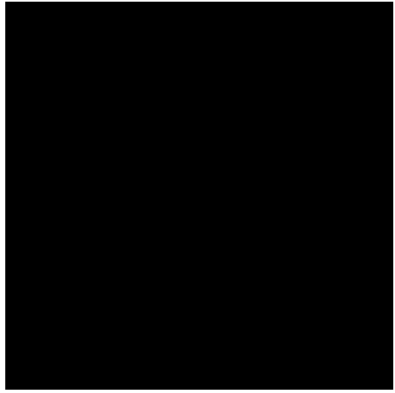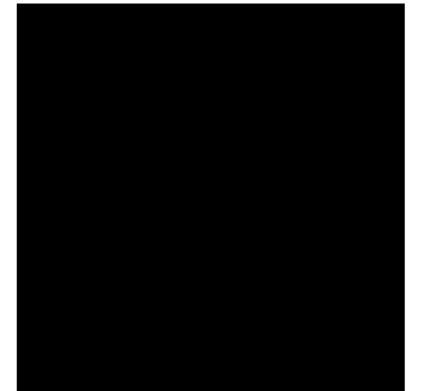# Multiple grammars of Georgian placeholder verbs coexist across speakers

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The Fourth South Caucasian Chalk Circle (SCCC-4) • Paris • Oct 8, 2025

Introduction

The placeholder verb (**PHV**) construction is emerging in colloquial Georgian (Amiridze 2010)

- Used when the intended verb can't: ineffability, euphemism, tip-of-the-tongue states

Transparently derived from the event anaphoric VP "do that"

- Demonstrative *imas* has become a prefix

- Clearly some amount of reanalysis/ grammaticization has occurred

(1) ***imas-ʃvreba.***
DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

[Context 1: The speaker is pointing to someone doing an unlexified activity]

[Context 2: The speaker wishes to avoid using a curse word]

[Context 3: The speaker's intended verb is on the tip of their tongue]

(2) ***imas   ʃvreba.***
DEM:DAT   do:PRES:3
"S/he is doing that."

Introduction

PHVs exhibit morphological variation

- Unlike any other type of verb in Georgian!

Research questions

- Is there one grammar to derive them all, or multiple grammars across speakers?

- What small change could have given rise to *even more* complexity in Georgian morphology?

- How does a platypus grow wings?

(3) a. ***imas-v-kʰen-i***
DEM-1SU-do-PST1/2

b. ***ga=imas-v-kʰen-i***
PVB=DEM-1SU-do-PST1/2

c. ***ga=v-imas-kʰen-i***
PVB=1SU-DEM-do-PST1/2

d. ***ga=v-imas-v-kʰen-i***
PVB=1SU-DEM-1SU-do-PST1/2

All: "S/he thatdid."

Core patterns

Three major stages in the development of PHVs

$$VP \rightarrow V^0 \rightarrow PVB=V^0$$

PHVs exhibit unusual variation in prefixal inflection

<u>DEM</u>-AGR-*do*

PVB=<u>DEM</u>-AGR-*do*

PVB=AGR-<u>DEM</u>-*do*

PVB=AGR-<u>DEM</u>-AGR-*do*

Ongoing reanalysis

Three stages of development for the PHV construction

(4) a. ***imas*** ***ʃvreba.***
DEM:DAT do:PRES:3
"S/he is doing that."

Event-anaphoric VP "do that"

b. ***imas-ʃvreba.***
<u>DEM</u>-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

Simple PHV (no preverb)

c. ***ga=imas-ʃvreba.***
PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

Complex PHV (with preverb)

Ongoing reanalysis

In Complex PHVs, the PVB matches what would be on the intended verb

Sentence w/ intended verb

(5) **_Mariam-i_**   **_ga=a-tʃʰer-a._**
Mariam-NOM   PVB=TR-stop-PST3
"S/he stopped Mariam."

Sentence w/ PHV

(6) a. **_Mariam-i_**   **_<u>imas</u>-kʰn-a._**
Mariam-NOM   <u>DEM</u>-do-PST3
"S/he thatdid Mariam." [Simple PHV]

b. **_Mariam-i_**   **_ga=<u>imas</u>-kʰn-a._**
Mariam-NOM   PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do-PST3
"S/he thatdid Mariam." [Complex PHV]

c. ***_Mariam-i_**   **_ʃe=<u>imas</u>-kʰn-a._**
Mariam-NOM   PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do-PST3
Attempted: [Complex w/ mismatched PVB]

Ongoing reanalysis

Distinguishable by the position of negation

(4) a. ***imas   ʃvreba.***
DEM:DAT do:PRES:3
"S/he is doing that."

b. ***imas-ʃvreba.***
DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

c. ***ga=imas-ʃvreba.***
PVB=DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

(7) a. ***imas   ar ʃvreba.***
DEM:DAT NEG do:PRES:3
"S/he isn't doing that."

b. ***ar   imas-ʃvreba.***
NEG   DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he isn't thatdoing."

c. ***ar   ga=imas-ʃvreba.***
NEG   PVB=DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he isn't thatdoing."

Ongoing reanalysis

Distinguishable by object scrambling

(4) a. **_imas_** **_ʃvreba._**
DEM:DAT do:PRES:3
"S/he is doing that."

b. **_imas-ʃvreba._**
DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

c. **_ga=imas-ʃvreba._**
PVB=DEM-do:PRES:3
"S/he is thatdoing."

(8) a. **_ʃvreba_** **_imas._**
do:PRES:3 DEM:DAT
"S/he is doing that."

b. ***_ʃvreba-imas_**
do:PRES:3-DEM
Attempted: "S/he is thatdoing."

c. ***_ga=ʃvreba-imas._**
PVB=do:PRES:3-DEM
Attempted: "S/he is thatdoing."

Ongoing reanalysis

Distinguishable by case-shift of objects across tenses

(4) a. **imas ʃvreba.**
   DEM:DAT do:PRES:3
   "S/he is doing that."

   b. **imas-ʃvreba.**
   <u>DEM</u>-do:PRES:3
   "S/he is thatdoing."

   c. **ga=imas-ʃvreba.**
   PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do:PRES:3
   "S/he is thatdoing."

(9) a. **is kʰna.**
   DEM:NOM do:AOR:3
   "S/he did that."

   b. **imas-kʰna**
   <u>DEM</u>-do:AOR:3
   "S/he thatdid."

   c. **ga=imas-kʰna.**
   PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do:AOR:3
   "S/he thatdid."

Ongoing reanalysis

Distinguishable in expression of the intended event's theme

(9) a. **is** **kʰna.**
DEM:NOM do:AOR:3
"S/he did that."

b. **imas-kʰna**
DEM-do:AOR:3
"S/he thatdid."

c. **ga=imas-kʰna.**
PVB=DEM-do:AOR:3
"S/he thatdid."

(10) a. **is** **u-kʰna** **mariam-s.**
DEM:NOM APPL-do:AOR:3 Mariam-DAT
"S/he did that to Mariam."

b. **imas-kʰna** **mariam-i.**
DEM-do:AOR:3 Mariam-NOM
"S/he thatdid Mariam."

c. **ga=imas-kʰna** **mariam-i.**
PVB=DEM-do:AOR:3 Mariam-NOM
"S/he thatdid Mariam."

Ongoing reanalysis

Distinguishable by preradical vowels, e.g. signaling transitivity

(11) a. **is**   **(*a-)kʰna.**
        DEM:NOM (*TR-)do:AOR:3
        "S/he did that."

     b. **(*a-)<u>imas</u>-(*a-)kʰna.**
        (*TR-)DEM-(*TR-)do:AOR:3
        "S/he thatdid."

     c. **ga=ˀ(a-)<u>imas</u>-(*a-)kʰna.**
        PVB=ˀ(TR-)<u>DEM</u>-(*TR-)do:AOR:3
        "S/he thatdid pro_3."

Variation in prefixal agreement

PHVs have unusual morphological structure and behavior

- The *imas-* prefix does not correspond to any position of a normal verb

- Inflectional prefixes (like *v-*) can appear after, before, or around *imas-*

- This variation is more typical of Complex PHVs

(12) ***imas-v-kʰeni***
DEM-1SUBJ-do:AOR:1/2
"I thatdid"

Simple/Inner

(13) a. ***ga=imas-v-kʰeni***
PVB=DEM-1SU-do:AOR:1/2
"I thatdid"

Complex/Inner

b. ***ga=va-imas-kʰeni***
PVB=SU:TR-DEM-do:INFL
"I thatdid"

Complex/Outer

c. ***ga=va-imas-v-kʰeni***
PVB=1SU:TR-DEM-1SU-do:INFL
"I thatdid"

Complex/Doubled

Analytical possibilities

We propose four analyses for PHVs, differing in the representation of *imas-*

Analytical approach	*imas-* reanalyzed as...
Compound analysis	X^0 adjoined/incorporated to V^0
PVB analysis	Novel instance of Asp^0
F^0 analysis	Novel functional head
Anaphor analysis	Replacement for a subword constituent

Starting points

Assumptions for a standard verb:

- Verb root = V^0
- Prefixal Infl = $Voice^0$
- Preverb = Asp^0
- Suffixal Infl = T^0
- Head mvmt forms the verb word
- (cf. Béjar & Rezac 2009, Lomashvili 2011)

