

EAT expressions in Central Asian languages

Shinji Ido

Tohoku University / University of Sydney

Verbs that have the sense of ‘eating’ often have other ‘metaphorical’ senses that come forth when they cooccur with particular sets of words. For example, the sense that the verb *eat* has in *what’s eating him?* differs from that the *eat* in, say, *I eat eggs* has – the former does not involve any putting of food into the mouth or chewing or swallowing which the latter sense does. Thus, *eat* has multiple senses, the most frequently exploited of which is arguably ‘put (food) into the mouth and chew and swallow it’ (definition taken from Concise Oxford English Dictionary; hereafter abbreviated as PCS). A tentative semantic decomposition of PCS is shown below using the notational conventions of Jackendoff’s (1990) Lexical Conceptual Semantics.

- (1) [Event CAUSE ([Thing]_i, [Event GO ([Thing]_j, [Path TO ([Place IN ([Thing MOUTH-OF ([Thing]_i))]])])])])]
 [Event CAUSE ([Thing]_i, [Event INCH ([State BE_{Comp+} ([Thing]_j, [Place AT ([Thing PIECES]_k))]])])])]
 [Event CAUSE ([Thing]_i, [Event GO ([Thing PIECES]_k, [Path TO ([Place IN ([Thing]_i))]])])])]

Verbs that denote/exploit (1) (hereafter EAT verbs) in such Central Asian languages as Tajik and Uzbek also have senses that are different from (1). However, the non-PCS senses of EAT verbs in Central Asian languages do not coincide with those of English *eat*. While some of the non-PCS senses of Central Asian EAT verbs, such as:

- (2) [Event INCH ([State BE_{+contact} ([Thing]_i, [Place AT_{+contact} [Thing]_j])])]

(or roughly ‘an event which is the inchoation of the state of an object_i being in contact with another object_j’) are shared by EAT verbs in a number of (genetically divergent and geographically distant) Asian languages, as can be observed in these examples:

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|-----|----------|---|---|---|-----------------------------|
| (3) | Japanese | <i>genkotsu</i>
fist
‘to be hit’ | <i>o</i>
acc | <i>kuu</i>
eat | |
| (4) | Chinese | <i>ta¹</i>
he
‘he was hit’ | <i>chi¹le⁵</i>
ate | <i>yi⁴quan²</i>
one fist | (Nakamoto and Oya 2002: 36) |
| (5) | Tajik | <i>mušt</i> | | <i>xūrdan</i> | |
| (6) | Uzbek | <i>mush</i>
fist
‘to be hit/beaten’ | | <i>yemoq</i>
eat | |

- | | | | |
|-----|--------|--------------|---------------|
| (7) | Uyghur | <i>oq</i> | <i>yémæk</i> |
| (8) | Tajik | <i>tir</i> | <i>xūrdan</i> |
| | | arrow | eat |
| | | 'to be shot' | |

there is one sense that is particularly prevalent among EAT verbs in Central Asian languages as well as Persian and Turkish, namely:

- (9) [Event INCH ([State GO_{Ident} ([Thing]_i, [Place TO ([Property DISTRESS])])])]

(or roughly 'an event which is the inchoation of the state of an object_i becoming distressed'). Some examples of EAT verbs with this sense are shown below.

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|------|---------|------------------------------|---------------|
| (10) | Tajik | <i>ğam</i> | <i>xūrdan</i> |
| | Uyghur | <i>ğæm</i> | <i>yémæk</i> |
| | Uzbek | <i>g'am</i> | <i>yemoq</i> |
| | Turkish | <i>gam</i> | <i>yemek</i> |
| | Persian | <i>qæm</i> | <i>xordæn</i> |
| | | grief/anxiety | eat |
| | | 'to grieve, to feel anxiety' | |
| (11) | Tajik | <i>ğussa</i> | <i>xūrdan</i> |
| | Persian | <i>qosse</i> | <i>xordæn</i> |
| | | grief/sorrow | eat |
| | | 'to grieve, to feel sorry' | |
| (13) | Tajik | <i>afsūs</i> | <i>xūrdan</i> |
| | | regret | eat |
| | | 'to regret, to be sorry' | |
| (14) | Uzbek | <i>pushaymon</i> | <i>yemoq</i> |
| | | regretful/sorry | eat |
| | | 'to regret, to be sorry' | |

How did this sense (i.e. (9)) come to be shared by EAT verbs in these languages? At first glance, it appears that either Tajik or Persian exported to neighbouring languages sets of phrases such as *ğam xūrdan* and *ğussa xūrdan*, some of which made their ways into the lexicons of the neighbouring languages as loan translations. This may well be the case. However, this is by no means the only plausible explanation of the fact that EAT verbs in a number of Central Asian languages have (9) in common.

EAT verbs with the sense of (9) are attested in some historical Turkic languages, e.g. Xakani Turkic (11th Century) *yér sakınç* (eat anxiety) 'he will suffer anxiety' and Ottoman Turkish (14th-16th Centuries) *kayğū yé-* (sorrow/anxiety eat) 'to be sorrowful' (Clouston 1972: 599,870). The latter of these even has a modern equivalent: Uzbek *qayg'u yemoq* (anxiety/sorrow eat). All the morphemes that occur in these phrases are, unlike *gam/ğam/ğæm/g'am* in (10) and *pushaymon* in (14), which are Arabic and Persian respectively, Turkic. A phraseological dictionary of Uyghur (Abbas 1991: 1074) lists *vayim yémæk* 'to grieve' as an entry. This phrase seems to consist of (woe), (-1sg), and (eat), at least two of which are Turkic, and does not have a Persian/Tajik equivalent.

The existence of EAT verbs with the sense of (9) in historical Turkic languages suggests that (9) as a sense of EAT verbs has been in currency for almost a millennium in Central Asia. On the other hand, the apparent lack of any Persian/Tajik equivalent of *vayim yémæk* allows the hypothesis that the phrase may have come into existence not as a loan translation of a Persian/Tajik phrase but as a product of the millenium-long currency of (9) as a sense of EAT verbs in Central Asian languages, of which, of course, Uyghur is one. If this hypothesis is valid, the exploitation of (9) by EAT verbs may qualify as an areal linguistic feature that has wide currency across a number of Central Asian languages. (Note that this hypothesis is based on an unorthodox assumption that a function that maps ‘senses’, or semantic entities, to verbs that have a specific set of ‘senses’ can be transmitted and/or shared between different languages.)

References:

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