

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CAUCASIAN LANGUAGES
UM ESTUDO COMPARATIVO DE LÍNGUAS CAUCASIANAS
UN ESTUDIO COMPARATIVO DE LAS LENGUAS CAUCÁSICAS

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ABSTRACT: The authors explore the Avar language, which has not yet been sufficiently studied and is waiting for a detailed linguistic characterization by specialists. Following the scientific tradition of reconstruction of the protolanguage, this question is relevant for the Avar language: the language on which Avar is based is not historically attested, unlike in the case of French, whose development can be traced back over the centuries. Comparative study of Caucasian languages has become especially popular in recent years. The choice of French, one of the most scrutinized languages of global cultural significance, as the external etalon is explained not only by the lack of similar works in Avar linguistic literature but also by the fact that French linguists, who have long been researching Caucasian languages, particularly Avar, regrettably, neglect the comparative aspect of research.

KEYWORDS: Comparative juxtaposition of languages. Avar language. Caucasian languages. French language.

RESUMO: Os autores exploram a língua Avar, que ainda não foi suficientemente estudada e aguarda uma caracterização linguística detalhada por especialistas. Seguindo a tradição científica de reconstrução da protolíngua, essa questão é relevante para a língua Avar: a língua na qual o Avar se baseia não é atestada historicamente, ao contrário do francês, cujo desenvolvimento pode ser rastreado ao longo dos séculos. O estudo comparativo das línguas caucasianas tornou-se especialmente popular nos últimos anos. A escolha do francês, uma das línguas mais escrutinadas de significado cultural global, como o etalon externo se explica não apenas pela falta de obras semelhantes na literatura linguística Avar, mas também pelo fato de linguistas franceses, que há muito pesquisam as línguas caucasianas, particularmente o Avar, lamentavelmente, negligenciam o aspecto comparativo da pesquisa.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Juxtaposição comparativa de línguas. Linguagem avar. Línguas caucasianas. Língua francesa.

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RESUMEN: Los autores exploran la lengua avar, que aún no ha sido suficientemente estudiada y está a la espera de una caracterización lingüística detallada por parte de especialistas. Siguiendo la tradición científica de reconstrucción de la protolengua, esta pregunta es relevante para la lengua avar: la lengua en la que se basa Avar no está históricamente atestiguada, a diferencia del francés, cuyo desarrollo se remonta a siglos. El estudio comparativo de las lenguas caucásicas se ha vuelto especialmente popular en los últimos años. La elección del francés, uno de los idiomas de importancia cultural mundial más analizados, como etalon externo se explica no solo por la falta de trabajos similares en la literatura lingüística avar, sino también por el hecho de que los lingüistas franceses, que han estado investigando durante mucho tiempo lamentablemente, las lenguas caucásicas, en particular el avar, descuidan el aspecto comparativo de la investigación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Yuxtaposición comparativa de lenguas. Lengua avar. Lenguas caucásicas. Idioma francés.

Introduction

Dagestan, located in the Caucasus, at the junction of Asia and Europe, has long been known as a unique region in terms of its ethnic and linguistic diversity. As far back as in the times of medieval Arab geographers, Dagestan was known not only as “the country of mountains”, but also as “the mountain of languages” bearing about 50 languages. There is a beautiful parable: God was returning after the creation of the world when his sack of languages got caught on top of one of the many mountains of Dagestan, and all the languages remaining after the distribution poured out on the Dagestan soil...

The object of the study is one of the many languages of Dagestan, the Avar language spoken by over half a million Dagestanis, the language of the Nakh-Dagestani family of languages, the national language of Avars. A small number of speakers of this language are also found in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey.

The primary research method is the comparative method. Comparison of syntactic units of the same type was conducted in the article in terms of synchronicity in two aspects:

- 1) Demonstration of the phenomena present in both languages with both their similar and different features;
- 2) Demonstration of the specific characteristics of each of the languages with an indication of the possible equivalents in the other language.

Results and discussion

The fact is that “language is a mirror that reflects not only the real world around a person, the conditions of life but also his mentality, the people's view of themselves, their image of the world” (MAKAROVA; GAZILOV; GOZALOVA, 2018, p. 618). The French language, with which the Avar language is compared in this work, belongs traditionally to the Romance group of the Indo-European family of languages. Being one of the most widespread Indo-European languages, French has substantive similarities at the phonetic, morphological, lexical, and syntactic levels of the language hierarchy with Germanic, Baltic, Albanian, Armenian, and some dead languages. Moreover, we cannot rule out similarities between French and other languages that are not part of the Indo-European family of languages as there is a wide field for research (AVAGIAN; GOZALOVA, 2018; GAZILOV; GOZALOVA; AVAGYAN, 2018).

