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When is a Present not Present? — Turkish İmîş, Kazakh Eken, and the Albanian Admimative

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One of the most vexing problems in describing the meaning of Turkish imiş is the question of tense/reference. At the same time – in the larger context of Turkic linguistics – the relationship of various forms of the type -(I)P and -Gän in Turkic languages such as Kazakh, where their usage corresponds to the nonconfirmative often expressed by -mîš in Turkish, has not received more than superficial treatment (e.g. Haarmann 1970). In this paper, I will take a step in the direction of exploring these issues by considering the relationship between Turkish imiş and Kazakh eken with the help of Albanian data. I am particularly interested in usages with apparent present meaning, and I will argue that the Albanian admimative, which resembles the Turkic nonconfirmatives in many respects, helps demonstrate that in Kazakh, as in Turkish, usages meaning ‘be’ with apparent tense neutralization in fact must contain some reference to a past event or state.1 In the case of Kazakh, however, the relationship of eken to the past tense -Gän is more complex that of Turkish imiş to the mîş-past, as it is in transition from marked past to unmarked for tense, much as happened to the Albanian present admimative, which is of perfect origin. Unlike Albanian, however, where the transition is complete, the Kazakh situation is not yet complete.

As noted by Erdal (2004: 290–91, 297; 1991: 382–87), -Gän was obsolescent in Old Turkic and became more productive later in time.

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1 As I have argued elsewhere (Friedman 2000, 2005), the Albanian admimative is marked for non-confirmativity. As such its usage usually indicates surprise, disbelief, or a report. See also Demir (2003) on imişi in Cypriot Turkish. I wish to thank my colleagues Kagan Arik and Cornell Fleisher of the University of Chicago, Rexxep Işmâli of the Academy of Arts and Sciences of Kosovo, and Eleonora Sulaimova of al-Farabi Kazakh National University, and also Dana Akanova for their help.
Erdal (2004: 297) also notes that attested Orkhon Turkic uses of -məš are identical to modern Turkish with one exception, whereas Uyghur -məš resembles -gən in non-Oghuz languages. The discussion of the use of -məš for non-confirmative status in Old Turkic in Erdal (2004: 272–75) shows that at that period the category was already present in Old Turkic as we see it in Turkish today. Thus hints of the transfer of status from older Turkic -məš to Kazakh (and other West Turkic) -Gən are already foreshadowed in the earliest periods. Erdal (1991: 383, 2004: 288, 320) also notes the problematic etymology of ərkən (= Kazakh əken): the stem in ər- ‘be’ is clear, but the origin of the -kən is problematic—i.e., if it is from -Gən we must accept the devoicing of /g/ after /r/, if it is from the temporal adverbial suffix -kən we must accept that a suffix that only attaches to temporal adverbs was attached to this one verb. Here we accept Erdal’s view that -Gən is the more probable source, which makes for more consistent continuity with Kazakh developments. For Kazakh, Kenesbaev and Karasheva (1966: 332) – who label the Kazakh past tense in -DI the catenational past (категорициеское прошедшее), e.g. ol keldi ‘he came [definitely]’ – treat both -(I)P and -Gən under the heading давнопрошедшее ‘pluperfect’. They specify that the past in -(I)P expresses the unexpected, unwitnessed, or irony and use Russian words such as okazyvaetsja ‘it turns out/appears/seems’, jakoby and kak budo both with nuances of ‘supposedly, allegedly, apparently’ in their translations to indicate that -(I)P is non-confirmative. They use Russian davno ‘long ago’ for the meaning of -Gən, e.g. ol barqyty ‘he apparently/supposedly went’ biz kelengemİ ‘we came (a long time ago)’ 2 Sulejmenova et al. (1997: 158–166) use Russian недавно прошедшее and Kazakh жезел өткен ‘recent past’ for -DI, деъєттил’нə прошедшее ‘truly past’ and бурсыңы өткен ‘before past’ for -(I)P, прошто давно прошедшее or өз жетеги өткен ‘simple pluperfect (distant past)’ for the past tense in -Gən. They specify the first as witnessed or confirmative, the second as unwitnessed but confirmative, and the third as marking the distant past and non-confirmative. Kara (2002: 39–40) states that the past in -DI denotes recent past actions with relevance for the present while -Gən denotes distant past completed actions. Thus keldi is translated ‘he arrived/has arrived’ and kelgen as ‘he arrived (but he is gone now)’. He describes the past in -(I)P as ‘evidential’, i.e., (marked) non-confirmative. As can be seen, more needs to be done on Kazakh tense marking in general, but here I shall limit myself to əken.

For Kazakh əken, we are immediately faced with the problem of its status in the language. Sulejmenova et al. (1997: 220–221) treat əken as a ‘modal word’ together with emphatic əjoı, existential bar, non-existential øk, necessitative kerek etc., whereas Koço et al. (2003: 137) and Taştov (199: 102) treat it as the Gən-past of ‘be’. It would appear from usage that əken straddles these two categories, retaining links to its etymological origin as the Gən-past of ‘be’ while also modifying verb phrases as a marker of uncertainty.

