

Non-verbal predication in Ossetic

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Abstract. This article deals with the semantic functions and morphological expression of different types of non-verbal predication in Ossetic. Ossetic features two third-person singular present-tense forms of the verb ‘to be’ (*iš*) and *u*), one of which, namely *iš*, can be argued to be the copula. The two forms are employed in non-overlapping types of non-verbal predication. With plural subjects, however, no morphologically distinct copula is available. Because of this, non-agreement and the third person singular copula are used in differentiating between predication types. In particular, full agreement is exhibited in “nominal” predications (e.g. *John is a teacher*), while non-agreeing verbal forms and the copula are used in “locational” ones (e.g. *John is in New York*). Additionally, in locative clauses proper a further distinction can be drawn between thematic and rhematic location, with definiteness also playing a role in the selection of the non-agreeing copula or the verb ‘to be’. The article also covers the usage of the negated forms of the copula (*næj*) and the verb ‘to be’ (*næw*). It is shown that their distribution mirrors that of the positive forms, although some contexts with *næw* do require more careful examination. Some morphosyntactic differences between “nominal” predication types, i.e. those conveying Equation (*John is my father*), Proper Inclusion (*John is a teacher*), and Attribution (*John is handsome*), are also highlighted. In particular, there is variation between types as to whether use is made of a pure adjective, which in Ossetic can bear no nominal morphology, or of the corresponding lexicalized substantive form, capable of attaching e.g. the plural marker.

Key words: Ossetic, non-verbal predication, non-agreement, copula

Acknowledgements: This research was supported by RSF grant № 24-18-00199. I am grateful to all the speakers of Ossetic who shared their knowledge of the language with me. I would also like to thank the audiences of the MYaBL-2024 conference, where I presented my talk on the subject matter of this article, for their stimulating questions and discussions following the talk. I am indebted to the editors of this journal, especially Arseniy P. Vydrin, for their invaluable help in the preparation of this article.

For citation: Alekseev D. A. Non-verbal predication in Ossetic. *Indo-Iranian languages*. 2025. 1(1). P. 173–192.

DOI: 10.30842/30346800.2025.1.1.8

Неглагольная предикация в осетинском языке

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются семантические функции и морфологическое выражение разных типов неглагольной предикации в осетинском языке. В частности, показывается, что одну из двух морфологически различных форм бытийного глагола третьего лица единственного числа настоящего времени можно справедливо считать глаголом-связкой (копулой). При этом морфологически отдельной копулы для использования с субъектами во множественном числе нет. Однако различие между типами неглагольной предикации всё ещё можно выразить через использование несогласованных с такими субъектами форм бытийного глагола. Отдельное внимание уделено локативным предложениям, отрицательным формам бытийного глагола и вопросам категориальной принадлежности предикативного имени.

Ключевые слова: осетинский язык, неглагольная предикация, рассогласование, копула

Благодарности: Исследование поддержано грантом РФФ № 24-18-00199, реализуемым в Институте языкознания РАН. Я благодарен носителям осетинского языка за оценку стимульного материала, слушателям моего доклада на конференции «Малые языки в большой лингвистике — 2024», материалы которого легли в основу этой работы, за вопросы и обсуждение, а также редакторам журнала, в особенности А. П. Выдрину, за их неоценимую помощь в подготовке настоящей статьи.

Для цитирования: Alekseev D. A. Non-verbal predication in Ossetic. *Indo-Iranian languages*. 2025. 1(1). P. 173–192.

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1. Introduction

Ossetic is an Iranian Indo-European language spoken by up to 614,000 speakers, according to the Ethnologue,¹ in the Northern Caucasus and other areas. The most important dialectal split is between the Iron and Digor varieties. Digor is spoken in the northwestern part of the republic of North Ossetia–Alania, while Iron is the dominant variety in the rest of the Ossetic-speaking region.

The present article is chiefly concerned with the morphological expression of different types of non-verbal predication in Ossetic. I make reference to both Iron and Digor, but largely focus on the former. No difference in the functioning of copular verbs has been found between the two dialects.

