

Agreement beyond the verb: Georgian -t in vocative address

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In many languages, politeness is encoded by pluralizing the second/third person. Georgian aligns with this pattern: the pronoun *tkven* ‘you.PL/HON’ is used for a single addressee in formal settings, and verbs carry the corresponding plural suffix *-t* (Aronson, 1990; Hewitt, 2011). Thus, *sad khar-t?* ‘where are you (hon./pl.)?’ is entirely ordinary. The novelty lies elsewhere. In contemporary Georgian, *-t* has escaped the verb and now attaches to non-verbal hosts which include greetings, farewells, apologies, collective address nouns, vocatives. In all these cases, a verbal agreement morpheme appears on nouns and discourse particles, with no syntactic agreement relation.

(1) *saghamo* *Msvhidobia=t* (Vazha Pshavela, 1888)
evening Peaceful=PL/POL
‘Good Evening (plural)

Shanidze (1953:192) noted that *-t* moved “from verbs to words addressed to many.” By the mid-20th century forms like *madloba-t* were widespread, and in contemporary speech *-t* freely attaches to new tokens. Crucially, these non-verbal uses do not uniformly encode honorific meaning. Forms such as *kargi-t* may be used both in polite address to adults and in neutral address to children, while *megobrebo-t* (‘friends’) and *khalkho-t* (‘people’) naturally target plural audiences. This distribution shows that *-t* does not lexically encode politeness, but rather realizes second-person plural addressee features, with honorific interpretations arising pragmatically in singular-addressee contexts. At the same time, the distribution of non-verbal *-t* is sharply constrained: it never attaches to proper names (**Giorgi-t*), never appears in referential or descriptive contexts (**es tsigni-ts saintereso-a* ‘this book is interesting’), and cannot occur on modifiers such as *tchemo* ‘my’. These negative facts demonstrate that *-t* is not a free discourse particle, but is licensed only within vocative and address structures. I argue that the non-verbal distribution of *-t* reflects a restricted reanalysis of verbal agreement morphology within the domain of address. Early non-verbal uses (e.g. *gambarjoba-t*) are plausibly explained by analogy with polite imperatives and highly frequent formulaic expressions, a conclusion supported by early attestations. However, the extension of *-t* to vocative titles and collective address nouns cannot be straightforwardly derived from elided verbal sources alone, pointing toward an emerging addressee-oriented function.

Georgian thus provides evidence for a transitional stage in which agreement morphology partially persists beyond its original syntactic domain and is reinterpreted within vocative structure.

References:

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