Concerning the Avar language, based on the result of linguistic research that has been accumulated to this day, it is reasonable to assume that Avar differs from French genealogically, arealogically, typologically, and statistically. Without dwelling on all the numerous differences between the two languages that exist because they belong to different systems and types, we shall note here only the most important of them (CHARACHIDZÉ, 1981; DUMÉSIL, 1960).

French is recognized as an analytic language, while Avar is a synthetic language that, nevertheless, contains some elements of analyticism (analytic verb forms).

In terms of phonetic comparison, the Avar language is characterized by rich consonantism (the French consonants are twice as few as the Avar ones: 20 versus 44).

The richness of the morphological means of the language can be judged at least by the fact that it has very many case forms of nouns. This variety of grammatical cases is primarily the result of the development of locative cases and contributes to the exceptionally rich nominative word-formation in Avar, in contrast to modern French, which has no cases.

In turn, a considerable range of grammatical phenomena characteristic of the French language is not found in Avar. For instance, the modern Avar language has no articles, which in French serve as a means of expressing definiteness and indefiniteness, as well as gender and number. However, it needs to be noted that the meaning of the French definite article “*le*” can sometimes be conveyed in Avar by demonstrative pronouns “*dov*”, “*ğov*” (= the one, the known, the one in question) and indefiniteness expressed by the article “*un*” can be reflected through the numeral “*co*” (= one). The latter can also be joined by a form made up of

interrogative pronouns to express indefiniteness: “*co ššibaligo žo*” (= **some** thing), “*co kinabaligo hajvan*” (= **some** animal), etc. This assumption is also supported by the fact that the elimination of the demonstrative pronoun in Avar often leads to a violation of the logical connection between sentences. This is exactly what happens in French when the article “*le*” is eliminated. Let us compare:

Avar: “*Dida viḡana co vas*” = French: “*J’ai vu un garçon*” = I saw a (some) boy.

Avar: “*Vas veḡanqulev vukana*” = French: “*Un garçon riait*” = A boy (in general, not the one I saw) was laughing.

A significant difference between the Avar and French languages is also the expression of correlation of nouns in French with the lexico-grammatical category of animate/inanimate, and in Avar – with the category of human/non-human. At first glance, the division of nouns into these categories in Avar and French have much in common: animate and inanimate nature, the difference in the formulation of questions addressed to these categories of nouns in Avar – “*ššiv?*”, “*ššij?*” (= who?) and “*ššib?*” (= what?); the influence of classification on the grammatical properties of nouns, etc. At the same time, the correlation of nouns in these languages with a certain class is motivated differently. In the Avar language, the assignment of nouns to the lexico-grammatical category of human/non-human is based on their sentient or non-sentient nature and concepts (GAZILOV, 2004, p. 12).

In French, the category of animate nouns includes nouns denoting animate beings and inanimate nouns denoting objects and phenomena of inanimate nature. Yet in this case, the animate/inanimate nature is usually denoted not by the noun form itself, as in Avar, but outside the noun, in the forms of pronouns that replace the name as an indirect object (“*en- de lui*”, “*y- lui*», «*dessus- sur lui*”). For example:

Animate: “*Je pense à elle*” (= I think about her);

Inanimate: “*J’y pense*” (= I think about it).

In turn, the lexico-grammatical category of a noun determines its grammatical class in Avar. Thus, all nouns from the non-human class belong in the Avar language to the third grammatical class, the impersonal: “*ruq*” (= house), “*bač*” (= wolf), “*xer*” (= grass), etc. The nouns of the personal class are subdivided into a class of masculine nouns: “*emen*” (= father), “*vas*” (= son, boy), “*jas*” (= daughter, girl), etc.

The association of a noun with classes is also formally evident in the Avar language in the control of other words. A predicate expressed by a non-transitive verb has the same index as the subject noun with which the predicate is correlated, e.g.:

“*Emen vačana*” (= Father came);

“*Ebel jačana*” (= Mother came);

“*Bač bačana*” (= Wolf came).

The predicate of a transitive verb indicates the direct object:

“*Insuca vačana vac roqov*” (= Father brought brother home);

“*Insuca jačana jac roqoŋ*” (= Father brought sister home).