From the point of view of numerous typological works devoted to non-verbal predication, Ossetic, as I show in this paper, is a split-language in the terminology of [Stassen 1997, 2013], meaning that the morphological strategies for encoding “nominal” (e.g. *John is a teacher*) and “locational” (e.g. *John is in New York*) predication are different. However, this difference is not pervasive across the TAM paradigms, as separate morphological “nominal” and “locational” forms are found only in the third person singular of the present tense. With third person plural subjects, “locational” predications are distinguished from “nominal” ones by means of non-agreement, i.e. the use of singular verbs with plural subjects. Thus, I would suggest characterizing Ossetic more accurately as a partial split-language.

Unless otherwise noted, the examples cited were elicited during my fieldwork in Vladikavkaz, North Ossetia–Alania, Russia, in August 2023 and July 2024. I also draw upon the Iron data from the Oral Corpus (OC; 60,000 tokens²) and certain works of fiction in modern

¹ URL: <https://www.ethnologue.com/>, accessed June 15th, 2024.

² URL: <https://ossetic-studies.org/en/texts>, accessed June 15th, 2024.

Ossetic, including translations of some foreign authors, which can be accessed online³ along with their Russian versions.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 introduces the paradigms of the verb ‘to be’ in Ossetic. In Section 3 the forms of the verb ‘to be’ and the copula are mapped onto a classification of predication types by Payne [1997], with Subsection 3.2 dedicated to exploring locational predications in Ossetic, which are shown to exhibit certain peculiar properties. The negated forms of the verb ‘to be’ and the copula and their functioning are the subject matter of Section 4. Section 5 introduces language-specific diagnostics that help differentiate between certain predication types, and in Section 6 I draw up my conclusions.

2. Morphology

Ossetic has a three-way person distinction and a two-way number distinction.⁴ All six person-number combinations are expressed by a unique morphological exponent across all paradigms (meaning there is no intraparadigmatic syncretism). Take, for example, the present, cf. Table 1 below.

Table 1. Present tense endings and sample paradigm
for *kænən* ‘to do’

	Present tense endings		Example paradigm <i>kænən</i> ‘to do’	
	SG	PL	SG	PL
1 st person	-ən	-æm	<i>kænən</i>	<i>kænæm</i>
2 nd person	-əš	-ut	<i>kænəš</i>	<i>kænut</i>
3 rd person	-ə	-əns	<i>kænə</i>	<i>kænəns</i>

³ URL: <https://ironau.ru/bilingva/>, accessed June 15th, 2024.

⁴ For a more detailed description of the structure of Ossetic TAM paradigms, the reader is advised to consult [Vydrin 2023]. There it is suggested that Ossetic might feature a separate ‘0th person’ for the morphological impersonal verb forms. For the purposes of this study, however, I stick to a traditional three-way person distinction.

The verb *wævən* ‘to be’, however, has been said to feature two different third-person singular present forms in Iron, namely *iš* and *u* [Abaev 1964: 55; Akhvlediani 1963: 226], see Table 2 below.

Table 2. Present forms of *wævən* ‘to be’ in the Iron dialect of Ossetic

	SG	PL
1 st person	<i>dæn</i>	<i>štæm</i>
2 nd person	<i>dæ</i>	<i>štut</i>
3 rd person	<i>iš/u</i>	<i>štə</i>

The form *iš* also has an allomorph *i* that is in free variation with it; there are no semantic differences between the two.

The same split, featuring two present tense singular forms of the verb ‘to be’, is found in Digor, cf. Table 3. The form *je* (an optional allomorph *jes* is available) is regularly related to *iš* through a correspondence Digor /*(j)e/* ~ Iron /*i/* [Testen 1997: 723]. Iron *u* and Digor *æj* do not share a single origin, according to [Kim 2023].

Table 3. Present forms of *un* ‘to be’ in the Digor dialect of Ossetic

	SG	PL
1 st person	<i>dæn</i>	<i>an</i>
2 nd person	<i>dæ</i>	<i>ajtæ</i>
3 rd person	<i>je/æj</i>	<i>æncæ</i>

It is worth noting that Iron *iš* and *u* also have special negated variants, *næj* and *næw* (*næjje(s)*) and *næj* in Digor), which are discussed in Section 5.

