On a Grammatical Aspect of Ostyak Parallelism
Anna Szabolcsi

1. Northern Ostyak folk poetry (and the folk poetry of other Finno-Ugric languages, which I do not consider here) is conspicuously characterized by a very strict kind of parallelism. The syntactical and morphological structures of parallel lines standing either next to or near each other are identical; moreover, the lexical items appearing in them are also identical with the exception of one or two, and occupy the same syntactic position in both lines.

\[ \text{xaro\^ g\~\text{\'i} x\~\text{\'er\\'em\~\'a k\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} et\~\text{\'a}}} \]
\[ \text{xaro\^ ker\^t x\~\text{\'er\\'em\~\'a k\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} et\~\text{\'a}}} \]

(Reguly-Papay 1944-65, II: 129, II. 80-81.)

'to my spacy town's space (=square) I go out,'
to my spacy village's space (=square) I go out'

\[ \text{xh\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'a}lu\^t\~\text{\'i} x\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'i} y\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'i}} \]
\[ \text{y\~\text{\'a}n xh\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'a}lu\^t\~\text{\'i} y\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'i}} \]
\[ \text{h\~\text{\'a}r\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a}x\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'a} l\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} l\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} n\~\text{\'a}n\~\text{\'a} h\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} n\~\text{\'a} h\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a}} \]
\[ \text{h\~\text{\'a}r\~\text{\'a}n\~\text{\'a}h\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} t\~\text{\'a} l\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} l\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} h\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} b\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} l\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} l\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} n\~\text{\'a} n\~\text{\'a} h\~\text{\'a} m\~\text{\'a} h\~\text{\'a} m\~\text{\'a}} \]

(Ibid: 105, II. 931-34.)

'for their long-waited ends I wait here,'
for their short-waited I wait here,
after their walk till the middle of the meaty week,
after their walk till the middle of the bony month

[... they arrive]'

Following Austerlitz's (1958) formalization, the first two lines will appear as follows (his distinction between verbal and nominal lines is omitted here for the sake of simplicity):

\[ \text{A x B C} \]
\[ \text{A y B C} \]

From Lowth to Jakobson, three types of parallelism have commonly been distinguished, in Lowth's terminology, parallel synonyma, parallelia antitheta, parallelia synthetica. Common to all three is the characteristic that each line refers to a self-contained bit of reality, and the contents of the two lines standing together can be in opposition but by no means in contradiction to each other. Ostyak parallelisms do not fit into any of these three categories; as they occur in the narration of a story, together they evidently refer to a single bit of reality but, seemingly, they are logically contradictory (e.g., nothing can be a town and a village at the same time, or someone can be awaited for either a short or a long time).

2. Consequently, we face the phenomenon that texts of folk poetry are frequently uninterpretable. In cases like this we can follow two essentially different strategies: 1) we may conclude that these lines are impossible to interpret and may assign them on the whole to the scope of poeties, where the conveniences of the genre can be established, which does not add to their intelligibility; 2) we may assume that nothing can be said even in folk poetry that would not make sense to the native speaker, and try to find some interpretation. Of the two possibilities it is common to choose the first. I shall attempt to experiment with the second.

3. The stock of parallel words in folk poetry is more or less fixed. Similarly we find a fixed set of coordinate compounds in Ostyak (and in other Finno-Ugric languages). In one kind, the 'intensifying compound', the constituents of the compound are synonyms (cf. Hung, d\~\text{\'a}g\~\text{\'a}z\~\text{\'a}qog 'immensely rich', b\~\text{\'a}b\~\text{\'a}z\~\text{\'a} very attractive [originally meaning 'sorcerer'], b\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a}h\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a}x\~\text{\'a}n\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a} very sad', t\~\text{\'a}sz\~\text{\'a}\~\text{\'a}\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a} k\~\text{\'a}r\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a} deep-rooted, autochthon'). In the other, the 'comprehensive compound', the constituents may be viewed as antonyms, but in fact they mark the two extremities defining a genus. Standard Hungarian examples are sz\~\text{\'a}n\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a}v\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a}o\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a} "ploughman", orca (=ortez\~\text{\'a}q) 'nose-mouth = cheek', f\~\text{\'a}f\~\text{\'a}na 'grass-tree = everybody', boldog-boldogtalan 'happy-unhappy (ones) = everybody', but other cases with negation might well be included here: se nem oszi, se nem szoros 'it neither divides nor multiplies = it does not count', se h\~\text{\'a}z, se h\~\text{\'a}l 'neither meat nor fish = has none of the clear characteristics one of which it ought to have', se z\~\text{\'a}z, se b\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'a}z 'has neither taste nor smell = characterless', etc.

