

# Argument Structure and Impersonality in Avar

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## Abstract

The article presents a preliminary overview of the impersonality category in Avar. On the basis of valency patterns, argument structure, and verb lability I point out several syntactic constructions with impersonal semantics. The term 'impersonality' here covers referential impersonals, verbal impersonals, and null-subject impersonal predicates.

## 1. Introduction

Avar belongs to the Avar-Andic language group of the Nakh-Daghestanian (or East Caucasian) family and is spoken in the Republic of Daghestan by 814,500 speakers.<sup>1</sup> This figure also includes the Andic, Tsezic, and Archi peoples with a total number of about 40,000 speakers. A significant number of the Avar language speakers live in Azerbaijan where, in accordance with the data of the last Soviet census of 1989, their number was estimated to be 44,100 (Alexeev 2001: 203). The Avars call themselves *mašarulal* 'mountaineers' and their language *mašarul mac:* 'mountain language'.

The unmarked order of constituents in Avar is SOV, although all possible permutations of major constituents are admissible. Talking about the East Caucasian languages, van den Berg (2005: 171) notes:

Grammatical relations are not sensitive to the relative order of the verbal arguments in the clause: word order encodes primarily pragmatic functions like topic, focus, givenness, and contrastiveness. SOV is the neutral order, whereas OVS may be used to put the object in focus. To place the subject in focus, OSV order is applied – not SVO.

Avar is a language with the ergative alignment: the S/P arguments take the absolutive case, and the A argument is in the ergative case, while the verb agrees with S/P in gender. Verb agreement is realised by single-consonant gender markers which are either prefixal<sup>2</sup> or suffixal (participles).<sup>3</sup> The gender in the singular is marked by the following consonants: w for male human, j for female human, and b for non-human; for example: *bač'ine*, *wač'ine*, *jač'ine* 'to come'; *bač'arab*, *wač'araw*, *jač'araj* 'come.PP'. In the plural there are two markers for all the three genders: the prefix *r-* and the suffix *-l*: *rač'aral* 'PL of come.PP'. The category of person is not marked on the verb.

As material for the article samples of modern Avar prose literature, as well as

<sup>1</sup> According to the 2002 census presented at <http://www.perepis2002.ru>

<sup>2</sup> Not all the verbs have the prefixal gender marker.

<sup>3</sup> Derived verbs and the verb ha-G-ize 'to do' have the infixal gender marker.

published collections of fairy tales and proverbs have been used, especially the following publications:

1. Alieva, F., (1987). *Q'añilab c'ad* (Blue Rain). Maxačkala. (FA)
2. Hamzatov, R. (1975). *Dir Daristan* (My Daghestan). Maxačkala. (RH)
3. Medžidova, Ch. (1991). *Awar adabijatalul čiraq* (Cresset of the Avar Literature). Maxačkala. (CM)
4. Muhamadov, M. (1991). *Goro-c'er balelde cebe* (Before the Hail). Maxačkala. (MM)
5. Rasulov, M. et al. (1991). *Mařarural godek'anir* (Mountaineers at the gathering place). Maxačkala. (MR)

The article is divided into three sections. The second section contains a description of grammatical structures and processes connected with impersonal semantics in Avar: valency, argument structure, and lability. In the third section the category of impersonality and semantic types of impersonal predicates are discussed.

## 2. Valency and argument structure

Avar has the following main valency patterns: intransitive, transitive, affective, and possessive.<sup>4</sup> The intransitive valency pattern consists of either a one-place verb [ABS], as shown in (1) or a two-place verb [ABS, OBL] with an oblique object, as in (2).<sup>5</sup>

- (1) *ředer-go w-eker-ana ha-w*  
quickly-FOC I-run-PRT DEM-I:ABS  
'He ran quickly.' (MM: 120)
- (2) *he-l-dasa-řagi-iř: mun ĥinq'-ula-r-e-w*  
DEM-PL-ABL1-even-QS you:ABS scare-PR-NEG-PRP-I  
'Are not even you afraid of them?' (MR: 19)

The transitive valency pattern includes either a two-place verb [ERG, ABS], as in (3) or a three-place verb [ERG, ABS, OBL] with an oblique object (4).

