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Assertive Verb Forms in Lak

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In my article on the typological significance of status in the Lak verbal system (Friedman, 1984), I accepted the terminologies of Zirkov (1955) and Burc'uladze (1979) for the purpose of examining Lak status categories in the broader context of Balkan and Caucasian languages. Implicit in my acceptance of that terminology was the acceptance of certain assumptions about grammatical meanings associated with those terms unless otherwise specified. Thus, for example, I used the term *confirmative* (based on the Russian *utverditel'nyj* 'affirmative' and *podtverditel'nyj* 'confirmative') for the synthetic finite verbal forms based on the participle in *-ss[a]-*, and I cited some examples of typical usage without being able to enter into greater detail, due to the paucity of information in the available sources. I also attempted to draw some limited parallels with forms called *confirmative* in Balkan languages, e.g., Bulgarian, Macedonian, and Turkish. In this article dedicated to Academician Akaki Šanidze, I wish to examine these Lak screeves in greater detail, and I will try to characterize their basic meaning, which, as I hope to justify here, I will label *assertive*.

I will be primarily concerned with the synthetic, finite, aspectually unmarked, nonmodal present and past screeves of the type *čičajssar*, *-a*, *-u* ('write,' present), *čivčussar*, *-a*, *-u* ('write,' past), and to a lesser extent *čičajssija*, *-v* ('write,' imperfect). In addition to the two Russian terms mentioned above, these forms have been described by the Georgian term *mt'k'icebiti* 'affirmative, assertive.'<sup>1</sup> The available sources on Lak, however, do not go much further than the label in defining these forms. Burc'uladze (1979:244) compares them with the English construction in *do* as in the following example:

- (1) *Na čičajssar čağar*  
I do write a letter.

Xajdakov (1961:116) observes that the present assertive is the standard screeve used in proverbs and cites a number of examples, including the following:

- (2) *Käa"valin lavgunni kunu laččul nac'u qqabuč'ajssar.*  
Having gone to the Kaaba, garlic does not return sweet.

Murkelenskij (1971) generally renders the affect of the Lak assertive into Russian by using the adverb *dejstvitel'no* 'really' although he also uses *imenno* 'precisely' and *opredelenno* 'definitely,' as in the following examples:<sup>2</sup>

- (3) *Na čivčussar. = Ja napisal (imenno).* (Murkelenskij 1971:180)  
I wrote (precisely) [it].  
(4) *Ina čivčussar. = Ty (dejstvitel'no) napisal.* (Murkelenskij 1971:180)  
You (really) wrote [it].  
(5) *Na zunt'issara. = Ja (opredelenno) budu rabotat'.* (Murkelenskij 1971:181)  
I (definitely) will work.

Beyond these, there are no explicit observations on the assertive other than, e.g., Xajdakov's that the plain and assertive imperfect are "ves'ma blizki po značeniju drug drugu (Xajdakov 1953:12, cited in Burc'uladze 1979:195) 'extremely close to one another in meaning'.<sup>3</sup>

The chief peculiarity of the present and past assertive is that they are used in what appear to be two distinct contexts and functions. On the one hand, these assertives function in colloquial speech as a type of emphatic, i.e., the speaker is purposefully emphasizing the truth of the proposition, as in example (6), where the surrounding context makes it clear that the speaker is greatly excited and is trying to impress his listeners with the urgency of the fact that the time to act has indeed arrived:

- (6) *Nanu! Č'unssar!* (Murqilinskij 1980:49)  
Come on! It is time!

On the other hand, and this is not observed in the grammars, the present assertive functions in expository prose as the most common present tense screeve. Example (7) is typical in this respect:

(7) *Agar maq k'iva žuralij čičajssa buxxurča, slovar'danuvu k'ivagu žura kkakkan buvnu bussar.* (Xajdakov 1962:17)

If a word has two written forms, both forms are shown in the dictionary.

Consider also in this light the contrast between examples (8) and (9) as well as the statement made in example (10):

(8) *A'kinssakssa mašinarttu baqqašivrijn buvnu, cila c'umal qus t'ajla qqadurkssar.* (Murqqilinskij 1981:117)

Due to the absence of the necessary cars, the goods were not sent in time.

(9) *X'aq'inu čanssa mašinarttu bija. Qus t'ajla dukkan žušča qqašurna.* (Murqqilinskij 1981:117)

There were too few cars today. We didn't send the goods.

(10) *Iširal stil'danuvu asar k'ic'lagan čülu buvssa maqru, kalimarttugu išla qqadajssar.* (Murqqilinskij 1981:119)

In the business (practical) style, emotive and decorative words and phrases are not used.

These three examples are taken from the section on style in the seventh/eighth-grade grammar used in Lak schools (Murqqilinskij 1981). The context of the contrast between examples (8) and (9) is Murqqilinskij's explanation that the style of formal writing is different from the style of relaxed speech. He gives (8) as an example of how we would explain a situation in an official report, and he gives (9) as an example of how we would describe the same situation when talking with our friends. As can be seen, the official style in (8) uses a past assertive like the present assertive in the expository sentence in (7), whereas the colloquial version in (9) uses an unmarked imperfect and a simple preterite. Example (10) is another expository statement like (7) and (8). It is significant because it states a principle that applies to example (8) (and also to [7] and [10] itself), viz., the avoidance of highly colored language in business and expository, i.e., formal and neutral, style. This appears to establish a curious contrast: on the one hand the assertive can be said to be marked for something like 'personal emphasis' in colloquial speech, but on the other hand this same assertive is used in formal speech and writing as the neutral tense form. Before attempting to explain these facts, I shall adduce one more example:

(11) *Graždan dä"vilul c'umal Uxssavnil čuluxmur Kavkazulal zunttavu ukunssa iš xussar.* (Murqqilinskij 1981:22)

Before the civil war in the mountains of the North Caucasus such an incident occurred.

