EAT expressions in Central Asian languages

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Verbs that have the sense of ‘eating’ often have other ‘metaphorical’ senses that come forth when they co-occur with particular sets of words. For example, the sense that the verb *eat* has in *what’s eating him?* differs from that the *eat* in, say, *I eat eggs* has – the former does not involve any putting of food into the mouth or chewing or swallowing which the latter sense does. Thus, *eat* has multiple senses, the most frequently exploited of which is arguably ‘put (food) into the mouth and chew and swallow it’ (definition taken from Concise Oxford English Dictionary; hereafter abbreviated as PCS). A tentative semantic decomposition of PCS is shown below using the notational conventions of Jackendoff’s (1990) Lexical Conceptual Semantics.

\[
\begin{align*}
(1) & \quad \text{Event CAUSE} ([\text{Thing} \ i, \ \text{Event GO} ([\text{Thing} \ j, \ \text{Path TO} ([\text{Place IN} ([\text{Thing} \ \text{MOUTH-OF} ([\text{Thing} \ i])])]))])] \\
& \quad \text{Event CAUSE} ([\text{Thing} \ i, \ \text{Event INCH} ([\text{State BEComp+} ([\text{Thing} \ j, \ \text{Place AT} ([\text{Thing} \ \text{PIECES}k])]))]))] \\
& \quad \text{Event CAUSE} ([\text{Thing} \ i, \ \text{Event GO} ([\text{Thing} \ \text{PIECES}k, \ \text{Path TO} ([\text{Place IN} ([\text{Thing} \ j])]))]))]
\end{align*}
\]

Verbs that denote/exploit (1) (hereafter EAT verbs) in such Central Asian languages as Tajik and Uzbek also have senses that are different from (1). However, the non-PCS senses of EAT verbs in Central Asian languages do not coincide with those of English *eat*. While some of the non-PCS senses of Central Asian EAT verbs, such as:

\[
(2) \quad \text{Event INCH} ([\text{State BE+contact} ([\text{Thing} \ i, \ \text{Place AT+contact} [\text{Thing} \ j])]))]
\]

(or roughly ‘an event which is the inchoation of the state of an object being in contact with another object’) are shared by EAT verbs in a number of (genetically divergent and geographically distant) Asian languages, as can be observed in these examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Verb Form</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japanese</td>
<td>genkotsu</td>
<td>fist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>o</td>
<td>acc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>kau</td>
<td>eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘to be hit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>tā le'</td>
<td>one fist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>chî</td>
<td>he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yi'quan</td>
<td>ate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘he was hit’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Nakamoto and Oya 2002: 36)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tajik</td>
<td>mušt</td>
<td>fist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>xūrdan</td>
<td>eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uzbek</td>
<td>musht</td>
<td>fist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>yemoq</td>
<td>eat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>‘to be hit/beaten’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(7) Uyghur  oq  yémæk
(8) Tajik  tir  xårđan
       arrow  eat
‘to be shot’

There is one sense that is particularly prevalent among EAT verbs in Central Asian languages as well as Persian and Turkish, namely:

(9) [Event INCH ([State GOIdent ([Thing ] i, [Place TO ([Property DISTRESS])])])]

(or roughly ‘an event which is the inchoation of the state of an object, becoming distressed’). Some examples of EAT verbs with this sense are shown below.

(10) Tajik  ḡam  xårđan
     Uyghur  ḡem  yémæk
     Uzbek  g’am  yemoq
     Turkish  qam  yemeq
     Persian  qem  xordan
grief/anxiety  eat
‘to grieve, to feel anxiety’

(11) Tajik  ḡussa  xårđan
     Persian  qosse  xordan
grief/sorrow  eat
‘to grieve, to feel sorry’

(13) Tajik  afsūs  xårđan
     regret  eat
‘to regret, to be sorry’

(14) Uzbek  pushaymon  yemoq
     regretful/sorry  eat
‘to regret, to be sorry’

How did this sense (i.e. (9)) come to be shared by EAT verbs in these languages? At first glance, it appears that either Tajik or Persian exported to neighbouring languages sets of phrases such as ḡam xårđan and ḡussa xårđan, some of which made their ways into the lexicons of the neighbouring languages as loan translations. This may well be the case. However, this is by no means the only plausible explanation of the fact that EAT verbs in a number of Central Asian languages have (9) in common.

EAT verbs with the sense of (9) are attested in some historical Turkic languages, e.g. Xakani Turkic (11th Century) yër sakınç (eat anxiety) ‘he will suffer anxiety’ and Ottoman Turkish (14th-16th Centuries) kayğ’u ye- (sorrow/anxiety eat) ‘to be sorrowful’ (Clauson 1972: 599,870). The latter of these even has a modern equivalent: Uzbek qayg’u yemoq (anxiety/sorrow eat). All the morphemes that occur in these phrases are, unlike gam/gam/gæm/g’am in (10) and pushaymon in (14), which are Arabic and Persian respectively, Turkic. A phraseological dictionary of Uyghur (Abbas 1991: 1074) lists vayim yémæk ‘to grieve’ as an entry. This phrase seems to consist of (woe), (-1sg), and (eat), at least two of which are Turkic, and does not have a Persian/Tajik equivalent.
The existence of EAT verbs with the sense of (9) in historical Turkic languages suggests that (9) as a sense of EAT verbs has been in currency for almost a millennium in Central Asia. On the other hand, the apparent lack of any Persian/Tajik equivalent of vayim yémæk allows the hypothesis that the phrase may have come into existence not as a loan translation of a Persian/Tajik phrase but as a product of the millenium-long currency of (9) as a sense of EAT verbs in Central Asian languages, of which, of course, Uyghur is one. If this hypothesis is valid, the exploitation of (9) by EAT verbs may qualify as an areal linguistic feature that has wide currency across a number of Central Asian languages. (Note that this hypothesis is based on an unorthodox assumption that a function that maps ‘senses’, or semantic entities, to verbs that have a specific set of ‘senses’ can be transmitted and/or shared between different languages.)

References: