

The verb focus construction in Iron Ossetic

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Abstract. This paper describes a construction consisting of a participle-converb with the suffix *-gæ* and the verb *kænən* ‘to do’ in Iron Ossetic. I show that it marks verb focus and is obligatorily used in the presence of focus particles modifying a verb. Its morphosyntactic properties include (1) attachment of prefixes to the auxiliary verb and (2) the interposition of negative and other elements in the left preverbal position. These properties can be linked to the placement of the non-finite form in *-gæ* in the focus position. This accounts for the incompatibility of the verb focus construction with complex verbs consisting of a nominal part and a light verb (often *kænən* ‘to do’), as their being in focus is marked with the nominal part appearing in the focus position. I conclude that the Ossetic focus construction showcases a cross-linguistically attested strategy of employing periphrasis with a verb ‘to do’ for marking verb focus in a language with word order restrictions.

Key words: ‘do’-constructions, Iron Ossetic, verb focus

For citation: Podgornaia A. D. The verb focus construction in Iron Ossetic. *Indo-Iranian languages*. 2025. 1(1). P. 152–172.

DOI: 10.30842/30346800.2025.1.1.7

Конструкция глагольного фокуса в иронском диалекте осетинского языка

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Аннотация. В статье на материале иронского диалекта осетинского языка рассматривается конструкция, состоящая из причастия-деепричастия на *-гæ* и глагола *кæнын* ‘делать’. Показано, что употребление данной конструкции для маркирования фокуса на глаголе и ее морфосинтаксические свойства связаны с положением компонентов конструкции в структуре клаузы, в которой отмечается жесткий порядок следования элементов глагольного комплекса. Использование особой конструкции для маркирования глагольного фокуса находит типологические параллели.

Ключевые слова: глагольный фокус, иронский осетинский, конструкции с глаголом ‘делать’

Для цитирования: Podgornaia A. D. The verb focus construction in Iron Ossetic. *Indo-Iranian languages*. 2025. 1(1). P. 152–172.

DOI: 10.30842/30346800.2025.1.1.7

1. Introduction

Ossetic is a modern East Iranian language spoken in North Ossetia–Alania, Russian Federation, and South Ossetia. Its most widespread dialect, Iron, is spoken by about 345,000 people in North Ossetia¹ and has numerous descriptions, cf. [Miller 1903; Gagkaev 1952, 1956; Abaev 1959, 1964; Bagaev 1965, 1982; Akhvediani 1963, 1969], among others.

The discussion in this paper will be based on elicited examples collected during my fieldwork in Vladikavkaz in 2023 and corpus data from both oral (around 60,000 tokens) and written corpora (around 12 million tokens) of Iron Ossetic, contexts from which will be marked with OC and ONC respectively.²

This paper deals with a productive construction consisting of a lexical verb that appears in the non-variable participle-converb form with the suffix *-гæ* and the auxiliary verb *кæнæн* ‘to do’ carrying verb inflections, consider *kušgæ kodta* ‘[he] worked’ in (1).

¹ According to the 2020 All-Russia Census of Population URL: https://rosstat.gov.ru/vpn/2020/Tom5_Nacionalnyj_sostav_i_vladienie_yazykami.

² Links are given in the Sources at the end of the article. Transliteration follows the guidelines at URL: <https://www.ossetic-studies.org/biblio/ossetic-orth-en.pdf>.

- (1) *Æxšæv kuš-gæ kod-t-a, bon=ta*
 night work-CVB do-TR-PST.3SG day=CONTR
qaqqæd-t-a jæ=xi wəsə tudzɣən-t-æj.
 guard-TR-PST.3SG POSS.3SG=REFL that blood.enemy-PL-ABL
 'In the night he worked, and during the day he protected himself
 from blood enemies.' [OC: Tower, 1.8]

Although this construction is mentioned in a lot of descriptions of Ossetic, the consensus on its function and a detailed account of its properties are missing. In this paper, I will show that it is an instantiation of the cross-linguistically attested type of constructions with a verb 'to do' that allows one to mark verb focus, while preserving the place of a finite predicate in a clause.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I give a brief overview of the features of Iron Ossetic relevant to the present topic. Section 3 presents the components, restrictions on productivity, syntactic and pragmatic properties of the verb focus construction and attempts to explain the set of its properties in connection to the Ossetic clause structure. I summarize the findings and consider them in a typological perspective in the Conclusions.

