

# Journal of Linguistics

<http://journals.cambridge.org/LIN>

Additional services for *Journal of Linguistics*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## The expression of 'inferentiality' in Abkhaz

B. G. Hewitt

Journal of Linguistics / Volume 15 / Issue 01 / March 1979, pp 87 - 92

DOI: 10.1017/S0022226700013128, Published online: 28 November 2008

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0022226700013128](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0022226700013128)

### How to cite this article:

B. G. Hewitt (1979). The expression of 'inferentiality' in Abkhaz. *Journal of Linguistics*, 15, pp 87-92 doi:10.1017/S0022226700013128

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

NOTES AND DISCUSSION

**The expression of 'inferentiality' in Abkhaz<sup>1</sup>**

B. G. HEWITT

*St John's College, Cambridge*

(Received 21 February 1978)

In Comrie (1976: 108) we read: 'Several languages have special inferential verb forms, to indicate that the speaker is reporting some event that he has not himself witnessed, but about whose occurrence he has learnt at second hand (though without, incidentally, necessarily casting doubt on the reliability of the information)'. Two pages later Comrie writes as follows:

Serebrennikov (1960: 66) lists the following languages known to him where there is a close formal relation, down to identity, between the expression of perfect and inferential meaning: Turkic languages: the Uralic languages Nenets (Yurak-Samoyed), Finnish, Estonian, Mari (Cheremis), Komi (Zyryan), Udmurt (Votyak), Mańsi (Vogul); Georgian; and the Indo-European languages Latvian, Bulgarian, and Albanian.

And on the same page (110) Comrie explains this relationship between perfect and inferential meaning thus:

With the perfect, a past event is related to a present state, in other words the past event is not simply presented *per se*, but because of its relation to a present state. With the inferential, the past event is again not presented *per se*, rather it is inferred from some less direct result of the action (e.g. a second-hand report, or *prima facie* evidence, such as the wetness of the road leading to the inference that it has been raining, even when the raining itself has not been directly witnessed). Thus, the semantic similarity (not, of course, identity) between perfect and inferential lies in the fact that both categories present an event not in itself, but via its results, and it is this similarity that finds formal expression in languages like Georgian. . . .

Of the languages listed above, Georgian is the only representative of the three Caucasian language-families. Georgian is, in a sense, an exception among the Caucasian languages in that this semantic feature of inferentiality is of extremely limited occurrence, being restricted to the perfect tense-group (i.e. perfect and plu-perfect tenses), and even then these tenses are not, of necessity, endowed

[1] This work was supported by a grant from the Social Science Research Council for the study of the syntactic typology of the non-Slavic languages of the U.S.S.R.

with this feature. Given the convincing demonstration (see especially Lohmann, 1937; Peikrišvili, 1974; Kavtaradze, 1956) that the inferential nuance has developed from the basic meaning of the perfect tense-group by the natural semantic progression suggested above by Comrie, we may assume that the same development occurred in the related South Caucasian languages of Svan, Mingrelian and Laz, after which there followed an extension of the feature to the other tenses where it is attested today – see especially Rogava (1953) for a description of the fully generalized system of inferentials in Mingrelian. It would seem that the same assumption may be made for those languages of the North-east Caucasian group which were examined during the preparation of this paper. According to Imnaišvili (1954) there existed in proto-Nax (one of the sub-groups of N.E. Caucasian) a systematic division between ‘action witnessed’ (marked by -rā) and ‘action not-witnessed’ (marked by -nā). Imnaišvili further argues that the P’ank’isi dialect with its past, present and future inferentials has best preserved this original system, whilst elsewhere in Nax the present and future inferentials have been lost. We should hope to suggest in more detail elsewhere that P’ank’isi is the innovator here. However, quite a different picture emerges when we consider Abkhaz, one of the three North-west Caucasian languages.

In Abkhaz (and I am indebted to my wife, Zaira Khibi, for supplying the examples found below) the basic tense-system for non-stative verbs is as follows:

Present	Imperfect
Aorist	Past Indefinite
Future I	Conditional I
Future II	Conditional II
Perfect	Plu-perfect

With the exception of the Future I, those indicatives of column one have their finite forms marked by final -yt’, those of column two by final -n. By removing these finite-markers we are left with the stem characteristic of each of the tenses. It is this stem which provides the base for the formation of participles, moods, etc. . . . To distinguish derivatives of column one from those of column two (for the stem is the same in both cases) a final -z is added to the latter, e.g.

from a-ca-rā = ‘to go’ we obtain

s-co- <i>yt</i> ’	←	*s-ca-	wa- <sup>2</sup>	yt’	=	‘I am going’
		I go	(present)	(finite)		
			(non-stative)	(column one)		
s-co- <i>n</i>	←	*s-ca-wa- <i>n</i>			=	‘I was going’ (imperfect)
		(finite)				
		(column two)				



The corresponding inferentials are:

- də-t<sup>o</sup>à-zaap' = 'Apparently (s)he is sitting'  
 də-t<sup>o</sup>é-zaarən = 'Apparently (s)he was sitting'

The question now arises – how are we to explain the choice of these particular exponents, -zaap'/-zaarən, for the representation of the inferential nuance? This brings us to the Future I, styled by Usler (1887: 35) the Definite Future – a misleading term since BOTH future tenses in Abkhaz convey some doubt as to the actual fulfilment of the action; for an action which will definitely occur in the future the PRESENT tense is used. The difference between the Future I and the Future II, Usler's Indefinite Future, is that the former expresses an action whose likely fulfilment will occur in the immediate future as opposed to the more remote future-signification of the latter tense. The exponent of this Future I is -p' (the only finite, indicative tense of column one not to end in -yt'), e.g.