In the past tense, one can only find a single third-person singular form, namely *wədiš*. It also has available free allomorphs, *wədi* and *wəd*. Their frequency distribution, however, is not the same: according to the OC data, *wəd* is the least commonly used (less than 30 occurrences), potentially due to its homonymy with the past participle, *wədiš* is the second most commonly used variant, with more than 100 tokens, and *wədi* tops the list at more than 600 tokens.

3. Semantic Functions

3.1. General Remarks

The forms *iš* and *u* differ both syntactically and semantically. Previous descriptions have indicated that the former is restricted to existential (1), locational (2), and possessive⁵ (3) clauses, while the latter is used in identificational function (4), cf. [Gagkaev 1956: 60–61].

- (1) *axæm programmæ iš.*
such program EXT
'There is such a program.' [OC: Aguzarova Izeta, 27.4]
- (2) *jæ=xæzar am iš, jæ=xædæg næj.*
POSS.3SG=house here EXT⁶ POSS.3SG=self EXT.NEG
'His house is here, but he himself is nowhere to be found.'
[Gagkaev 1956: 61]
- (3) *mæn-æn xæzar iš.*
1SG-DAT house EXT
'I have a house.' [Gagkaev 1956: 61]
- (4) *ænæ-žon-gæ ærvad žnag u.⁷*
without-know-PCVB relative enemy be.PRS.3SG
'An unfamiliar relative is an enemy.'
[Ossetic proverb; Gagkaev 1956: 61]

⁵ Gagkaev himself does not give a non-negative example of existential predication.

⁶ For convenience, I gloss *iš* as EXT, standing for "existential copula". However, as I will show in this paper, its functions are not limited to conveying existence.

⁷ The reader should be aware of certain peculiarities of Ossetic transcription. For Iron, the Latin transcription strays quite far from the official Cyrillic orthography. For example, <c> and <ç> are transliterated as <š> and <ž>, since a chain shift involving affricates and sibilants occurred in the Iron varieties that became the foundation of modern colloquial Ossetic. Additionally, the Cyrillic letter <æ>, which is used solely by Ossetic, does not stand for the vowel conveyed by IPA /æ/, but is instead used for the mid-open vowel /ɜ/. A full description of the transliteration conventions adopted here, authored by Oleg Belyaev, can be accessed at the Ossetic Grammatical Studies website: URL: <https://ossetic-studies.org/biblio/ossetic-orth-en.pdf>, accessed June 15th, 2024.

Gagkaev in particular notes that the functions of *iš* are similar to those of the French *il y a* and German *es gibt* ‘there is’ constructions [Gagkaev 1956: 61].

Mapping the functions of *iš* and *u* onto a more fine-grained classification, such as that of Payne [1997], might shed more light on their distribution. The form *u* is used in clauses involving Equation (5), defined by Payne [1997: 114] as “assert[ing] that a particular entity ⟨...⟩ is identical to the entity specified in the predicate nominal” (*Alan is my father* = *My father is Alan* (5)). It also conveys Proper Inclusion (membership in a class of items or entities, e.g. the set of teachers in (6)), and Attribution (7).

- (5) *alan mæ=fəd u.*
 Alan POSS.1SG=father be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Alan is my father.’
- (6) *madinæ ax^wər-gæn-æg u.*
 Madina learning-do-PTCP.PRS be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Madina is a teacher.’
- (7) *žawər ræšusd u.*
 Zaur beautiful be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Zaur is beautiful.’

The copula *iš*, on the other hand, is found in Existential (8), Possessive (9) and Locational (10) predication (confirming Gagkaev’s insight above). It should also be noted that Ossetic is a language with an intransitive predicative possession construction, according to Stassen’s [2013] typology (unlike, for example, English, which features a transitive verb (*have*) to convey Possession). In the Ossetic possession construction the Possessor is marked by the dative or the allative, the Possessed is Nominative, and the verb ‘to be’ usually agrees in person and number with the Possessed.

- (8) *soslan xæzar-ə iš / *u.*
 Soslan house-IN EXT be.PRS.3SG
 ‘(Who is at home? / Where is Soslan?) Soslan is at home.’

