“Placeholders” in Agul and Udi spontaneous narratives

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I forget the word for "fan" or "window", and it might take me a couple of stammers to get the right word out - usually I end up saying something like: "Can you turn of[f] the THING - the WOTSIT - the air blower?".

http://wisewitch.blogspot.com/2006_09_01_archive.html

1. Introduction

What are placeholders?
Placeholders are hesitation markers which signal production difficulties on the side of the speaker (such sorts of devices have been also called “preparative substitutes” in literature).

Typologically, such elements as
a) demonstrative, interrogative, indefinite or universal pronouns,
b) generalized nouns like ‘thing’,
c) lexicalized combinations like “how-you-call-it”
— are most often used as placeholders (see Podlesskaja 2006a).

Cf. examples from Podlesskaja 2006a; 2006b; Xurdžudjan 2006:

(1) English
What happened to a, WHATCHACALLIT, to a potential contributor to your community?

(2) Russian (etot — demonstrative pronoun ‘this’)
A vy segodnja nas povedēte v ETOT… v trenažēmyj zal?
and you today us will lead to THIS to gym
And will you bring us today to THIS… to the gym?

(3) Armenian (ban — a generalized noun ‘thing’)
Kar-as ban-ov gas ink-hiť nat-iř-ov
may-PRS:2SG  BAN-INS come:SBJV:PRS:2SG airplane-INS
You may fly by THING... by airplane.

The goal of this talk is to describe placeholders in Agul and in the Nizh dialect of Udi (both: Lezgic < East Caucasian).

Our data are based on a corpus of spontaneous narratives collected in 2004—2006 (for Agul) and 2002—2006 (for Nizh Udi)1.

1 The work on Agul was supported by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.
NB: To the best of our knowledge, placeholders in these languages have not been noticed before, which was motivated by the partly artificial nature of texts used in most descriptions of East Caucasian languages. Such texts often do not represent spontaneous speech, but are written down by the linguists or the native speakers, with a subsequent normalization of some sort (like avoiding “redundant words” and adjusting “incorrect forms” and “wrong word order”). We will show by the example of the hesitation function of pronouns that spontaneous narratives present us with a number of features that deserves special attention from both purely descriptive and typological points of view.

2. First acquaintance

**Placeholders in Agul:** fiš ‘who’, fi ‘what’:

(4) Agul (Fite dialect)

sa jąk.ą, xibu-d-pu fi.čti-s, jąk.a-s, un-ar aq’.u-ni axt’i paluba.di-l-di

one day:ERG three-A-ORD what-DAT day-DAT sound-PL do.PF-PDT CIT deck-SUPER-LAT

*One day, on the third WHAT… day, he called (him) to the deck.*

**Placeholder in Udi:** he ‘what, which’:

(5) Udi

iz uqI:en-čo gir-b-i he-tu bap-i, meški-ä...


*Having gathered her bones and having put them into WHAT… into the sack…*

In both Agul and Udi, the basic function of items serving as placeholders is the **interrogative function**:

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

(6) fiš ‘who’

ket’.u-na, fiš e mi-sa-ʔ a-je-f, fiš e mi-sa-ʔ a-je-f,

wake_up.PF-CONV who COP DEMM-LOC-IN {IN}be-PART-A who COP DEMM-LOC-IN {IN}be-PART-A

fiš e mi-sa-ʔ a-je-f, č’al=la ḫ.a-j-dewa.

who COP DEMM-LOC-IN {IN}be-PART-A speech=& say.IPF-CONV-COP:NEG

*Having waken up (he says): «Who’s here, who’s here, who’s here?» – but there is no answer.*

(7) fi ‘what’

a. ti-č ʔ,a-guna fi mešni q’.a-a?

DEMT-LAT go/come.IPF-TEMPS what song do.IPF-PRS

*And what song they sing when they go there (to bring the bride)?*

b. hun, mahmi-šti, hal sara fi ḫ.a zu wa-s?

