Verbal number in Sumerian and Itonama

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Introduction

Verbal number has been attested in a number of languages across the world, most notably those from North-American and Polynesian language families (Corbett, 2000, p. 245; Crevels, 2006, p. 160). Thus far, Itonama is the only South-American language for which verbal number has been attested. Sadly, the language has become extinct not so long ago. Verbal number is also present in Sumerian, an ancient Near Eastern Language spoken more than 4000 years ago in southern Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) (Jagersma, 2010).

Verbal number

As opposed to nominal number, which relates to entities, verbal number relates to events (Corbett, 2000). These events take the shape of actions or states that are repeated across time and/or space (Crevels (2006), p. 160, Jagersma (2010), p. 414). This type of plurality is usually expressed by verbal affixes and reduplication. Most often derivational rather than inflectional (Crevels, 2006, p. 15?).

It is important to note the difference between nominal and verbal number. Corbett (2000, p. 243) gives the following examples:

(1) the sheep jump

The verb *jump* in this sentence shows number. However, this number refers to the number of sheep, not the number of 'jumpings'. Hence, this is nominal number. The next two examples show the use of verbal number in Rapanui:

(2) ruku
dive
'dive'

(3) ruku ruku
dive dive
'go diving'

(4) suggests several 'divings', but doesn't give us any information regarding the number of divers.

Types of verbal number

According to Corbett (2000) there are two types of verbal number: event number and participant number. (4) is an example of the former. Event number is independent of the number of participants. The most important distinction that is made with event number is between single and multiple events. Compare for instance the sentences (5) and (6) in Itonama:

(5) why do you want to eat us, uncle?

(6) he has seen us!

The difference between participant number and agreement is subtler. Instead of enumerating entities, participant number expresses the quantifies actions or states. In Sumerian, for instance, this is expressed using alternating verb stems. Compare:

(7) 'it (one lamb) is one that lives at PN, the fattener's place' (Jagersma 2010, p. 316).

(8) 'They (sheep) live at Lugal-ikush's place' (Jagersma 2010, p.316).

Sumerian

verb alternation

Sumerian uses two different ways to express verbal number. Some verbs specify number as part of their lexical meaning (Table 1). Other verbs use reduplication of the verbal stem.

Table 1: Sumerian alternating verbs

stem	meaning
gub	stand (singular)
su_4.g	stand (plural)
gen	go, come (singular, perfective)
er	go, come (plural, perfective)
du	go, come (singular, imperfective)
su_8.b	go, come (plural, imperfective)
tus	sit (singular, perfective)
dur	sit (singular, imperfective)
durun	sit (plural)
lu_5.k	live (singular) (said of animals)

stem	meaning
ti.l	live (singular) (said of persons)
se_{12}	live (plural)
tum	bring (singular)
lah_5	bring (plural)
du_{11}.g	say, do (singular, perfective)
e	say, do (plural, perfective)
us	die, kill (singular)
ug_7	die, kill (plural)

Verbal forms that reflect number are not that rare. In German, for instance, verbs are inflected for number, hence they have different forms for singular and plural. German verb forms, however, are part of a paradigm. E.g. 1SG *bin* and 1PL *sein* both belong to the paradigm of *sein* ('to be'). The Sumerian verb stems in Table 1 do not behave like this at all. Rather, they behave just like other verbs, showing the same person affixes. Number is part of their lexical meaning.

Generally, it is assumed that the verbs in Table 1 show participant number (Jagersma, 2010, p. 317). However Jagersma (2010) argues that the crucial factor is not the number of a syntactic function, but rather that of a certain semantic role. It is always the role of the most directly affected participant that is pluralized. However, verbal number is not determined by this. Jagersma (2010) shows that these singular and plural verb forms primarily express verbal number, but because multiple events imply multiple participants the association with participant number is not far fetched (Jagersma, 2010, pp. 317–319).

Verb reduplication

Verb alternation is limited to a small subset of Sumerian verbs. Verbal number, however, is not. For verbs that do not belong to the subset in Table 1, Sumerian uses full verb stem reduplication to express number. E.g.:

(9) 'He fashioned several clay nails.' (En. I 30 2:7; L; 25)

The pluralized stem mainly expresses event number, e.g. plurality of action or state (Jagersma, 2010, pp. 319–322).

Verbal number in Itonama

Like Sumerian, Itonama does not mark non-human entities for number. Table 2 lists the only nouns for which a plural form has been attested.

Table 2: Plural nouns in Itonama

singular		plural	
woman	*wabï'ka*	women	*ïwabï*
man	*umu*	men	*umu'ke*
girl	*t'iyaya'tya*	girls	*t'iyaya'tye*

Kinship terms are also marked for number, but according to Crevels (2006, p. 163) these terms have been derived from verbs and hence owe their plural marking to that origin.

Crevels (2006) argues that number is a verbal category in Itonama. The language expresses both participant and event number, using a variety of strategies (Table 3).

Table 3: Expression of verbal number in Itonama

Participant number	Verbal number
partial CV reduplication	partial CV reduplication (with intensive infix)
suppletive stems	distributive marker
pluractional markers	pluractional markers
verbal classifiers	

Participant number

Participant number can be expressed using partial CV reduplication, e.g. in 11 the reduplication of the stem signals that several dogs were involved in the biting, in contrast to 10.

(10) sih-k'i-ma-doh-ne upa'u
(11) sih-k'i-ma-**do~doh**-ke upa'u

suppletive verbal stems can also be used. Note that the use of different verb stems in 12 and 13 automatically leads to a distinction in participant number (Crevels, 2006, p. 167).

(12) Use examples from the handout
(13) fix them using TIPA

The verbal classifiers in 14 and 15 refer to vertical, planted objects.
Itonama has a number of different verbal classifiers. Generally, these are combined with an existential predicate or predicates of possession, location and manipulation. An overview can be found in Crevels (2012, p. 269)

(14) group examples

(15)

participant number is also marked using pluractional markers (Crevels, 2006, p. 167). In 17, for example, the pluractional marker *-cha'ke* indicates plural participant number. Example 16 shows that pluractional markers are used for event number as well. An overview of these markers is given in Crevels (2006, p. 168)

(16)

(17)

Event number

Event number in Itonama is expressed using several approaches (Table 3), some identical to those used for participant number. The examples in (18) and (19) show the use of a distributive marker to mark different 'giving-events' (Crevels, 2006, p. 165).

(18)

(19)

Another strategy is partial reduplication. This strategy differs from the one marking participant number in that it is combined with an intensifying infix, e.g.:

(20)

(21)

Finally, Itonama also marks event number using a pluractional marker:

(22)

Comparison

An important difference in the way Sumerian and Itonama deal with number is that nominal number is as good as absent in Itonama; Sumerian, on the other hand, has the pluralizing affix *-ene*, which is used for human referents.

References

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