- (9) <...> *x^wəsaw iš ævi=næ?*
 God EXT OR=NEG
 ‘“Tell me, wretched slave,” said he, “do you think< there is a God, or not?”’ [Leo Tolstoy, *The Coffee-House of Surat*⁸]
- (10) *vašo-mæ ručk’æ iš.*
 Vasya-ALL pen EXT
 ‘Vasya has a pen.’

In the past tense, no distinction between different types of predication is made with singular subjects, as only *wədiš* and its allomorphs *wədi* and *wəd* are available. The following examples highlight the absence of any morphological distinction between the predication types:

- equation
- (11) *alagirskiy rajon-ə xisaw wəd-i.*
 Alagir region-GEN head be-PST.3SG
 ‘He was head of the Alagir region.’ [OC: Zagnieva-Khabalova 2, 73]
- proper inclusion
- (12) *xorž læg wəd-i*
 good man be-PST.3SG
 ‘He was a good man <...>’ [OC: Zagnieva-Khabalova 2, 72]
- attribution
- (13) *axæm fætæn wəd-i*
 so wide be-PST.3SG
 ‘<...> it was so wide <...>’ [OC: Zagnieva-Khabalova 2, 30.3]
- location
- (14) *kwazæn-ə bærægbon-ə ješo ierušalim-ə k^wə*
 Easter-GEN celebration-IN Jesus Jerusalem-IN when

⁸ Translated into Ossetic by Cocko Æmbalty, URL: https://ironau.ru/bilingva/PROSE/dunejan_iu_huycau_is.htm; English translation by Aylmer and Louise Maude.

wəd-i <...>

be-PST.3SG

‘Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, <many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did>.’ [John 2:23⁹]

existence

- (15) *æmæ iw adæjmag wəd-i*

and one person be-PST.3SG

‘There was one man <...>’ [OC: Alagir School, 11.8]

possession

- (16) *sviter=dær=mən næ wəd-i.*

sweater=ADD=1SG.DAT NEG be-PST.3SG

‘<...> I didn’t even have a sweater.’ [OC: Classmates (Gizel), 64.6]

In the present tense, if the subject is a plural-marked NP (a collective noun or some other type of nominal capable of inducing plural agreement¹⁰), the plural form *štā* ‘be.PRS.PL’ is used instead of *u* ‘be.PRS.3SG’. Copular *iš*, when used with plural subjects, still performs the functions described above, except for Location, which I omit for now and describe later. Cf. the examples below, where *štā* ‘be.PRS.3PL’ is used with plural subjects in sentences conveying Identification (17), Proper Inclusion (18), and Attribution (19), while *iš* is the copula in existential (20) and possessive (21) sentences.

- (17) *žalinæ æmæ alan mæ=nəjjardž-atæ štā.*

Zalina and Alan POSS.1SG=parent-PL be.PRS.3PL

‘Zalina and Alan are my parents.’

- (18) *me=mbæł-ttæ doxtər-tæ štā.*

POSS.1SG=friend-PL doctor-PL be.PRS.3PL

‘My friends are doctors.’

⁹ English translation given according to the King James Bible; the Ossetic translation is cited from the Institute for Bible Translation version, URL: <https://online-bibliya.ru/book/osetinskii-iron-vzag-32/>, accessed June 15th, 2024.

¹⁰ An overview of the inventory of such subjects can be found in [Alekseev 2023: 14–20].

- (19) *gabo æmæ dzabo žond-džən šta.*
 Gabo and Dzabo clever-PROP be.PRS.3PL
 ‘Gabo and Dzabo are clever.’
- (20) *nar-ə kom-ə iš axæm soslovi-tæ.*
 Nar-GEN gorge-IN EXT such class-PL
 ‘The following classes exist in the Nar gorge <...>¹¹ [K’osta Xetægkatə, *Osoba*¹²]
- (21) *batraz-mæ iš topp-ətæ.*
 Batraz-ALL EXT gun-PL
 ‘Batraz has weapons.’

Past tense non-verbal predications with plural subjects pattern with present tense ones: again excluding Location (note that a table summarizing the distribution of the copula and the verb ‘to be’ concludes Section 3.2), the plural form *wədəštə* (be.PST.3PL) can be found in place of *štə* (be.PRS.3PL) in Equation (22), Proper Inclusion (23) and Attribution (24) clauses, while the single form *wədi* (be.PST.3SG) is used in existential (25) and possessive (26) predications (the plural form *wədəštə* is less acceptable).

- (22) *batraz æmæ timur*
 Batraz and Timur
wəd-əštə mæ=wæržond æmbæł-ttæ.
 be-PST.3PL POSS.1SG=favorite friend-PL
 ‘Batraz and Timur were my favorite friends.’
- (23) *me=fšamær-ttæ wəd-əštə amaj-dž-ətæ.*
 POSS.1SG=brother-PL be-PST.3PL build-PTCP.PRS-PL
 ‘My brothers were builders.’

¹¹ The Nar gorge is located to the west of Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia–Alania. It also houses the eponymous village which is the birthplace of K’osta Xetægkatə, the national poet of Ossetia.

¹² URL: <https://ironau.ru/bilingva/PROSE/osoba.htm>, accessed June 15th, 2024; the English translation is mine – DA.

- (24) *mæ=fədæɫ-tæ wəd-əštə bæržond.*
 POSS.1SG=ancestor-PL be-PST.3PL tall
 ‘My ancestors were tall.’
- (25) *wæræše-jə biræ ræšʊbd xəzær-ttæ wəd-i.*
 Russia-IN many beautiful house-PL be-PST.3SG
 ‘In Russia, there were many beautiful houses.’
- (26) *axmat-mæ wəd-i / ?wəd-əštə čing^{wə}-tæ.*
 Ahmat-ALL be-PST.3SG be-PST.3PL book-PL
 ‘Ahmat had books.’

3.2. The case of Location

In locational clauses, however, both the copula *iš* (which is mainly used with singular subjects) and the plural form of the verb ‘to be’ *štə* can be found:

- (27) *fatimæ æmæ ežeta šk’ola-jə iš / štə.*
 Fatima and Ezeta school-IN EXT be.PRS.3PL
 ‘Fatima and Ezeta are at school.’

This difference in verbal agreement can be analysed in terms of an extension of Payne’s predicate typology, specifically Koch’s [2012] differentiation of Thematic and Rhematic Location.

The argument structure of locative predications in general consists of a Located participant and a Locus. Thematic and Rhematic Location are delineated through the information-structural status of the Located. For example, in Brazilian Portuguese the verb *estar* ‘to be’ is used for Thematic Location (28a), while Rhematic Location features the verb *ter* ‘to have’ (28b).

Brazilian Portuguese

- (28) a. *O livro est-á sobre a mesa.*
 DEF book be-PRS.3SG on INDEF table
 ‘The book is on the table.’ [Koch 2012: 536]
- b. *Tem um livro sobre a mesa.*
 have.PRS.3SG INDEF book on INDEF table
 ‘There is a book on the table.’ [Koch 2012: 542]

This information-structural status can be probed using different kinds of questions. For example, (28a) can be used to answer the question ‘Where is the book?’, while (28b) answers ‘What was on the table?’, cf. [Koch 2012: 538].

A similar distinction can be argued to be present in Ossetic, although it only seems to surface exclusively with plural subjects through (non-)agreement. That is, with singular objects the copula *iš* is used for both types of Location (29)–(30), and with plural objects the verbal forms *štə* and *wədəštə* are employed for Thematic Location in the present (31) and past (32) tenses respectively. Rhematic Location in the present and past is conveyed by *iš* (33) and *wədi* (34) respectively. Notice, however, that the latter two examples feature a certain amount of interspeaker variation and the plural forms can be used as well.

- (29) *šošlan xəzar-ə iš / *u.*
 Soslan house-IN EXT be.PRS.3SG
 (Where is Soslan?) ‘Soslan is at home.’
- (30) *xəzar-ə iš / *u šošlan.*
 house-IN EXT be.PRS.3SG Soslan
 (Who is at home?) ‘Soslan is at home. (~ At home [there] is Soslan.)’
- (31) *fatimæ æmæ ežeta šk’ola-jə *iš / štə.*
 Fatima and Ezeta school-IN EXT be.PRS.3PL
 (Where are Fatima and Ezeta?) ‘Fatima and Ezeta are at school.’
- (32) *dərb-tæ *wəd-i / wəd-əštə ašəkk-ə.*
 fruit-PL be-PST.3SG be-PST.3PL box-IN
 (Where were the fruits?) ‘The fruits were in the box.’
- (33) *šk’ola-jə iš / štə fatimæ æmæ ežeta.*
 school-IN EXT be.PRS.3PL Fatima and Ezeta
 (Who is at school?) ‘Fatima and Ezeta are at school.’ (Lit. ‘At school [there] are Fatima and Ezeta.’)
- (34) *ašəkk-ə dərb-tæ wəd-i / wəd-əštə.*
 box-IN fruit-PL be-PST.3SG be-PST.3PL
 (What was in the box?) ‘There were fruits in the box.’

