

## Doing form and meaning in a field: a few reflections on Buriat and Nenets

**Overview.** In this paper we address issues surrounding the form-meaning relationship as instantiated in the methodology of field linguistics. The goal of this study is two-fold. First, we want to argue that, despite a few run-of-the-mill examples found in textbooks on field linguistics, morphological patterns of underrepresented languages provide us with excessive evidence that a certain class of semantic generalizations (broadly conceived) can only be properly identified through their formal manifestation and not the other way around. Secondly, we present the results of two case studies that support this argument. One comes from the morphological encoding of event structure, the other concerns a proper representation of the case subsystem of a nominal inflection. Data for the study have been accumulated in the fieldwork on Tundra Nenets (Uralic) and Buriat (Altaic).

**Objectives.** Standard fieldwork practices (e.g. Crowley 2007) are unequivocally based on the meaning → form techniques. The opposite path in which one first identifies sequences of segments as “morphemes” and then assigns “denotations” to them is not something that fieldworkers normally do.

We want to make a contribution to the discussion by examining two cases where the form → meaning way of doing morphology seems to be necessary not just for arriving to a theoretically attractive analysis, but even for establishing right empirical generalizations about the observed morphological patterns.

**Case studies.** One case study comes from Tundra Nenets (Samoyedic), where one finds the pattern that looks like unconditioned allomorphy of a Special Finite Stem of inchoatives (Salminen 1997, 1998). Relying on the patterns of stem formation attested elsewhere we argue that the right way treating (1) would be to posit three distinct morphemes that merge on top of the inchoative, as in (2), and force certain operations on the event structure of a verbal predicate.

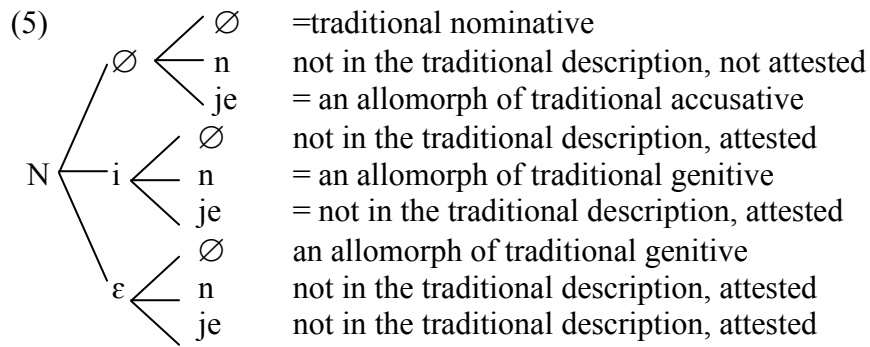
The pattern in (2) was missed in the previous accounts since due to independent semantic reasons the basic stems  $-l-\emptyset$  and  $-l-\emptyset$ , unlike the corresponding SFSs, only surface in a limited amount of morphosyntactic configurations.

The other case is nominal morphology of Buriat (Mongolic). The traditional description of case morphology is shown in (3) (Sanzheev 1941). We argue that the right morphological generalization is in (4) and that « case endings » consist of two layers of morphology, the inner one being allocated for the elements  $\{\emptyset, \varepsilon, i\}$ , the outer one reserved for  $\{\emptyset, n, je\}$ . (4) predicts that the nominal paradigm is the Cartesian product of the two sets, (5), and this prediction is borne out.

In sum, morphological patterns of underrepresented languages provide us with excessive evidence that a certain class of semantic generalizations can only be identified through their formal manifestation and not the other way around. Overall, the less a semantic or functional feature has to do with well-established categories, the more likely it is to require formal clues to be recognized by fieldworkers.

### Examples

- |     |                               |   |
|-----|-------------------------------|---|
| (1) | Basic stem: $-la$             | Special finite stem: $-li-$ , $-le-y\emptyset-$ , $-l-y\emptyset$ |
| (2) | a. Basic stem: $-l-a$         | Special finite stem: $-le-y\emptyset-$                            |
|     | b. Basic stem: $-l-\emptyset$ | Special finite stem: $-li-$                                       |
|     | c. Basic stem: $-l-\emptyset$ | Special finite stem: $-l-y\emptyset$                              |
| (3) | GEN $-\varepsilon$<br>$-in$   | (4) GEN $-\varepsilon-\emptyset$<br>$-i-n$                        |
|     | ACC $-je$<br>$-ije$           | ACC $\emptyset-je$<br>$-i-je$                                     |



## References

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