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The Interpretation of Ancient Indo-European Noun Declensions

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Abstract

The features of the ancient Indo-European noun declensions, the role of consonantal nominal declensions as one of the formal criteria to single out animate/active substantives are discussed in this paper. The ancient Indo-European noun declension is, probably, connected with consonantal stem-building. Stem-building markers are assumed to refer to the class and active type relics preserved in the noun declension paradigm.

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1. Introduction

One of the features of ancient Indo-European noun declensions is that they were divided into the vowel and consonantal ones. Both classes had their formal features. There is also a point of view that the nominal declension originated from the substantives of an active, animated class (Tronski, 1967). The vowel declensions, in opposition to the consonantal ones, primarily concentrated inanimate nouns which in their past were supposed not to be declined at all since the declensions appeared first in the nouns with consonantal stems, i.e. in active class (Specht, 1947, Shantren, 1953; Barrow, 1976). The gender distinctions were built on already different principles in comparison with the pre-historic times. The indication for other principles may be found in the meaning of substantives referring to the consonantal declensions. It means that they were grouped in this declension on some other principles (Gukhman et al., 1977).

Thus, the substantive was characterized by some other categories. It is confirmed by a typological comparison

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with the active languages typology in which the noun was divided into animate and inanimate, or active and inactive. It has also been noted that the declension itself originally appeared in the substantives of the active class. It is a very important observation which will help to restore the most ancient correlation typical of the languages of the active structure with a poorly developed declension system. According to G. A. Klimov, only substantives of the active class possessed such declensions (Klimov, 1977). There is every reason to assume that the division of the Indo-European nouns was preceded by a two-class system, i.e. the opposition of animate, active substantives which had declensions to the inactive ones. T. G. Gamkrelidze and V. V. Ivanov shared G.A. Klimov's viewpoint and considered that the Pre-Indo-European period may be characterized by the active typology (Gamkrelidze & Ivanov, 1984). The languages of active typology (to which ancient Indo-European languages formerly belonged) are characterized by the opposition of the active, marked case to the inactive, unmarked one and only nouns of the active class could possess the declension (Klimov, 1977). The aim of the present paper is to show the main feature of the ancient Indo-European consonantal nominal declensions – the evolving of animate/active substantives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Linguistic category

The category of animateness/inanimateness is characterized by a unity of meanings as well as formal features. Therefore, one should adhere to the definition of a linguistic category given by O.S. Akhmanova in the dictionary. The linguistic category means ... "the general properties of various classes and ranks of linguistic units that constitute these classes and receive a variety of linguistic expression" (Akhmanova, 1966).

M.M. Gukhman pointed to the relics preserved in nominal inflectional system, particularly nominal paradigms formation, in her work "Historical typology and the problem of diachronic constants" (Gukhman, 1981). Nouns grouping in "animate" and "inanimate" classes was characteristic of not only the class type language, but also the initial stage of the active languages type (Klimov, 1977).

2.2. The category of animateness/inanimateness

The grouping of nouns into "animate" and "inanimate" classes is indicative of a more ancient stage compared with the grouping of nouns in the active typology languages "according to a much more abstract activity ~ inactivity feature of substantives" (Klimov, 1977). However, a clear distinction between the noun class combination on the basis of animateness/inanimateness and activity/inactivity is very difficult to draw, because these categories evolved gradually absorbing new substantive groups as if penetrating one another. M.M. Gukhman admits the existence of a ... "binary opposition of active and inactive classes, correlated to and partially overlapped by the noun opposition on the basis of animateness/inanimateness in the system of nouns" (Gukhman, 1981). Even in those languages where the gender category is preserved, one can observe very complex lacings of this category with the opposition expressing sex, personality - non-personality, animateness – inanimateness (Aksenov, 1984). T. G. Gamkrelidze and V. V. Ivanov show a combination of different features of the active nouns apart from animateness (Gamkrelidze & Ivanov, 1984). According to A.N. Savchenko, "the terms 'animateness' and 'inanimateness' are inaccurate for the Pre-Indo-European period, because many substantives denoting inanimate objects belonged to the active class as well" (Savchenko, 1967). Anyway, the terms animateness/inanimateness and active/inactive have their right to exist. However, the semantic bases of this division have been lost, but its formal features - stem-buildings markers - can be identified. Therefore, using this term, one can mean animate classes of substantives in a more comprehensive sense, i.e. substantives including activity.

A. Meillet characterized the following substantives as those belonging to the "animate" class: "In Indo-European everything that moves, everything that works, thus, falls under the concept of 'animate'" (Meillet, 1938). It's interesting to mention that "if you start thinking of the semi-civilized person, you can almost always explain why one or the other word refers to the 'animate' or 'inanimate' gender" (Meillet, 1938). The scientist also attributes ... "names denoting active forces" to the "animate" gender (Meillet, 1938). G. O. Curme adds to the "animate" gender description by mentioning the fact that the ancient Indo-Europeans personified a great number of inanimate things such as the sun, the moon, the earth, the sky, the sea, stars, bushes, plants, flowers, trees, rivers, winds, water, fire,

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