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(Based on Georgian Ethnographic Data)**

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Ritual-Based Performatives (Based on Georgian Ethnographic Data)¹

ABSTRACT

Performative utterances do not describe anything, they are used for a rather distinct objective: to make things happen. Utterances referring to *to bless, to swear, to promise, to threaten*, etc. have been considered performatives.

Notably, in Georgian such utterances have some semantic peculiarities: 1) They are formulaic, that is, a meaning of a construction is not a sum of its components' meanings and 2) words, referring to those actions, are not just etymologically associated with those referring to free individual behaviors but rather to established social situations, certain rituals, occurring in a given people's culture and history. For example: *šen šemogevle* [lit. I will surround you] - a blessing formula. It is related to the ritual when a person goes around (surrounds) a sick person and believes that s/he can die instead of the one who was surrounded (Sakhokia, 1956, p. 95); *šens p'irs šakari* [lit. sugar to your mouth] - a blessing formula. It is related to a wedding ritual. When the bride and groom were approaching the house, one member of a bridal party was the first to go to the house to tell the hosts the news of bringing the bride. The hosts would put sugar into the messenger's mouth. It is known that sugar was not easy to get back then (Mourier, 2018, p. 165; Sakhokia, 1979, p. 754); *šegircxves cxviri* [lit. let your nose be disgraced] – a curse formula. It is related to the old Georgian form of punishment, cutting off the nose, which was often used by men to punish unfaithful wives (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 822; Lamberti, 1938, p. 16), etc.

The paper is aimed at illustrating similar, semantically specific performative utterances, at establishing their ritual provenance, and at highlighting their ethno-cultural peculiarities. Evidence from Georgian ethnographic sources will be drawn as empirical data, and the methodology of the Ethnography of Communication will be applied for their analysis.

Keywords: *performatives, ritual, ethnography of communication.*

Introduction

Based on definitions of the key constituents of the Ethnography of Communication (speech community, speech situation, speech event, speech act), any speech event may consist of one or more speech acts being, in their turn, represented utterances of various modalities. Performatives are among them, and, as different from constatives, they do not describe anything; they are used for a rather

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distinct objective: to make things happen.

The term “performative” (lat. *performs* - I act, I perform) was introduced into scientific circulation by the British philosopher John Austin (Austin, 1962; Austin, 1961)². Apart from this, in some parts of his discussion in “Philosophical Papers” Austin uses “ritual phrase” instead of “performative” and as a term synonymous with it (Austin, 1961, pp. 70-71), referring to the speech situations in which he discusses specific cases of performatives as “ritual”. For instance, “I apologize” is found in the ritual of apology, etc. (Austin, 1961, pp. 233-234). The ritual context is not excluded by the American philosopher John Searle either, for whom the speech act is nothing more than engaging in an action governed by certain rules (Searle, 1969, p. 30; Searle, 1965, p. 222).

Austin and Searle’s theories for the study of the ritual language are shared by the American researcher Wade Wheelock, who, analyzing the languages of Vedic and Tantric rituals, defines the ritual language as a set of expressions closely related to the action context of the ritual (Wheelock, 1982, p. 50). Furthermore, according to Wheelock, the peculiarity of “ritual utterances” is that they represent speech acts and do not convey or convey only little information (Wheelock, 1982, p. 58). Levinson talks about speech acts within the framework of pragmatics and points out that the purpose of such an expression is not only to express an opinion, but also to perform an action (Levinson, 1983, pp. 243-244).

Interestingly, the category of performativity for the analysis of rituals was initially discussed by anthropologists. For instance, in 1973 Benjamin Ray, in his work “Performative Utterances in African Rituals”, based on the example of the languages of the Republics of South Sudan and Mali, discusses performative utterances within the framework of various rituals and emphasizes that in the so-called primitive communities the magical power attributed to speech is what Austin calls illocutionary power (Ray, 1973, p. 19); Stanley Tambiah, an American anthropologist, also linked the category of performativity to the ritual. Tambiah considers the ritual to be a culturally constructed system of symbolic communication consisting of patterned words and sequential actions and characterized by formality, convention, stereotypism and rigidity. Besides, it is possible to discuss it based on Austin’s perspective: saying something means doing something (Tambiah, 1980, p. 119).