The reader might notice, going back to Brazilian Portuguese, that examples (28a) and (28b) are not minimal pairs *sensu stricto*, as the copulas *está* and *tem* are not the only thing that is different about them. The referential status of the Located also differs, as indicated by the use of articles *o* and *um* respectively.

Ossetic is not indifferent to definiteness contrasts either, as is quite evident from the behavior of past tense Location clauses. For example, in (35) the subject *Soslan æmæ Zawər* is a coordinated noun phrase consisting of proper nouns. Non-agreement, i.e. using the predicate in its 3SG form (*wədi*), was judged as significantly less acceptable by my consultants than the 3PL form of the predicate (*wədəštə*). Generic nouns¹³ in the case of Locative sentences usually do not agree with the predicate in number, cf. (34) with the generic NP *dərbtæ* ‘fruits’.

- (35) *soslan æmæ žawər bədar-ə ??wəd-i / wəd-əštə*.
 Soslan and Zaur field-IN be-PST.3SG be-PST.3PL
 (Who was in the field?) ‘Soslan and Zaur were in the field.’

Notice that animacy does not affect predicate agreement in number, as indicated by the following example with an animate generic subject *čəžžətæ* ‘girls’ from the Iron Corpus of Oral Texts:

- (36) <...> *čəžžətæ=zə wəd-i mænæ k’æbær či*
 girl-PL=3SG.IN be-PST.3SG INTJ food who
kæn-ə <...>
 do-PRS.3SG

‘<And we knew that the concert will take place on Sunday, and the last act is ours. There were elderly people, like Zina, God rest her soul, poor thing! Zina,> there were girls who could cook, <make pies, pickles>.’ [OC: Kazbek (Gizel), 24]

Another point worth mentioning is that the usage of the copula *iš* in example (33) above, which featured a definite NP, was rated just as acceptable as the plural form of the verb ‘to be’ (*štə*). Thus, there is no definiteness contrast, unlike in example (35). It is yet not clear why

¹³ I have not tested indefinite noun phrases, but I expect them to exhibit identical behavior.

definiteness should play a role in the past tense but not in the present. This question merits further investigation.

In conclusion, the following distribution of third person forms of *wævən* ‘to be’ with regards to verb tense and predication type emerges, as depicted in Table 4. Overall, this makes Ossetic a split-language in Stassen’s [1997, 2013] terms, i.e. a language in which the encoding of “nominal” and “locational” predications is different. Split-languages (which are more common typologically, according to Stassen’s [2013] data) are opposed to share-languages, such as English (37)–(38), which do not make such a distinction.

(37) *Julia is a nurse.*

(38) *Julia is in Barcelona.*

However, certain other split-languages might have a more pervasive morphological difference between verbal forms used in “nominal” and “locational” predications. For example, in Spanish the verbs *ser*, used for “nominal” predications (39), and *estar*, a “locational” copula (40), remain distinct across the TAM paradigm.

(39) *Julia es enfermera.*
 Julia SER.PRS.3SG nurse
 ‘Julia is a nurse.’ [Stassen 2013]

(40) *Julia está en Barcelona.*
 Julia ESTAR.PRS.3SG in Barcelona
 ‘Julia is in Barcelona.’ [Stassen 2013]

As was shown above, in Ossetic a separate locational copula only surfaces for the third person singular present, but the overall distinction between “nominal” and “locational” predications is nonetheless a significant one. With this in mind, I would suggest using the term “partial split-language” in order to characterize the situation found in Ossetic and described in this paper.

