



**HAL**  
open science

# Evaluation between grammar and context The case of blessings and curses

Nina Dobrushina

► **To cite this version:**

Nina Dobrushina. Evaluation between grammar and context The case of blessings and curses. *Diachronica*, 2024, 41 (4), 10.1075/dia.23032.dob . hal-04851380

**HAL Id: hal-04851380**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04851380v1>**

Submitted on 20 Dec 2024

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Evaluation between grammar and context

## The case of blessings and curses

Nina Dobrushina

Laboratoire Dynamique du Langage, CNRS | Université Lyon 2

This paper analyzes how the grammatical meaning of qualitative evaluation is developed in optatives which denote blessings and curses. Based on the analysis of several Turkic forms and several Russian constructions, this study distinguishes the grammatical meaning of evaluation from a pragmatic implication arising in particular contexts. It shows that grammatical items that have evaluative usages often exhibit a certain “fluidity”, with positive or negative interpretation specified by the context. Positive or negative evaluation comes as a pragmatic satellite, and even if the category generally leans towards a negative (or positive) interpretation, it can in certain contexts display the opposite evaluation. Based on this approach, the paper suggests two different paths of the development of grammatical markers which denote qualitative evaluation.

**Keywords:** optative, qualitative evaluation, maledictive, benedictive, Turkic languages, Russian

### 1. Introduction

Qualitative evaluation, or positive or negative attitudes towards people, things or situations, is infrequently expressed by grammatical means.

The best-described cases are nominal diminutives and augmentatives. Although their main function is the quantitative evaluation of size or age, they often also express pejoration or amelioration; see Grandi and Körtevélyessy (2015), where the results of many previous studies are summarized. Qualitative evaluation as an optional meaning is also observed for verbal diminutives; Audring et al. (2021) point to affection and contempt as possible pragmatic attenuations of such forms.

Another recent attempt to approach the encoding of evaluation in grammar focuses on emotions since emotions usually contain positive or negative attitudes;

Dressler and Barbaresi (1994: 140–141) claim that emotionality is itself evaluative, although evaluation need not be emotional. A collection of articles devoted to the encoding of emotions in grammar by Ponsonnet and Vuillemer (2018) describes many cases where evaluation is expressed by verbs, including morphemes denoting fear (Vuillemer 2018), depreciation (Guillaume 2018: 129–135), irritation (Zariquiey 2018: 189–190) and accusation (Zariquiey 2018: 190–191).

While in these cases evaluation is an obligatory part of the semantics of the form, much more often the qualitative evaluation emerges through the context. Ponsonnet (2018) presents an overview of emotional connotations of nominal diminutives and augmentatives. Diminutives are often reported to express either small size or positive emotion, depending on the context, as in examples (1) and (2) from Beja.

- (1) Beja  
*bille:=t*                      *riba=t-i*    *ge:b*  
 flat.DIM=INDEF.F **mountain=INDEF.F/DIM-GEN.sg**<sup>1</sup> beside  
 ‘Next to a flattish small hill’    (Vanhove & Hamid Ahmed 2018: 58)

- (2) *Allaj ta:=riba*  
 God **DEF.PL.F.NOM/DIM=mountain**  
*ti=bi=i-far-aj-n=et*    *i-sa:n-n=ho:k*  
 DEF.F/REL=NEG.OPT=3-jump-OPT-EP=REL.F 3-wait.OPT-PL=OBJ.2sg  
 ‘God! May you find the mountains that cannot be jumped over!’  
 (Vanhove & Hamid Ahmed 2018: 57)

This paper addresses the grammatical forms which convey an evaluation of a situation as good or bad, but which have not been taken into account in the literature as described above. In some languages, there are inflectional forms for blessings and curses. Some of these forms are specialized to denote only blessings or only curses and hence evaluate a potential situation as good or bad. Such a form is found in Kazakh (Turkic):

- (3) Kazakh  
*alla žaza-ŋ-dy*    *ber-gir*  
 Allah punishment-2SG-ACC **give-MAL.OPT**  
 ‘May Allah punish you.’    (pc with Aimgul Kazkenova)

The aims of this paper are threefold. The first is to introduce evaluative optatives into the domain of evaluative morphology (where they have not so far been considered). Second, the study contributes to the understanding of how qualitative grammatical evaluation evolves, by disentangling evaluation as an obligatory part

1. The slash (/) indicates morphology that cannot be segmented, i.e. stem alternation.

of grammatical semantics from evaluation as the result of semantic extensions triggered by particular contexts. In the case of Kumyk and Nogai inflectional optatives and Russian optative constructions, I draw attention to the fact that grammatical items that have evaluative usages often exhibit a “fluid” value whose positive or negative character needs to be specified by its context. Finally, I use these new facts to advance several hypotheses about the possible sources of evaluative grammatical morphemes.

I start by showing that optatives which express blessings and curses are inherently neutral in respect of evaluation, but that they are always used in utterances that have either a positive or a negative value (§2). Next, I describe Turkic optatives specialized for curses, including cases where this specialization may only be defined in terms of relative occurrence, i.e. when the forms express curses much more frequently than blessings (§3). Considering the case of Russian, I show that in a language where wishes are expressed by syntactic constructions, specification of optative constructions towards blessings or curses is also possible (§4). In §5, I ask what makes blessings and curses so different that they can be grammaticalized with different forms. In conclusion, I point to the parallels between optatives and other evaluative grammatical forms and discuss how the study contributes to our understanding of the development of grammatical evaluative markers.

## 2. Evaluative optatives cross-linguistically

Optatives express a wish or a hope of the speaker that something will happen (Bybee et al. 1994: 321; Nikolaeva 2016: 77). The term is often used for a dedicated morphological (inflectional) form (as in Dobrushina et al. 2013) but also for syntactic constructions that express the wish of the speaker without containing any lexical item whose primary meaning is that of wish or desire (as in Grosz 2012: 5). In this paper, I will consider both optatives expressed by a dedicated affix (as in many languages of the Caucasus) and those which are denoted by constructions (as in Russian, English and most other European languages).

Optatives are semantically close to imperatives. As was pointed out in Dobrushina et al. (2013), “with the optative, the state of affairs wished for is typically outside the sphere of influence of the speaker... With an imperative, however, the speaker launches an appeal to the hearer to fulfill the wish”. While optative and imperative meanings can be co-expressed by the same form (as English ‘go to hell’ and ‘go to school’), many languages spoken in the Caucasus have different inflectional forms for optatives and imperatives.

Optatives exhibit semantic distinctions (Dobrushina 2011; Plungian 2011: 327; Nikolaeva 2016). For example, Kumyk (a Turkic language of Dagestan) has

two different optatives. The first one (called the “performative optative” in Dobrushina 2011) expresses blessings and curses (4), while the second one is used for dreams or desires (“desiderative optative” in Dobrushina 2011) (5). In languages which don’t have dedicated morphology for optatives, these two meanings are also usually expressed in different ways. For instance, one common way to express a blessing or curse in English is to use imperative or a construction with *may*. Meanwhile, desiderative optative constructions often contain words *If only...* and *Would that...*

Performative optative

(4) Kumyk

*sen süjün-gür*

you.SG **be.glad-PFM.OPT**

‘Live merrily!’ (‘May you live merrily!’) [Tagir Gadžiakhmedov, pers. comm.]

Desiderative optative

(5) *sen on-u al-baj e-di-ŋ*

you.SG 3SG-ACC **take-DES.OPT AUX-PST-2SG**

‘You’d better take him [your son] with you.’

[Tagir Gadžiakhmedov, pers. comm.]