- (3) *bac'-ic:a ř'w-ana dur řaqabi*  
wolf-ERG kill-PRT you.GEN sheep.PL:ABS  
'The wolf killed your sheep.' (MR: 58)
- (4) *he-b mac:'-ař: ř'-una die kwarř'abi*  
DEM-III language-ERG give-PRT I.DAT wing.PL:ABS  
'This language gave me wings.' (RH: 76)

Affective and possessive constructions in Avar share the same valency pattern: [OBL, ABS]. The experiencer of the affective constructions is either in the dative case

<sup>4</sup> Arguments of two main valency patterns are marked "non-canonically", see, e.g., Onishi (2001: 1–4).

<sup>5</sup> All the grammatical and spatial cases, except for the ergative and the absolutive, are treated as oblique in this context.

or in the first essive case<sup>6</sup> depending on whether it is used with verbs of emotion (e.g. *G-oł'ize* 'to love', *xiralize* 'to appreciate, to like', etc.) or with verbs of perception (e.g. *G-iḡize* 'to see', *raḡize* 'to hear', *ḡaze* 'to know', etc.). The verbs of emotion require the experiencer in the dative case (5), and the verbs of perception require the first essive case of the experiencer (6).<sup>7</sup>

(5) *š:i-b due b-oł'-ule-b ḡaj-iš: ḡarac-iš:*  
 what-III you.DAT III-love-PRP-III knowledge-QS money-QS  
 'What do you like, knowledge or money?' (MR: 135)

(6) *ha-b kina-b-go maḡ'-iḡ-iš:-xa ha-sda b-iḡ-ule-b b-ug-e-b*  
 DEM-III all-III-FOC dream-ESS4-QS-EMPH DEM-ESS1 III-see-PRP-III III-be-PRP-III  
 'Does he dream about all this?' (lit. 'Does he see it all in dream?'). (MM: 28)

Possessive constructions require the possessor either in the genitive case (7) or in the second essive case (8), where the semantic difference seems to be the expression of a temporal vs. permanent possessor.

(7) *dir coḡo jas j-igo*  
 I.GEN only daughter:ABS II-be.PR  
 'I have only the one daughter.' (MM: 21)

(8) *diq b-ugo guča-b jaray*  
 I.ESS2 III-be.PR powerful-III weapon:ABS  
 'I have a powerful weapon.' (RH: 123)

One and the same verb in Avar can have different valencies depending on whether it is used transitively or intransitively. This property of Avar verbs is discussed in the following subsection.

## 2.1 Lability

Most of the Avar verbs are labile in terms of association "with two valency patterns, a transitive valency pattern and an intransitive valency pattern that lacks the Ergative agent argument", as Haspelmath (1993: 289) puts it. Actually, an ergative subject of a transitive verb or an oblique subject of an affective verb can be omitted for pragmatic reasons to produce an intransitive verb.

The verb *G-uḡize* 'to burn' is used transitively in (9), and intransitively in (10):

(9) *he-b c'a ḡabdal-asuqe ḡ'-uni he-s ži-w-go-gi*  
 this-III fire:ABS idiot-LAT2 give-COND DEM-ERG self-i-FOC-and  
*cogi-jal-gi r-uḡ-ize b-eh-ula*  
 other-PL-and PL-burn-INF III-can-PR  
 'If you give this fire to an idiot, he can burn both himself and others.' (RH: 269)

<sup>6</sup> Spatial cases are named here in accordance with the classification of Hewitt (2006: 263), except for the allative case, which is called lative here.

<sup>7</sup> The primary meaning of the first essive case is the location of an object on a surface.