(14) ***mariam-i   ga-va-tʃʰer-e.***
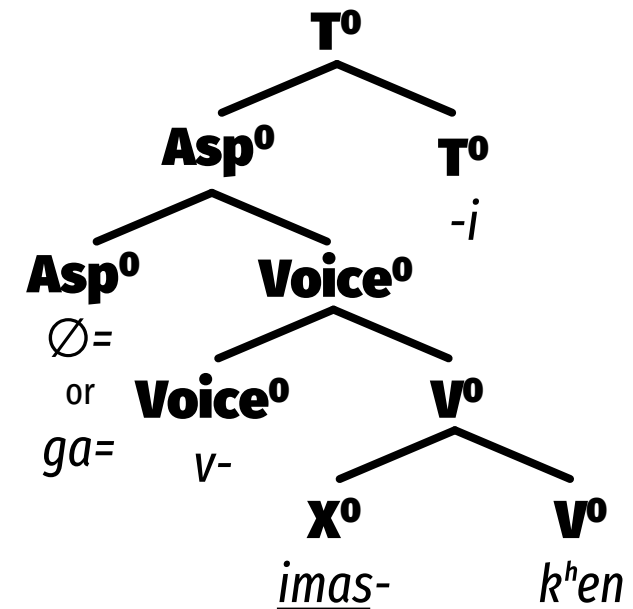Mariam-NOM   PVB-1SU:TR-stop-PST1/2
"I stopped Mariam."
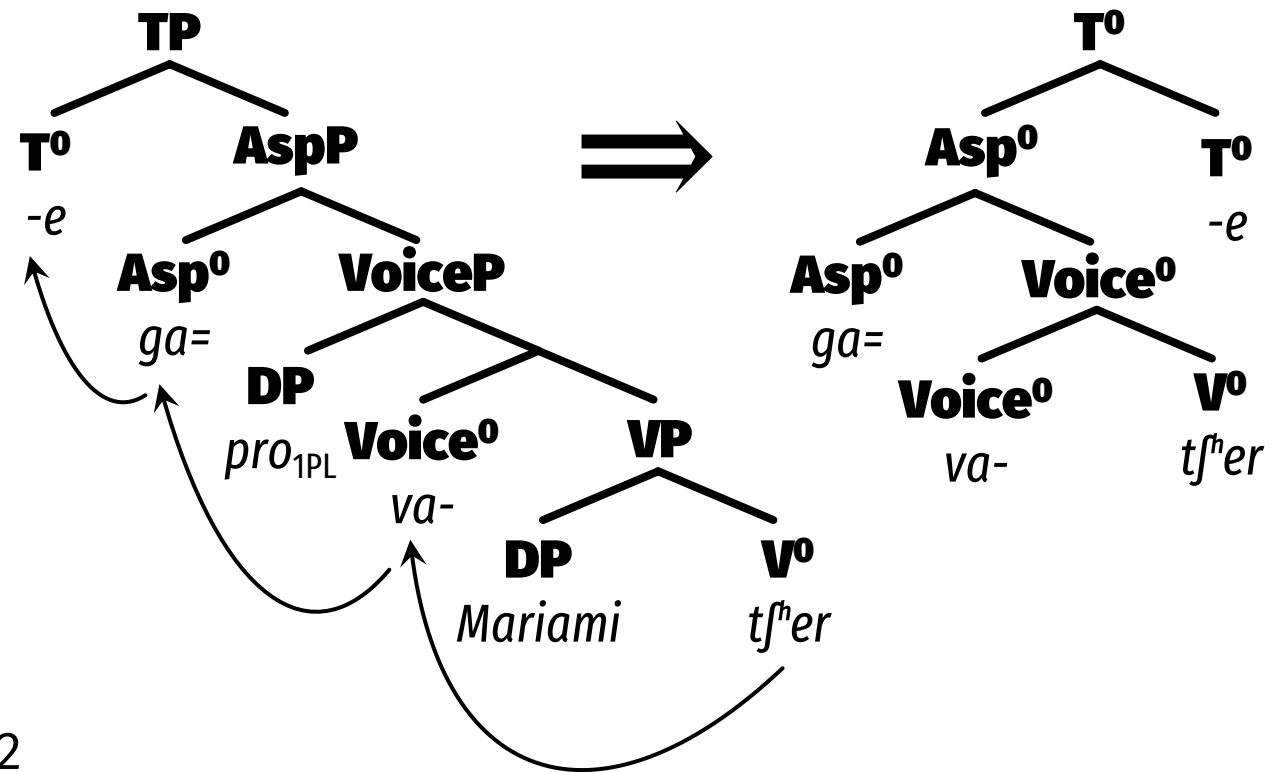
Compound analysis

imas- forms part of a complex root

- Perhaps an incorporated theme — i.e. synchronically, PHV is derived from EAVP

- Asp^0 might be null, or copied from intended V
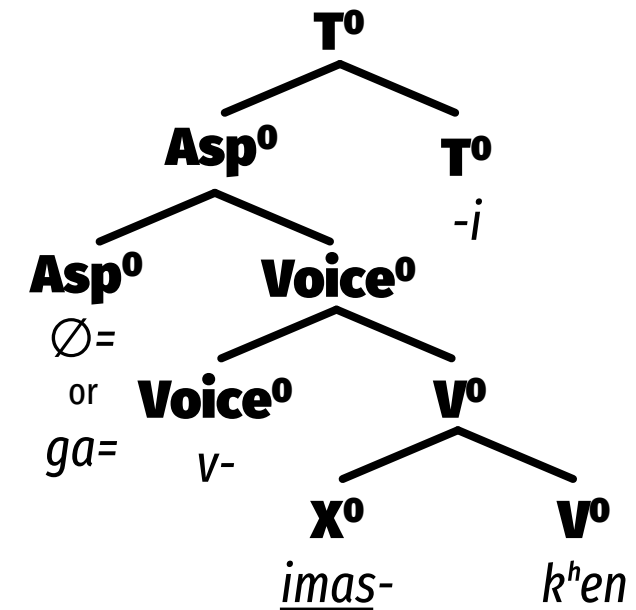
Akin to other compound verbs

(15) **ga=va-[did-gul]-e**
    PVB=1SU:TR-[big-heart]-PST:1/2
    "I made *pro$_3$* arrogant."

$$
\begin{array}{c}
\text{T}^0 \\
\diagup \diagdown \\
\text{Asp}^0 \quad \text{T}^0 \\
\qquad -i \\
\diagup \diagdown \\
\text{Asp}^0 \quad \text{Voice}^0 \\
\varnothing = \\
\text{or} \quad \text{Voice}^0 \quad \text{V}^0 \\
ga= \quad v- \\
\qquad \text{X}^0 \quad \text{V}^0 \\
\qquad \textit{imas-} \quad k^h en
\end{array}
$$

Compound analysis

Key predictions

| PHV Variant	Compound Analysis
Simple *imas-v-kʰeni*	✓
Complex/Inner *ga=imas-v-kʰeni*	✗
Complex/Outer *ga=v-imas-kʰeni*	✓
Complex/Double *ga=v-imas-v-kʰeni*	✗

Compound analysis

Some head-scratchers:

- Theme incorporation is possible for standard verbs, but only in nonfinite forms

- Incorporated themes come outside PVBs

  (16) [**χel**]+[**da=ban-il-i**]
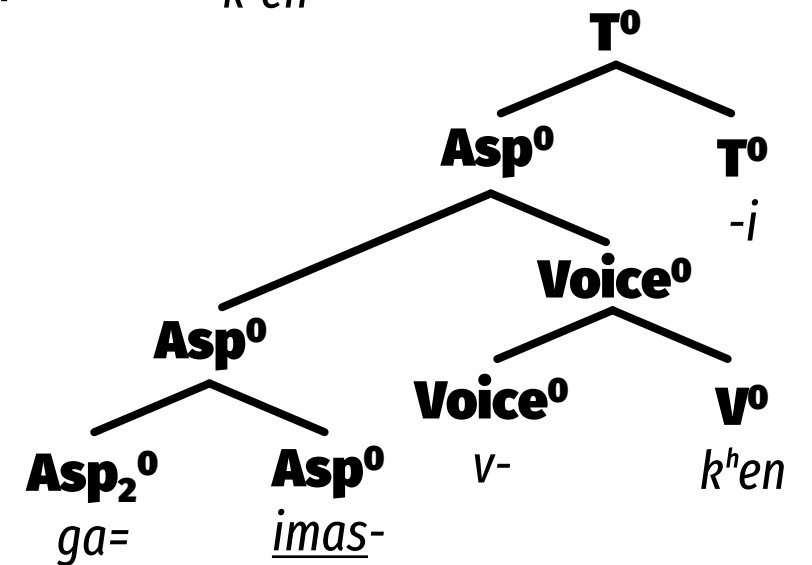   [hand]+[PVB=wash-PPTC-NOM]
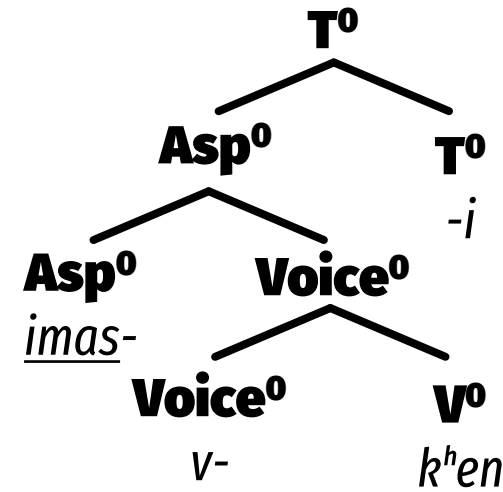   "with washed hands"

  (17) *[**χel**]+[**da=vi-ban-e.**]
        [hand]+[PVB=1SU:REFL-wash-PST1/2]
        Attempted: "I hand-washed."