Performative optatives are cross-linguistically more common than desiderative optatives, probably because blessings and curses are important everyday rituals in some cultures, as in the Caucasus. Only the former will be the focus of this paper.

Performative optatives are most often neutral in the sense that they do not specify whether the speaker evaluates the situation denoted by the form as positive or negative. For example, the Albanian optative (apparently the only dedicated optative in Europe) is equally used to express blessings and curses:

Blessing

(6) Albanian

(Rusakov & Morozova 2022: 36)

*Pun-a jote dal-të mbarë*

work-NOM.SG.DEF you.F.SG.NOM **go.out-OPT.PRS.3SG** successfully

‘May your work be successful!’ (ANC: Asdreni. “Burri i dheut” 1920–1922)<sup>2</sup>

Curse

(7) *Zot-i të= mallko-ftë!*

God-NOM.SG.DEF 2SG.ACC= **damn-OPT.PRS.3SG**

‘God damn you!’

(ANC: Panorama 2017)

Performative optatives are very typical for Nakh-Daghestanian languages (Dobrushina 2011). In Mehweb, a Nakh-Daghestanian language of the Dargwa

2. Data from Albanian National Corpus (ANC); see Rusakov and Morozova (2022).

group, optatives are understood as being addressed to a supernatural power, which is usually Allah, or, much more rarely, a *sheytan* ‘bad spirit’.

Blessing

(8) Mehweb

*Allah-li-ni hum-be ʔa<sup>ɕ</sup>χ d-uh-aq-a-b!*

Allah-OBL-ERG way-PL good NPL-become:PFV-CAUS-IRR-OPT

‘May Allah give you a good trip!’

Curse

(9) *kapul-le w-ebk'-a-b!*

pagan-ADV M-die:PFV-IRR-OPT

‘May he die impious!’

Although the performative optative is neutral in respect of evaluation in the sense that it can be equally used for blessings ((6) and (8)) and curses ((7) and (9)), it is never neutral in actual usage. Any particular optative utterance can always be clearly identified as having either a positive or a negative value. In some Nakh-Daghestanian languages (for example Rutul), the optative co-expresses blessings and curses with third person commands (i.e., a command directed towards someone who is not a participant of the speech act). The contexts of third person command do not bear any evaluative connotation (10), but the optative contexts always do (11):

3rd person command

(10) Rutul

*said-a uq' sej-ij*

Said-ERG grass mow-OPT

‘Said should mow the grass.’

(author, field data)

Blessing

(11) *had sak r-iš-ij*

that healthy F-become-OPT

‘May she be healthy.’

To sum up, the performative optative usually does not contain evaluation as an obligatory part of its semantics, but utterances with this form always express either a positive or negative attitude which is conveyed by the meaning of the words and the particular situation. There are, however, infrequent cases when an optative is specified for blessings or curses only.

Aikhenvald (2020), in the only account (to my knowledge) of grammatically expressed curses, describes a Tariana form with the suffix *-tupe*. This form is used in curses and malediction, often as an expression of annoyance and despair in the

face of adverse circumstances. Aikhenvald defines its meaning as “do to the detriment of the addressee” (2020: 63):

- (12) Tariana  
*pi-pa-tupe-mhade*      *phia*  
2sg.rot-MALEF.IMP-FUT you.SG  
‘You absolutely must rot to your detriment!’

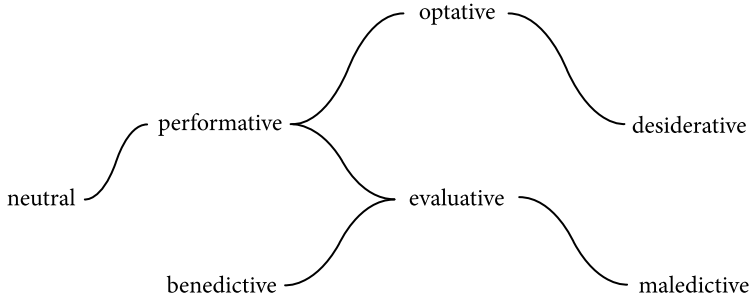
Aikhenvald considers this form a subtype of imperative and calls it “malefactive imperative” because it often refers to a certain action which the addressee is carrying out or will carry out in the future. For example, when a child was repeatedly trying to bite a rubber ball, his exasperated relative said:

- (13) Tariana  
*pi-hña-tupe*      *ma-hña-karu-peri-nuku*  
2SG-eat-MALEF.IMP NEG-eat-PURP-COLL-TOP.NON.A/S  
‘Eat to your detriment what is not edible!’ (Aikhenvald 2020: 69)

As Aikhenvald shows, the form in *-tupe* often occupies the same position as the regular imperative, but it contains a negative evaluation of the action to which it refers. At the same time, it differs from other imperative forms in a number of ways: (i) it can occur with any person; (ii) it can be used with stative verbs; (iii) it can co-occur with one of the imperative markers, evidentials and the future marker; and (iv) it is negated similarly to a declarative verb (while other imperatives have a special negation). All these properties have certain diachronic explanations, as Aikhenvald (2020) shows, but still make this form synchronically distinct from imperatives. The Tariana form seems to occupy an intermediate position between imperatives and optatives.

Apart from Tariana, Aikhenvald (2020) finds one more language with forms dedicated to curses: Tukano. She also mentions three languages with a form dedicated to blessings: Classical Sanskrit (MacDonnell 1927: 126–127); Ladakhi, a Tibeto-Burman language from India (Koshal 1979: 226–227); and Kambaata, a Cushitic language from Ethiopia (Treis 2008: 406). Kambaata, however, should be excluded from this list, because, as Yvonne Treis clarified (pers. comm.), the Kambaata wish form is not dedicated to blessings but is rather a standard performative optative that can be used both for blessings and curses (Treis 2016). Several additional cases can be added to Aikhenvald’s list. First, a form which expresses curses was reported in Kalamang (a Papuan language of Indonesia); according to Visser (2022: 435–436), there are special constructions to express curses in Kalamang where the verb is marked by a suffix *-kon* of unknown origin. Second, there are forms dedicated to the expression of curses in Turkic languages. These will be discussed in §3.

Forms which are specialized for one type of wish – blessings or curses – can be considered a subtype of the more general category of performative optatives. In this paper, I will use the term “evaluative (performative) optative” to refer to optatives which specifically denote good or bad situations, distinguishing between “benedictive” (denoting blessings) and “maledictive” (denoting curses) evaluative optatives. Evaluative optatives are opposed to neutral ones, as Figure 1 shows.



**Figure 1.** Functional types of optatives

Evaluative optatives seem to be very rare in the languages of the world, partly because inflectional optatives themselves are rare. In the sample of 319 languages which was used for the World Atlas of Linguistic Structures (WALS) chapter on optatives (Dobrushina et al. 2013), there were 48 languages with a morphologically dedicated optative, and most of them were found in one of two areas: the Caucasus and Tibet. The actual ratio of languages with dedicated optatives is likely to be much lower because the WALS sample was not balanced; the chapter on optatives took into consideration as many languages of the Caucasus as possible. Some of the optatives in the WALS database are maledictives or benedictives, but these categories were not specifically coded. Based on her sample of 700 languages, Aikhenvald argues that benedictive forms are a cross-linguistic rarity, while special maledictive forms are even rarer. I have no sufficient cross-linguistic data to estimate the comparative frequency of maledictives and benedictives, but the anecdotal evidence I came across provided me only with examples of maledictives, which I will discuss in the next section.

