Variation of dynamic modals on the syntax-semantics interface: case of Terek Kumyk

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Overview

It is sometimes said that dynamic modals occupy a rather low position in the verbal domain

Our talk: some preliminary evidence from Terek Kumyk that this is not the case

About Terek Kumyk

- Kumyk is a Turkic language spoken in Caucasus regions of Russia
- Literary Kumyk is based on Daghestan dialect of Kumyk
- Terek Kumyk is spoken in two villages in North Ossetia

Russian fieldwork tradition

The fieldwork in Russia is mostly carried out by students

With the foundation of the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics of MSU in 1962 Russian fieldwork has been started by A. A. Kibrik

These days students and professors participate in expeditions throughout the year and work on description and documentation of the languages spoken in Russia

Main methodology

Methodology:

- Acceptability judgement
- Before judgement, the context of utterance is set to
  ensure the intended interpretation
- Metalinguistic speculations of consultants mostly ignored

Possible complication: most consultants are teachers, some of
which teach literary Kumyk to schoolchildren

Three-way syntactic distinction in modals (Ramchand, 2018)

We list the three types of readings — dynamic, root (deontic and circumstantial), and epistemic — according to the height established via crosslinguistic studies (Cinque, 1999; Nauze, 2008)

Three-way syntactic distinction in modals (Ramchand, 2018)

Dynamic modality is based upon the subject's own characteristics and abilities

Epistemic modality is based upon the speaker's knowledge

Root modality: basically, everything else

Epistemic » Root » Dynamic

Evidence for low position

All diagnostics build on the idea that dynamic modals project
an argument and assign a theta-role

- Symmetric predicates
- Weather predicates
- Expletives

Ramchand says that the position of the dynamic modal is in the EvtP domain (roughly equivalent to the lower vP domain of the clause, the domain of theta-role assignment)

Should that be the case we also expect unavailability of:

- propositional negation under the modal
- aspectual morphology under the modal

Which is what we seem to have found in Terek Kumyk

Terek Kumyk modals

There are two modal constructions with predicate *bol-*: with an embedded *-p* converb and with an embedded *-mAʁA* infinitive

Modal + *-p* converb: dynamic, #deonitc, #epistemic

Modal + *-mAʁA* infinitive: #dynamic, deontic, epistemic

Terek Kumyk modals

Context for the dynamic reading: Somebody asks Umar's friend if anyone knows how to drive a car in his village, he responds (1), because he knows that Umar does

(1) *Umar mašin xaida-p   bol-a*
     Umar car   drive-CVB AUX.MOD-PRS

     'Umar can drive a car.' (he knows how to do it, it is his ability)

Terek Kumyk modals

Context for the dynamic reading: Somebody asks Umar's friend if anyone knows how to drive a car in his village, he responds (2), because he knows that Umar does

(2) *#Umar mašin xaida-maʁa bol-a*
     Umar car   drive-INF   AUX.MOD-PRS

   'Umar can drive a car.' (he knows how to do it, it is his ability)

Terek Kumyk modals

Context for the deontic reading: Some of Umar's friends are talking about going to Kizlyar; they all know how to drive but need someone who is allowed to drive a car in order not to get a fine; finally, one of them remembers that Umar has just got his driver license

(3) *#Umar mašin xaida-p bol-a*
Umar car drive-CVB AUX.MOD-PRS

'Umar may drive a car.' (he is allowed to do so, since he has driver license)

Terek Kumyk modals

Context for the deontic reading: Some of Umar's friends are talking about going to Kizlyar; they all know how to drive but need someone who is allowed to drive a car in order not to get a fine; finally, one of them remembers that Umar has just got his driver license

(4) *Umar mašin xaida-maʁa bol-a*
     Umar car drive-INF AUX.MOD-PRS

'Umar may drive a car.' (he is allowed to do so, since he has driver license)

Terek Kumyk modals

Context for the epistemic reading: Some of Umar's friends are talking about going to Kizlyar; they don't know who is going to drive a car, but they suppose that Umar is going to do it, since he did it last time

(5) *#Umar mašin xaida-p   bol-a*
     Umar   car   drive-CVB AUX.MOD-PRS

     'Umar may drive a car.' (he will probably drive a car)

Context for the epistemic reading: Some of Umar's friends are talking about going to Kizlyar; they don't know who is going to drive a car, but they suppose that Umar is going to do it, since he did it last time

(6) *Umar mašin xaida-maʁa bol-a*
Umar car drive-INF AUX.MOD-PRS

'Umar may drive a car.' (he will probably drive a car)

It appears that Terek Kumyk employs a morphological strategy to distinguish dynamic modal interpretations from others

⇒ it is a testing ground for proposals about syntax of dynamic modality (since the interpretation is set by morphology itself)

For a closely related language (Balkar), properties of similar converbs have been investigated by Privoznov, 2021

He argues that, in Balkar:

- *-p* converbs with an overt subject contain a CP structure
- *-p* converbs with a covert subject are a vP structure

Structural properties

For Terek Kumyk modal constructions we may expect the converb that is found in contexts of dynamic modality to exhibit properties of a "small", vP-size converb.

This makes sense given the theoretical context and data from closely related languages.

Structural properties

The converb in Terek Kumyk dynamic modal constructions allows both negation and aspectual auxiliaries (⇒ is bigger than vP):

(7) *men uč   sutka uhla-mɨ-j   tur-up   bolaman*
     I   three day   sleep-NEG-PRS HAB-CVB AUX.MOD-PRS-1SG

     'I can go by without sleeping for three days.'

Structural properties

(8) *men   uč   minut   suv-nu   tübüne   tɨnɨš*
    I   three minute water-GEN bottom   breath
    al-ma-j   tur-up   bolaman
    take-NEG-PRS   HAB-CVB   AUX.MOD-PRS-1SG

'I can hold my breath underwater for three minutes.'

Taking stock

If Terek Kumyk dynamic modals indeed can take larger-than-vP complements, then it makes sense to tie the usual 'low' position of dynamic modals not with the syntactic height itself but rather the possibility to project an argument

Limitations

- A circumstantial interpretation instead?
- A non-verbal context may clear the picture (what can it look like?)
- Syntactic tests: we still need to establish symmetric and weather predicates of Terek Kumyk
- Other considerations?

Conclusions

1. In Terek Kumyk, dynamic modals are morphologically distinguished from other modals via verbal morphology on the embedded predicate (-p converb)
2. The data collected during fieldwork provides preliminary evidence against defining dynamic modals as those that occupy a low position in the clausal spine
3. If correct, the data goes against the height analysis of dynamic modals

References

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