18
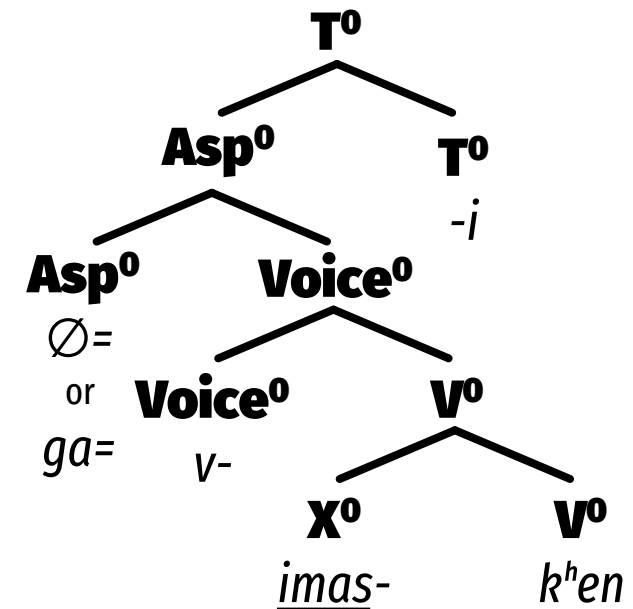
Preverb analysis

imas- is reanalyzed as a new PVB

- It is in the same linear position…

- …But it doesn't express perfective aspect or direction of motion (Makharoblidze 2018)
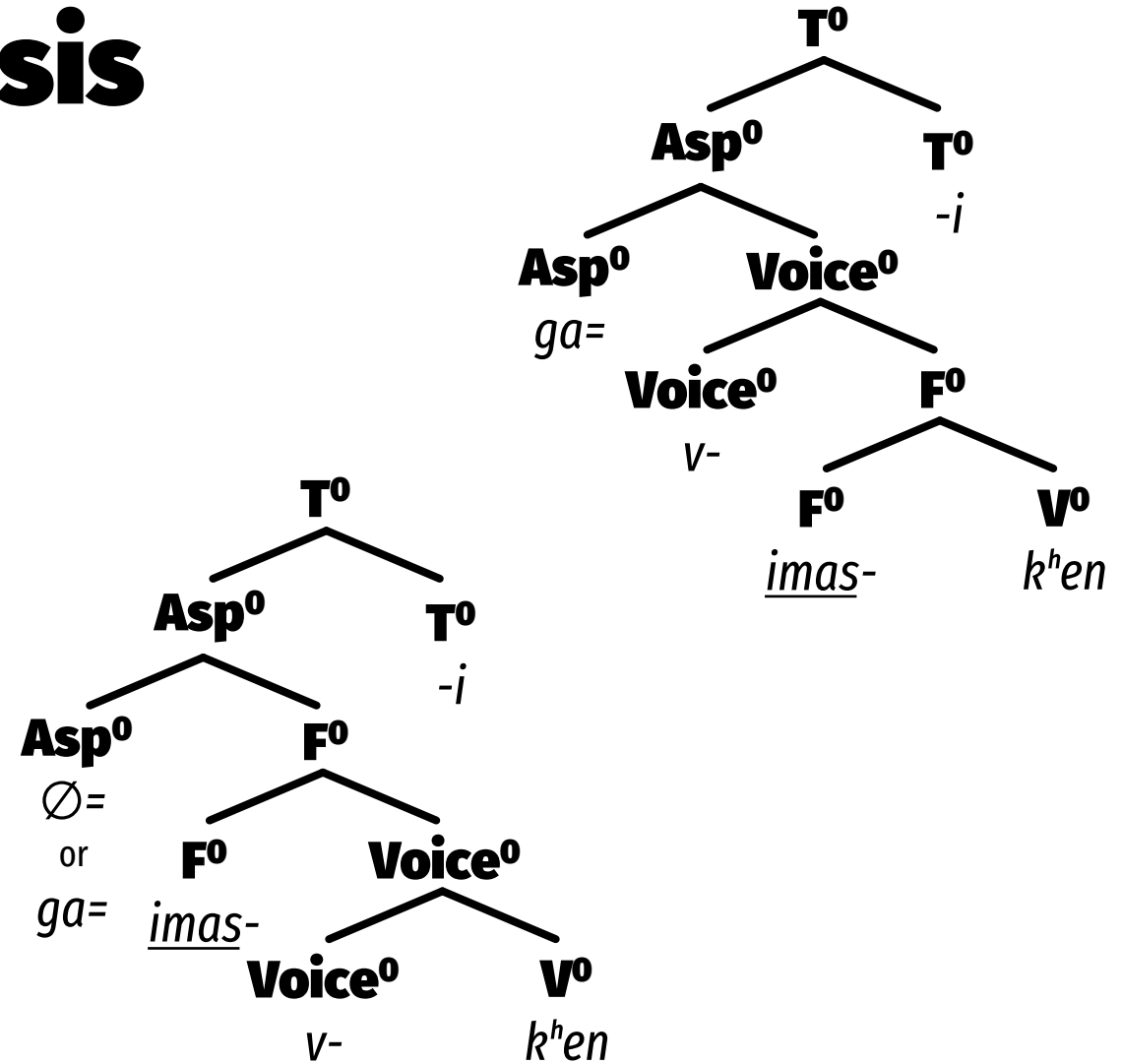
- A copied PVB could be adjoined to Asp^0

Tree 1:

T^0
- Asp^0
  - Asp^0 — *imas-*
  - $Voice^0$
    - $Voice^0$ — *v-*
    - V^0 — *kʰen*
- T^0 — *-i*

Tree 2:

T^0
- Asp^0
  - Asp^0
    - Asp_2^0 — *ga=*
    - Asp^0 — *imas-*
  - $Voice^0$
    - $Voice^0$ — *v-*
    - V^0 — *kʰen*
- T^0 — *-i*