2. Basic facts about Iron Ossetic

Iron Ossetic is a discourse-configurational language with the basic word order SOV and rigidly constrained order of elements in the preverbal area [Lyutikova, Tatevosov 2009; Erschler 2012; Belyaev 2022]. The order of constituents depends on their information status and is determined in relation to the finite predicate. As shown in (2) from [Belyaev 2022: 45], the verbal complex includes elements in focus (Foc), followed by question words (Wh), comparative adverbs (Adv), negative elements (Neg) and non-verbal components (NVC) that come before the finite verb (V). The left periphery of the clause is associated with topicality, whereas postverbal elements can be both topical and focal.

- (2) Foc – Wh – Adv – Neg – NVC – V

In the verbal domain, Ossetic has rich morphology and perfectivizing preverbs [Vydrin 2021]. A substantial part of verbal vocabulary is comprised of so-called ‘complex’, or ‘compound’, verbs (Russian *složnye / sostavnye glagoly*) that consist of a nominal part and a light verb (most commonly *wævən* ‘to be’ and *kænən* ‘to do’), see (3). Ossetic complex verbs show prosodic, syntactic, morphological, and semantic unity, for details see [Vydrin 2014; Grashchenkov 2018].

- (3) *Æž d^war næ ba-jgom kod-t-on.*
 I door NEG PV-opened do-TR-PST.1SG
 ‘I didn’t open the door.’ [Grashchenkov 2018: 80]

Some authors describe the verb focus construction as a type of complex verbs [Gagkaev 1952: 80; Akhvlediani 1969: 105; Thordarson 2009: 77–79]. However, as I show in subsequent sections, they differ in properties and should be considered separately.

3. The Iron Ossetic verb focus construction

3.1. Components

Researchers usually emphasize the ‘complex’ nature of the construction in question calling it a ‘compound verb form’ (*sostavnaja forma glagola*) [Abaev 1959: 98], ‘complex verb form’ (*složnaja forma glagola*) [Bagaev 1965: 337], ‘periphrastic verbal expression’ (*perifrastičeskoe glagol’noe vyraženie*) [Vydrin 2014: 66], etc. The two-element construction is claimed to be semantically equivalent to a ‘simple’ verb, e.g., in [Gagkaev 1956: 67; Abaev 1959: 98; Bagaev 1965: 337]. In fact, (4a) and (4b) are taken by native speakers to express the same propositional content, and the construction in question can be easily replaced by a simple form in most contexts, for exceptions see Section 3.3.

- (4) a. *Zalinæ žar-ə.*
 Zalina sing-PRS.3SG

- b. *Zalinæ žar-gæ kæn-ə*.
 Zalina sing-CVB do-PRS.3SG
 ‘Zalina sings / is singing.’

The first component of the construction is a non-finite form derived from the present stem with the suffix *-gæ*. This form can be used either as a participle denoting progressive or habitual events (5) or as a converb (6). In the latter function it appears in dependent clauses describing time and manner, thus competing with the converb proper (the present stem with the suffix *-gæjæ*), cf. [Belyaev, Vydrin 2011].

- (5) *wat-ə=nən jed wəd-i... šug-æj*
 room-IN=1PL.DAT HES be-PST.3SG firewood-ABL
ænzar-gæ pes
 ignite-CVB stove
 ‘In the room we had a stove that was stoked with firewood.’
 [OC: Zangieva, Khabalova, 112.2]
- (6) *æmæ špor kæn-gæ sæw-æm*
 and quarrel do-CVB go-PRS.1PL
 ‘And we are walking while quarreling.’ [OC: Houses and children, 7.5]

The verb *kænən* ‘to do’ denotes what can be called a ‘generalized action’ [Schulze-Berndt 2008], as in (7).

- (7) *æmæ=dam=šən k^wəd kæn-on*
 and=CIT=3PL.DAT how do-SBJV.1SG
 ‘And he says, “What do I do with them?”’ [OC: Fatima Aguzarova, 54.1]

3.2. Productivity

Abaev [1959: 98] states that the construction can be derived from any verb in Ossetic, and my data prove that it is in fact very productive.

First, it is not limited to the expression of agentive actions and combines with verbs denoting events with a single patient participant, cf. (8) with *mælan* ‘to die’, and states like *riššən* ‘to hurt’, *særən* ‘to live’.

The participant structure of the predicate is determined by the lexical verb.