### 3. Optatives formed with the suffix *-gyr/-qyr* in Turkic languages

Several Turkic languages have optatives with the same cognate suffix *-gyr/-qyr*. There are different hypotheses about its origin. It might originate from a participle suffix, according to Baskakov (1988:341). Another suggestion is that this suffix



comes from the imperative *kör* of the verb ‘see, watch, try’ (Räsänen 1955: 206). This optative form can have different meanings in different Turkic languages, from neutral in Uzbek to negative in Kazakh.

### 3.1 Uzbek optative: Neutral

In the grammar of Uzbek, this form is called “the emotive suffix”: “Originally a participle form, the emotive suffix *-zyp/-zyp* [-*byr/-gur*] in modern Uzbek creates an optative form in the third person singular to express curses or good wishes. They are used, mostly, as endearing words” (Bodrogligeti 2003: 643–644). Kononov’s grammar of Uzbek also gives examples of both blessings and curses (1960: 161):

(14) Uzbek  
*ül-gur*  
die-OPT  
‘May he die!’

(15) *qur-ma-yur-lar*  
dry,OUT-NEG-OPT-PL  
‘May they prosper!’ (lit. ‘May they not dry out and fade!’)

The Uzbek form is neutral in respect of evaluation: the utterance is defined as a blessing or a curse only in the context (similar to the Mehweb and Rutul forms discussed in §2). The cognate forms in some other Turkic languages, however, display a preference for curses.

### 3.2 Kumyk and Nogai optatives: Evaluative in context

In Kumyk, a Turkic language spoken in Daghestan, the suffix *-byr/-gir/-bur/-gür* is also used for wishes. Although grammars give examples of both curses and blessings (Gadžiakmedov 2000: 121, Gadžiakhmedov 2014: 290), the expression of curses appears much more typical for this form than blessing. The Kumyk–Russian dictionary (Bammatov & Gadžiakhmedov 2013) contains plenty of wish-expressions to illustrate the usages of different words. A search in this dictionary for the Russian stimuli *pust’* (‘let’) and *čtob* (subjunctive complementizer) returned 87 examples of optative expressions with two forms: the third person imperative form (jussive) in *-syn/-sin/-sun/-sün* (examples (16) and (17)) and the optative form in *-byr/-gir/-bur/-gür* (examples (18) and (19)).

- (16) Kumyk  
*iš qolaj bol-sun*  
 job better **be-JUSS**  
 ‘May your work succeed.’
- (17) *qara gün tuv-sun saya*  
 black day **emerge-juss** YOU.DAT  
 ‘May the black (bad) days come for you.’
- (18) *üj-uŋ-ge budaj jav-ƙur*  
 house-2sg-DAT wheat **pour-OPT**  
 ‘May the wheat fall on your house.’
- (19) *jer jut-ƙur seni*  
 ground **swallow-OPT** you  
 ‘May you go to hell!’ (literally ‘May the ground swallow you!’)

While the form in *-syn/-sin/-sun/-sün* is equally distributed among blessings and curses, the form in *-ƙyr/-gir/-ƙur/-gür* shows a clear tendency to express curses; see Table 1. Note that the counts in Table 1 should not be taken as evidence for the fact that curses are more numerous than blessings. The search for two Russian stimuli (*pust’* and *čtob*) does not exhaust the examples of wishes in the dictionary; there are probably more formulae which are translated with other constructions in Russian.

**Table 1.** Number of benedictive and maledictive expressions in the Kumyk dictionary (Bammatov & Gadžiakhmedov 2013)

Verb form in	Blessings	Curses
<i>-syn/-sin/-sun/-sün</i>	30	31
<i>-ƙyr/-gir/-ƙur/-gür</i>	3	22

A similar distribution was found in the dictionary of Nogai, another Turkic language. Most of the examples of the form in *-gyr/ -gir/ -kyr / -kir* found in the dictionary (Musaev 2018) are curses (14 out of 15).

Therefore, in Kumyk and probably also in Nogai, the form which is neutral in Uzbek tends to be specialized for the expression of curses. It is, however, important that it can be used for blessings as well. The evaluative meaning is still not part of the semantics of this grammatical category but emerges from the context. In §5, I will discuss how and why such a specialization could happen. Remarkably, in Kazakh, another Turkic language, the optative with the suffix *-qyr/ -yyr/ -gir/ -kir* is used exclusively for curses.

### 3.3 Kazakh optative: Evaluative in grammar

Kazakh, a Turkic language spoken in Central Asia, has a form dedicated to the expression of curses. In the description of Kazakh this form is referred to as a special type of second person imperative which expresses curses (Bizakov 2012: 206), but in this paper I will call it maledictive optative. It has the suffix *-qyr/ -yyr/ -gir/ -kir* attached to the bare stem, which is identical to second person singular imperative. This form is used only to express curses; it cannot be used for blessings:<sup>3</sup>

- (20) Kazakh  
*Aram qat-qyr*  
filthy freeze-MAL.OPT  
'Drop dead.' ('Die filthy = pagan')

Maledictive optative is used with the plural affix *-lar* if it refers to several addressees:

- (21) *Aram qat-qyr-lar*  
filthy freeze.up-MAL.OPT-PL  
'Drop dead.' (addressed to several people)

The Kazakh maledictive optative can have a third person subject which refers to the subject of some bad situation that the speaker wishes on the addressee:

- (22) *žau šap-qyr*  
enemy attack-MAL.OPT  
'May the enemy attack [you]'
- (23) *alla žaza-ŋ-dy ber-gir*  
Allah punishment-2SG-ACC give-MAL.OPT  
'May Allah punish you.'

The optative can also add the affix of negation *-ma-*. As is typical of imperatives and optatives, negation does not affect the illocutory force of wishing, but negates the situation which falls under its scope: 'The speaker wants not *p*'. The meaning of a curse is thus retained under negation:

- (24) *balašaya-ŋ-nyŋ qyzyy-y-n kör-me-gir*  
children-2SG-GEN interest-POSS-ACC see-NEG-MAL.OPT  
'May you not see the happiness of your children.'

---

3. The Kazakh data was collected with the help of Aimgul Kazkenova. More examples can be found in Bizakov (2012: 334–336).

Similarly to Kumyk, a curse in Kazakh can also be expressed by a form with the suffix *-syn / -sin*, whose main function is to denote third person imperative (indirect command):

- (25) *qajtyp kel-sin*  
 again come-JUSS  
 ‘Let him come back.’

This form is widely used in optative constructions with a third person subject, and can denote both curses and blessings:

- (26) *allá žaza-ŋ-dy ber-sin*  
 Allah punishment-2SG-ACC give-JUSS  
 ‘May Allah give you punishment.’

- (27) *alla ber-sin*  
 Allah give-JUSS  
 ‘May Allah give you prosperity.’ (lit. ‘May Allah give’)

To sum up, four Turkic languages exemplify different types of optatives which developed from the same source. The Uzbek optative is neutral, with the negative or positive value being defined by the context. Optatives in Kumyk and Nogai show a high preference for the expression of curses, but can encode blessings as well, which means that evaluation is still the job of the communicative context and the lexical meaning of the words. The Kazakh optative is fully specialized for curses; speakers do not accept the expression of blessings with this form. Hence in Kazakh, evaluation has entered the domain of grammatical meaning.

Unfortunately, there is no information about how these forms developed. At the end of this paper, I will discuss some possible paths based on the findings of this paper. The direction of change will be clearer in the case of Russian, a language which has no inflectional form for optative, but uses syntactic constructions to denote wishes.

#### 4. Evaluative optatives: Russian wish-constructions

In most languages of the world, including English and Russian, the wish of the speaker is expressed not by dedicated inflectional forms, but by syntactic constructions (“wish-constructions”). For example, English blessings and curses can be denoted by a combination of the main verb and the modal verb ‘may’ (28):

- (28) *May you enjoy every happiness in your new home!*

I will show that some Russian syntactic constructions tend to be specified in terms of blessings or curses.