While discussing the history of the study of the issue diachronically, it is obvious that long before Anglo-American philosophy, even in the 4th century BC, Aristotle noted in the treatise “Interpretation” that there are cases of the use of language in which the spoken utterance does not belong to the traditional type at all. For example, a prayer is an utterance, although, unlike typical utterances, it is

² Similar expressions were discussed in the scientific literature before Austin, though using different terms. For example, *durative present* (Pintar, 1890, pp. 685-690); *Praesens effectivum* (Skrabec, 1903, pp. 554-556); *koinzidenz* (Koschmieder, 1962, p. 163).

not evaluated as true or false (Edghill, 1937).

In the second half of the 20th century the theory of performatives (performative expressions) presented the issue of language functioning in a different way, making it clear that the purpose of language is often not only to reflect, but also to perform an action.

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to describe performatives based on rituals, to emphasize their ethno-cultural peculiarities and to reveal possible parallels in intercultural terms. To achieve the purpose the methodological framework of the ethnography of communication will be used. Unlike the speech act theory, the ethnography of communication focuses on the description of utterances and the functional perspective (Saville-Troike, 2003, p. 13). The analysis of the empirical contexts within which any speech activity acquires content is pivotal to the ethnography of communication (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975, pp. 105-109).

Saying a performative utterance is a speech act, involving cases such as: blessing, cursing, promising, commanding, calling, etc. Naturally, due to the scale of the issue, it is impossible to present and analyze all the performatives based on rituals in the language in one paper. Below we will try to discuss some of them and to present the speech events (rituals) from Georgian ethnographic sources with which specific speech acts (performatives) are etymologically connected. Admittedly, most of such rituals are no longer found in Georgian culture, but this does not prevent the existence and functioning of the utterances related to them in the language.

Performative of Blessing

- *šens p'irs šakari* [lit. sugar to your mouth] — the saying is related to the act of putting sugar in the mouth of the person with good tidings during the wedding ritual. The formula of this kind of blessing is based on the ancient Georgian wedding custom: when the bride and the groom approached the house, one member of the wedding party would go to the house first in order to tell the hosts the news of bringing the bride. The hosts put sugar in the mouth of this person. Sugar was not easy to get at that time (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 754). European missionary travelers in Georgia Arcangelo Lamberti and Jules Mourier mention a similar ritual: “When good news is brought to someone, they serve a spoonful of sugar with their hands to the person bringing the news” (Lamberti, 1938, p. 103); “On the day of the wedding the mother-in-law stands at the threshold of the house with a lump of sugar in her hand to put it in the bride’s mouth, wishing her a sweet life and a sweet tongue” (Mourier, 2018, p. 165).

In modern Georgian the saying *šens p'irs šakari* [lit. sugar to your mouth] is a kind of blessing

and expresses the agreement and good attitude of the speaker towards the topic or object of conversation. Interestingly, almost similar cases can be found in different cultures. For example, the Afrikaans phrase “*That mouth should get jam*” is used when the speaker is telling the truth or a pleasant story; when the listener agrees with the speaker (compare the Georgian phrase “*Honey flows from the mouth*”, which is a formula for praising a sweet-talking person); the German phrase “*Honig ums Maul schmieren*” (lit: applying honey around the mouth) intends to give a compliment and agree with what has been said. There are two versions concerning the origin of the phrase: 1) it is related to the tradition of training bears – rewarding them by smearing honey around their mouths (as, for instance, dolphins are rewarded with fish); 2) it is related to the Chinese tradition - the so-called “Honey Ritual”. At New Year family members place sugarcane stalks at the door as a hope for a sweet future. The image of God is smeared with honey around the mouth so that he could say only sweet words about the family to the governor of heaven (Oxtoby, 2002, p. 403).