- (8) *wəd wəsə əvžag kæn-ə mæl-gæ,*
 then that language do-PRS.3SG die-CVB
mæl-gæ kæn-ə.
 die-CVB do-PRS.3SG
 ‘⟨...⟩ if no one speaks the language,) then that language dies, dies.’
 [OC: Talk (Gizel), 163.3]

When the construction is derived from a prefixed verb, the prefix invariably attaches to the auxiliary verb, as mentioned in [Gagkaev 1956: 67; Bagaev 1965: 338; Akhvlediani 1969: 222; Vydrin 2014: 67]. To illustrate, (9) includes a construction corresponding to the prefixed verb *akušan* ‘to work (for some time)’, to which the preverb *a-* imparts perfective delimitative meaning, and (10) features the construction derived from the prefixed verb *rajg^wərən* ‘to be born’ with the perfective preverb *ra-* attached to *kænən*.

- (9) *Alan kuš-gæ a-kod-t-a / *a-kuš-gæ*
 Alan work-CVB PV-do-TR-PST.3SG PV-work-CVB
kod-t-a.
 do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Alan has worked for some time.’
- (10) *g^wər-gæ=dær am ra-kod-t-on*
 be.born-CVB=ADD here PV-do-TR-PST.1SG
 ‘(Yes, [I have been living here] for a long time,) I was born here too.’
 [OC: Zangieva, Khabalova, 68.1]

The auxiliary verb can be dropped in imperative forms [Bagaev 1982: 67; Akhvlediani 1969: 120] and coordinated structures, taking the prefix with itself, see a modified corpus example with added auxiliaries in parentheses (11).³

³ In [Belyaev, Vydrin 2011: 128] it is stated that the auxiliary cannot be dropped with prefixed verbs, however, the examples cited there show rather the ungrammaticality of a prefixed participle-converb form in this construction.

- (11) *g^wər-gæ=dær am (ra-kod-t-on / *kod-t-on)*,
 be.born-CVB=ADD here PV-do-TR-PST.1SG do-TR-PST.1SG
sær-gæ=dær am (kæn-ən), šk'ola=dær am –
 live-CVB=ADD here do-PRS.1SG school=ADD here
iwwəldær
 all
 ‘(It seems to me that there is no village except for Dzuarikau.
 Really.) I was born here, I live here, the school is here – everything’
 [OC: Dzuarikau school, 56.3]

There is, however, a restriction on the construction’s productivity, as it is incompatible with complex verbs, no matter what position the participle-converb form takes (12b)–(12c); (12d) contains the form *ax^wərgængæ* with the first consonant of the stem *kæn-* being voiced as it appears in a participle-converb derived from this verb.

- (12) a. *Nər ax^wər kæn-ən.*
 now study do-PRS.1SG
 ‘I study / am studying now.’
 b. **Nər kæn-gæ ax^wər kæn-ən.*
 now do-CVB study do-PRS.1SG
 c. **Nər ax^wər kæn-gæ kæn-ən.*
 now study do-CVB do-PRS.1SG
 d. **Nər ax^wər.gængæ kæn-ən.*
 now study.do-CVB do-PRS.1SG

This incompatibility is not due to the avoidance of repetition, since *kænən* can be used in this construction as a lexical verb (13), contra [Vydrin 2014: 66].

- (13) *kæn-gæ=wən ni-sə kæn-dzən-ən.*
 do-CVB=2PL.DAT NEG-what do-FUT-1SG
 ‘(Don’t be afraid,) I won’t do anything to you.’ [ONC: Iron adæm
 šfældəštad. Vol. 2. Vladikavkaz: IR, 2007]

Furthermore, the construction is not used with complex verbs featuring other auxiliary verbs such as *kom darən* ‘to fast’ (14), *əngəlmæ kəsən* ‘to wait’ (15), *məštəj marən* ‘to tease’ (16).

- (14) *Alan kom {dar-ə / *dar-gæ kæn-ə}*.
 Alan mouth hold-PRS.3SG hold-CVB do-PRS.3SG
 ‘Alan fasts / is fasting.’
- (15) *Dæ=xæzar raʒ=dæm ænqæl-mæ {kæš-ən /*
 POSS.2SG=house front=2SG.ALL hope-ALL look-PRS.1SG
**kæš-gæ kæn-ən}*.
 look-CVB do-PRS.1SG
 ‘I wait / am waiting for you in front of your house.’
- (16) *Me=fšəmæx=mæ mæšt-æj {mar-ə /*
 POSS.1SG=brother=1SG.GEN anger-ABL kill-PRS.3SG
**mar-gæ kæn-ə}*.
 kill-CVB do-PRS.3SG
 ‘My brother teases / is teasing me.’