- (10) *dun w-uḥ-ule-w w-ugo*  
 I:ABS I-burn-PRP-I I-be.PR  
 'I burn.' (RH: 252)

The affective verb *raʕize* 'to hear' is used transitively in (11) and (12), and intransitively in (13) and (14):

- (11) *co q'o-jalda kortasda raʕ-un b-ugo he-w či xw-an-ilan*  
 one day-ESS1 PN.ESS1 hear-PCVB III-be.PR DEM-I man.ABS die-PRT-CML  
 'One day Kortaw heard that this man died.' (MR: 64)
- (12) *dida raʕ-ule-l r-ugo he-l raʕabi*  
 I.ESS1 hear-PRP-PL PL-be.PR DEM-PL WORDS.PL:ABS  
 'I hear these words.' (FA: 17)
- (13) *hele-xa hanže raʕ-ule-b b-ugo rocada rak'*  
 indeed-EMPH now hear-PRP-III III-be.PR chest cartridge.ESS1 heart  
*k'ut'-ule-b kuc*  
 beat-PRP-III way  
 'Now indeed it is heard how the heart beats in the chest.' (MM: 96)
- (14) *hanže dayistan-aḥ:ul haraḷ' rik:'ade raʕ-ule-b b-ugo*  
 now Daghestan-GEN voice:ABS far.LAT1 hear-PRP-III III-be.PR  
 'Now Daghestan is known far away' (lit. 'Now Daghestan's voice is heard.'). (RH: 40)

The examples above demonstrate P-labile verbs, when the S of intransitives equals the P of transitives. An A-labile verb (S = A) is shown used intransitively in (15), and transitively in (16):

- (15) *c'aq' qant'-un q'arum-gi kw-an-ila*  
 very be greedy-PCVB PN:ABS-and eat-PRT-QUOT  
 'And Qarum ate very greedily.' (CM: 13)
- (16) *he-l: čurpa kwan-ala-ro*  
 DEM-ERG soup eat-PR-NEG  
 'She does not eat the soup.' (FA: 122)

In the same way, semantically intransitive verbs can be used in syntactically transitive constructions, as shown in the following examples where the verb *G-ač'ine* 'to come' is used intransitively (17) and transitively (18):

- (17) *hale dun w-ač'-ana hani-we*  
 MIR I:ABS I-come-PRT here-I.LAT5  
 'And now I came here.' (RH: 15)
- (18) *ʕor-uc:a c'ul b-ač'-ana*  
 river-ERG timber:ABS III-come-PRT  
 'The river brought timber.' (Bokarev 1949: 41)

Functions of the ergative case in Avar are not limited to only the A argument marking; the ergative case is also used in the instrumental meaning. The verb in (18) can also be understood intransitively if the instrumental meaning of the ergative case is assumed here.

### 3. Impersonality

Siewierska (2008: 3–4) defines the semantic characteristics of impersonality as centred on either agentivity or reference. The referential type of impersonals includes constructions with a non-specified human agent, and from the point of view of agentivity Siewierska distinguishes between the following types: weather phenomena (meteorological); bodily sensations and emotions; and modality. Blevins (2006: 238), on the contrary, distinguishes between impersonal constructions and “impersonal predicates that express weather conditions, natural forces, etc.” which lack “a logical subject, and thus cannot participate in passive or impersonal constructions”.

I will distinguish between the referential impersonal constructions with omitted third-person plural pronouns, verbal impersonals, and null-subject impersonal predicates which roughly coincide with the agentivity type of impersonality of Siewierska.

#### 3.1 Referential impersonals

According to Blevins (2003: 473), impersonals “are insensitive to the argument structure”. Referential impersonal constructions in Avar will here be defined as constructions with an omitted third-person plural pronoun, where the pronoun dropping neither permutes argument relations nor removes arguments.

As has been noted above, person is not marked on the verb. Usually, omission of arguments of a valency pattern makes the sentence non-grammatical, except for the pronoun dropping.<sup>8</sup>

Dropping of the first (20) and second (19) personal pronouns is only possible when they can be recovered from the discourse context.