The modifier most often expressed by an adjective indicates the class of the modified noun:

“*bercinaj jas*” (= beautiful young lady);

“*bercinav vas*” (= beautiful boy);

“*bercinab ruq*” (= beautiful house).

Here we should specify that this control is characteristic only of the singular form and not the plural in the Avar language:

“*Vasal račana*” (= Boys came);

“*Jasal račana*” (= Young women came);

“*Hijal račana*” (= Sheep came).

French, on the other hand, distinguishes between two genders – the masculine (male) and the feminine (female):

“*Une fille est venue*” (= Young woman came);

“*Un garçon est venu*” (= Boy came).

However, a specific feature of the expression of gender in French is that its differentiation may sometimes only exist in writing without being expressed morphologically in oral speech, as, for example, in the case of:

“*L`amie est venue*” (= Girlfriend came);

“*L`ami est venu*” (= Friend came) – both sentences are pronounced the same.

Moreover, in modern French, gender is not consistently motivated by sex differences. The motivation of grammatical gender by sex differences is only present in most animate nouns.

The main differences and similarities between the Avar and French verbs deserve a detailed discussion. The verb is one of the most complex and important sections of both Avar and French grammar. The need for a more detailed comparative study of verbal categories in Avar and French is also dictated by the fact that the basic, initial, or derivative structure for all

Avar and French sentences is the verb sentence where the verb is the main indicator of predicativity.

As demonstrated in Table 1, the Avar verb almost does not change depending on the grammatical person, unlike the French, yet the system of the grammatical moods of the verbs compared is practically identical.

Table 1 – Verb modification

<i>Verb categories</i>	<i>Avar</i>	<i>French</i>
Person	+	+
Mood	+	+
Voice	–	+
Tense/form	+	+
Number	+	+
Class/gender	+	+

Source: Prepared by the authors

Thus, of the four compared moods in the Avar language, three match with the French:

Avar - French:

Indicative Indicative

Subjunctive Subjunctive

Imperative Imperative

Interrogative Conditional.

However, French moods differ in form and meaning from one another. For example, the French imperative is always formally the same as the indicative. The distinction between the subjunctive and the indicative is also often blurred. The conditional mood is similar in form and content to the indicative (GAZILOV, 2013, p. 54).

The infinitive as it appears in modern French, in two morphological forms, the simple (“*aller*” – to go) and the perfect (“*être allé*” – having gone), which do not reflect class or number, is not characteristic of the Avar language. Some linguists believe it altogether incorrect to use the term “infinitive” (infinitivus) in relation to Avar, as in this language, the verb provides a varying indicator of class, which at the same time reflects number. For example, “*bačine*” – the impersonal class, “*vačine*” – the masculine class, “*jačine*” – the feminine class, and “*račine*” – the plural form of “to come”.

Some scholars qualify the infinitive as the imperative mood or a purposive form (GAZILOV, 2004, p. 26). The common French category of voice is also not characteristic of

the Avar language. This is primarily due to the functioning of a special construction in the Avar language, which does not exist in modern French – the ergative construction. The essence of the ergative construction is that the form of the case of the subject in the sentence depends on the transitivity and non-transitivity of the verb.

However, not all linguists agree that the voice position is absent in ergative languages. The positions on this issue vary and sometimes contradict each other. In this, it is probably necessary to consider that the languages typically classified as ergative differ in terms of syntax. For example, the Avar language belongs to the languages with consecutive ergative structure, while Georgian is a language with normative-ergative structure, that is, in modern Georgian, the transitive verb has both nominative and ergative constructions, while in Avar – only ergative.

We hold the view that the modern Avar language does not have the voice opposition found in the Indo-European languages, particularly in French. The fact is that the Avar ergative construction is externally similar to the French passive voice. Oftentimes, this is how it is translated (GAZILOV, 2004, p. 25), yet believing it to be passive is still a mistake. Furthermore, the French passive construction is always a derivative, whereas the Avar ergative construction is generative. For example, translating the subject of an Avar ergative sentence “*Dica xer becuneb bugo*” (= “*I am mowing the grass*”, literal translation: “*The grass being mown by me is*”) with an object in the French version “*L’herbe est fauché par moi*” (= *The grass is being mown by me*) is primarily due to the fact that active and passive voices are grammatically pronounced in modern French, which is not the case in Avar.

