Mermaid construction: a case of Kazym Khanty

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Kazym Khanty

Uralic > Finno-Ugric > Ob'-Ugric > Khanty > Kazym Khanty

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Brief typological portrait of Khanty:

- SOV basic word order
- head-marking with respect to both noun phrases and clauses
- nouns can have 3 case forms: dative, locative and unmarked nominative
- pronouns can have accusative, locative and unmarked nominative case.

Mermaid constructions

Mermaid construction (MMC) is a construction that superficially looks like (1). 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).

(1) [Clause] Noun Copula

MMCs are defined by 5 criteria that describe a prototype of a mermaid construction (ibid.).

i. The structure is as shown in (1) – superficially at least.
ii. The Noun is an independent word (not a clitic) that is a noun.
iii. The subject of the Clause and the Noun are non-coreferential.
iv. The Clause can be used as a sentence by itself.
v. The Clause is not the subject of the "Noun + Copula" (like in (2)).

(2) [He won] a surprise is. (madeup language)

Khanty MMC conforms to all of the five criteria above. Below are examples of mermaid construction in Khanty.

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

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

Noun slot options:

- *śir* 'possibility'
- *numəs* 'thought'
- *kəm* 'time, moment', etc.

Copula slot options:

- *tăjti* 'to have'
- *wəjətti* 'to find'
- *wəšti* 'to get lost', etc.

Tsunoda (2020) argues for monoclausality of mermaid constructions. Khanty MMCs appear to constitute a counterexample.

Evidence for control

Subject of the embedded clause must coincide with the matrix subject or the possessor of Noun (4). The subject receives a theta-role in embedded as well as in the matrix clause, which indicates that this is a case of control.

(4) *__ma__ kaš-ɛm wə-ʌ [__năŋ__ jira măn-ti]
__I__ wish-POSS.1SG be-NPST[3SG] __thou__ away go-NFIN.NPST
Expected: 'I want you to go away (lit. I have a wish that you would go away)'.

Mermaid constructions in Khanty pass the partial control test (Landau, 2001). The possessor of Noun in (5) serves as antecedent for the PRO subject of the embedded clause, which denotes not only Wasya, but also someone he's meeting.

(5) wasa-jen$_i$ [PRO$_{i+j}$ xoʌəm šos-ən wəjtant-ti]
Vasya-POSS.2SG three hour-LOC meet-NFIN.NPST
piś-əʌ wə-ʌ
possibility-POSS.3SG be-NPST[3SG]
'Vasya can meet at three o'clock'.

Dismissing other empty categories

i. **Restructuring**
So-called 'long passive' is impossible in mermaid constructions (6).

(6) *ma wasa-jen-ən sɛŋk-ti śir __tăj-ʌ-aj-əm__
I Vasya-POSS.2SG-LOC hit-NFIN.NPST possibility __have-NPST-PASS-1SG__
Expected: 'I can get hit by Vasya'.

Clausal negation is partially allowed inside of Clause, which constitutes a point against restructuring (7).

(7) %ma [tămxătəʌ školaj-a __ăn măn-ti__] śir tăj-ʌ-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)'.

ii. **Subject raising**
The argument against subject raising comes from a test employing scope of negative pronouns (8).

(8) tăm xop-ən __nɛm xuj-at__ ʌowəʌ-ti śir ăntəm
this boat-LOC __nobody who-INDEF__ [row-NFIN.NPST] possibility NEG.EX
'Nobody can row in this boat (*This boat is such that it can go without anybody rowing)'.
NEG > ∃; *∃ > NEG

The negative pronoun *nɛm xujat* 'nobody' can only have wide scope in (8).

Structure of Khanty MMCs

I suggest the following structure for Khanty MMC (trees (1-2) correspond to (3a-3b)).

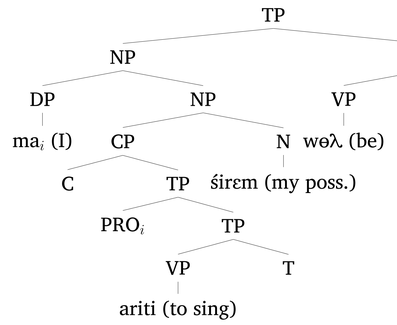

Figure 1. Copula MMC

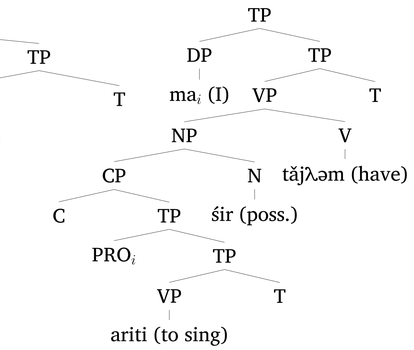

Figure 2. Matrix predicate MMC

Nominal shell

The Noun of MMC in Khanty appears to lack some layers of nominal structure. Adopting the nominal structure from Longobardi (2001), I show what modifiers Noun can take in the schema in (9).

(9) Quantifier > Dem > Poss > Num > Adj > N
* # # * OK

Adjectives attached to Noun can modify the meaning of the whole MMC, rather than merely the Noun itself (10).

(10) ma ari-ti jăm śir-ɛm wə-ʌ
I sing-NFIN.NPST good possibility-POSS.1SG be-NPST[3SG]
'I can sing very well'.

Demonstratives and possessive markers are not possible to test, because a noun inside of MMC cannot have any referent, and hence it cannot be a possessor or have a determiner due to semantic reasons. The nominal shell of Khanty MMC lacks several layers that a regular noun has, which is quite expected (most probably due to grammaticalization).

References

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Longobardi, G. (2001). *The structure of DPs: Some principles, parameters, and problems*. Citeseer.

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