(19) *š:aj* *ʃod-ule-w*  
 why cry-PRP-I}  
 ‘Why are you crying?’

(20) *per* *k-une-b* *b-uk'-un*  
 onion:ABS eat-PRP-III III-be-PCVB  
 ‘Because I am eating onion.’ (MR: 7)

<sup>8</sup> The person of dropped pronouns is underterminable in conditional clauses, where it can either be the second singular or the third singular/plural, for example:

(a) *hoc'o-gi* *λ'oʃt-ula* *ʃemer č:'ik'-ani*  
 honey:ABS-and taste bitter-PR much lick-CND  
 ‘Even honey tastes bitter if one licks it (too) much.’ (CM: 30)

When a dropped pronoun in a non-conditional clause cannot be recovered from the context, it most probably is the third-person plural pronoun. In the Avar language, the third-person plural pronouns are omitted when it is important to stress a reference to an indefinite human agent, as shown in (21) and (22):

- (21) *zankila-lda ce-be baŕarhalil čurpa t-un b-ugo*  
 PN-ESS1 before-III.LAT5 haricot.GEN soup:ABS put-PCVB III-be.PR  
 ‘In front of Zankilaj they have put a (bowl of) haricot soup.’ (MR: 6)

- (22) *dir son-al t’iq’wa-jalda qw-an r-ugo*  
 I.GEN year-PL:ABS horseshoe-ESS1 write-PCVB PL-be.PR  
 ‘My years are written on my horseshoe.’ (CM: 12)

Bokarev (1949: 115) gives an example (23) of the impersonal passive (*bezličnaja stradatelnost’*) and explains it as only being possible in constructions with a compound predicate:

- (23) *anž’-ab-go balah b-ač’-une-b b-uk’-ana mefer řundul*  
 seven-ATR-FOC trouble:ABS III-come-PRP-III III-be-PRT nose:ABS ear.PL:ABS  
*kwer-al q’ot’-ule-l r-uk’-ana*  
 hand-PL:ABS cut-PRP-PL PL-be-PRT  
 ‘All the seven troubles were coming; nose, ears, hands were being cut.’  
 (Bokarev 1949: 115)

As a matter of fact, the examples (21) and (22) on the one hand, and (23) on the other hand, are syntactically identical, since in all of them the third-person plural pronoun is dropped to gain the impersonal semantics. The only difference is the TAM category in use: perfect in (21) and (22), and imperfect in (23). However, impersonal constructions are also possible in simple predicates, as in (24):

- (24) *q’aluda j-at-ana zulajxat*  
 noon.ESS1 II-find-PRT PN:ABS  
 ‘At noon Zulajxat was found’ (or ‘they found’). (FA: 216)

### 3.2 Verbal impersonals

In Avar agentless passives can be categorized as verbal impersonals. The Avar language does not have “sentence-pairs like active and passive that allow precisely the same semantic roles to be expressed by different syntactic positions” (Comrie 2004: 118). Since the only possible case for the logical subject is the ergative (instrumental) case, which would switch the construction from passive into active, the logical subject cannot be expressed in passive constructions. Thus, the passive in the Avar language can only be impersonal.

Agentless passives in Avar are possible in compound predicates with the past participle, as in (25) and (26).

- (25) *nužer c:’ar-al hiq’-ize die huq’-ara-b b-ugo*  
 you.PL.GEN name-PL:ABS ask-INF I.DAT forbid-PP-III III-BE.PR  
 ‘I am forbidden to ask your names.’ (RH: 470)

- (26) *ħanč:’ida req’-ara-b b-uk’-una bi*  
 bird.ESS1 fit-PP-III III-be-PR blood:ABS  
 ‘The blood is fitted for the bird’ (i.e., the amount of blood is proportional to the size of a bird). (RH: 24)

The difference between verbal and referential impersonals is obvious in the structure of compound predicates: verbal impersonals include the past participle.