yə-q'a-l-c'ā-p' = 'She will (shortly) do it'

The Conditional I, a past tense of the Future I, is formed, like all column two tenses, by suffixing -n to the stem of the Future I, which ends in -rə in this instance,<sup>3</sup> e.g.

yə-q'a-l-c'a-rə-n = 'She would [perhaps] (have) do(ne) it'

This, then, gives us a clear connexion with the future for the elements -p'/-rə-n. That settled, what can be said of -zaa-? Or, more specifically, what of -zaa- in the sequence -zaa-p'? Let us return to the problem of the tense-defective stative verbs. How do they form their futures? One way of saying 'He/She will be lying' is:

də-štà-zaa-we-yt',  
 |  
 lie

where the non-stative marker -wa- appears in conjunction with the non-stative, finite marker -yt'. But a second, admittedly less frequent, formation is:

[3] Although this -ra/ə- element is lacking from the finite form of the Future I, it appears in the following non-finite form:

s-	an-	ca-	rà	sə-	z-	dər-	wa-	m
I	when	go	(Future I)	I	(potential)	know	(non-stative)	(negative)
			(non-finite)					

= 'I don't know when I'll go'.

This -ra/ə is replaced by -lak'' if the non-finite Future I is functioning as a temporal subordinate clause, e.g.

s-an-ca-làk'' yə-q'a-s-c'ò-yt' = 'When I go, I'll do it'.

də-štà-zaa-p',

the most immediate meaning of which is 'apparently (s)he is lying' – it is interesting to note that it cannot have the meaning 'apparently (s)he will be lying' (Čkadua, 1970: 203). Indeed, the only form that seems capable of bearing this meaning is one which is judged to be both ugly and artificial, namely

də-štà-zaa-wa-zaa-p'(\*?)

The sequence -zaa-p' may, then, be used either as an exponent for the future indicative of stative verbs, or, more commonly, as the marker of the inferential nuance for the tenses of column one (as already noted by Lomtadze, 1954: 267, 270); -zaa-rə-n is similarly endowed with only the two functions of marking inferentiality for the tenses of column two and of providing stative verbs with their conditional forms. As regards the origin of the element -zaa-, Lomtadze has suggested that it be analysed as consisting of the two components -za-, the original function of which she sees as marking durativity, +-aa-, which is defined as an original future-marker (for details see Lomtadze, 1954: 267 ff., 1955: 219 ff). Whether this be the correct interpretation or not, the question has still to be asked: 'Why should one exponent be endowed with the two functions that are associated with -zaa-p' in Abkhaz?' Just as it is possible to see a semantic parallelism between a perfect expression and an inferential expression relating to the past, which happily accounts for the frequency and apparent ease with which the two notions become allied to the same formal exponents, perhaps a semantic link of a different nature may be presumed to account for the facts of Abkhaz – quite simply, if an action is inferred to have occurred, to be occurring or to be likely to occur, the possibility remains that the inference may be proved wrong by the subsequent acquisition of more information. This is precisely and necessarily the case with each and every pronouncement concerning an event in the future; the same lack of certainty attaches to statements about the future which attaches to descriptions of events not witnessed, or being witnessed, by the speaker personally – i.e. just the inferential statements we have been examining.<sup>4</sup>

#### REFERENCES

- Čkadua, L. P. (1970) *Sistema vremen i osnovnyx modal'nyx obrazovanij v abchazsko-abchazskix dialektax*. Tbilisi: Mecniereba.  
 Comrie, B. (1976). *Aspect*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
 Imnaišvili, D. (1954). Turmeobitebi kist'uri džgupis enebši. *IKE* 6. 324–342.  
 Kavtaradze, I. (1956). Unaxaobis k'at'egoriis ist'oriisatvis kartulši. *IKE* 8. 179–192.

[4] The link between the marking of futurity and inferentiality we have been examining is not so clearly attested in the most divergent of the Abkhaz dialects, T'ap'anta Abaza, where the suffix -za-p' signifies probability or even simple futurity rather than inferentiality, which latter notion is generally expressed analytically, the periphrasis incorporating the verb 'to turn out' (Lomtadze, 1944: 156).

B. G. HEWITT

- Lohmann, J. (1937). Ist das idg. Perfektum nominalen Ursprungs? *KZ* 42-61.
- Lomtadze, K. (1944). *Apxazuri Enis T'ap'anturi Dialekt'i (T'ekst'ebiturt)*. Tbilisi: Sakartvelos SSR Mecnierebata Ak'ademiis Gamomcemloba.
- Lomtadze, K. (1954). St'at'ik'uri da dinamik'uri zmnebi apxazurši. *IKE* 6. 257-271.
- Lomtadze, K. (1955). Apxazuri zmnis dzjritad dro-k'ilota sist'ema. *IKE* 7. 207-227.
- Peikrišvili, Ž. (1974). Turmeobitis mnišvneloba da gamoq'eneba axal kartulši, *Kartvelur Enata St'rukt'uris Sak'itxebi* 4. 53-70.
- Rogava, G. (1953). Dro-k'ilota meotxe džgupis nak'vtebi kartvelur enebši. *IKE* 5. 17-31.
- Serebrennikov, B. A. (1960). *Kategorii vremeni i vida v finno-ugorskix jazykax permskoj i volžskoj grupp*. Moscow: Izd-vo AN S.S.S.R.
- Uslar, P. K. (1887). *Ėtnografija Kavkaza. Jazykoznanie*. Tiflis: Abxazskij jazyk.