This restriction is tentatively formulated in [Akhvlediani 1969: 222–223], where it is stated that the construction is more characteristic of simple verbs. The only attested example of a complex verb appearing in this construction, also mentioned in [Ibid.], is *qəgdarən* ‘to disturb’ (17). This verb, originally composed of *qəg* ‘sorrow, trouble’ and *darən* ‘keep, hold’, however, is close to being lexicalized and is written as one word in contrast to other complex verbs.

- (17) *Qəgdar-gæ=mæ kæn-ut*.
 disturb-CVB=1SG.GEN do-PRS.2PL
 ‘(Please, don’t read so loud!) You are disturbing me.’ [ONC: Max dug, 3, 1997]

In Section 3.5 I propose an explanation for the impossibility of the verb focus construction with complex verbs. The proposal is corroborated by the syntactic and pragmatic properties of this construction.

3.3. Syntactic properties

Most occurrences of the construction feature the participle-converb form in preposition to the auxiliary. The reversed order is attested

in 5 cases out of 146 in OC, for example, in (8) and (18)–(19), cf. [Bagaev 1965: 338; Akhvlediani 1969: 220].

- (18) *kuš-gæ=dæx kod-t-am, štæj kod-t-am*
 work-CVB=ADD do-TR-PST.1PL then do-TR-PST.1PL
kaf-gæ=dæx
 dance-CVB=ADD
 ‘(And we were sent to the “Gran” fabric.) We worked, then we danced as well.’ [OC: Classmates. 5th night school, 4,8]
- (19) *ætmæ=iw čevre-jæ ba-kod-t-øj ælxæn-gæ=dæx*
 and=ITER intermediary-ABL PV-do-TR-PST.3PL buy-CVB=ADD
 ‘And the intermediary was even bribed.’ [OC: Talk (Gizel), 66.3]

As noted in [Akhvlediani 1969: 106, 220; Bagaev 1982: 64; Kudzoeva 2003: 62, 72] and as the examples cited above demonstrate, the two parts of the construction can be separated from each other. First, if a component of the construction happens to be the first prosodic word in a minimal discourse unit, second-position clitics come after it, for details see [Lowe, Belyaev 2015], cf. (17) and the clitic cluster in (20).

- (20) *æftaw-gæ=jæm=æj ba-kod-t-øj*
 add-CVB=3SG.ALL=3SG.GEN PV-do-TR-PST.3PL
 ‘(⟨...⟩ then this new [building] was finished,) it was attached to it [the old building].’ [OC: Dzuarikau school, 6,4]

Secondly, the construction is frequently used with focus particles such as the additive *dæx*, contrastive *ta*, and *k^wə* modifying the verb. They appear in a third of all examples from OC, that is, 49 occurrences out of 146. When these focus particles are used, the construction cannot be changed to a simple verb. This was pointed out in [Belyaev, Khomchenkova 2022: 40–41] for the emphatic coordinate construction, which features *dæx* (21). Our data show that the generalization can be extended to the other uses of *dæx*, see (10), and other particles (22)–(23).

- (21) a. *Zalinæ abon kuš-gæ=dæx a-kod-t-a ætmæ*
 Zalina today work-CVB=ADD PV-do-TR-PST.3SG and

kaf-gæ=dæɾ ***a-kod-t-a***.

dance-CVB=ADD PV-do-TR-PST.3SG

‘Zalina worked as well as danced today.’

b. **Zalinæ abon a-kʷəš-t-a=dæɾ* *æmæ*

Zalina today PV-work-TR-PST.3SG=ADD and

a-kafəd=dæɾ.

PV-dance.PST.3SG=ADD

(22) ***kæš-gæ=tə*** *næ kæn-ə!*

read-CVB=CONTR NEG do-PRS.3SG

‘(We have so many books in the attic! ⟨...⟩) And he does not read!’