In Ostyak the sets of parallel words and coordinate compounds overlap. Examples of overlapping are the following: a\~\text{\'a}w\~\text{\'a}r\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a}t 'father-mother = parents', n\~\text{\'a}\~\text{\'a}tk\~\text{\'a} 'woman-man = human being', sa\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a}h\~\text{\'a} 'cup-plate = dish', x\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a} 'day-night = 24 hours', \~\text{\'a}s\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a} 'daughter-tom = child', m\~\text{\'a}t\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a} 'earth-water = world or native land', w\~\text{\'a}l\~\text{\'a}z\~\text{\'a} 'animal-fish = all sorts of animals', j\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a} 'hand-foot = [in idioms like] having all the body healthy', l\~\text{\'a}k\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a} 'eat-drink = have a meal', l\~\text{\'a}j\~\text{\'a} 'age-time, tal\~\text{\'a}n 'winter-summer = a year', loj\~\text{\'a}m\~\text{\'a} 'horse-cow = domestic animal'.

The author is an associate researcher in the Linguistic Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

August, 1976
ār-māfs ‘song-tale’, nēm-ajj ‘name-sound = name’.

2. This identity of parallel words and coordinate compounds can be demonstrated by examples:

parallelism:

nįj manam nįjī suj māl-gi
xui manam xuijī suj māl-gi

(Pāpay 1910:172.)

‘if a province with women [that is] wandered over by women you need,
if a province with men [that is] wandered over by men you need’;

coordinate compound:

si nējxoī žottā māl

(Pāpay 1910:74.)

‘this human being (woman-man) must be helped’.

Conversely, the following pairs are bound together by parallelism only: ēttī-loōjī ‘rising-setting’, tōrm-jējlo ‘sky-heaven’, fōrm-bōnt ‘field-forest’, pēn-kună ‘tooth-claw’, sūn-pōsēj ‘vaporous-smoky’, nāj-xōl ‘larch-pine’.

The latter set does not appear to differ significantly from the former.

4. I have not yet discussed the distribution of the above-mentioned pairs. The versified texts of folk poetry use parallel lines (and consequently parallel words), while they make hardly any use of the coordinate compounds. In non-versified tales parallelism is very rare but it does occur, whereas a great many coordinate compounds appear (e.g., ār-simol lōjījō dī ‘many-few mice were there’; Pāpay 1910:74). In prose texts that are not of poetic origin there are no parallelisms, but coordinate compounds are employed as normal, nonpoetic devices. The compounds can take suffixes on the second constituent or on both constituents.

At this point we should consider the age of our data. The collection of versified tokens of Ostyak folk poetry began in the first half of the 19th century, but by that time the genre had ceased to be productive, so the informants necessarily communicated texts of a former state of the language, preserved in the versified form. Non-versified tales are younger (Pāpay), and they can be assumed to reflect basically the state of the language at the time they were collected. The fact that these tales partially retain conventions of the genre may account for the parallelisms still occurring in them. I do not have exact data on the language of today, and I know of no current research on the subject. All my decisions as to a certain pair of words are based on information from Ėva Schmidt, a researcher in Northern Ostyak from Budapest.¹

5. In virtue of the facts listed above, it seems quite certain that the phenomena of parallel words and coordinate compounds are related, and, moreover, that parallel lines are to be interpreted through observance of the pattern of coordinate compounds (e.g., in the example mentioned above woman-man means a human being in the parallelism just as it does in the prose text, where it appears as a coordinate compound). Therefore, our fundamental problem is solved: we need no longer regard the contradictory lines as grotesque, as Steinitz (1941) did, for instance. In some trivial cases these meanings can be immediately verified from the story itself.

Although the problem is not inherently concerned with the history of these phenomena, it is possible to set up a logically plausible hypothesis about the historical correlation of the two. We assume that coordinate compounds were already extant in the language before the versified texts emerged. It was a convention of the genre that coordinate compounds were to be disjoined into two clauses where they occupied the same syntactic positions, but they retained their original semantics. It was also a convention of the genre that other lines should follow the same repetitive pattern (the problem is most satisfactorily discussed in Austerlitz 1958). It is not impossible that the over-all convention could appear just because there were such coordinate compounds in the language. Since, however, the genre was improvisational, it was necessarily schematic, and the story-teller would usually make use of formulas already known from other stories rather than creating new ones. This improvisational character may account for the fixed stock of parallel words. It would be interesting to take a closer look at the slight differences between parallel words bound together by parallelism only and parallel words that are also present in the set of coordinate compounds. Purely parallel words are more often of the 'intensifying' kind than coordinate compounds; this may also result from the improvisational character of the genre. The rule "parallelize whenever possible" may also account for the fact that although parallel verbal lines are far less frequent than nominal ones, they are more numerous than coordinate compounds of verbal nature.

I conclude that it is impossible for the contemporary reader to regard these parallelisms as purely poetic devices, and that in interpreting them he should follow, not his artistic intuition, but rather the coordinate compound patterns of the language.

NOTE

1. On the present state of the language and suffusion of coordinate compounds, I have used Ėva Schmidt's very useful personal comments, I express my gratitude for her help. Naturally, any erroneous conclusions are my responsibility.

REFERENCES


LANGUAGE SCIENCES