### 3.3 Impersonal predicates

Predicates expressing atmospheric precipitation generally include the polysemantic labile verb *G-aze*. In different contexts this verb can have the following meanings: ‘to hang, to be hanged; to build, to be built; to pour, to be poured; to spend time’, etc. It is difficult to determine whether the verb *G-aze* is used transitively or intransitively in these constructions, or in other words, whether A is suppressed (e.g., sky) or lacking, as in the following examples:

- (27) *rahduq b-a-le-b b-uk’-ana c:’ad*  
 outside.ESS2 III-pour-PRP-III III-be-PRT rain  
 ‘Outside it was raining.’ (RH: 65)
- (28) *b-a-le-b b-uk’-ana řazu*  
 III-pour-PRP-III III-be-PRT snow  
 ‘It was snowing.’ (FA: 171)

A probable missing A argument can be traced in (29), where the verb with the explicit transitive semantics is used:

- (29) *čiq č’wa-le-b b-ugo*  
 drizzle kill-PRP-III III-be.PR  
 ‘It is drizzling.’ (Saidov 1967)

Verbs of bodily sensation and emotion constitute the class of “experiential predicates” (Haspelmath 2001: 59). In Avar the experiential predicates can further be subdivided into two groups: verbs of emotion have the affective valency pattern and are used in personal affective constructions; constructions of bodily sensation can be built either personally or impersonally depending on the type of experience evaluation. Personal experience presupposes the use of personal constructions with the experiencer in the absolutive case (30), while the expression of common or ambient sensations occurs in impersonal predicates (31):

- (30) *kida-l-go kwač-ala a-sul ħat’al*  
 always-PL-FOC be cold.PR DEM-GEN foot.PL:ABS  
 ‘His feet always get cold.’ (MM: 213)
- (31) *ħaq’iq’at-alda-gi kwač-an b-uk’-ana ha-b k’udia-b k’alřa-jal:ub*  
 truth-ESS1-AND be cold.PCVB III-be-PRT DEM-III big-III palace-ESS5.III  
 ‘And to tell the truth, it was cold in this big palace.’ (MM: 208)

Modal impersonal predicates include infinitives in combination with verbs *G-ehize* ‘may’ (32), *k:eze* ‘must, to have to’ (33), etc.

(32) *t'ok'-ab kwat'-ize beh-ula-ro*  
 more-ATR.III be late-INF may-PR-NEG  
 ‘One may not come late any more.’ (RH: 13)

(33) *š:i-b-ab nux-ał: hit'in-go ruhun-ab piša-jalde*  
 what-III-ATR.III time-ERG small-FOC common-ATR.III occupation-LAT1  
*w-uss-ine k:-ana*  
 I-return-INF must-PRT  
 ‘Every time one had to return to a less common occupation.’ (RH: 12)

#### 4. Conclusion

The main valency patterns in Avar are intransitive, transitive, affective, and possessive. The majority of verbs are labile. This verb lability probably compensates the personal passivization, so the passive in the Avar language can only be impersonal. The category of impersonality includes referential impersonals, verbal impersonals, and null-subject impersonal predicates. The referential impersonals do not change valency and are built by dropping the third-person plural pronouns, in order to obtain an indefinite human reference. Verbal impersonals include agentless passives. The logical subject of agentless passives cannot be expressed syntactically, and impersonal predicates lack the logical subject.

#### Abbreviations

I-III	genders
1-5	local cases
A	agent of action verbs
ABL	ablative
ATR	attributive
ABS	absolutive
CML	complementizer
CND	conditional
CVB	converb
DEM	demonstrative pronoun
EMPH	emphatic particle
ESS	essive
FOC	focus particle
GEN	genitive
G	gender marker
INF	infinitive
MIR	mirative particle
NEG	negation suffix
OBL	oblique
P	patient of action verbs
PCVB	past converb
PL	plural
PN	proper noun

PP	past participle
PR	present tense
PRP	present participle
PRT	preterite
QUOT	quotational particle
QS	question particle
S	single argument of monovalent verbs

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