[OC: Zangieva, Khabalova, 197.4]

(23) *æmæ=zə*, *žæɪ-ən*, *æž æppæl-gæ=kʷə*

and=3PL.IN say-PRS.1SG I praise-CVB=PTCL

kod-t-on *wəm-æj!*

do-TR-PRS.1SG that-ABL

‘And so, I say, I complimented her, didn’t I!’ [OC: Houses and children. P. 2, 89.2]

Moreover, some elements can only be positioned after the participle-converb form right before the auxiliary verb. These can be subsumed under the category of elements bound to the left preverbal position, see Section 2, including negation *næ* (24) and other negative and question/relative words, see *nisə* ‘nothing’ (13), *niči* ‘nobody’ in (25) and *či* ‘who’ in a relative clause (26) (cf. some observations in [Akhvlediani 1969: 106, 220; Bagaev 1982: 64; Kudzoeva 2003: 62, 72]).

(24) *Zalinæ kuš-gæ* *næ kod-t-a* / **næ*

Zalina work-CVB NEG do-TR-PST.3SG NEG

kuš-gæ kod-t-a.

work-CVB do-TR-PST.3SG

‘Zalina doesn’t work / isn’t working.’

(25) *Am zur-gæ ni-či* *kæn-ə* /

here talk-CVB NEG-who do-PRS.3SG

**ni-či zur-gæ kæn-ə*.

NEG-who talk-CVB do-PRS.3SG

‘Nobody is speaking here.’

- (26) *Alan, nər {fəs-gæ č̣i kæn-ə / *č̣i*
 Alan now write-CVB who do-PRS.3SG who
fəs-gæ kæn-ə}, wəj u.
 write-CVB do-PRS.3SG that be.PRS.3SG
 ‘Alan is the one who is writing right now.’

The only contexts in which relative words were found to come before the participle-converb are parallel coordinate clauses, such as (27) and (28) that compare actions of different people and in different places respectively. These cases feature multiple partitive constructions, to use the term coined by Haspelmath [1997: 177ff.], and need further investigation.

- (27) *æmæ=iw=zə č̣i ælviš-gæ kod-t-a,*
 and=ITER=3PL.ABL who spin-CVB do-TR-PST.3SG
č̣i=zə c’anda kod-t-a, č̣i=iw=zə
 who=3PL.ABL stocking do-TR-PST.3SG who=ITER=3PL.ABL
pir-gæ kod-t-a,
 comb.wool-CVB do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Some of them were spinning, some of them were knitting stockings, some of them were combing wool.’ [OC: Zarema Timofeevna, 12.6]
- (28) *kæm beton žmæš-t-am, kæm jed kod-t-am,*
 where concrete mix-TR-PST.1PL where HES do-TR-PST.1PL
kæm amaj-gæ kod-t-am, aftæ-tæ.
 where build-CVB do-TR-PST.1PL so-PL
 ‘(Then we both started and built them.) We mixed the concrete in one place, did this or that in the other, built in the other, this way.’ [OC: Zangieva, Khabalova. P. 2, 87.2]

Preverbal subordinators, such as *k^wə* ‘when, if’ (29), also have to appear before the auxiliary verb.

- (29) *Don {fəs-gæ k^wə fæ-kæn-ə / *k^wə*
 water boil-CVB when PV-do-PRS.3SG when
fəs-gæ fæ-kæn-ə}, wæd ag tæng tævd væj-ə.
 boil-CVB PV-do-PRS.3SG then pot very hot be.ITER-PRS.3SG
 ‘When water boils, the pot can be very hot.’

The example (30) features the elements from all the above-mentioned groups: the focus particle *dæx*, the second position genitive enclitic *dæ*, the preverbal conjunction *k^wə*, and the negative adverb *nik^wə*. They account for the majority of cases in OC.

- (30) ***wən-gæ=dæx=dæ*** *k^wə* *ni-k^wə* ***kod-t-on***,
 see-CVB=ADD=2SG.GEN when NEG-when do-TR-PST.1SG
 ‘<...> if I have never ever seen you, (how could I have turned you out?)’ [OC: Houses and children. P. 2, 38.4]

Other elements that can occur in the interposition between the components of the construction include adverbs like *am* ‘here’ (10)–(11), *aftæ* ‘so’. There are 5 cases in OC where the components are separated by at least one content word, one of them is *raž-dæx* (front-CMPR) ‘before, earlier’ (31), which is a comparative adverb that is placed in the verbal complex. Constituents that can appear between the parts of the construction need further investigation.