- *čemi c'q'ali gadagesxas* [lit. let my water be poured on you] — is a formula of blessing through which the speaker wishes the listener to be as happy as he is. A newly married woman told this frequently to an unmarried one (Sakhokia, 1979, pp. 780-877). The saying is related to the ritual of sprinkling water on the bride. Water was deemed as a symbol of fertility.

While discussing the cult of water Mzia Makalatia emphasizes the fact that the so-called water creatures mentioned in Georgian folk stories are always male and fertilizing qualities are attributed to the rivers, lakes and seas. For instance, there was a ritual in Zemo Adjara at the festival of Shuamtoba during which childless women bathed in a lake in order to be granted fertility (Makalatia, 1972, pp. 300-301).

- *šen genacvale* [lit. I will be your replacement, ready to die instead of you] — is a phrase expressing love related to various superstitions linked to the theme of death in ancient times, including the belief in somehow gratifying death by sacrificing cattle, pieces of furniture and other precious possessions by the family members as replacement of a dying person (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 89), thus, trying to “replace” the dying person through various rituals.

- *šen šemogevle* [lit. I will surround you] — is related to the so-called ritual of surrounding a sick person. It is a phrase expressing love and signifies readiness of the speaker to die instead of the person who is being surrounded. According to T. Sakhokia, the custom of moving a hand around someone’s head is based on the belief that one person can die instead of the other; one person can sacrifice his or her life for the well being of the other. This custom was applied during the sickness of a beloved person. For example, when a child was ill, the mother or the father moved their hands three times around the child’s head, pleading with the death to take their souls instead of that of their child. (Sakhokia, 1956, p. 95).

Performative of curse

● *šgircxves cxviri* [lit. let your nose be disgraced] — is a formula of cursing linked to the ancient form of punishment – cutting off the nose. According to Lamberti, when the prince of Samegrelo, Levan Dadiani, learnt about the betrayal of his spouse, “he got furious, turned the wife out immediately and cut off her nose in accordance to Greek customs in order to disgrace her” (Lamberti, 1938, p. 16). Sakhokia also points out that such punishment “was moral disgrace rather than physical suffering, since the nose is a visible part of a face and without it the face looks immensely ugly” (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 822).

Although Lamberti considers this form of punishment to be based on Greek customs, it should be noted that rhinotomy can be found in many other ancient cultures. Fremgen argues that cultural categories such as “Honour” and “Shame” are often coded in morphology of the body. Cutting off the nose as a form of punishment was also common in ancient Egypt, Europe in 14th-15th centuries, India and Eastern countries (Fremgen, 2006, pp. 243-245). Compare the English expressions: *pay through the nose* — which denotes a large payment for something and is related to the invasion of Ireland by the Danes in the 9th century and the rule of the population census based on the noses (the so-called ‘counting noses’). The person who failed to pay taxes was punished by cutting off the nose. The expression *cut off your nose to spite your face* — means thoughtless behaviour of a person which is harmful not only to others, but also to himself.

Cutting off the nose as punishment is found in the Christian religion as well. In a book by Ezekiel we can read the threat of God to Egyptian whores: “And I will direct my jealousy against you, that they may deal with you in fury. They shall cut off your nose and your ears, and your survivors shall fall by the sword” (Bible, n.d., Ezekiel 23:25).

Performative of threat

● *q'urebze xaxvi ar damač'ra* [lit. don't cut the onion on my ears] — is an answer to a formula of threat through which the speaker tells the listener that he is not afraid of him; that the listener is unable to inflict any harm on him. The expression is etymologically related to an ancient form of violence – cutting off the ears of slaves. The members of the enslaved tribes got their ears cut off not to deprive them of the ability to work and also to give them an external mark. Afterwards, onions mixed with essential oils were cut on the wounds in order to disinfect and heal them quickly (Sakhokia, 1979, pp. 724-725; Jorbenadze, 1997, p. 92). The relation of the expression to the aforementioned procedure is questioned by Takaishvili and suggests that semantics of the phrase might be linked to the difficulty of

carrying out this procedure and have ironic connotation (it is difficult to cut the onion on a person's ears). This supposition is based on the fact that in the Svan language we can find "neck" instead of "ear": *kiserze xaxvi ar damač'ra* [lit. don't cut the onion on my neck] (Takaishvili, 1961, pp. 43-44).