The form *xussar* 'occurred' is a past assertive used in the opening sentence of a short story. The story continues to use past assertive forms to set the scene, and then switches to a simple past form *uvkuna* 'he said' to introduce the first dialogue. After this the narration continues in the simple past. Example (11) is neither colloquial nor official but is taken from belles-lettres. The purpose here could be to invoke the neutrality of expository prose, e.g., as if a news item of historical event were being reported in a formal context. Or the purpose could be to impress the reader, i.e., as if the author were saying: "This *really* happened..." This second possibility seems less likely since the assertive continues to be used for the entire first paragraph of the story until the introduction of the dialogue.

How, then, can the meanings of 'personal emphasis' and 'neutrality' be reconciled? One possible explanation is suggested by the Turkish enclitic *-dir*, etc., which functions both as a type of emphatic and as a copulative particle. The principle functions of *-dir* can be illustrated by the following examples from Lewis (1967:97):

(12a) *Vesika kasadadır.*

Writing/Formal Speech: The document is in the safe.

Informal Speech: The document is surely in the safe/The document *is* in the safe.

(12b) *Vesika kasada.*

Informal Speech: The document is in the safe.

As Lewis points out, *-dir* functions as a copula in writing and formal speech (as in 12a), but it is ordinarily omitted in informal speech (as in 12b).<sup>4</sup> The use of *-dir* as a copula in informal speech will usually have the effect of emphasizing the predicate, although such emphasis can actually render the predicate less certain, as can be seen in the translation of (12b) which uses the adverb *surely*. The Turkish enclitic *-dir* has a wide range of uses which are not comparable to the Lak assertive,<sup>5</sup> but the essential dichotomy — formal:neutral/informal:emphatic — is analogous.

I would suggest, therefore, that the two different uses of the Lak assertive are reconcilable into a single meaning, viz., 'objective assertion.' Formal contexts are ordinarily supposed to be objective, and so the use of a form that specifies the predicate as an objective fact will be contextually neutral. Informal contexts, however, usually imply some degree of subjectivity, and so the use of a marked objective form will be contextually emphatic, i.e., emphasis on objectification (vs. personal opinion) is neutral in a formal context but emphatic in an informal one.

This in turn leads me to my choice of the term *assertive* over, e.g., *confirmative* or *affirmative*. I eschewed the term *affirmative* (Russian *utverditel'nyj*) in my earlier work on Lak due to the fact that in English this term is often opposed to *negative* and *interrogative* as one of the three basic types of sentences, and I still hold to that view. In my work on Balkan languages (e.g., Friedman 1978), I have used the term *confirmative* to refer to screeves in which the speaker always personally vouches for the truth of the predicate. Such forms are characterized, among other things, by the fact that they can only refer to events which have already occurred (i.e., are past) and can thus be truly vouched for as well as merely believed in. The Lak assertive occurs not only in the past and present, but also, e.g., in the future (*čičint'issara*) and conditional (*čičint'issanija*, *čičajssanija*). Also, the common (plain, unmarked) forms to which the Lak assertives are opposed do not carry nuances of nonconfirmativity (e.g., reportedness) such as occur in the nonconfirmative forms of the Balkans. Such nuances in Lak are carried by various analytic and syntactic constructions, e.g., those in *t'ar*, *unukkar*, *xxaj ur*, and the present gerund with *-ussa -ur*. The term *assertive*, which is one of the possible translations of the Georgian *mt'k'icebiti*, best captures the meaning of the Lak finite synthetic forms based on the participle in *-ss[a]-*. Just as in English, an assertion can be objective or aggressive (consider, e.g., the term *assertiveness training*), so also in Lak the assertive can be objective in formal writing or speech but aggressive, or emphatic, in informal speech.

This Lak phenomenon is extremely important to a broader understanding of status categories, i.e., categories involving a personal evaluation of the narrated event. Despite the obvious similarities between assertive and confirmative meanings, the two are clearly different gradations on a continuum of "positive personal involvement," while nonconfirmative, unwitnessed, reported, etc., continue in the direction of "negative personal involvement."

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#### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>Interestingly enough, Murqılinskij (1980:108-111) does not distinguish between assertive and nonassertive screeves in his section on tense in his Lak school grammar..

<sup>2</sup>Murkelenskij uses *opredelenno* only in future assertive screeves, which are beyond the defined scope of this article. Nonetheless, an example has been included to give a fuller picture of the nuances carried by assertive forms.

<sup>3</sup>This pair of forms is problematic in many respects, including the accuracy of the label *imperfect*, and I will treat them in a later work. In the remainder of this article, I will restrict my attention to the forms labeled *present* and *past* (*čičajssar*, *čivčussar*, etc.).

<sup>4</sup>There are certain contexts in informal speech where -dir is not or cannot be omitted, but these are not relevant to this discussion (see Lewis 1967:97).

<sup>5</sup>See Lewis (1967:97-98, 139-41; also Friedman 1978:112-13). The analogies are potentially quite far-reaching, but they must be the subject of a separate study.

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