PTCL RDP:DEMM-ADV now more what say.IPF 1 you(Sg)-DAT

*So, what else shall I tell you now?*

Udi

(8) he ‘what’

he-t-ajnak =en har-e memija?

what-NMZ-Ben=2Sg come-Perf here

*What for have you come here?*
The typology of placeholder uses:

**Nominal placeholder** – replaces a noun or a noun phrase:

(9) Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

She told WHAT (= tales and legends) very well, and we, little children, were sitting near her.

Verbal placeholder – replaces a verb (or a verb phrase?):

(11) Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

Now wait... those who accompany... did the nikaah (islamic wedding), and in the morning they did WHAT.

3. Nominal placeholder

**Semantic specification:**

Udi:

The placeholder can be used for referents irrespectively of their animacy:

(13) te he-t-u, amdar-a elɣ-t-i eč-al = tun.

They will take that WHAT... man and bring (him).

(14) tac-i he-t-u papː-atan, beš kəz-ə ilša ereqluːs-a papː-atan...

I went and when I came to WHAT... when I came to the nut-tree garden near our house...

Note that as an interrogative pronoun, he cannot refer to human beings; in this case a special interrogative pronoun šu ‘who’ is used (the latter is not attested as a placeholder).
Agul (Huppuq’ dialect):
In general, the pronoun ‘who’ is used as a placeholder for human nominals, and ‘what’ for non-human nominals. However, the Agul ‘what’ pronoun can also be used for humans as a sort of “default” placeholder for NPs.

**fiš ‘who’** (in oblique cases, the stem is na-)

(15) na-s aʁ.a-a kun, me we jazna q’ulban.a-s=na će
who-DAT say.IPF-PRS I DEMM your(Sg) brother-in-law Qurban-DAT=AND your(Pl)
ge na-s, rahman.a-s aʁ.a-a kun, me ʒiga ze-f e p.u-na.
DEMG who-DAT Rahman-DAT say.IPF-PRS I DEMM place my-A COP say.PF-CONV

Then I tell WHOM... *your* brother-in-law Qurban and your WHOM... Rahman, I tell: “This place is mine”.

(16) ha qəzı, ja qəzı, ja fiš. isa aʁ.a-j haraj-ar q’.u-ne
PTCL Qazi VOC Qazi VOC who Isa say.IPF-CONV cry-PL do.PF-PFT
zun ge-wur.i.s.
I DEMG-PL-DAT

“Hey, Qazi, Qazi, hey WHO... Isa”, – cried I to them.

**fi ‘what’**

(17) qa-j x.u-ne pəcah.di-q sa ru... fi, sa ruʃ, bat’ar ruʃ.
{POST}be-CONV become.PF-PFT king-POST one [daugther] WHAT one daughter beautiful daughter

The king had a dau... WHAT, a daughter, beautiful daughter.

**Morphosyntax**

**Morphological distribution:**
In both languages placeholders can acquire nominal morphology.

**Udi**

(18) bitüüm he-ti-os-o, beʃ bitüüm māhāl-os-o oʃaʁ bu=jaʁ.
all what-NMZ-PL-DAT our all part_of_village-PL-DAT sacred_place COP=1PL:POSS

In all WHAT... in all our parts of village there are many sacred places.

**Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)**

(19) me ruʃ.a q-uʃ.u-na p.u-na-a, q’eq’t’ul.di, na-n, haʃi-n sus
DEMM girl(ERG) Re-go.PF-CONV say.PF-RES-PRS gallows(IN) who-GEN Hazhi-GEN bride
q’eq’t’ul.di a-a.
gallows(IN) {IN} be-PRS

Then this girl came back and said, on the gallows WHO’s... Hazhi’s wife is (hanging) on the gallows.

**Syntactic distribution:**
The placeholders may not only have the external syntax of noun phrases, but also take various modifiers.
Udi
The placeholder with a quantifier
(20) bitüm he-t-oṣ-o, beṣ bitüm māhāl-oṣ-o oṣṣak bu = jαχ.
after all NMZ-PL-DAT our all part of village-PL-DAT sacred place COP=1PL:POSS
In all WHAT... in all our parts of village there are many sacred places.

The placeholder with a possessive pronoun
(21) ho, mo-t-oṣ-on kal = e = ne, o, vi he maja, iṣqar?
yes this-NMZ-PL-ERG call=3SG=LV:PRS PTCL your(SG) what where:3SG:Q husband
Now, they are calling: “Hey, where is your WHAT... your husband? ”.