Example (1) – taken from the Turkish, Kazakh, and Albanian translations of the Russian novella Судьба Человека (usually translated as ‘the fate of a man’) – displays a classic usage of the Albanian present, Turkish imiş and Kazakh əken to express surprise at the discovery of an unsuspected but previously existing state or event:

1. Dunal, چی تو meningi үсудар’ s pravo, no ty, okazyvaetsja, smirnyi paron’. [Russian]
2. Qenke dijalı i urt. Pandeha se do tö më jepe unnonj guush me dorën e djahathë. [Albanian]
3. Sen yine dayankisi oğlanımızın, dedi, ben buna yuvar anşen saqlam eline bana yumruklar eklęyecęngi samuşam... [Turkish]
4. Sen meny qolyqem perip žberedi şøj dep edim, zaty, omym şigiz ekensiq [Kazakh]

‘I thought you were going to hit me with your right hand, but it turns out that you’re a peaceful lad.’

In fact, however, in precisely this context of present realization of a past state, Albanian can also use a perfect, imperfect, or pluperfect affirmative (paske genë, genkëshe, paskeşhe genë; see Friedman 2000 for details). From this we could conclude either that the Turkish and Kazakh forms neutralize tense or that the existence of reference to a pre-existing state of affairs allows for the usage of a past tense form. That the second of these two analyses is the more satisfactory here is demonstrated by the fact that the Albanian present affirmative, as a true present, can be used in questions that do not refer to a past event or state but only to the moment of speech itself, but, like both Turkish imiş and Kazakh əken, the Albanian past adveratives are also not permissible with a true present meaning. Thus, for example, a customer entering a shop...
and finding the owner absent can express surprise to the apprentice in a question that does not refer to the master’s pre-existing absence, but focuses only on his actual whereabouts at the moment of speech:

2. Ku qenka/paska qene... mjeshtri? [Albanian]
   Usta nerede *imis? [Turkish]
   Ustuz qajda *eken? [Kazakh]
   ‘Where is the boss?’

In such a context, forms marked for pastness are not acceptable. The Albanian present admittive (which is diachronically descended from an inverted perfect, e.g. ka qenë ‘has been’ > qenka ‘is!’), however, has become a true present with its own derived perfect (of the type paska qene). Nonetheless, many of the speakers interviewed for Turkish and Kazakh felt that one should be able to use imis and eken, respectively, in a question expressing surprise at not finding the master in his expected place. The formulations invariably involved a response to the statement of another, as seen in example (3):

   Usta yok mu? -- Yok. -- O nerede imis? [Turkish]
   Ustuz zoq pa? -- Zoq. -- Oi qajda eken? [Kazakh]
   ‘Isn’t the boss here?’ – ‘No.’ – Well where is he then?

In this scenario, the focus is on the absence of the boss as affirmed by the second speaker (the ‘no’ functions as a predicate), and thus the second question refers reactively to an already articulated pre-existing state.

Based on these data, I would argue that when standing alone as the predicate, both Turkish imis and Kazakh eken in its predicative usage always have some connection to a past state, expectation, speech event, thought, deduction, etc. When imis is a clitic or participial formant this is still the case. Even a sentence like gelecekmis ‘Ie will come –mis’ carries a reference of the type ‘he said...’, ‘I inferred...’, or an implied response to a previously uttered gelecek (in which case gelecekmis expresses surprise or disbelief). In the case of Kazakh, however, eken can also function as a particle that adds a sense of uncertainty to other verbs used in questions. In this usage, tense does not appear to play a role, as in Example (4):

4. Ne znaēsk, skoro li podojdējot lozhka? [Russian]
   Kayık çabuk gelecek mi? Biliyor musun? [Turkish]
   Qajq tez keler me eken, bilmem sig be? [Kazakh]

   ‘Do you happen to know whether the boat will come soon?’ or
   ‘You don’t happen to know whether the boat will come soon, do you?’

Here we see that eken expresses a degree of uncertainty with regard to the proposition tez keler ‘it will come soon’ or tez keler me ‘will it come soon’. Such usage of eken can even take person marking, as in example (5):

5. Proskačit’, Sokolov? [Russian]
   Çeşpilecek misin, Sokolof? [Turkish]
   Öüp kete alar ma ekenin, Sokolov? [Kazakh]

   ‘Will you [be able to] get through, Sokolov?’

At issue, then, is how to reconcile the restriction illustrated in (2) with the occurrences of (4) and (5). It would seem that when used in its original meaning of ‘be’, eken retains the kind of restrictions on -GAn that we find with Turkish -mls, i.e. like imis, eken in its literal meaning of ‘be’ must have some sort of past reference built in. However, as can be seen from examples (4) and (5), eken can be used to modify non-past verbs – albeit only but precisely in questions – to add a nuance of uncertainty or doubt, and in this usage it is no longer bound by the tense reference restrictions of -GAn but is instead a kind of modal marker. This shift is itself consistent with the behavior of tense in relation to status marking seen in the Albanian admittive. It is also consistent with the historical development of the old perfect marker -mls and the shift of meanings from -mls to -GAn with its revitalized productivity. As indicated by the differences in analyses of the Kazakh verb cited above, there is still considerable work to be done on status categories marked by -(f)P and -GAn as well as developments of eken, but it is hoped that this article will contribute to interest in such work.

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