Table 4. Distribution of third-person copula forms

Tense	Subject Number	Predicate Nominals	Thematic Location	Rhematic Location	Existence and Possession
PRS	SG	<i>u</i>	<i>iš</i>		
	PL	<i>štə</i>		<i>iš</i>	
PST	SG	<i>wədiš</i>			
	PL	<i>wədaštə</i>		<i>wədiš</i>	

4. Negation

As mentioned in Section 2, the copula *iš* and the verbal form *u* have negative forms *nəj* and *nəw* that arise via conflation with the negative particle *nə*. These negative forms are not only written as single words, but are also pronounced monosyllabically with a final glide, indicating a high degree of morphological integration.

The negated forms generally perform the same functions as the corresponding non-negative copula or the verb ‘to be’. In the negated versions of Equation (41), Proper Inclusion (42), and Attribution (43) *nəw* is used, while negative Location (44), Existence (45), and Possession (46) feature *nəj*, the negative copula.

(41) *waw, wəj nəw!*

INTJ it be.3SG.NEG

‘Oh! It is not he!’ [Alexander Pushkin, *The Snowstorm*¹⁴]

(42) *xur-ə ruxš don nəw <...>*

SUN-GEN light liquid be.3SG.NEG

‘The light of the sun is not a liquid; <for if it were a liquid it would be possible to pour it from one vessel into another, and it would be moved, like water, by the wind>.’ [Leo Tolstoy, *The Coffee-House of Surat*]

¹⁴ Translated into Ossetic by Sosko Æmbaltə, URL: <https://ironau.ru/bilingva/PROSE/tymygh.htm>; English translation by T. Keane.

- (43) *wəj rašt næw*
 it right be.3SG.NEG
 ‘It is not right.’ [OC: Kochieva-Karaeva, 43.3]
- (44) ⟨...⟩ *špal¹ni-t-ə næj*
 bedroom-PL-IN EXT.NEG
 ‘[I searched in every corner, I looked in the loggia and] in the bedroom — she wasn’t there.’ [OC: Zarema Aldatova, 14.6]
- (45) *wətmæj=zə xwəždær nəxaš næj!*
 that.ABL=3SG.IN better word EXT.NEG
 ‘There is no better word than this!’ [OC: Kazbek (Gizel), 5.2]
- (46) *ætæ=mæt nərtækkæ gitaræ næj mæn-mæ...*
 and=1SG.ALL now guitar EXT.NEG 1SG-ALL
 ‘And now I don’t have a guitar[, no more.]’ [OC: Kazbek (Gizel), 183.6]

However, one can also find examples that might appear to suggest that *næw* can be used in negative existential sentences, particularly in the *X-GEN bon* ‘can’ construction (lit. ‘X’s ability’), see [Vydrin 2011: 290]. Consider the following corpus example:

- (47) *mæn-æn ənæ me=fšəmærttæ*
 1SG-DAT without POSS.1SG=brother-PL
mæ=bon næw
 POSS.1SG=ability be.3SG.NEG
 ‘I can’t do without my brothers.’ [OC: Houses and Children 2, 81.8]

However, this is a misleading impression. First, *næw* is also used in bi-argument scenarios. For example, (48) features *zæbæx kæšən* ‘to read properly’, an infinitive nominalization.

- (48) ⟨...⟩ *zæbæx kæš-ən=dær=šæ mæ=bon næw*
 well read-INF=ADD=3SG.GEN POSS.1SG=ability be.3SG.NEG
 ‘[And I start, but] I don’t know how to read it properly.’ [OC: Alagir School, 59.1]

Second, *mæ bon* ‘my ability’ can be shown to be the agreement controller. If a conjoined noun phrase as in (49) is used instead of a single nominalization, the plural form, e.g. *štə* (be.PRS.3PL), does not become acceptable, which means that *mæ bon* does indeed control the agreement.

- (49) *ziza-jæ fiʒonæɡ kæn-ən æmæ=jæ fəs-ən*
 meat-ABL shashlik¹⁵ do-INF and=3SG.GEN boil-INF
*mæ=bon u / *štə.*
 POSS.1SG=ability be.PRS.3SG be.PRS.3PL
 ‘I can cook meat by both frying it and boiling it.’ (Lit. ‘My ability is to make shashlik from meat and boil it.’)