It is important to note that I am only considering those wish-constructions which encode blessings and curses (performative optative, §2), leaving aside expressions of dreams and desire (in Russian, the latter are usually encoded by the subjunctive).

In order to identify the entire set of various wish-constructions in Russian, I searched social media for occasions where wishes are typically used. Blessings are not a prominent genre in the lives of average urban speakers of Russian. However, there are some special situations where blessings are common, such as birthday or wedding congratulations. It is more difficult to find situations where curses are common; if there are such situations, they are probably hidden from the public view. Therefore, examples of curses are less numerous in my data. After I determined the main means of expressing wishes, I used the Russian National Corpus (RNC) for additional examples.

#### 4.1 Blessings in Russian

In order to collect blessing formulae, I searched in Facebook (FB) posts for birthday congratulations. Several typical constructions of blessings were found: isolated genitives, insubordinated clauses, jussives and imperative constructions.

##### 4.1.1 Blessings based on clauses with the verb *želat'* 'wish'

One group of constructions that are typically used for blessings are clauses with the verb *želat'* 'wish', or the independently used arguments of this verb. The verb *želat'* in modern Russian mainly has the meaning 'wish something to somebody': *želat' udachi / zla / otdokhnut'* 'wish luck / harm / to have a rest'. It can also mean 'want', but this meaning is almost entirely restricted to cases when the verb is used with negation (*videt' vas ne želaju* 'I don't want to see you'). Clauses with the matrix verb *želat'* 'wish' can occur in wish formulae in their entirety:

(29) Russian

*Pozdravljaem, želaem ščast'ja, zdorov'ja,*  
congratulate.PRS.1PL wish.PRS.1PL happiness.GEN.SG health.GEN.SG

*udači i l'ubvi!*

luck.GEN.SG and love.GEN.SG

'Congratulations, we wish you happiness, health, luck and love!'

(FB)

- (30) *Želaju, čtoby razočarovanih pomen'se, a iskrennega*  
 wish.PRS.1SG COMP.SBJV disappointment.GEN.PL less but sincere.GEN.SG  
*sčast'ja pobol'se*  
 happiness.GEN.SG more  
 'I wish you less disappointments, and more sincere happiness.' (RNC)

More frequently only the arguments of this verb are used for blessings: the matrix verb *želat'* 'wish' is omitted, and the wish formula consists of the object argument – the denotation of what is actually wished to the addressee (34)–(36). The verb *želat'* can have three types of object arguments: genitives (31), infinitives (32) and complement clauses with the conjunction *čtoby* or *čtob* (the reduced version of this conjunction) (33):

- (31) *Želaju vam sčast'ja*  
 wish.PRS.1SG you.PL.DAT happiness.GEN.SG  
 'I wish you happiness.'
- (32) *Želaju poskoree vyzdorovet'*  
 wish.PRS.1SG sooner get.well.INF  
 'I hope you get well soon.'
- (33) *Želaju, čtoby vse polučilos'*  
 wish.PRS.1SG COMP.SBJV all work.OUT.PST.N  
 'I hope everything worked out.'

Only two of these three types are commonly used as wish-constructions: genitives and *čtoby* clauses. Infinitives do not occur as blessings or curses without matrix verbs. Genitive nominal groups are by far the most frequent:

- (34) *Zdorov'ja, uspexov, udači vo vsem!*  
 health.GEN.SG success.GEN.PL luck.GEN.SG in everything.LOC.N  
 'Health, success, and luck in everything!' (FB)
- (35) *Novyx priključenij i otkrytij!*  
 new.GEN.PL adventure.GEN.PL and discovery.GEN.PL  
 'New adventures and discoveries!' (FB)

Complement clauses with *čtoby* are used as blessings rather infrequently (but they are quite typical for curses – see §4.3). Such examples fall under the type of “insubordination” – the recruitment of subordinate clauses to serve as main clauses (Evans 2007: 367):

- (36) *S dnem roždenija, Vera! I čtoby sledujuščij možno bylo vstrečat', gde sami poželaete*  
 with day.INS.SG birth.GEN.SG Vera.NOM and COMP.SBJV next.ACC.SG.M possible  
 be.PST.N.SG celebrate.INF where self.PL wish.2PL  
 'Happy birthday, Vera! And may the next one take place wherever you wish.'  
 (FB)

Although *čtoby* is a complementizer typical for many different matrix predicates (Dobrushina 2011), there are examples which clearly show that wishes with *čtoby* clauses should be traced back to sentences with the matrix verb *želat'*. In the next example, the dependent clauses are detached from the main clause by punctuation marks and by intonation:

- (37) *Želaju radosti žizni! I čtoby vremeni na vse, kak vsegda, ne xvatalo. I čtoby zdorov'je ne podvodilo!*  
 wish. PRS.1SG joy.GEN.SG life.GEN.SG and COMP.SBJV time.GEN.SG on everything  
 as always NEG be.enough.PST.N and COMP.SBJV health NEG fail.PST.N  
 'I wish you the joy of life! And may the time for everything, as always, be not enough. And may your health not fail.'  
 (FB)

Even rarer are the cases where blessing is expressed by the reduced version of the same complementizer *čtob*. As shown in Dobrushina (2016), the full and reduced variants *čtoby* and *čtob* have the same functions, but there are significant distinctions in the frequency of these functions. In §4.2, I will show that the reduced variant is strongly associated with curses.

#### 4.1.2 Blessings based on imperatives

Unlike Uzbek or Kumyk, which were discussed in §3, Russian has no inflectional form for jussive (third person imperative). To express this meaning, constructions with the particle *pust'* are used. As discussed in Dobrushina (2012), they have all contexts which are typologically common for this category: the most frequent is indirect causation (third person imperatives), but the contexts of wish (optative), permission, assumption, indifference and concession are also found. Blessings can also be expressed by a combination of the indicative verb and the particle *pust'* (< *pustiť* 'to let'):

- (38) *Pust' sledujuščee desjatiletie budet eščë bolee vlekatel'nyĭ, čem prošedšee!*  
 PTCL next.NOM.SG.N decade.NOM.SG be.FUT.3SG even more exciting.INS.SG.N  
 than last.NOM.SG.N  
 'May the next decade be even more exciting than the last.'  
 (FB)

- (39) *Pust' žizn' u Paši budet zaxvatyvajušče*  
 PTCL life.NOM.SG by Pasha.GEN.SG be.FUT.3SG excitingly  
*interesnoj i nepremenno ščastlivoj!*  
 interesting.INS.SG.N and certainly happy.INS.SG.N  
 'May Pasha's life be excitingly interesting and certainly happy.' (FB)
- (40) *Pust' vse zamysly ispolnjajutsja i smenjajutsja novymi!*  
 PTCL all plan.NOM.PL come.true.3PL and be.replaced.3PL new.INS.PL  
 'May all plans come true and be replaced by new ones!' (FB)

Finally, some wish-formulae contain a second person imperative. These are, however, limited to several expressions with the verbs *byt'* 'be' and *ostavat's'a* 'remain':

- (41) *Bud'te zdorovy i ščastlivy!*  
 be.IMP.PL healthy.PL and happy.PL  
 'Be healthy and happy!' (FB)
- (42) *S dnëm roždenija, dorogaja!!! Ostavajsja takoj*  
 with day.INS.SG birth.GEN.SG darling.NOM.SG.F remain.IMP.SG such.INS.SG.F  
*že prekrasnoj!*  
 PTCL great.INS.SG.F  
 'Happy birthday, darling! Stay as great as you are.' (FB)

#### 4.1.3 Summary

A number of constructions can be used to express blessings in Russian: full clauses with the matrix verb *želat'*, genitives, insubordinated *čtoby*-complement clauses, and second and third person imperatives. The difference between them is pragmatic rather than semantic. For example, a wish for health (by far the most frequent birthday wish) can be expressed by any of these constructions:

- (43) *Želaju dobrogo zdorov'ja!*  
 wish.1SG good.GEN.SG.N health.GEN.SG  
 'I wish you good health!'
- (44) *Zdorov'ja!*  
 health.GEN.SG  
 'Be healthy!'
- (45) *Čtob ty byla zdorova, dorogaja podrug!*  
 COMP.SBJV you be.PST.F healthy.NOM.SG.F dear.NOM.SG.F friend  
 'May you be healthy, dear friend!'



