Mermaid construction: a case of Kazym Khanty[1]

Alexandra Shikunova, Laboratory of formal models in linguistics, NRU HSE, Moscow

The concern of my talk is the syntax of mermaid construction in Kazym dialect of Khanty (< Finno-Ugric < Uralic) language. The data comes from fieldwork.

Mermaid construction (MMC) consists of the following parts: [[Clause] Noun Copula] (for detailed description and criteria, see Tsunoda (2020)). MMC can express modal, aspectual, evidential and other meanings. This type of construction has been attested in multiple languages, most prominent groups being Tibeto-Burman and languages of East Asia, according to Tsunoda (2020).

Below are examples of mermaid construction in Khanty.

(1) a. ma ari-ti śir-ɛm wɵ-ƛ
I sing-NFIN.NPST possibility-POSS.1SG be-NPST.[3SG]

b. ma ari-ti śir tăj-ƛ-əm
I sing-NFIN.NPST possibility have-NPST-1SG
'I can sing (lit. I have a possibility to sing)'.

The Noun slot can be filled with various nouns (*śir* 'possibility', *numəs* 'thought', *kɵm* 'time, moment', *kaš* 'wish', etc.). The construction can have the meaning of possibility, wish, intention, etc. depending on Noun. The Copula slot can be occupied with content verbs like *tăjti* 'to have', *wɵjətti* 'to find', *wɵšti* 'to get lost'.

I suggest the following structure for Khanty MMC (examples (1a-1b) have structures (2a-2b) respectively).

(2) a. $[_{TP}\ [_{DP}\ \text{ma}_{i DP}\ [_{DP}\ [_{NP}\ [_{CP}\ [_{TP}\ \text{PRO}_i\ [\ \text{ariti}_V\ ]\ ]\ ]\ \text{śirɛm}_N\ ]\ ]\ ]\ \text{wɵƛ}_V\ ]$
b. $[_{TP}\ \text{ma}_{i DP}\ [_{VP}\ [_{DP}\ [_{NP}\ [_{CP}\ [_{TP}\ \text{PRO}_i\ [\ \text{ariti}_V\ ]\ ]\ ]\ \text{śir}_N\ ]\ ]\ \text{tăjƛəm}_V\ ]\ ]$

The embedded clause is the adjunct of Noun (*śir*), which is the argument of the matrix verb. PRO in [Spec, TP] of the embedded clause is controlled by the subject (*ma*) in matrix clause's [Spec, TP] or the possessor of Noun in [Spec, DP]. The clause can appear before (3a) and after (3b) Noun, whereas other adnominal infinitival constructions in Khanty are strictly prenominal (Starchenko, 2019; Bikina et al., 2020).

(3) a. wasaj-en [xot oməs-ti] śir-əƛ wɵ-ƛ
Wasya-POSS.2SG house build-NFIN.NPST possibility-POSS.3SG be-NPST[3SG]

b. wasaj-en śir-əƛ wɵ-ƛ [xot oməs-ti]
Wasya-POSS.2SG possibility-POSS.3SG be-NPST[3SG] house build-NFIN.NPST
'Wasya can build a house'.

Khanty MMCs allow temporal adverbs (4), passivization (5) and negation in the embedded clause (6).

(4) wasa-jen [xăƛɛwət ƛapkaj-a măn-ti] kɵm tăj-s, tăm
Wasya-POSS.2SG tomorrow shop-DAT go-NFIN.NPST possibility have-PST[3SG] this
xat-əƛ măn-s
day-POSS.3SG go-PST[3SG]
'Wasya could go to the shop tomorrow, but he went today'.

(5) mɯŋ [aŋke-ƛ-aw-ən ƛapət-ti] śir-ew wɵ-ƛ
we mother-PL-POSS.1PL-LOC feed-NFIN.NPST possibility-POSS..1PL be-NPST[3SG]
'Our parents can feed us'.

[1]

(6) %ma [tămxătəɬ školaj-a ăn măn-ti] śir tăj-ɬ-əm
I today school-DAT NEG go-NFIN.NPST possibility have-NPST-1SG
'I can skip school today (lit. I have a possibility not to go to school today)'.

Nevertheless, subject of the embedded clause must coincide with the matrix subject or the possessor of Noun.

(7) *ma kaš-ɛm wɵ-ɬ [năŋ jira măn-ti]
I wish-POSS.1SG be-NPST[3SG] you away go-NFIN.NPST
Expected: 'I want you to go away (lit. I have a wish that you would go away)'.

The subject receives a theta-role in embedded as well as in the matrix clause, which indicates that this is a case of control. Also, Khanty MMCs pass the partial control test (Landau, 2001).

(8) wasa-jen$_i$ [PRO$_{i+j}$ xoɬəm šos-ən wɵjtant-ti] piś-əɬ
Wasya-POSS.2SG three hour-LOC meet-NFIN.NPST possibility-POSS.3SG
wɵ-ɬ
be-NPST[3SG]
'Wasya can meet at three o'clock'.

The generative approach gives an unexpected result: Tsunoda (2020) argues that MMCs merely appear biclausal, while actually there is only one clause. However, in my talk I am going to show that mermaid construction in Kazym Khanty is biclausal and exhibits control. This analysis may be extended to more well-researched MMCs in other languages.

References

Bikina, D., Rakhman, D., Starchenko, A., and Toldova, S. (2020). Kazym khanty non-finite forms: Multifunctionality and variability in the amount of structure. In *BOOK OF ABSTRACTS*, page 339.

Landau, I. (2001). *Elements of control: Structure and meaning in infinitival constructions*, volume 51. Springer Science & Business Media.

Starchenko, A. (2019). Periphrastic nominalization in kazym khanty. *talk at Syntax of Uralic Languages*, 3.

Tsunoda, T. (2020). *Mermaid Construction: A Compound-Predicate Construction with Biclausal Appearance*, volume 6. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.