Preverb analysis

Key predictions

PHV Variant	PVB Analysis
Simple _imas-v-kʰenitʰ_	✓
Complex/Inner _ga=imas-v-kʰenitʰ_	✓
Complex/Outer _ga=v-imas-kʰenitʰ_	✗
Complex/Double _ga=v-imas-v-kʰenitʰ_	✗
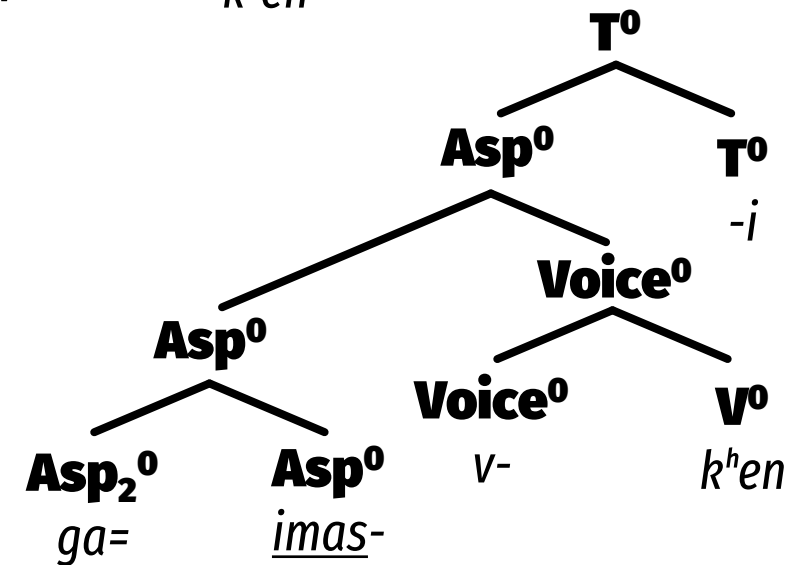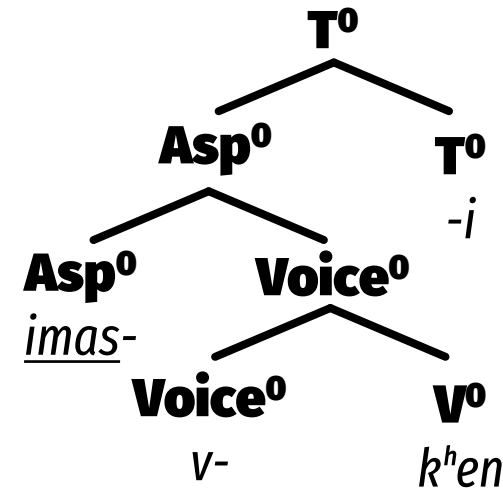
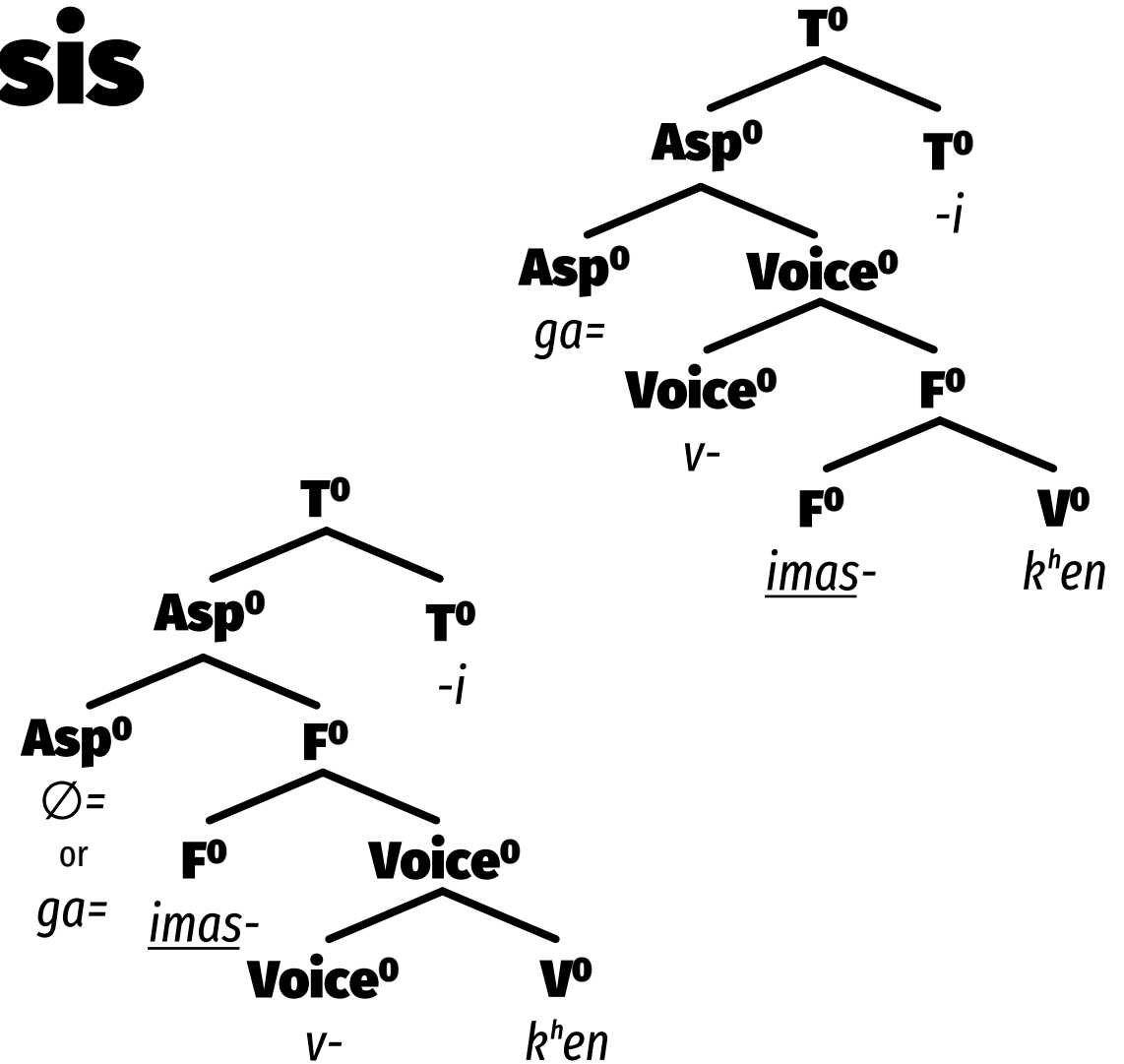# Functional head analysis

imas- is reanalyzed as a novel F^0

- FP could be merged in various positions, accounting for multiple variants...

- ...But it isn't clear how to rule out certain combinations (like *v-<u>imas</u>-k^hen-it^h*)

- ...Nor is it clear what FP's functional (TAM/argument structure) contribution is

T^0

Asp^0 T^0
           -i

Asp^0 $Voice^0$
$ga=$

        $Voice^0$ F^0
        v-

                F^0 V^0

                <u>imas-</u> k^hen

T^0

Asp^0 T^0
           -i

Asp^0 F^0
$\varnothing=$
or
$ga=$ F^0 $Voice^0$
        <u>imas-</u>

                $Voice^0$ V^0
                v- k^hen

Functional head analysis

Key predictions

PHV Variant	Novel F⁰ Analysis
Simple *imas*-v-kʰenitʰ	✓
Complex/Inner *ga=imas*-v-kʰenitʰ	✓
Complex/Outer *ga=v-imas*-kʰenitʰ	✓
Complex/Double *ga=v-imas*-v-kʰenitʰ	✗

Morphological anaphor analysis
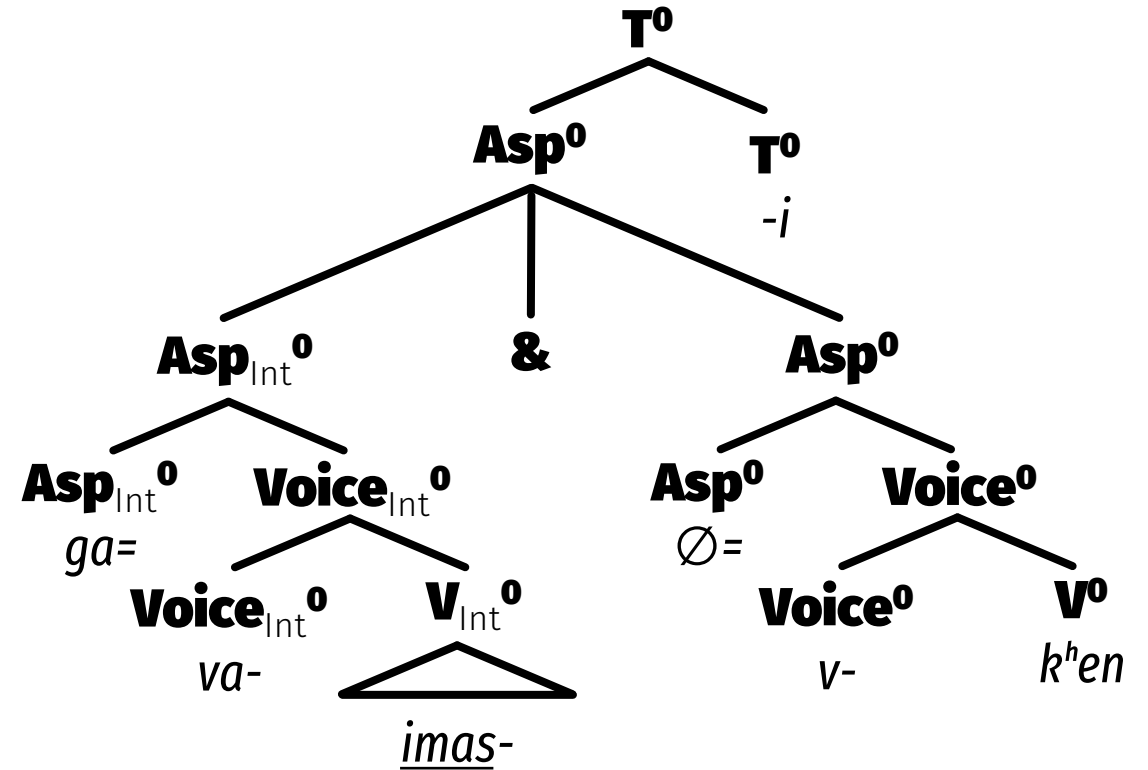
imas- is reanalyzed as a subword anaphor

- PHVs literally contain the intended verb, conjoined at AspP

- Replacing different subword constituents with *imas-* accounts for morphological variants

- Morphological anaphors are rare, but attested (Compton & Pittman 2010)

Morphological anaphor analysis

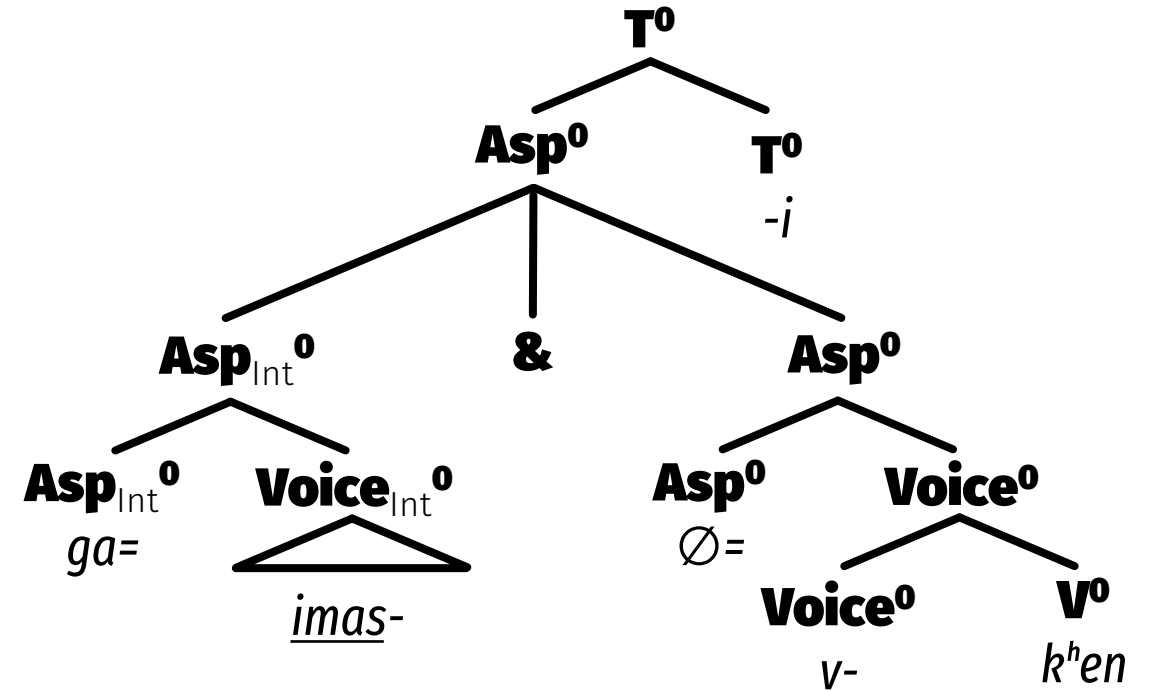*imas-* is reanalyzed as a subword anaphor