Interestingly, the history of the ritual of cutting off ears started in ancient Egypt in 1550-1070 BC. This form of punishment human mutilation was the main law of the legislation of the New Kingdom, which is also confirmed by the text of an oath written on papyri: "if I speak falsehood [replaceable by potentially any reprehensible action], may there be cut off my nose and ears" (Loktionov, 2017, p. 265). Records about the act of cutting off ears as a form of punishment can be found in the Bible as well: "Then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life." (Bible, n.d., Exodus 21:6); "With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear" (Bible, n.d., Matthew 26:51).

- *enas amogažrob // mogač'ri* [lit. I will cut your tongue] — is a formula of threat used when making someone keep silent (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 175). The expression is specific to the Georgian language, since we had difficulty finding a similar case in other languages to draw a parallel, in spite of the fact that cutting out the tongue in a literal sense as a form of punishment and depriving the accused of the ability to speak can be found in almost all cultures. For example, cutting out the tongue was common in the Roman Empire, was found in medieval Europe and is still found today in many countries of the East. Interestingly, we read one of the oldest records about cutting out the tongue in the Bible, more specifically in Solomon's proverbs: "The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out" (Bible, n.d., Proverbs of Solomon 10:31). The following performative expressions with the request to refrain from speaking are also found in Georgian: *ena daimok'le // ena čaigde // enas k'bilebi daač'ire* [lit. hold your tongue, press your teeth to your tongue] — are formulas of command. Compare English *hold your tongue* and *bite your tongue*. The expressions have the same semantics in Georgian and English, they mean "shut up", "stop talking" (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 175; Neiman, 1978, p. 167; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

- *c'in nu gadamivli* [lit. don't pass in front of me] — is a formula of threat and warning related to a superstition and the ancient rule of spatial organization of the communication environment. For example, in ancient times in Georgia, while gathering by the hearth, if a person - younger in social status - passed in front of an elder person, it was considered to be a bad omen. At this time they would take the younger person's hand and turn him back. This kind of behaviour was so unacceptable that it was as if "they tried to reduce the degree of the harmfulness of the behaviour by turning back the person who had come forward" (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 865). Later, such behaviour was given the

characteristics of resistance and disobedience and was established in the language as a performative expression. It is used when a younger or weaker person dares to disobey an older and stronger one. The following performative expressions have similar semantics: *c'in nu damidgebi* [lit. don't stand in front of me]. To stand in front of somebody means to show one's superiority and rivalry (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 865); furthermore, in Georgian there is an expression which denotes keeping the promise "*cin dagaq'eneb*" [lit. I'll put you in front] — using this expression the speaker promises the addressee that he will prefer him to everyone and will give priority to him.

The *forward/backward* parameters of the spatial organization of the speech situation correspond to the *good/bad* dichotomy, which can also be seen in an expression "*ukan daq'eneba*" — it means to oppress, harm or play somebody down (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 625).

Forward/backward as *good/bad* dichotomy can be found in the Western culture as well, as evidenced by numerous phraseological expressions. For instance, the English expression *put something behind you* — means to leave a bad experience behind so that it does not affect the future; *get ahead of something or someone* — means to be better than something or someone; more successful in business. According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, *step backward/forward* in English means an action that can be harmful/beneficial (Merriam Webster's Dictionary, n.d.). The unambiguously negative connotation of the parameter "*back*" can be found in the Christian religion as well. In the Gospel of Luke we read: "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God!" (Bible, n.d., Luke's Gospel 9:62).