- (31) ***šk’æf-gæ=dæx=iw*** *raž-dæx* ***kod-t-oj*** *məd-ə*
 seize-CVB=ADD=ITER front-CMPR do-TR-PST.3PL honey-GEN
k’uš, ævi nər ba-jdəd-t-oj?
 cup or now PV-begin-TR-PST.3PL
 ‘Was there a tradition to steal the bowl of honey before, too, or is it a new tradition?’ [OC: Zangieva, Khabalova. P. 3, 37]

To sum up, most instances of the construction show contact placement of the participle-converb form in preposition to *kænən*. However, the reversed order is also possible. Constituents bound to the preverbal area cannot precede the participle-converb form.

3.4. Functions

While it does not affect the semantic content of the clause (see Section 3.1), the construction is said to be used for “highlighting the action” [Abaev 1959: 98–99; Bagaev 1965: 338] or expressing “emphasis” [Vydrin 2014: 67]. Such notions are frequently used when dealing with focus, which can be defined as a phenomenon of marking “the semantic

component of a pragmatically structured proposition whereby the assertion differs from the presupposition” [Lambrecht 1994: 213].

The construction has proved felicitous in contexts of verb focus (32a), cf. [Belyaev, Vydrin 2011: 127], but not in the presence ofthetic focus on the whole clause (32b), predicate focus on the verb phrase (32c), and argument focus on a constituent like a direct object (32d).

- (32) a. Context: What has Zalina done to the floors? They are so clean!
Zalinæ p'ol-tæ [nəxšad-t-a / æxš-gæ
 Zalina floor-PL PV.wash-TR-PST.3SG wash-CVB
nək-kod-t-a_F.
 PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Zalina [has washed]_F the floors.’
- b. Context: What happened? The furniture is moved.
 [*Zalinæ p'ol-tæ nəxšad-t-a / #æxš-gæ*⁴
 Zalina floor-PL PV.wash-TR-PST.3SG wash-CVB
nək-kod-t-a_F.
 PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘[Zalina has washed the floors]_F.’
- c. Context: What has Zalina done? The room looks fresh.
Zalinæ [p'ol-tæ nəxšad-t-a / #æxš-gæ
 Zalina floor-PL PV.wash-TR-PST.3SG wash-CVB
nək-kod-t-a_F.
 PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Zalina [has washed the floors]_F.’
- d. Context: What has Zalina washed?
Zalinæ [p'ol-tæ]_F nəxšad-t-a / #æxš-gæ
 Zalina floor-PL PV.wash-TR-PST.3SG wash-CVB
nək-kod-t-a.
 PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Zalina has washed [the floors]_F.’

The observation that the construction is a specialized means of marking verb focus is corroborated by its frequent use with focus particles, which cannot attach to the finite verb, triggering its use, see

⁴ The symbol # here indicates that the sentence with this form is grammatical but infelicitous in the given context.

Section 3.3. Corpus examples lend support as well. Consider a part of the dialogue in (33) between a teacher and a student who has concealed the fact that she is performing. In (33a), the teacher wants to know whether the student is actually singing and uses the construction in question, whereas the subsequent questions (33b) and (33c) deal with other aspects, thus featuring simple verb forms.

- (33) a. *Larisa, žar-gæ kæn-aš?*
 Larisa sing-CVB do-PRS.2SG
 ‘Larisa, do you sing? (Yes.)’
- b. *æmæ max-æn sæwəlnæ išk^{wə} a-žarəd-t-a?*
 and we-DAT why.not ever PV-sing-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Why didn’t you sing for us? (I don’t want, I feel shy.)’
- c. *æmæ wəm=ta scenæ-jæ žarəd-t-a?*
 and there=CONTR scene-ABL sing-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘And did you sing from stage there? (Yes.)’
 [OC: Alagir school, 130–135]

The examples (32a) and (33a) illustrate the use of the construction to mark (new) information focus (also called state-of-affairs focus). It also frequently appears under contrastive focus (34)–(35) and verum focus (also called truth focus) when the speaker asserts the truth of the proposition (36)–(37).

- (34) Context: Did Zalina wash the floors?
Zalinæ p’ol-tæ æxs-gæ næ, fælæ mæřž-gæ
 Zalina floor-PL wash-CVB NEG but sweep-CVB
nək-kod-t-a.
 PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Zalina didn’t wash the floors, she swept them.’
- (35) *ærtækkæ ælxæn-gæ kæn-əns, fælæ wəd=ta*
 now buy-CVB do-PRS.3PL but then=CONTR
lævar læværd-t-oj
 gift give-TR-PST.3PL
 ‘Now people buy [flats], but at that time [they] were given for free.’
 [OC: Zarema Aldatova, 139.4]