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Morphological anaphor analysis
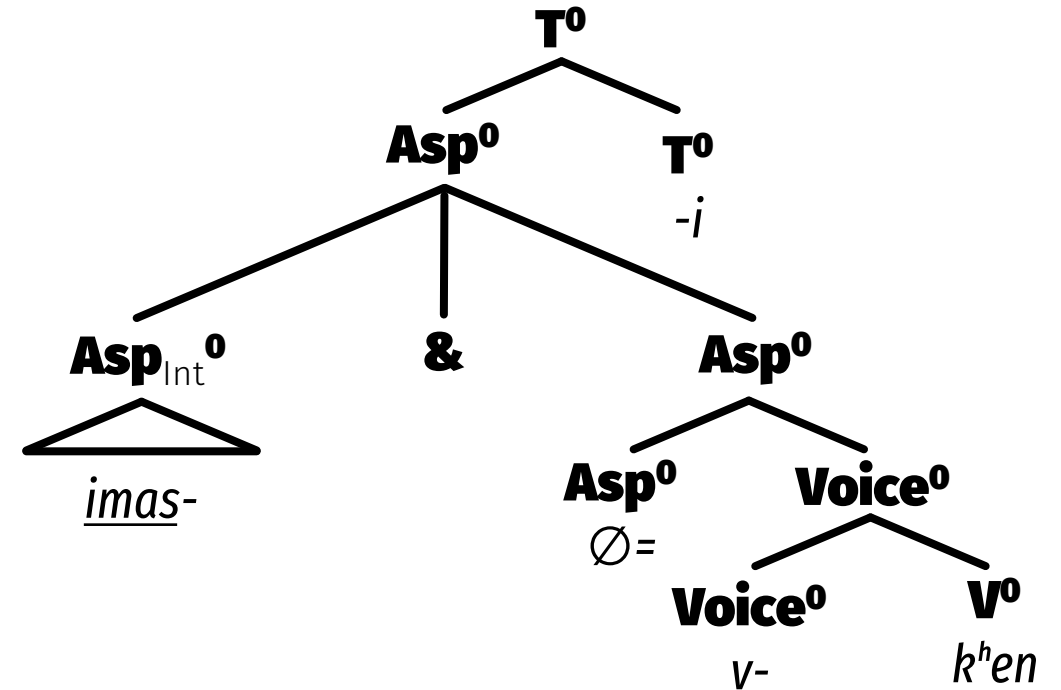
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- PHVs literally contain the intended verb, conjoined at AspP

- Replacing different subword constituents with *imas-* accounts for morphological variants

- Morphological anaphors are rare, but attested (Compton & Pittman 2010)

T^0
Asp^0 T^0 -i
Asp_{Int}^0 & Asp^0
Asp_{Int}^0 $Voice_{Int}^0$ Asp^0 $Voice^0$
ga= *imas-* ∅= $Voice^0$ V^0
v- k^hen

Morphological anaphor analysis

imas- is reanalyzed as a subword anaphor

- PHVs literally contain the intended verb, conjoined at AspP

- Replacing different subword constituents with *imas-* accounts for morphological variants

- Morphological anaphors are rare, but attested (Compton & Pittman 2010)

Morphological anaphor analysis

This conjunction structure is independently attested in truncated compounds (Harris 2017)

- But, truncated compounds and PHVs don't have parallel semantics
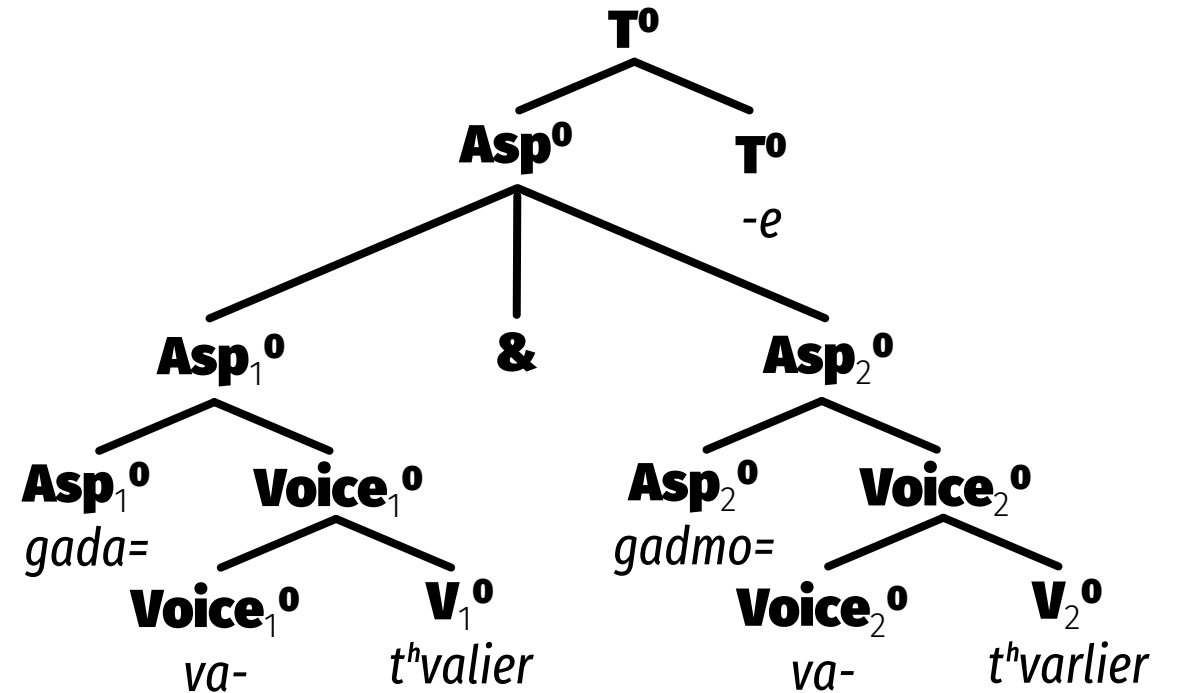
(18) ***ts'ign-i***   [***gada=va-tʰvalier***]+[***gadmo=va-tʰvalier***]-***e.***
      book-NOM   [PVB$_1$=1SU:TR-look]+[PVB$_2$=1SU:TR-look]-PST1/2
      "I looked through the book back and forth."

Morphological anaphor analysis

Key predictions

PHV Variant	Anaphor Analysis
Simple *imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✓
Complex/Inner *ga=imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✓
Complex/Outer *ga=v-imas-kʰenitʰ*	✗
Complex/Double *ga=v-imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✓
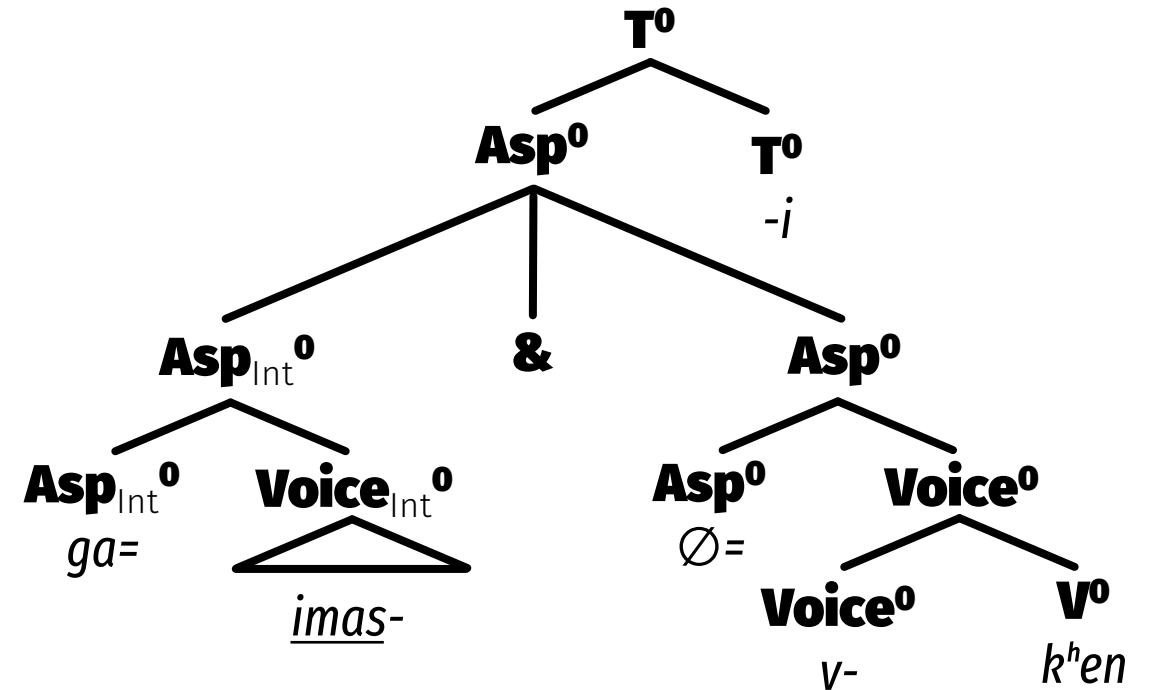
Summary

No single analysis accounts for everything — each is a set of predictions!

PHV Variant	Compound Analysis	PVB Analysis	Novel F⁰ Analysis	Anaphor Analysis
Simple *imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✓	✓	✓	✓
Complex/Inner *ga=imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✗	✓	✓	✓
Complex/Outer *ga=v-imas-kʰenitʰ*	✓	✗	✓	✗
Complex/Double *ga=v-imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✗	✗	✗	✓

1. Introduction

2. Core patterns

3. Analytical possibilities

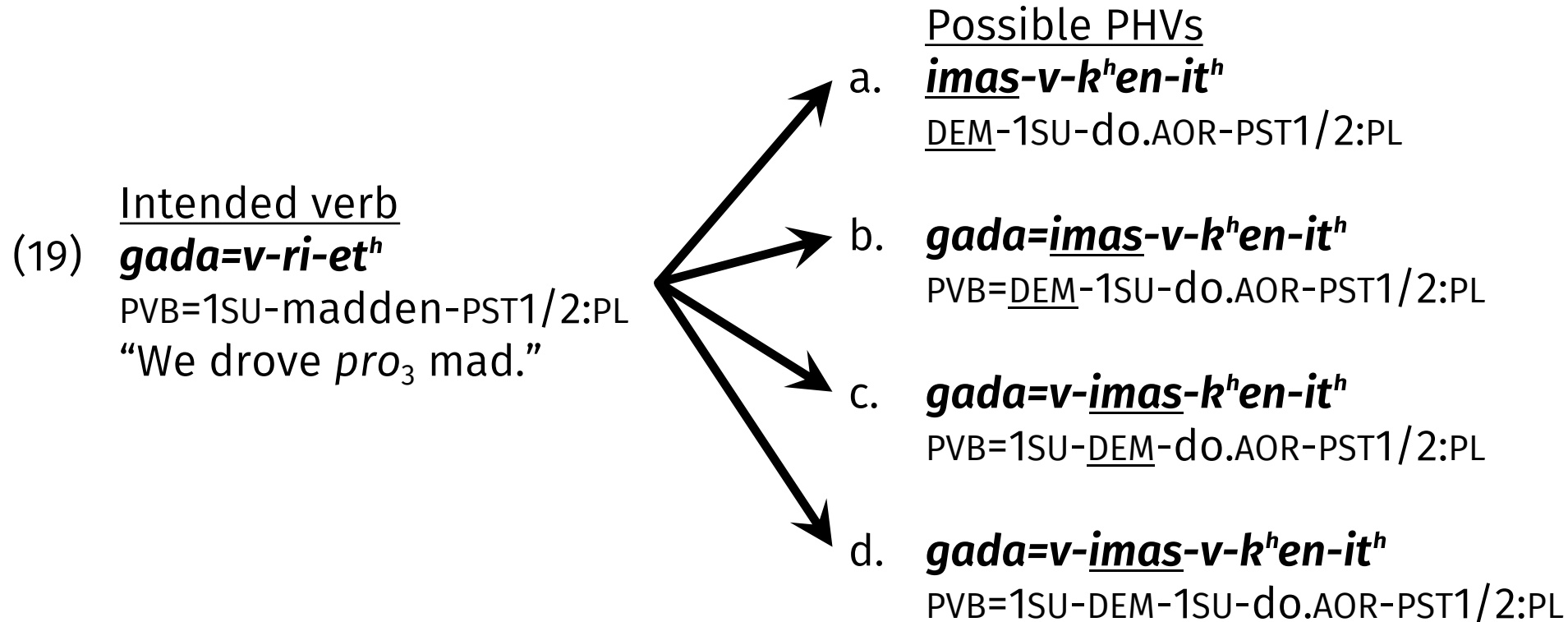**4. Acceptability experiment**

5. Conclusion

Acceptability experiment

Task: rate how good a PHV form is relative to a given intended verb

Experimental trial mock-up	
ნაგულისხმევი ზმნა: მოვატყუებ	Intended verb: *mo=va-t'q'u-eb* PVB=1SU:TR-deceive-THM "I will deceive *pro₃*"
ჩამნაცვლებელი ზმნა: მოიმასვიზამ	Placeholder verb: *mo=<u>imas</u>-vi-z-am* PVB=<u>DEM</u>-1SU:REFL-do.FUT-THM "I will thatdo *pro₃*"
1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 (ძალიან ცუდი) (ძალიან კარგი)	**1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5** (very bad) (very good)

Acceptability experiment

Design: IntV paired with all four major PHV types (Latin Square distribution)

Possible PHVs

a. ***imas*-v-kʰen-itʰ**
   <u>DEM</u>-1SU-do.AOR-PST1/2:PL

Intended verb
(19) ***gada=v-ri-etʰ***
PVB=1SU-madden-PST1/2:PL
"We drove *pro*$_3$ mad."

b. ***gada=imas*-v-kʰen-itʰ**
   PVB=<u>DEM</u>-1SU-do.AOR-PST1/2:PL

c. ***gada=v-imas*-kʰen-itʰ**
   PVB=1SU-<u>DEM</u>-do.AOR-PST1/2:PL

d. ***gada=v-imas*-v-kʰen-itʰ**
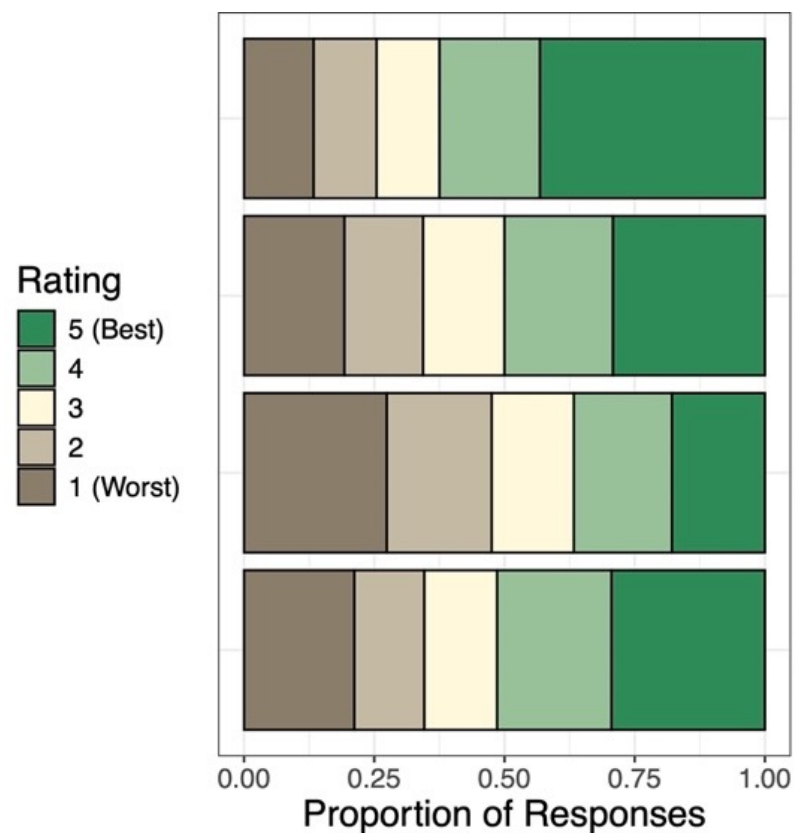   PVB=1SU-<u>DEM</u>-1SU-do.AOR-PST1/2:PL

Acceptability experiment

Other details

- 32 critical itemsets, 160 fillers; two experimental sessions

- 65 native Georgian speakers took part; 36 took both sessions

- Conducted remotely via the internet, hosted on PCIbex (Zehr & Schwartz 2018)
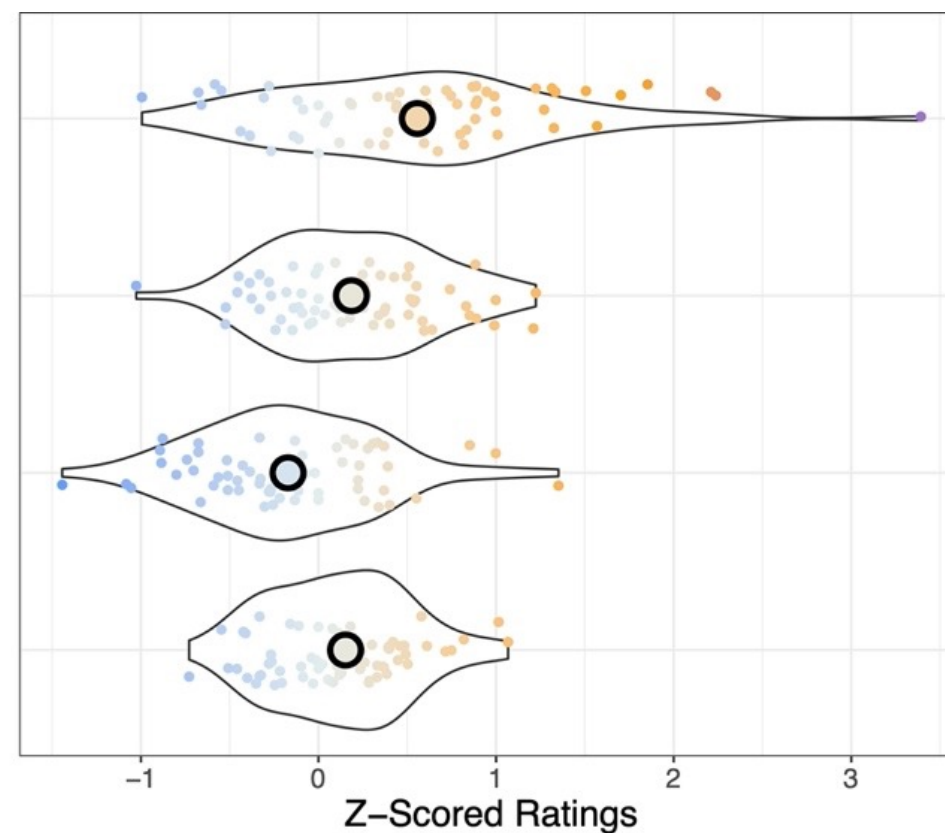
Aggregate results