- (46) *Pust' sledujuščij god prineset zdorov'je!*  
 PTCL next.NOM.SG.M year bring.FUT.3SG health.ACC.SG  
 'May next year bring you health!'
- (47) *Bud'te zdorovy!*  
 be.IMP.PL healthy.PL  
 'Be healthy!'

In the next section, we will take a look at the typical ways to express curses.

#### 4.2 Curses in Russian

It is difficult to collect the expressions of curses systematically, because, unlike with blessings, there are no common ritualized situations where curses would necessarily occur. The estimation of the comparative frequency of various means of expressing curses is therefore impressionistic.

Insubordinated complement clauses with the reduced conjunction *čtob* are much more typical for curses than for blessings. There are several frozen expressions with *čtob* which denote curses (48)–(50), but according to the National Russian Corpus and some occasional examples from the Internet, free expressions of curses are also possible (51)–(52).

- (48) *Čtob ty sdox*  
 COMP.SBJV you.SG die.PST.M  
 'Drop dead.'
- (49) *Čtob ty provalils'a*  
 COMP.SBJV you.SG fall.PST.M  
 'May you fall into the ground.'
- (50) *Čtob tebe pusto bylo*  
 COMP.SBJV you.SG.DAT empty be.PST.M  
 'May you get ruined.'
- (51) « *Čtob u vas utrom golovy polopalis'* », – *zlo poželala Ol'ga, vernulas' v komnatu i uleglas' na divan*  
 COMP.SBJV by you.GEN morning.INS.SG head.PL explode.PST.PL angrily  
 wish.PST.F Olga return.PST.F in room.ACC and lay.PST.F on sofa.ACC.SG  
 "May your heads burst in the morning," Olga wished angrily, returned to the room and lay down on the sofa.'

[Denis Tixij. *Ol'gin ostrov* // « Sibirskie ogni », 2013]

- (52) – *Ěto bylo ljubimoe babuškino prokljat'je.* –  
 this be.PST.N favorite.NOM.N grandmother.POSS.NOM.N curse  
*čtob na tvoju golovu odni neščast'ja sypalis'!*  
 COMP.SBJV on your.ACC.SG head.ACC.SG only misery.NOM.PL fall.PST.PL  
*čtob ty, krome vozmezdija, ničego ne videl!*  
 COMP.SBJV you.SG beside revenge.GEN.SG nothing NEG see.PST.M  
 'It was Grandma's favorite curse. – May only misfortunes fall on your head!  
 May you see nothing but retribution!'

[Pavel Sanaev. Poxoronite menja za plintusom (1995) // « Oktjabr' », 1996]

In order to provide quantitative evidence for the impression that insubordinated constructions with *čtob* are more typical for curses than for blessings, I collected a random sample of examples with capitalized *čtob*, and manually coded the meanings of 364 insubordinated clauses. Of the examples in this sample, 19 percent (69 occurrences) were wishes, and only five of them were blessings. I processed a random sample with capitalized *čtoby* in the same way. Of these, 141 insubordinated clauses with *čtoby* returned no examples of wishes at all (Table 2). Comtet (1992: 230) supposed that the reduction of the complementizer is obligatory in the curses. However, some examples of curses with *čtoby* are found beyond this sample, so such usage is not completely ungrammatical for *čtoby* (53):

- (53) *Čtoby sidel požiznenno vmeste so svoej šobloj,*  
 COMP.SBJV sit.PST.M lifetime.ADV together with own.INS.SG.F gang.INS.SG  
*čtoby žral balandu i spal pri svete, i*  
 COMP.SBJV eat.PST.M gruel.ACC.SG and sleep.PST.M by light.LOC.SG and  
*medlenno podyxal dolgie gody*  
 slowly die.PST.M long.ACC.PL year.ACC.PL  
 'May he be in prison for life with his gang, eat gruel and sleep in the light, and slowly die for many years.' (FB)

**Table 2.** Number of wish-constructions among insubordinated usages of clauses with *čtoby* and *čtob*

	Benedictives	Maledictives	All contexts
<i>Čtoby</i> clauses	0	0	141
<i>Čtob</i> clauses	1% (5)	18% (64)	364

Insubordinated clauses with the reduced complementizer *čtob* are thus indeed typical for curses. Another means of expressing curses are constructions with the jussive particle *pust*,<sup>1</sup> which was mentioned in §3.1.2:

- (54) *Prokljanu. Pust' mučaits'a. Pust' zal'jets'a slezami ot damn.FUT.1SG PTCL suffer.PRS.3SG PTCL shed.FUT.3SG tear.INS.PL from odinočestva. No pust' živět. Očen' dolgo.*  
loneliness.GEN but PTCL live.PRS.3SG very long  
'Damn him. May he suffer. May he shed tears of loneliness. But may he live. A very long time.'
- (55) *Pust' gnida živět do nar i ostatok svoej krysinoj PTCL louse live.PRS.3SG till bunk.PL and rest.NOM.SG his.GEN.SG ratty.F.GEN.SG žizni pust' tam že provedět.*  
life.GEN.SG PTCL there PTCL spend.FUT.3SG  
'May the louse live till he gets to jail and may he spend the rest of his rat life there.'

Second person imperative constructions which express curses are also possible, but most of them exploit the same few verbs, such as *sdoxnut'* 'die', *provalit'sa* 'fall through', *podavit's'a* 'choke up' and the expression *byt' prokl'atym* 'be damned':

- (56) *Provalites' vy oba, čtob vam v adu sgoret'!*  
fall.IMP.2PL you.PL both.M COMP.SBJV you.DAT.PL in hell.LOC.SG burn.INF  
'Go underground, both of you, so that you burn in hell!'  
[Aleksij Ivanov (Aleksij Mavrin). Psoglavcy. Gl. 1–20 (2011)]
- (57) *Bud'te prokljaty vo veky vekov za to, čto sdělali*  
be.IMP.2PL damned.PL in century.PL century.GEN.PL for that what do.PST.PL  
*so mnoj!*  
with I.INS  
'All of you be damned! Be damned forever and ever for what they did to me!'  
[Pavel Sanaev. Poxoronite menja za plintusom (1995) // « Oktjabr' », 1996]

The pattern which is the most frequent for blessings — a noun in genitive case — is not used in curses at all. While the utterance in (58) is unambiguously interpreted as a wish for good health addressed to another person, the utterance in (59) can have different interpretations, the most probable being a demand for someone to be executed 'Kill him/her/them', or, less likely, a demand for one's own death ('Kill me', 'Let me die'). The omitted matrix verb in (59) is presumably *trebovat'* 'demand':

- (58) *Zdorovja!*  
health.GEN.SG  
'Health!'

- (59) *Smerti!*  
 death.GEN.SG  
 ‘Death!’