- (36) Context: Did Alan wash the floors?
Alan p'ol-tæ æxs̥-gæ nək-kod-t-a, fælae ævžæ.
 Alan floor-PL wash-CVB PV-do-TR-PST.3SG but bad
 'Alan did wash the floors, but [he did it] badly.'
- (37) *fəš-gæ=jæ fæ-kod-t-on*
 write-CVB=3SG.GEN PV-do-TR-PST.1SG
 '(Haven't you written down anything from them? <...>) I have
 written her down, (<...> but not so much.)' [OC: Dzaurikau school,
 73.1]

Some authors characterise the construction in aspectual terms, with Thordarson [2009: 72] ascribing a habitual meaning to it and Pisowicz [2022: 140ff.] calling it a compound present (progressive) tense (Polish *czas terażniejszy złożony*). However, although these uses are prominent, the construction allows the whole spectrum of aspectual interpretations that simple verbs have, for instance, consider the perfective context in (32a). Furthermore, even in habitual and progressive contexts the construction is incompatible with argument focus, as (38) shows. Therefore, it is more precisely described as a pragmatic, rather than an aspectual device, although constructions with a verb 'to do' are a frequent source of aspect markers [Jäger 2006: 276ff.], as well as focus constructions [Güldemann 2003].

- (38) Context₁: What does Zalina usually wash?
 Context₂: What is Zalina washing right now?
Zalinae [p'ol-tæ]_F æxs̥-ə / #æxs̥-gæ
 Zalina floor-PL wash-PRS.3SG wash-CVB
kæn-ə.
 do-PRS.3SG
 'Zalina washes / is washing [the floors]_F.'

3.5. Analysis

The previous sections give an overview of the properties of the construction under discussion, most of which are mentioned in the descriptions I have consulted. However, none of them attempts to explain the set of observations.

I propose that they can be accounted for if we assume that the participle-converb in the construction fills a focus position, being placed either in the verbal complex or postverbally, as is proved possible by (18)–(19) in Section 3.3. This conditions the obligatory use of the construction with verb-modifying focus particles and the interposition of the negative and question words, as well as other elements bound to the preverbal position.

This assumption also helps to account for the incompatibility of the construction with complex verbs. It is noted that combinations that usually function as complex verbs can diverge from the single-unit behaviour described in Section 2, with the nominal part functioning like a normal direct object. In this case prefixes attach to the verb, compare the complex verb with the prefix attached to the nominal part in (39) and a simple combination of the nominal part and the prefixed verb in (40), cf. [Gagkaev 1956: 67; Akhvlediani 1969: 107]. The latter is similar to the verb focus construction.

- (39) *Žæβ, sə=dən ba-lævar kæn-on?*
 say.IMP.2SG what=2SG.DAT PV-gift give-SBJV.1SG
 ‘Tell [me], what present should I give you?’ [ONC: A. Qajtəqtə. Amondwardžətæ. Vladikavkaz: IR, 1993]

- (40) *fælxə=šən Comartatæ wæj næ, fælxə*
 but=3PL.DAT Comartov.PL sale NEG but
lævar ba-kod-t-øj kʷəj-tæ.
 gift PV-do-TR-PST.3PL dog-PL
 ‘(Once two men came down from the mountains to buy dogs,) but Comartovs haven’t sold dogs to them, but rather gave them as a present.’ [ONC: Z. Gaglojtə. Iron mæggægtæ. Vladikavkaz: IR, 2005]

The element that can function as a nominal part of a complex verb in these cases is detachable, see (41), which shows that the negative particle is placed to the left of *fənæj* ‘sleep’ in the complex verb (41a) and to the right of it in case of a simple combination of a noun and a verb with a prefix (41b). Note that other orders are not accepted.

- (41) a. *Alan abon næ a-fənæj kod-t-a.*
 Alan today NEG PV-sleep do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Alan didn’t sleep today.’

- b. *Alan abon fənæj næ a-kod-t-a.*
 Alan today sleep NEG PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
- c. **Alan abon a-fənæj næ a-kod-t-a.*
 Alan today PV-sleep NEG PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
- d. **Alan abon næ fənæj a-kod-t-a.*
 Alan today NEG sleep PV-do-TR-PST.3SG

Further parallelism with the verb focus construction can be demonstrated in contexts featuring a focus particle. For example, in the emphatic coordinate construction in (42) the particle *dær* attaches to *fənæj* ‘sleep’ and *kænən* ‘to do’ takes the prefix *a-*. The use of the complex verb *afənæj kænən* ‘to have a sleep’ is not possible in this context. Corpus examples illustrate the verb focus construction coordinated with *ax^wər kænən* ‘to study’ that usually functions as a complex verb (43), as well as a combination of a verb with a normal direct object (*sočinenitæ fəššən* ‘to write compositions’) (44).