Rating
- 5 (Best)
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1 (Worst)

Simple
imas-v-kʰeni

Complex/Inner
ga=imas-v-kʰeni

Complex/Inner
ga=v-imas-kʰeni

Complex/Inner
ga=v-imas-v-kʰeni

Proportion of Responses

Z–Scored Ratings

Worse than average ← **→ Better than average**

Aggregate results
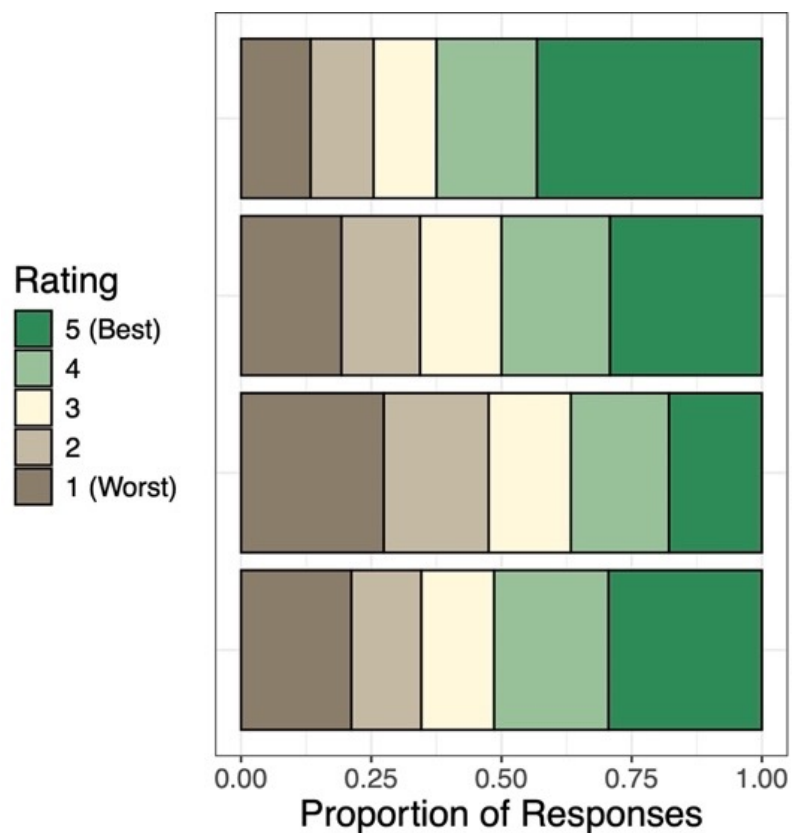
Simple PHVs were rated best overall

Among Complex PHVs, outer agr is the worst

Rating
- 5 (Best)
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1 (Worst)

Simple
imas-v-kʰeni

Complex/Inner
ga=imas-v-kʰeni

Complex/Inner
ga=v-imas-kʰeni

Complex/Inner
ga=v-imas-v-kʰeni

Proportion of Responses

Z–Scored Ratings

Worse than average ←   → Better than average
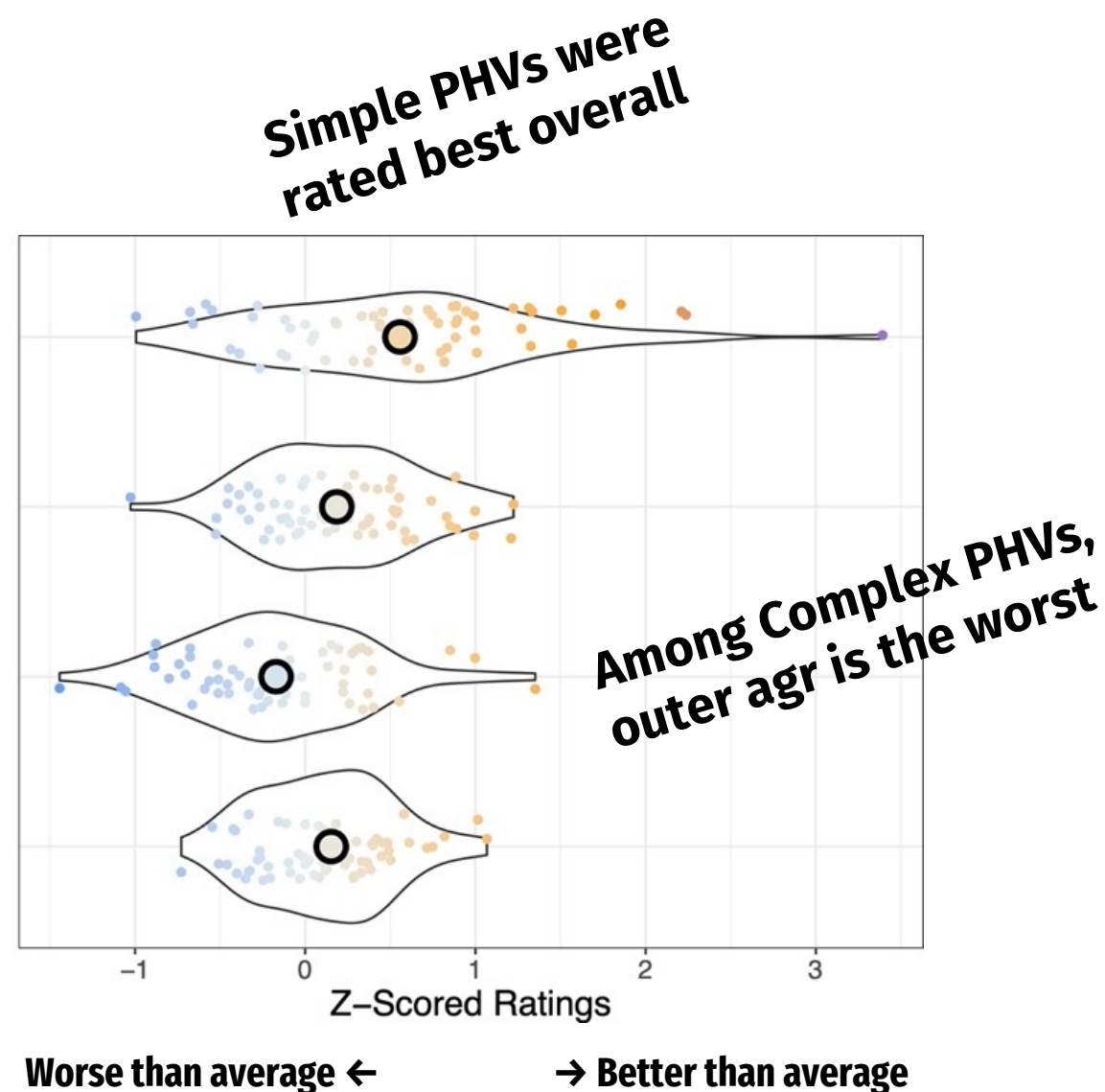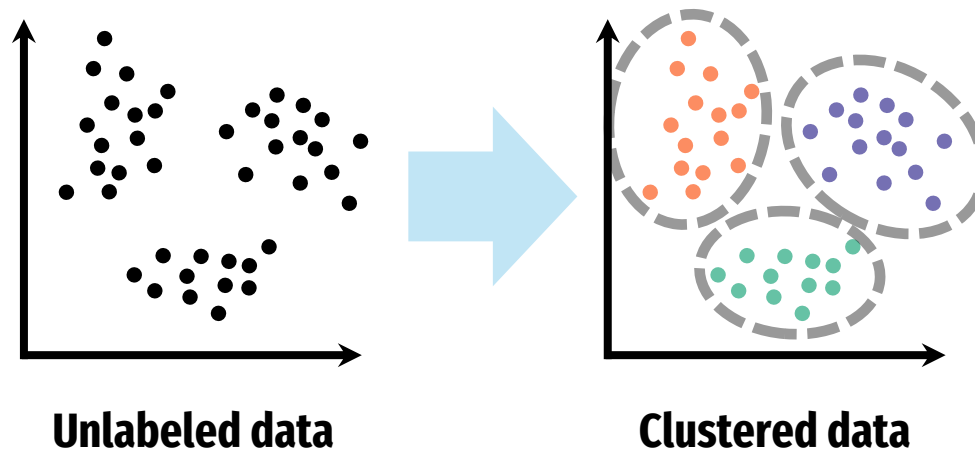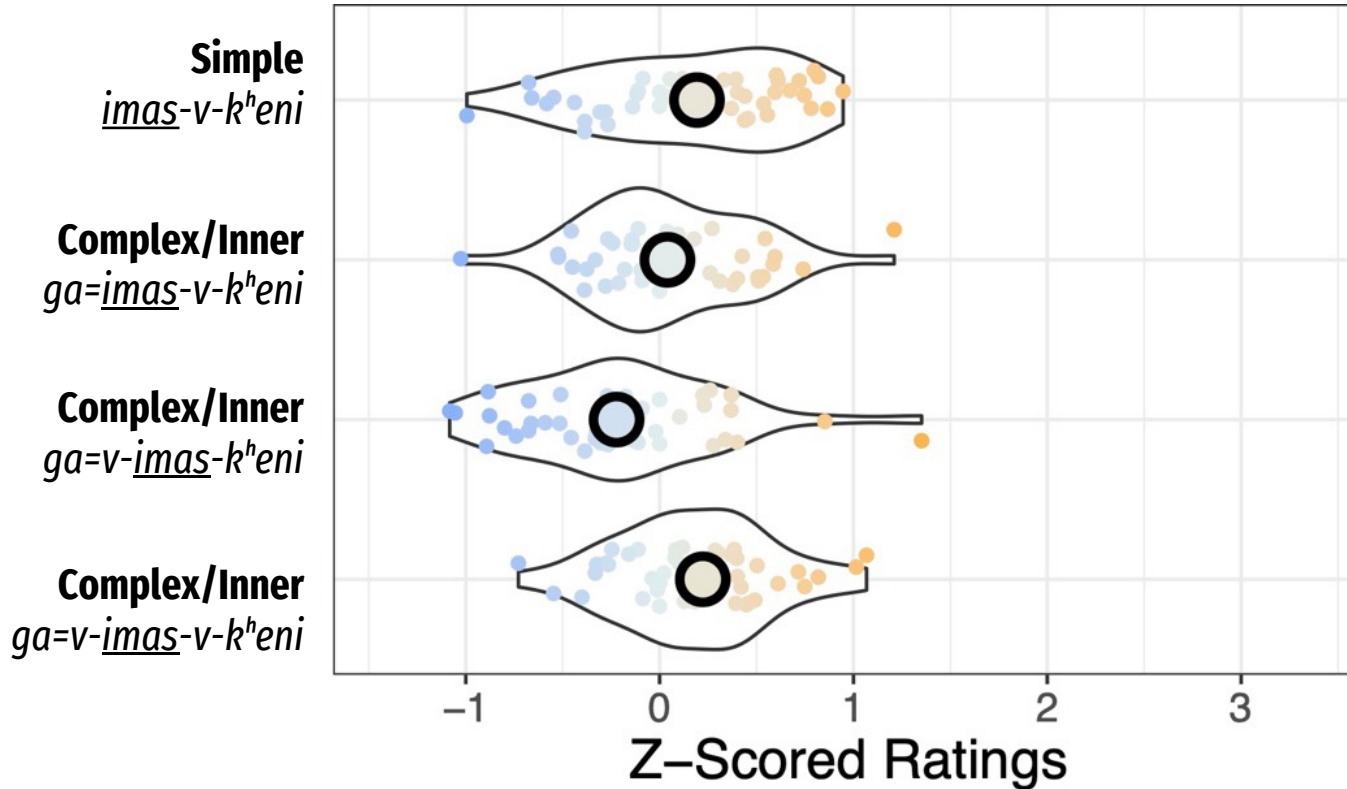
Clustering analysis