Full complement clauses with the verb *zhelet’*, which are quite typical for blessings, are not used to express bad wishes either.

### 4.3 Summary

Russian wish-constructions are fed by two functional domains: that of optatives (clauses with the matrix verb ‘want, wish’) and that of imperatives. This accords with what is observed for other languages. The maledictive in Tariana (malefactive in Aikhenvald’s terms) exhibits both optative and imperative properties (§2). The performative optative in Nakh-Daghestanian languages often co-expresses wishes and third person imperatives (§2).

The means of expressing blessings and curses in Russian are generally the same, but the frequency of their usage for blessings and curses is significantly different. Isolated genitives are very typical for blessings, but hardly ever used for curses. Insubordinated complement clauses with a reduced variant of the complementizer *čtob* are found almost exclusively with curses. In fact Plungian (2011: 436) called this construction a marker of negative performative optative. However, for this paper it is important to emphasize that insubordinated clauses with the complementizer *čtob* can be found in expressions of blessings in the RNC, even if very rarely:

- (60) *Proževav, šumno zagovorili i prinjalis’ vykrikivat’ ej svoi*  
 chew.CVB.PFV noisily talk.PST.PL and start.PST.PL shout.OUT.INF she.DAT refl.PL  
*poželanija: – Tanja, čtob ty stala millioneršej! –*  
 wish.ACC.PL Tanja.NOM COMP.SBJV you.SG become.PST.F millionaire.INS.SG  
*kričala v obščem šume jeje podrug. – Pust’*  
 shout.PST.F in common.LOC noise.LOC.SG her friend.NOM.SG PTCL  
*muž kupit tebe norkovuju šubku! – Čtob*  
 husband.NOM.SG buy.FUT.3SG you.DAT mink.ADJ.ACC.F coat.ACC.SG COMP.SBJV  
*ty vsju žizn’ ezdila na “Kadillakax” i “Mersedesax”!*  
 you.SG all.ACC life.ACC.SG drive.PST.F on Cadillac.LOC.PL and Mercedes.LOC.PL  
 ‘Having chewed, they began to talk noisily and shout out their wishes to her:  
 “Tanya, may you become a millionaire!” her friend shouted in the common  
 noise. “May your husband buy you a mink coat!” – “May you drive Cadillacs  
 and Mercedes all your life!”’

[Vladimir Goljaxovskij. *Russkij doktor v Amerike* (1984–2001)]

Second person imperatives and constructions with the particle *pust'* seem not to be biased towards blessings or curses if we keep in mind that blessings are generally more frequent in urban colloquial discourse.

**Table 3.** Benedictive and maledictive expressions in Russian (constructions which are specified for blessings or curses are in bold)

	Benedictives	Maledictives
complement clauses with the matrix verb <i>želat'</i> 'wish' and the conjunction <i>čtob(y)</i>	<b>often</b>	almost never
insubordinated complement clauses with the conjunction <i>čtoby</i>	rare	rare
insubordinated complement clauses with the conjunction <i>čtob</i>	rare	<b>often</b>
isolated genitives	<b>often</b>	almost never
<i>pust'</i> constructions (jussives)	often	often
2nd person imperatives	often	often

Table 3 shows the distribution of various constructions for blessings and curses in Russian. We can see that the Russian and Turkic data are similar in that they contain constructions and forms which are semantically vague, but have a strong preference for one type of value: curses for Russian constructions with *čtob*, blessings for Russian genitive, and curses for Kumyk and Nogai forms in *-byr / -gir / -bur / -gür*. The evaluation encoded by these forms and constructions is entrenched in the context.

While for Turkic languages we cannot be sure about the direction of the development, whether from semantically vague evaluative optative to the dedicated expression of curse or *vice versa*, in Russian the direction is clear. We know that the sources of the constructions in question are neutral (genitives and complement clauses), hence the maledictives and benedictives developed through the specialization of previously neutral forms.

In the next section I address the following question: what is so different about blessings and curses that they can be expressed by different structural patterns?

## 5. Why blessings and curses can be expressed by different means

Optative forms are usually neutral in terms of evaluation; in most cases they are not specialized for the expression of blessings or curses. However, as I have shown, there are languages in which inflectional optatives express only curses (Kazakh). I also showed that what looks like a neutral optative can in reality

refer almost exclusively to negative situations, as in Kumyk. The case of Russian demonstrated that syntactic constructions can also be specified for the expression of blessings or curses.

This means that there is a substantial difference between blessings and curses, such that they can be expressed by different forms or constructions. Indeed, blessings and curses are two different discourse genres which might have significantly distinct domains of usage, different properties and different content.

The difference between curses and blessings lies partly in the domain of pragmatics. Curses are stronger in terms of their illocutionary power, while the power of blessings is blurred. Blessings are usually a part of common rituals, such as wishes expressed in the morning, wishes which go along with meetings or farewells, greetings for the birth of a child, for a wedding, or a housewarming. In some cultures, the range of situations which demand blessings can be much wider than in others. For example, in language communities in Daghestan, special wish formulae may exist for addressing someone who obtained new clothes or starts to eat, to a blind person or a family who have lost a small child. Due to their high predictability and ritualization, blessings are usually not experienced as outstanding events. On the contrary, curses are used in situations of conflict. They are not obligatory, are less ritualized and thus are stronger.

The second distinction between blessings and curses is that the latter are more prone to express emotion. Curses are colored with emotions like anger and hatred. Aikhenvald (2020) indicates that the Tariana malefactive imperative reflects an emotional attitude and general malevolence. Blessings can also be associated with such positive emotions as love or sympathy, but they are less emotionally charged because of their ritualized expression.

Another reason which might have led to the specification of blessings and curses is the fact that blessings and curses tend to refer to different types of situations. Blessings usually refer to static situations, such as being healthy, happy, lucky or loved, while curses often denote dynamic situations or events which should happen to the addressee: dying, sinking into the ground or becoming blind or lost. Curses usually imply a change from the current state of affairs to a worse one, while blessings do not necessarily mean that something should change. The main contents of wishes are a long, happy, sound life for blessings, and an early, painful, undignified death for curses. The former are static, while the latter are events. To illustrate this, I quote some examples of blessings or curses from the dictionary of Kumyk (Bammatov & Gadzhiakhmedov 2013) below:

## Blessings

- (61) Kumyk  
*gəlin-igiz qut-lu bol-sun!*  
 daughter.in.law-2PL attractive-ADJ be-JUSS  
 ‘May your daughter-in-law be charming!’
- (62) *üj-ugüz nasip-den tol-sun!*  
 house-2PL happiness-ABL fill-JUSS  
 ‘May your home be filled with happiness!’
- (63) *quvanč-ly gün-ler-iŋ köp bol-sun!*  
 joy-ADJ day-PL-2SG many be-JUSS  
 ‘May you have many happy days!’
- (64) *avlet-li, devlet-li bol-ɤur*  
 offspring-ADJ happiness-ADJ be-OPT  
 ‘May you have many children and wealth.’

## Curses

- (65) *göz-juŋ çyq-syn!*  
 eye-2SG leave-JUSS  
 ‘May you lose your eye!’
- (66) *kül-dej bol-ɤur!*  
 ashes-CMPR be-OPT  
 ‘May you turn into ashes!’
- (67) *art qumartqy-ŋ bol-sun!*  
 last last.gulp-2SG be-JUSS  
 ‘May [this] be your last sip!’
- (68) *tajpa-sy quru-ɤur!*  
 clan-3SG die.out-OPT  
 ‘Let his race die out!’