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)
The placeholder with a possessive pronoun (cf. also example (15) above)
(22) ha-ge uč.i-n fi, t’eʔem degiš x.u-na-dawa ge xit:a-n.
ha-DEMG REF:GEN what taste <change> become.PF-RES-PRS:NEG DEMG water-GEN
And its WHAT... this water’s taste haven’t changed.

NB: Such combinatorics is in principle not typical of interrogative pronouns.

Conclusion:
– Nominal placeholders show semantic underspecification.
– Nominal placeholders show more combinatoric possibilities than their ancestors
(interrogative pronouns).

4. Verbal placeholders

In both languages, verbal placeholders are based on combinations of a non-human/universal
nominal placeholder ‘what’ with the least semantically marked roots ‘do’ and (more rarely) ‘be’. These combinations take the necessary verbal morphology:

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)
(23) aχpα fi q’.a-j-e, χ.a-j-e guni – xed.
then what do,IPF-CONV-COP carry,IPF-CONV-COP bread water
Then they DO WHAT... they bring bread and water.

(24) aχpα gi p.u-na-a, q’ul?an.di jeri ajat ag,ar-q’.u-na-a gi,
then DEMG(ERG) say,PF-RES-PRS Quran(IN) seven ayah see-do,PF-RES-PRS DEMG(ERG)
ha-ge jeri ajat p.u-na-a lik’ p.u-na-a bic’i q’ul-ar.i-l,
ha-DEMG seven ayah say,PF-RES-PRS write(IMPERF) say,PF-RES-PRS little plank-PL-SUPER
ha-ge q’ul-ar.i-l lik’i-na ha-le hür.i-n mulk i-de-χildi har
ha-DEMG plank-PL-SUPER write,PF-CONV ha-DEML village-GEN territory COP-PART-xildi every
ʒiɡa.ji-l sa-sa-d lix.i-na fi q’-e p.u-na-a.
place-SUPER one-one-A {SUPER} put,PF-CONV what do-IMP say,PF-RES-PRS
Then he said, he showed seven ayahs from theh Quran and said: “Write these seven ayahs
on little planks, and after you write on little planks, put one plank on a separate place around
the village, and DO WHAT”’, he said.
Udi


People of older times in order to plant (crops), to plough and to dig, for a long time with a plow DID WHAT... worked.

(26) häviţ-â = 1 čāk=: jan = ne, šik:lam-a = 1 k:ac=: jan = ne, šik:lam-a = 1 coriander-DAT=FOC choose=1PL=LV:PRS onion-DAT=FOC cut=1PL=LV:PRS onion-DAT=FOC he = jan = b-sa, čāk=: jan = ne. what=1PL=do-PRS choose=1PL=LV:PRS

{From a culinary recipe.} We also select (good) coriander, cut onions, then DO WHAT... select them.

Evidence for lexicalization of the combinations PLACEHOLDER+VERB:

– Verbal placeholders based on the root ‘do’ can combine with direct objects (i.e. placeholders do not necessarily replace the direct object):

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

(27) zu wun fi q’a-s-tawa. pašman aq’a-s-ta...
I you(SG) WHAT do.IPF-INF-COP:NEG sad do.IPF-INF-COP:NEG

I will not DO WHAT with you, offend...

Udi

(28) meč-a čapaţar-en = jan ċlak:... he-b-sa, k:ac:-e.

{From a culinary recipe.} The nettle we press... DO WHAT, cut with a special knife.

NB: In Agul, however, such verbal placeholders can occasionally be used intransitively with their subjects in nominative:

(29) qa, kanešna ţabar adad k’.i vàχt:una ha-te = ra qa of_course Dzhabar uncle die.PF time(TMR) ha-DEMT=&
fi q’u-naje-f-ij sara.
what do.PF-PART2-A-COP:PST PTCL

Yes, of course, when uncle Dzhabar died, she (NOMINATIVE) also DID WHAT.