In this regard, of interest is the translation of the following two Avar sentences made by the French avarologist C. Tchekhoff:

“*Xer becuneb bugo*”.

“*Či vecunev vugo*”.

The scholar translates the first Avar sentence into French with a passive construction “*L’herbe est fauché*”, literally: “*L’herbe est impliqué dans une opération de fauche en ce moment*” (= *The grass is involved in the operation of mowing at this time*) (TCHEKHOFF, 1983, p. 301).

In the second case, the French translation already has the active voice: “*L’homme fauche l’herbe*”.

Yet in the Avar language itself, even though “*xer*” (= the grass) does not act itself (the grass cannot mow itself) and “*či*” (= the person) does, the structure of both constructions

remains the same except for class indicators. However, it needs to be noted that although the Avar verb itself is deprived of the voice category, participles in the Avar language can sometimes have active and passive meanings. In this, a peculiarity of Avar participles that distinguishes them from the French ones is that the same form of the Avar participle can have both passive “*dida viḡarav čī*” (= the person seen by me) and active “*dun viḡarav čī*” (= the person who saw me) meaning depending on the context.

Thus, the voice in the Indo-European sense is not characteristic of the Avar language; the declension of nouns by numerous cases and the presence of the ergative structure makes the grammatical structure of the Avar language peculiar and complex, in particular, eliminates the voice opposition typical of the French language.

Comparative analysis of the category of tenses in Avar and French is complicated by the fact that neither the number of tenses nor their nomenclature has been theoretically established for either of the languages studied in this article.

In modern French, the following issues remain unresolved:

1. Whether forms with “-rait” should be considered as provisional or modal (*conditionnel*);
2. Whether immediate constructions should be recognized as a verb form or periphrasis (“*il va faire*” = he is about to do; “*il vient de faire*” = he just did);
3. Whether to consider the opposition *passé simple (passé composé)/ imparfait* to be of temporal or type nature, as well as the opposition of simple and complex forms.

However, all French grammarians agree that a clear transmission of various temporal relations is the most distinctive feature of the French verb system.

In Avar linguistics, the number of tenses is also one of the controversial issues. For instance, P.K. Uslar indicates 31 tense forms in the indicative mood alone: 8 forms for the present tense, 17 forms for the past, 3 for the long past, and 3 for the future. The scheme proposed by L.I. Zhidkov, on the contrary, appears to be simple. The scholar identifies only three verb tenses, the present (“*čalula*” = reads), the future (“*čalila*” = will read читать), and the past (“*čalana*” = did read), as well as three forms of participles and one form of transgressives (BOKAREV, 2001, p. 56).

Bokarev explains this discrepancy by the fact that most of the forms considered by P.K. Uslar as special tenses are attributed by L.I. Zhirkov to the “descriptive” forms, i.e., the ones the meanings of which are determined by a combination of the main and auxiliary meanings of the corresponding forms (BOKAREV, 2001, p. 34).

Meanwhile, a school textbook of the Avar language offers four tenses. This is most likely due to the fact that the authors of the textbook sought to build them on the model of Russian grammar (GAZILOV, 2004, p. 37). Yet the majority of avarologists, both native and foreign, currently tend to distinguish three spheres of functioning of Avar verbal tenses: the present, the past, and the future. Here we will consider in detail the second sphere, the most differentiated in the Avar language, which consists of several temporal aspects:

1) Perfect, which has two forms of expression:

- a) the syntactic: “*habuna*” (= has done);
- b) the analytic: “*habun bugo*” (= has done).

This tense characterizes the action as a completed fact of the past with no emphasis on the process of its occurrence.

In modern French, the perfect tense can be expressed both by *passé simple* (“*fit*” = “*habuna*” = has done) and *passé composé* (“*a fait*” = “*habun bugo*” = has done). In this, *passé simple* (synthetic form) in French expresses an action completed in the past and usually not related to the present. It differs from *passé composé* (analytical form) in that the former is used only in literary texts, reports, while the latter tense is used, on the contrary, in living everyday speech. This distinction is characteristic of the Avar language Perfect tense as well.

2) Imperfect:

- a) “*ħaltulev vugooan*” (= was working [at the time when]);
- b) “*ħaltulev vukana*” (= worked);
- c) “*ħaltulev vukunaan*” (= worked [have been working]);

The last construction is also referred to as the past repetitive form because it expresses common repetitive actions in the past.