K-means clustering

- A technique for latent patterns in data (Burnett et al. 2014)

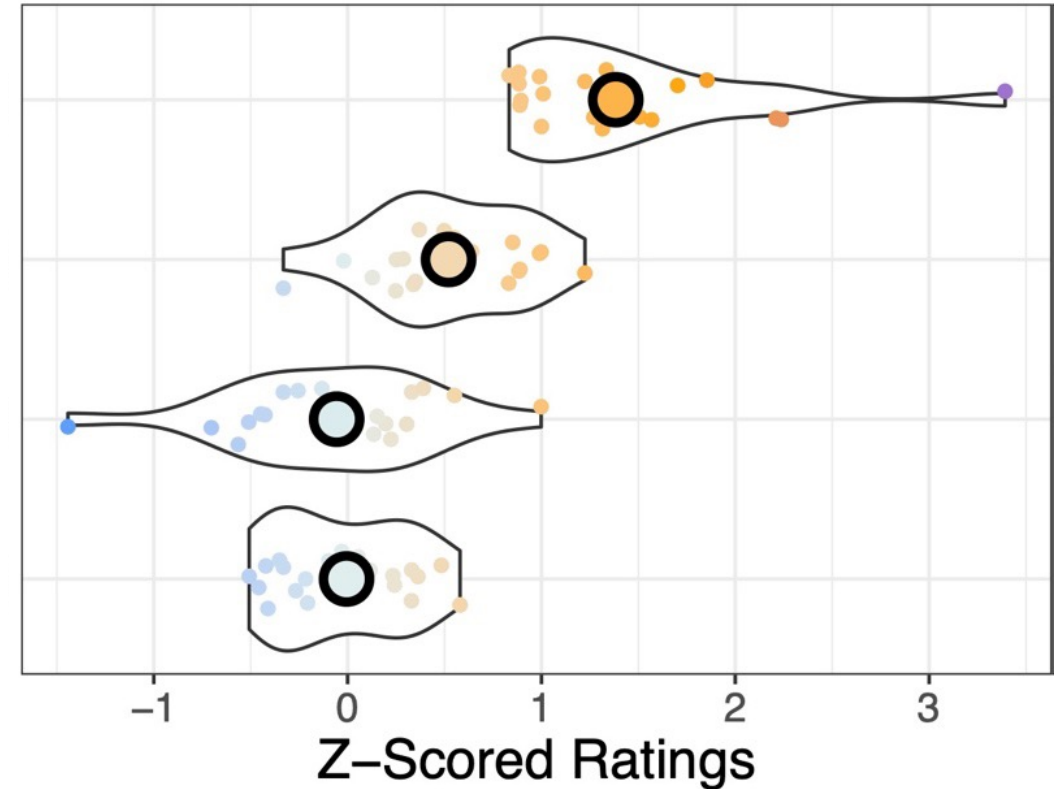- Here, used to identify groups of participants whose ratings were similar

Unlabeled data   **Clustered data**

Clustering analysis

Cluster A
- 43 participants
- Complex/Outer PHVs rated worse than all the others
- Speakers with the Anaphor Grammar?

Cluster B
- 20 participants
- Simple PHVs best by far; Complex/Inner ok
- Speakers with the PVB Grammar?

Clustering analysis

PHV Variant	Compound Analysis	Cluster B grammar — PVB Analysis	Novel F⁰ Analysis	Cluster A grammar — Anaphor Analysis
Simple *imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✓	✓	✓	✓
Complex/Inner *ga=imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✗	✓	✓	✓
Complex/Outer *ga=v-imas-kʰenitʰ*	✓	✗	✓	✗
Complex/Double *ga=v-imas-v-kʰenitʰ*	✗	✗	✗	✓

1. Introduction
2. Core patterns
3. Analytical possibilities
4. Acceptability experiment
5. Conclusion

Conclusion

Our experiments suggests there are at least two types of speakers

- Those who reanalyze *imas-* as a novel PVB, and those who reanalyze it as a morphological anaphor

Why these grammars rather than the others?

- Language-specific pressure: Georgian avoids theme-incorporation

- Language-general pressure: Repurpose existing constructions, rather than positing new structure (FP)

Conclusion

Outstanding questions

- Do EAVPs and PHVs have identical interpretations? Or has there been semantic change?

- What PHV forms are best when intending an intransitive (e.g. passive) verb?

Intended intransitive verb

(20) **ga=tʃʰer-d-a   ~   ga=i-ts'vrtʰn-a**
PVB=stop-INCH-PST   PVB=REFL-train-PST
"S/he was stopped ~ trained."

Conceivable PHVs

(21) a. **ga=<u>imas</u>-kʰn-a**
PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do-PST

b. **ga=<u>imas</u>-kʰn-d-a**
PVB=<u>DEM</u>-do-INCH-PST

c. **ga=<u>imas</u>-i-kʰn-a**
PVB=<u>DEM</u>-REFL-do-PST

Conclusion

Georgian is already a platypus among languages

- i.e. many typologically unusual and complex grammatical features

The development of PHVs shows how a language can become *more complex*

- How might a platypus grow wings? Possibly in multiple ways!

Special thanks

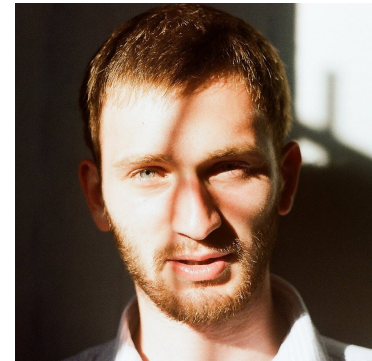To our research assistants in Georgia:

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