This is not always the case, of course. Blessings can refer to happy events (69), and curses can denote undesirable states (70):

- (69) *bek bit-sin saban-lar, aša-ma-syn qaban-lar!*  
 very grow-JUSS plowing-PL eat-NEG-JUSS boar-PL  
 ‘Let the crops grow well, let the boars not eat (them).’
- (70) *talaj-yŋ taš-ka jaz-yl-syn sen-i!*  
 happiness-2SG stone-DAT write-PASS-JUSS you-GEN  
 ‘So that your happiness is written on a (tomb)stone.’

The tendency for blessings to be static and for curses to be dynamic is found in other languages as well. Curses with *čtob* and *pustʹ* in Russian usually contain perfective verbs, while blessings are either verbless or contain the verb ‘be’. The difference between dynamic curses and static blessings might be the reason why curses, unlike blessings, are typically not expressed by genitives in Russian.

Optative forms and constructions are used to express blessings and curses, which, as shown in this section, are different discourse genres. If the form or construction becomes associated with one of those genres, the meaning of evaluation can become obligatory and thus enter the domain of grammar.

## 6. Evaluation between grammar and context: Discussion

In this paper I have considered how qualitative evaluation is expressed by optative forms and constructions. I showed that inherently neutral inflectional optatives are used in evaluative contexts of blessings or curses (Mehweb, Rutul and Uzbek). I then demonstrated that in some languages (Kumyk, Nogai and Russian) there are optative forms and constructions that specialize in one discourse genre, namely curses, and thus are associated with negative evaluation. These forms and constructions are semantically vague (Tuggy 1993), or, in other terms, underspecified (Zwicky & Sadock 1975). Evaluation is not a part of the grammatical meaning of these forms but emerges through context because they are mainly used in formulae with negative evaluation. The case of the Kazakh optative, which has negative evaluation as an obligatory part of its semantics, was also discussed.

Several observations can be made that contribute to our understanding of how qualitative grammatical evaluation evolves.

The first observation is that qualitative evaluation often emerges as a result of subjectification: the process whereby speakers over time come to develop meanings that “encode or externalize their perspectives and attitudes as constrained by the communicative world of the speech event, rather than by the so-called ‘real-world’ characteristics of the event or situation referred to” (Traugott & Dasher 2001: 30). In my study, subjectification was observed on two levels: on the level of morphology – when the meaning of an inflectional form narrows towards encoding only negative attitude (the case of Kumyk and Nogai) – and on the level of syntax – when the meaning of a particular wish-construction is restricted to the expression of blessings or curses only (the case of Russian, see Table 3).

Second, I showed that one and the same optative form can express negative or positive evaluation depending on the context. Optatives which express blessings and curses can be considered neutral, since they are not related to any particular type of evaluation; however, the utterance is always evaluative; blessings are



clearly positive and curses are negative. Especially remarkable is that the forms which are associated mainly with the negative value, such as Kumyk or Nogai optatives or the Russian construction with *čtob*, infrequently are used in blessings, thus showing that their negative value can be suppressed by context.

Such a combination of two opposite values in one form might seem paradoxical, but this paradox also applies to augmentatives and diminutives: cf. Audring et al. (2021: 247) and Ponsonnet (2018). The evaluative vagueness in augmentatives and diminutives was observed not only at the level of the whole category (see examples in Pakendorf 2017: 131), but also as a property of one and the same form. In the sample discussed by Ponsonnet (2018), many forms are mentioned which can express both positive and negative emotions. For example, the Luganda augmentative prefix *li-* can be used in utterances where the speaker judges the referent to be ugly, and also in contexts where the referent is positively evaluated; Ponsonnet comes to the conclusion that the context plays a pivotal role in expressing amelioration and/or derogation (Namugala 2014: 52). The Mexican Spanish diminutive suffix *-ito/-ita* can indicate that something is endearing, but the same suffix is used to deprecate something (Chamoreau 2012). Vanhove and Hamid Ahmed (2018: 58) note that *ko:laj*, the diminutive of the word 'stick' in Beja, denotes either a negative judgment or a connotation of respect. Dressler and Barbaresi (1994: 136–137) give examples of Italian diminutive suffixes used negatively or positively depending on a particular word. The Yauyos Quechua diminutive suffix *-cha* can indicate an action of little importance or an affectionate attitude on the part of the speaker (Shimelman 2017: 214–215, example courtesy of Jenny Audring pers. comm.).

The explanation of this vagueness for diminutives was proposed in Jurafsky (1996). Jurafsky explained their positive-negative fluidity by assuming two core meanings, "child" and "small", and analyzed "affection" as being derived from the core meaning "child" by means of inference, while "contempt" is metaphorically related to "small". However, as we can see, evaluative vagueness is typical not only for diminutives, but also for augmentatives and for optatives.

There are further examples which show that vagueness of the distinction between positive and negative values is typical for various types of grammatical markers with evaluative meaning. For instance, there is a vocative particle *ya-* in Modern Hebrew (Fishman nd.). In Arabic, from which the Hebrew particle is borrowed, it is used in calls and in addresses with no evaluative interpretation, but in Hebrew it is common in utterances expressing negative emotions. According to Zuckermann (2006: 471), this particle "only precedes derogatory NPs". However, as Fishman demonstrates, positive contexts with the particle *ya* are also infrequently found in the corpus. Another example comes from Palermitan, a Romance language spoken in Palermo, Sicily. According to Giorgi and Sorrisi

(2018:77), the suffix *-vu* expresses an evaluative meaning which in Italian is encoded by adverbs such as *(s)fortunatamente* '(un)luckily', "with the only difference that *-vu* does not specify a positive or negative value, which is contextually determined".

Therefore, grammatical items which have evaluative usages often have a "fluid" value, whose positive or negative character depends on the context. Qualitative evaluation emerges as a contextually defined speaker's perspective on a given situation. It comes as a satellite to some other meaning, and even if it specializes towards negative or positive attitude, it can still maintain its unstable character and display the opposite meaning in a certain context, as with Kumyk and Nogai optatives.

Now we can return to the issue of the possible sources of Turkic optative suffixes, and the path which could lead to the development of evaluative optatives. As was mentioned in §3, there are two hypotheses concerning the origin of the suffix. The optative suffix might have originated from a participle suffix which is still found in some Turkic adjectives (Baskakov 1988:341), or from the imperative *kör* of the verb 'see, watch, try' (Räsänen 1955:206).<sup>4</sup> In the first case, the most likely path is from the initial stage of neutral optative (as in Uzbek), because participles are neutral. Then, through the intermediate stages exemplified by Kumyk and Nogai when curses outnumber blessings, but both meanings are still accepted, maledictive optative (Kazakh) developed. The second hypothesis allows another interpretation. The imperative of the verb 'see, watch, try' is well-known in constructions which denote the negative emotion of apprehension: 'beware, you could drown!'. If this was the source of the suffix, then the maledictive optative could have appeared at the beginning of the grammaticalization path, developing into a neutral optative later through the intermediate stage of fluid evaluative meaning.

Therefore, two paths for the development of the qualitative evaluation marker can be hypothesized. In the first case evaluation arises from context. The marker goes through the stage of evaluative vagueness, when the specific value is determined contextually. Later the form becomes associated with a certain type of evaluative contexts, and finally specializes for one particular value. With the second path, there is no stage of vagueness in the beginning: if the marker originates from a lexeme with inherent evaluative semantics, such as 'good' or 'bad', it is rigidly linked to a specific value (positive or negative). Such cases are described in Guillaume (2018). Tacana has several suffixes which denote negative emotions. Their tentative sources are lexical items with evaluative meaning: the compassion

---

4. An anonymous reviewer also suggested that the optative suffix could come from the meaning 'try, intend', also typical for this verb.

suffix *ichenu* probably originates from the adjective ‘poor’, the depreciative suffix *base* from the verb *base* ‘be wrong, be mistaken’, and the depreciative suffix *madha* might be historically related to the adjective *madha-da* ‘bad’. Guillaume (2018) traces the usages of these markers in the corpus and does not report any positive/negative vagueness.