– In some Agul dialects, the combinations PLACEHOLDER+VERB occasionally display phonological reduction. For example, in the Tsirkhe dialect the PLACEHOLDER+VERB combination frequently occurs in such reduced forms like fi-r’qari (Imperfective Converb), fi-rq’aria (Present), fi-rq’afe (Generic Present), etc., whereas the full forms should be fi ar’qari, fi arq’aria, fi arq’afe. The reduced forms like fi-r’qari are not possible in the interrogatives contexts.
5. The simulative plural construction: one more function of placeholders

Like in many other languages, in Agul and Udi the items serving as placeholders can also be used in the function of the approximate nomination:

Udi

(30) jöni oc:-k:-i qässäng čäk = jan = ne, žle he nu = bak-a = ne iz boš.

{From a culinary recipe.} We wash everything well, and sort out everything, so that there be no stones or SOMETHING inside.

Agul (Huppuq’ dialect)

(31) ʕ˳.a-jde req:ü ča-s har ʒüre.ji insan-ar, har go/come.iPF-PART3 road(IN) we:EXCL-DAT every sort(GEN) person-PL every ʒüre.ji welijat-ar fl-pur ag.u-ne ča-s.

sort(GEN) country-PL what-PL see.PF-PFT we:EXCL-DAT

On our way we saw all sorts of people and also countries AND ALL THAT.

In Agul, this use of placeholder is quite marginal, since there are other means to express the simulative meaning (e.g., nominal plural or a special construction with zat’ ‘thing’, which are not used as placeholders).

The simulative plural construction refers to a set of objects via the direct reference to one of them (the focal referent) to which other members of the set are similar (cf. Daniel & Moravcsik 2005).

The structure of the simulative plural construction:
The placeholder follows immediately the designation of the focal referent and copies its inflection (including person markers, if any).

(32) čäpär-mäpär-əχun ʒup-i ta = ne = sa, zijan = e tastɑ fence-RDP-ABL jump(+LV)-AOR go=3SG=ST+PRS harm=3SG give+PRS qonš-os-o he-t-u.
neighbour-PL-DAT what-NMZ-DAT

It (a cow) jumps over the fence and runs away, doing harm to neighbours and ALL THAT.

(33) bel = tan = k-sa aq:saqqal = e he = ne. sa ʃeʃ ava = ne, ʃo-t-o look=3PL=ST-Prs old_man=3Sg what=3Sg sa thing knowing=3Sg that-Nmz-Dat hajzer-i čäk̂ = jan = ne tamata.
stand_up-Aor choose=1PL=LV:Prs toast_master

{At the feast.} Then they look: he is an old wise man OR SOMETHING, he knows much, so after he stands up and they elect him the toast-master.

In Udi, the simulative plural construction is found with placeholder verbs as well:

(34) neχ = e = ki, ã, jan mema usen jöni jäsäijn̂-e = jan he-b-e = jan.
say:PRS=3SG=COMP VOC:M we so.many year well live(-LV)-PERF=1PL what-do-PERF=1PL

He says: “Hey, we were living (together) well and WHAT-DO for so many years.
6. Concluding remarks: theoretical implications

The history of placeholders in Agul and Udi can be considered an instance of pragmaticalization, a process similar to (or even subsumed under) grammaticalization.

Pragmaticalization (as is understood here) is the development of lexical items into discourse-structuring devices, primarily discourse markers.

Evidence for pragmaticalization:
– semantic bleaching manifested in semantic underspecification of placeholders;
– the increase in scope of use manifested in the fact that placeholders have more combinatorial possibilities than interrogative pronouns;
– lexicalization of some patterns (e.g., verbal placeholders);
– metatextual function: pronouns here do not necessarily provide an information on the attitude of the speaker towards the proposition, but only tell that the speaker has not in mind an appropriate designation.

NB: Note that pragmaticalization does not necessarily meets such criteria of grammaticalization as obligatorification, phonological attrition etc.

On the other hand, if the similitive construction indeed has developed from placeholder uses, then this is an instance of depragmaticalization:

– placeholders get more concrete semantics (‘and the like’);
– they get a fixed position defined by (presumably) grammatical rules;
– lexicalized items like verbal placeholders admit the analytical interpretation based on the rule of inflection copying;
– the metatextual function turns into the intratextual one, providing it with context-independent semantics.

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