

Stem alternations in the East Caucasian adjectives of size: between suppletion and dislexification

Michael Daniel^{1,2}

Rita Popova³

¹University of Tübingen, ²DDL Lyon, ³Saarland University

In some languages, the property of being small in size is expressed by two unrelated stems, depending on the number of objects it is ascribed to. Referring to one small entity, one stem is used, and the other one is used when referring to multiple small objects. The same may hold for the property of being big in size, cf. 1, 2.

(1) Swedish

(a) *en liten flicka*
a small girl
'a small girl'

(b) *två små flickor*
two small.PL girl.PL
'two small girls' (Nurmio 2017)

Number-driven stem alternations in the expression of size properties are reported for several branches of Indo-European as diverse as Mainland Scandinavian (Börjars & Vincent 2011), Brittonic (Nurmio 2017), Megleno-Romanian (Maiden 2014) and Tocharian (Kim 2019). This alternation of stems is not characteristic of properties from other semantic fields, such as LONG, OLD, RED, GOOD, etc. (Nurmio 2017).

In the previous discussion of Indo-European, the kind of stem alternation described above was interpreted as *number suppletion*. SMALL and BIG were claimed to be typologically odd as these are the only two adjectives that ever engage into number suppletion (Nurmio 2017).

In the present talk, we demonstrate that a similar phenomenon is attested in various East Caucasian languages from Lezgi, Andic, Lak and Nakh branches. cf. 2.

(2) Tsakhur

- (a) *ma-na xe-b-na iš diš-ē?*
this-AA big.SG-3-AA matter COP.NEG-Q1
'Isn't it a big deal?'
- (b) *č'ek-in umud-bi wo-d-im-mi*
big.PL-AA hope-PL be-NPL-A-PL
'There are high hopes.' (Kibrik & Testelec 1999: 773, 859)

At the same time, stem alternations in East Caucasian show no evidence favouring their interpretation in terms of suppletion. Suppletion is commonly understood as an irregular expression of the otherwise regular grammatical relationship (Veselinova 2017). Therefore, to prove that stem alternation is indeed an instance of suppletion, one must demonstrate that (i) a regular mechanism of number inflection is present in the language and (ii) the choice of the stem is governed by the same rules that control inflection.

We test the 'suppletive' status of the stem alternations in East Caucasian against the criteria (i) and (ii) and argue that in none of the languages of the family the two alternating stems are part of the system of number agreement in adjectives and therefore cannot be considered two allomorphs within one inflectional paradigm. An alternative approach would be to analyse the two meanings, 'small (of one)' and 'small (of many)' as distributed between two different lexical items with similar but different semantics - a *dislexification* analysis (François 2022).

To test if the choice between the singular and plural stems is indeed a lexical rather than grammatical choice, we look at the behaviour of SMALL and BIG in numeral modification constructions. In East Caucasian languages, numerals require the noun to be unmarked for number. If the choice of the stem is of lexical rather than grammatical nature, it is expected to be governed by semantics rather than by morphosyntax. Therefore SMALL.PL rather than SMALL.SG is expected to be used with numerals other than 'one' even though the noun is not marked for the plural. Unexpectedly, in most languages in the study, SMALL.SG is induced by the use of the singular form of the noun in NPs modified by a numeral.

We discuss possible interpretations of this apparently contradictory evidence for the suppletion vs. dislexification analysis.

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