Thus, examples of the type (47) can be explained through implicit object omission: ‘My ability is not (to do something) without my brothers’.

5. Differentiating the types

Interestingly enough, a further distinction can be made between the three “identificational” predication types, namely Equation, Proper Inclusion, and Attribution. For instance, in sentences with plural subjects featuring Equation (50) and Proper Inclusion (51) the predicate nominal is necessarily in the plural.

- (50) *alan æmæ Fatimæ *mæ=nəjjaræɡ / mæ=nəjjardž-ətæ*
 Alan and Fatima POSS.1SG=parent POSS.1SG=parent-PL
štə.
 be.PRS.3PL
 ‘Alan and Fatima are my parents.’
- (51) *me=mbæł-ttæ *doxtər / doxtər-tæ štə.*
 POSS.1SG=friend-PL doctor doctor-PL be.PRS.3PL
 ‘My friends are doctors.’

¹⁵ Barbecue, kebab, grilled meat.

But using the plural marker on the predicate nominal with Attribution-type clauses, where the nominal in question is an adjective, leads to lexicalization. For example, *žondžəntæ* in (52b) is understood as ‘know-it-all’, which is more idiomatic compared to simply ‘clever’ in (52a). A similar contrast is found between examples (53a) and (53b). Overall this pattern of lexicalization is systematic in Ossetic, cf. [Bagaev 1965: 178–179].

- (52) a. *gabo æmæ dzabo žond-džən šta.*
 Gabo and Dzabo clever-PROP be.PRS.3PL
 ‘Gabo and Dzabo are clever.’
- b. *gabo æmæ dzabo žond-džən-tæ šta.*
 Gabo and Dzabo clever-PROP-PL be.PRS.3PL
 ‘Gabo and Dzabo are know-it-all.’
- (53) a. *me=fšəməx-ttæ wəd-əšta amaj-æx.*
 POSS.1SG=brother-PL be-PST.3PL build-PTCP.PRS
 ‘My brothers were skillful.’
- b. *me=fšəməx-ttæ wəd-əšta amaj-dž-ətæ.*
 POSS.1SG=brother-PL be-PST.3PL build-PTCP.PRS-PL
 ‘My brothers were builders.’

This opposition clearly stems from the fact that in Equation and Proper Inclusion sentences the predicate nominals are nouns, while in Attribution sentences adjectives are used in this function. Since adjectives in Ossetic lack number and case morphology (thus, there is also no agreement within the NP), the use of the plural marker with an adjective leads to its re-interpretation and lexicalization.

6. Conclusions

This paper has aimed to describe the structure and function of non-verbal predication in Ossetic. The picture observed is reminiscent of that seen in other split-languages, i.e. languages that differentiate several copulas based on their functional (i.e. locational vs nominal) domain. However, the pattern found in Ossetic features a morphologically distinct copula, as opposed to the verb ‘to be’, only in the third

person singular. With plural subjects this lack of a separate copula is compensated by non-agreement and the usage of the third person singular copula. At the same time, it can be seen that locative predications are distinct in Ossetic as they feature an intimate interplay of definiteness, as a general factor triggering (non-)agreement, and information structure, thus splitting this type of predication into Thematic and Rhematic Location. Nominal predications in Ossetic, on the other hand, exhibit sensitivity to the syntactic category of the predicate nominal (nouns vs adjectives) which can be demonstrated with plural marking on the nominal.

The facts described in this paper are potentially significant both in the description of Ossetic and in the typologically oriented study of copularization and agreement.

Abbreviations

1, 3 – 1st, 3rd person; ABL – ablative; ADD – additive; ALL – allative; DAT – dative; DEF – definite; ESTAR – the Spanish verb *estar* ‘to be’; EXT – existential copula; GEN – genitive; IN – inessive; INDEF – indefinite; INF – infinitive; INTJ – interjection; NEG – negation; PCVB – participle-converb; PL – plural; POSS – possessive; PROP – proprietive; PRS – present tense; PST – past tense; PTCP – participle; SER – the Spanish verb *ser* ‘to be’; SG – singular.

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Получено / received 17.06.2024

Принято / accepted 09.09.2024