Performative of order

- *zemodan nu miq'ureb* [lit. don't look down on me] — is a formula of calling and warning and means - "don't belittle me", "don't be arrogant". The English phrase *look down on someone* has similar semantics and means thinking that you are better than someone; that someone is less important than you and does not deserve respect, whereas *to look up* means "to get better" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

The *up/down* proxemics parameters are proportional by the *good/bad* dichotomy, which is explained by their cognitive characteristics. Lakoff and Johnson refer to such cases as Orientational Metaphors and note that events with positive connotation in social or religious discourse are directed upwards, while negative ones are directed downwards, which is explained by human cultural experiences and has a physical, sensory-motor foundation (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 14-16). For example, a posture with straightened shoulders and head held up is associated with joy, whereas a stooped posture is linked to sadness. Compare the Georgian phrase "*elevated mood*" / "*falling into*

depression”; In people’s imagination “*up*” is heaven and paradise, “*down*” is earth and hell. Compare the Georgian performative of threat *mic’astan gagasc’oreb* [lit. I will raze you to the ground] — which means someone’s ruin and death. It denotes depriving someone of their entire height (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 406).

- *tvalebši // saxeši miq’ure* [lit. look into my eyes/face] — is a command formula which means “tell me the truth”, “don’t lie to me”. The English expression *look someone in the eye/face* has a similar meaning - a sincere conversation that does not cause suspicion (Spears, 2005, p. 415; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). According to Sakhokia, “looking into the eyes” takes place when we have not done anything wrong to someone and our conscience does not bother us (Sakhokia, 1979, pp. 259-260). Compare the opposite case, the request formula “*zurgi ar šemakcio*” [lit. don’t turn your back on me], which means “don’t turn away, don’t leave me”. Looking in the eyes/face is an important aspect of non-verbal communication, which is also a case of cultural homonymy. In the Western culture it is necessary to look into the interlocutor’s face during communication, since in this way we get the additional extra-linguistic markers that help us to conduct the given communication effectively. For example, if the interlocutor looks away, it may indicate that our conversation is uninteresting to him and he wishes to leave the speech event. We have a different picture in Eastern cultures - for example, in many Asian and African countries continuous eye contact may indicate aggression between people. Moreover, the issue of social and gender asymmetries should also be taken into consideration: subordinates do not look into the eyes of their superiors; children do not look into the eyes of adults, women do not look into the eyes of men, etc.

Performative of oath

- *marjvenas movič’ri* [lit. I will cut my right hand] — is a kind of promise and oath formula. Using the expression the speaker tries to convince the listener of the correctness of what he said. According to Sakhokia, “the oath was as strong and persuasive as the right hand was considered to be the main and necessary organ for doing physical activity” (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 376). “Right hand” is a figurative expression in Georgian and denotes a loyal and reliable person.

In the “Dictionary of symbolism” Biedermann indicates that in the right/left hand dualism the right hand is viewed more positively. Handprints found in Ice Age caves also indicate that humans were mostly right-handed. Perhaps that is why the right side is considered to be better and luckier than the left. Biedermann also connects this dichotomy with military equipment. Warriors carried their weapons with their right hand, while the left hand remained passive as a hand holding a shield (Biedermann, 1992, p. 283). In the “Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols” Cooper emphasizes that the right hand is the “hand of power,” whereas the left hand is its passive aspect

associated with theft and betrayal (Cooper, 1987, p. 78).

The right hand is found in Georgian in another performative expression: “*marjvena mogt'q'des*” [lit. let your right hand be broken] — which is a curse formula. According to Sakhokia, using this expression the speaker wishes the listener “to die, to be ruined in his work, to be oppressed” (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 376). There is also the opposite case: *marjvena xelimc šegrčeba* [lit. may your right hand be preserved] — a formula of blessing - the speaker wishes the listener “continuous use of the right hand and a constant ability to do work” (Sakhokia, 1979, p. 376).

Concluding remarks

The constituent components of the construction of performative expressions are presented in a figurative sense and the entire meaning of the phrase is formed in connection with the ritual actions which are found in the culture of the given ethnos. This fact requires considering this kind of expressions based on the ritual contexts which can provide us with additional information about the semantic peculiarities and modal framework of the expressions.

Performative expressions have a kind of reflective function. Their meaning is formed in accordance with the extra-linguistic factors in which the given language functions. That is why we believe the issue of reviewing the etymology of these expressions and connecting them with the relevant rituals is significant. Such discussions will give us the opportunity to connect linguistic facts with relevant cultural facts and identify specific or parallel cases in an intercultural context.

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