Alignment change and changing alignments: the Armenian perfect and its Iranian model

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This paper seeks to combine the insights gathered in a corpus study of the periphrastic perfect in Classical Armenian texts from the 5th century CE and research into the socio-historical and political interactions of the Armenians and their Iranian neighbours in the same time period.

It is argued that the construction of the Classical Armenian perfect, which consists of a participle in *-eal* (< PIE *-lo-) and an (optional) form of the copula, is most accurately described as tripartite morphosyntactic alignment (for other views, cf. BENVENISTE 1952, STEMPEL 1983, WEITENBERG 1986, KÖLLIGAN 2013):

- Intransitive and transitive passive verbs construe with a NOM subject and subject agreement of the copula;

- Transitive active verbs take GEN agents, ACC objects, and the copula is a petrified 3.SG.

This pattern shows some diachronic variation and by the 8th century CE has given way to NOM-ACC alignment under pressure from the rest of the verbal system. Based on observations in the corpus data and typological data, this alignment pattern can be explained as a case of pattern replication and pivot matching of an Middle Iranian, specifically Parthian, ERG-ABS model in pre-literary times and subsequent adaptation to Armenian requirements (cf. MEYER 2016, 2017).

This explanation is lent further credence by the existence of both a great wealth of Iranian loanwords in Armenian, as well as a small number of other linguistic patterns that have clear Iranian parallels. Furthermore, the prevalence of political quarrels between the Parthian rulers of Armenia and other Iranians, their adoption of Christianity in c. 301 CE, frequent intermarriage with Armenians, and the lack of any Parthian language data in the area suggest that the existence of Iranian syntactic patterns in Armenian is due not only to language contact, but indeed to language shift of the Parthian ruling class to Armenian.

References

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