEMP:2PL:IMP
kʰə—ye-n *vi-ve!*
 axe-[SG-NOM]—take-CONV:MAN:2PL:IMP go-IMP:2PL
 ‘After catching fish, taking the axe, go [you:PL]!’

The distribution of suffixes of Nivkh verb forms that display an obligatory agreement with the subject in person and number is shown in Tables 1 and 2. As one can see, the second and third person singular forms always comprise the consonant *r/ř*, cf. Tables 1 and 2, whereas all other forms comprise either the consonant *t*, cf. Table 1, or the consonant *n*, cf. Table 2.

	singular	dual	plural
1 PERSON	<i>-tlo, -ta, -t, -tot</i>	<i>-tlo, -ta, -t, -tot</i>	<i>-tlo, -ta, -t, -tot</i>
2 PERSON	<i>-rlo, -inəŋra, -jaŋra, -ra, -ř, -roř</i>		<i>-tlo, -inəŋta, -jaŋta, -ta, -t, -tot</i>
3 PERSON	<i>-rlo, -ra, -ř, -roř</i>		<i>-tlo, -ta, -t, -tot</i>

Table 1. Suffixes of assumptive negative, visual preventive and assumptive preventive verb forms in all tenses/moods and coordinated verb forms and converbs in the non-future indicative.

	singular	dual	plural
1 PERSON	<i>-na, -n, -non</i>	<i>-na, -n, -non</i>	<i>-na, -n, -non</i>
2 PERSON	<i>-ra, -ř, -roř</i>		<i>-na, -n, -non</i>
3 PERSON	<i>-ra, -ř, -roř</i>		<i>-na, -n, -non</i>

Table 2. Suffixes of coordinated verb forms and converbs in the future indicative, imperative, optative, or preventive.

Though most converbs are typically used as non-finites, I regard them as in-between forms since there does exist a converb that can be used as a finite form. The question is about the conditional converb with the suffix *ʱaj/χaj* which is

prototypically used as a non-finite, cf. (16). As a finite, it indicates an optative meaning and is not inflected for any categories, cf. *p'e-ƙaj* 'I would like to pick' in (18):

- (18) *Ñi p'xi-roχ vi-n alř—p'e-ƙaj.*
 I-[NOM] forest-[SG]-DAT go-CONV:MAN:1SG:OPT berry-[SG-NOM]—pick-COND
 'Going to the forest, I would like to pick berries.'

6. Conclusion

I have considered three classes of verb forms, i.e. finite, non-finite and in-between forms, focusing on their ability to agree with the subject in person and number and to be marked for tense and aspect. As can be seen, each class comprises verb forms that agree and do not agree with the subject, as well as the verb forms that are inflected or not inflected for tense and aspect. These facts confirm the assumption that regarding Nivkh, finiteness should be considered as a purely syntactic phenomenon dealing with the functional, but not morphological properties of verb forms. I have demonstrated that such a syntactic approach enables us to classify Nivkh verb forms in a rather straightforward way, even within an intermediate area of in-between forms that display evident asymmetry of finite and non-finite syntactic functions.

In general, the syntactic interpretation and a scalar three-way representation of finiteness seem to be useful for analysis of verb forms not only language-specifically, but also cross-linguistically. It is known that a distinction between verb forms used as single or matrix predicates and those used in other syntactic functions holds in most languages, and is therefore more or less universal. There is also no doubt that, in many languages, functional syntactic characteristics of verb forms directly correlate with their morphological characteristics. Thus, in contrast to the traditional morphological view of finiteness, which is based on morphological distinctions of verb forms underlined by their syntactic (functional) distinctions, I suggest a syntactic approach to finiteness that deals with the same features of verb forms but in a reverse order. The principal distinction is drawn between the syntactic (functional) characteristics of verb forms that may be supported by their morphological properties. The given treatment of finiteness seems to be one possible way to overcome difficulties arising, first of all, in analysis of problematic forms and marginal cases that are widely attested in languages of different types.

Abbreviations

ASS	assumptive	EXCL	exclusive	NOM	nominative
CATEG	categorical	FUT	future	OPT	optative
CONV	converb	IND	indicative	PL	plural
COND	conditional	INT	intentional	SG	singular
COORD	coordinated	INTER	interrogative	TEMP	temporal
DAT	dative	MAN	manner	VIS	visual
DU	dual	NEG	negative		
DUBIT	dubitative	NML	nominalizer		

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