The imperfect tense is used in the Avar language to characterize an action in the past, at the moment of its occurrence. Herein, the time of termination of the action is not taken into account. The imperfect is also found in modern French (*imparfait*).

Avar: “*Ĝov ħaltulev vukana*” = He worked.

French: “*Il travaillait*” = He worked.

In this case, the imperfect denotes an unfinished action that is continuing at the point in time in the past that is in question:

Avar: “*Doba ċaq ċoron bukana*” = It was very cold there.

French: “*Il faisait très froid là-bas*” = It was very cold there. The imperfect is used here to express a state in the past:

Avar: “*Dun kižun vukana, ğov vačarav mexalda*” = I was sleeping when he came.

French: “*Je dormais quand il est venu*” = I was sleeping when he came.

In this case, the action expressed by the imperfect tense is concurrent with another action in the past. In addition, the imperfect in both languages may often express a repetitive ordinary action as well:

Avar: “*Dun radal tad vaqunaan*” = In the mornings, I would wake up.

French: “*Le matin je me levais*” = In the mornings, I would wake up.

3) Plusquamperfect (the long past tense)

This tense describes an action long past, usually preceded by another action in the past, and has three forms of expression:

a) “*habun bukun bugo*” = “turned out to have done (a long time ago),” expresses a connotation of non-obviousness;

b) “*habun bugoan*” = “has done long ago,” expresses a connotation of completeness;

c) “*qvadarun vukana*” = “was writing for a long time”. The corresponding tense in modern French is *plus-que-parfait*, which, however, has only one form (the auxiliary verb in the imperfect and the past participle), unlike the Avar (Table 2).

Table 2 – The corresponding tense in modern French and Avar

<i>Avar</i>	<i>French</i>
<i>Habun bukun bugo</i>	<i>avait fait</i> = “had done a long time ago”
<i>Habun bugoan</i>	
<i>Habun bukana</i>	

Source: Prepared by the authors

There is probably no need to dwell on other spheres of verbal tenses as well, so let us immediately give the general scheme of the indicative tenses of Avar and French (Table 3).

Table 3 – The scheme of the tenses of the indicative mood

<i>Time spheres</i>	<i>Forms of tenses</i>	
	<i>Avar</i>	<i>French</i>
Present	General Specific	Présent
Past	Perfect Imperfect Plusquamperfect	Passé composé Imparfait Plus-que-parfait

		Passé simple Passé antérieur
Future	Simple Compound Definite Intent	Futur simple Futur antérieur Futur antérieur dans le passé

Source: Prepared by the authors

Below we also provide a scheme of time correspondences, which reflects the general trend (Table 4).

Table 4 – Time correspondence scheme

<i>Time spheres</i>	<i>Forms of tenses</i>		
	<i>Avar</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>English</i>
Present	General	Présent	Present Simple Present Continuous
	Specific		
			Present Perfect Continuous
Past	Perfect	Passé simple	Past Simple
		Passé compose	Present Perfect
	Imperfect	Imparfait	Past Simple
			Past Continuous
Plusquamperfect	Plus-que-parfait	Past Perfect	
		Past Perfect Continuous	
Future	Simple	Futur simple	Future Simple
	Compound		Future Perfect
			Future Perfect Continuous
	Definite	Futur antérieur	
Intent	Futur immédiat (proche)	Future Simple (be going to)	

Source: Prepared by the authors

Semantically integral are not only the forms of the indicative mood but also the forms of some other moods, such as the Avar subjunctive and the French conditional (Table 5).

Table 5 – Example of the subjunctive mood in French and Avar

<i>Avar</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Translation</i>
“ <i>Mun roqov vukunev ani, dun xurive unaan</i> ”	“ <i>Si tu restais à la maison, j`irais au champ</i> ”	If you had stayed home, I would have gone into the field.
“ <i>Mun vačun vukarav ani son, dun ine vukana gosuqe</i> ”	“ <i>Si tu étais venu hier, je serais allé chez lui</i> ”	If you had come yesterday, I would have gone to him.

Source: Prepared by the authors

Conclusion

Thus, the modern Avar and French languages, which differ from each other genealogically, areologically, typologically, and statistically, are characterized by a rich and branching temporal system, the comparative study of which reveals more similarities than differences. Most tense forms of the Avar language have certain correspondences in the French language. These correspondences can and should be relied on when studying these languages as they can help create the conditions for accelerating the process of learning a foreign language. In addition, the highlighted differences and similarities also contribute to overcoming linguistic interference in the learning process.

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