- (42) *Alan abon {fənæj=dær a-kod-t-a /*
 Alan today sleep=ADD PV-do-TR-PST.3SG
 **a-fənæj kod-t-a=dær / *a-fənæj=dær kod-t-a}*
 PV-sleep do-TR-PST.3SG=ADD PV-sleep=ADD do-TR-PST.3SG
æmæ kəš-gæ=dær a-kod-t-a.
 and read-CVB=ADD TR-do-TR-PST.3SG
 ‘Alan slept as well as read today.’
- (43) *wəsə rəštæčǵ-ə max kuš-gæ=dær kod-t-am*
 that time-IN we work-CVB=ADD do-TR-PST.1PL
æmæ ax^wər=dær kod-t-am
 and study=ADD do-TR-PST.1PL
 ‘At this time we worked as well as studied.’ [OC: Classmates. 5th night school, 4.1]
- (44) *æmæ=šən sočineni-tæ=dær fəšt-on,*
 and=3PL.DAT composition-PL=ADD write-PST.TR.1SG
kəš-gæ=dær kod-t-on še-mæ, alsədær
 read-CVB=ADD do-TR-PST.1SG they-COMIT everything
kod-t-on.
 do-TR-PST.1SG
 ‘And I wrote compositions, read with them, I did everything.’
 [OC: Alagir school, 69.4]

Such cases are associated with the nominal element that usually appears in a complex verb being emphasized [Abaev 1959: 98; Akhvediani 1969: 107], and Grashchenkov [2018: 84–85] assumes that it occupies the focus position. Such placement makes splitting the verb via the construction to fill the focus position, e.g. as required by focus particles, redundant. Moreover, as some native speaker consultants observed, placing focus on the light verb would have led to it being interpreted in its original meaning, which is not compatible with light verbs being semantically bleached, consider *marən* ‘to kill’ and the idiomatic *mæštəj marən* ‘to tease’ in (16).

4. Conclusions

Our data show that Iron Ossetic has a productive verb focus construction. Its counterparts are found in genetically unrelated and geographically distant languages. For example, such languages as Chuckchi (< Chukotko-Kamchatkan), Miya (< Chadic, Afro-Asiatic), Ngardi (< Pama-Nyungan) employ periphrasis with a verb ‘to do’ as a verb focus construction, cf. [Jäger 2013].

In a cross-linguistic study of such phenomena, Jäger [2006] formulates the following generalization about one of the most commonly attested functions of verb constructions with a verb ‘to do’: “If a language has rigid or dominant word order, periphrasis is used to mark clause types that display a deviant or irregular word order or to maintain a close approximation of the regular word order in these, i.e. to keep the relative order of verb and object unchanged” [Ibid.: 88]. These uses are typically associated with interrogativity, topicalisation, or focalisation and can be obligatory in presence of the corresponding elements. Ossetic, as it seems, adheres to Jäger’s generalization, as it imposes restrictions on word order, with the position of elements being determined in relation to the finite verb, and uses the construction with a non-finite form in *-gæ* to mark that the lexical verb is in focus, while utilising a semantically bleached verb *kænən* ‘to do’ as a site of attachment for TAM markers, thus preserving the finite verb’s place in the clause.

The Ossetic case was not previously included in the discussion of the mechanisms that are either structurally (periphrasis with a verb

‘to do’) or functionally (marking information status of the verb and/or saving the syntactic configuration) similar to it and thus contributes to their typological study.

Abbreviations

1, 2, 3 – 1st, 2nd, 3rd person; ABL – ablative; ADD – additive particle; ALL – allative; CIT – citative particle; CMPR – comparative; COMIT – comitative; CONTR – contrastive particle; CVB – converb; DAT – dative; F – focus; FUT – future tense; GEN – genitive; HES – hesitation marker; IMP – imperative; IN – inessive; ITER – iterative; NEG – negation; PL – plural; POSS – possessive; PRS – present tense; PST – past tense; PTCL – particle; PV – preverb; REFL – reflexive; SBJV – subjunctive; SG – singular; TR – transitivity.

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