The focus of most studies of evaluative morphology has been on diminutives and augmentatives (Bauer 1997; Stump 1993; Grandi 2011; Körtvélyessy 2015; Grandi & Körtvélyessy 2015). However, as has been shown in this paper, there are other grammatical categories which express evaluation, and steps should be made towards understanding evaluation morphology in its entirety.

## Acknowledgements










I want to express my gratitude to many people who answered my questions, helped me with references and examples and corrected my mistakes: Jenny Audring, Michael Daniel, Anna Dybo, Aimgul Kazkenova, Vera Maltseva and Maïa Ponsonnet. I am also grateful to Samira Verhees for proofreading an earlier version of this paper. Special thanks go to the anonymous reviewers and editors for their thoughtful comments.

## Abbreviations

1	first person	JUSS	jussive
2	second person	LOC	locative
ABL	ablative	M	masculine
ACC	accusative	MAL	maledictive
ADJ	adjectivizer	MALEF	malefactive
AUX	auxiliary	N	neuter
CAUS	causative	NEG	negative
CMPR	comparative	NOM	nominative
COLL	collective	NPL	non-human plural
COMP	complementizer	OBL	oblique
DEF	definite	OPT	optative
DES	desiderative	PFM	performative
DIM	diminutive	PL	plural
ERG	ergative	POSS	possessive
F	feminine	PRS	present
FUT	future	PST	past
GEN	genitive	PTCL	particle
IMP	imperative	PURP	purposive
INDF	indefinite	PV	preverb
INF	infinitive	SBJV	subjunctive
INS	instrumental	SG	singular
IRR	irrealis	TOP.NON.A/S	topical non-subject

## References

-  Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2020. "Damn your eyes!" (Not really): Imperative imprecatives, and curses as commands. In Nico Nassenstein & Anne Storch (eds.), *Swearing and cursing*, 53–78. Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
-  Audring, Jenny, Sterre Leufkens & Eva van Lier. 2021. Small events: Verbal diminutives in the languages of the world. *Linguistic Typology at The Crossroads* 1(1). 223–256.
- Bammatov, Burgan G., & Nurmagomed È. Gadžiakhmedov (eds.). 2013. *Kumyksko-russkij slovar'* [*Kumyk-Russian dictionary*]. Maxačkala, Institut jazyka, literatury i iskusstva im. G. Cadasy.
- Baskakov, Nikolai A. 1988. Kategorija naklonenija. In Tenišev, È.R. (ed.), *Sravnitel'no-istoričeskaja grammatika tjurkskix jazykov: Morfoložija* [*Comparative-historical grammar of Turkic languages: Morphology*]. Moscow: Nauka.
-  Bauer, Laurie. 1997. Evaluative morphology: In search of universals. *Studies in Language* 21(3). 533–575.
- Bizakov, Seidin. 2012. *Učebnik trudnostej kazaxskogo jazyka* [*Textbook of Kazakh language difficulties*]. Almaty, Kazakhstan: Kazakh ènciklopedijasy.
- Bodrogligeti, András J.E. 2003. *An academic reference grammar of modern literary Uzbek*. Munich: LINCOM Europa.
- Bybee, Joan, Revere Perkins & William Pagliuca. 1994. *The evolution of grammar: Tense, aspect, and modality in the languages of the world*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
-  Chamoreau, Claudine. 2012. Spanish diminutive markers -ito/-ita in Mesoamerican languages: A challenge for acceptance of gender distinction. In Martine Vanhove, Thomas Stolz, Aina Urdze & Hitomi Otsuka (eds.), *Morphologies in contact*, 71–91. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
-  Comtet, Roget. 1992. Usečennaja forma časticy russkogo soslagaťel'nogo naklonenija. [Truncated form of the Russian subjunctive mood particle]. *Russian Linguistics* 16(2). 225–237.
- Dobrushina, Nina. 2011. The optative domain in East Caucasian languages. In Gilles Authier & Timur A. Mašak (eds.), *Tense, aspect, modality and finiteness in East Caucasian languages*. Bochum, Germany: Brockmeyer Verlag.
-  Dobrushina, Nina. 2012. What is the Jussive for? *Linguistics* 50(1). 1–25.
- Dobrushina, Nina, Johan van der Auwera & Valentin Goussev. 2013. The Optative. In Matthew Dryer & Martin Haspelmath (eds.), *The world atlas of language structures online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. <http://wals.info/chapter/73>
- Dobrushina, Nina. 2016. *Soslagaťel'noe naklonenie v russkom jazyke: Opyt issledovanija grammatičeskoj semantiki* [*Subjunctive in Russian: A study in semantics of grammar*]. Prague: Animedia Company.
-  Dressler, Wolfgang U. & Lavinia M. Barbaresi. 1994. *Morphopragmatics: Diminutives and intensifiers in Italian, German and other languages*. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
-  Evans, Nicolas. 2007. Insubordination and its functions. In Irina Nikolaeva & Frans Plank (eds.), *Finiteness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 366–431.
- Fishman, Alon. nd. Ya xatixat. Unpublished manuscript, University of Tel Aviv.

- Gadžiakhmedov, Nurmagomed È. 2000. *Inflectional categories of noun and verb in the Kumyk language* [Slovoizmenitel'nye kategorii imeni i glagola v kumykskomazykye]. Maxačkala.
- Gadžiakhmedov, Nurmagomed È. (ed.) 2014. *Sovremennyy kumykskij jazyk [Contemporary Kumyk]*. Maxačkala: IJaLI DNC RAN.
-  Giorgi, Alessandra & Sorrisi Fabrizio. 2018. An evaluative head in Romance. *Annali di Ca'Foscari* 65. 65–85.
-  Grandi, Nicola & Livia Körtvélyessy (eds.). 2015. *Edinburgh handbook of Evaluative Morphology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
-  Grandi, Nicola. 2011. Renewal and innovation in the emergence of Indo-European evaluative morphology. *Lexis. Journal in English Lexicology* 6. 5–25.
-  Grosz, Patrick Georg. 2012. *On the grammar of optative constructions*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
-  Guillaume, Antoine. 2018. The grammatical expression of emotions in Tacana and other Takanan languages. *Studies in Language* 42(1). 114–145.
-  Jurafsky, Daniel. 1996. Universal tendencies in the semantics of the diminutive. *Language* 72(3). 533–578.
- Kononov, Andrei N. 1960. *Grammatika sovremennogo uzbekskogo literaturnogo jazyka [Grammar of contemporary standard Uzbek]*. Moscow & Leningrad: Izd-vo Akad. nauk SSSR.
- Körtvélyessy, Livia. 2015. *Evaluative morphology from a cross-linguistic perspective*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Koshal, Samyukta. 1979. *Ladakhi grammar*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- MacDonnell, Arthur A. 1927. *A Sanskrit grammar for students*. Third edition. London: Oxford University Press.
- Musaev, Kenesbaj M. (ed.). 2018. *Nogajsko-russkij slovar' [Nogai-Russian dictionary]*. Moscow: Nauka.
- Namugala, Samuel. 2014. Diminutive and augmentative functions of some Luganda noun class markers. Trondheim, Norway: Norwegian University of Science and Technology MA thesis.
- Nikolaeva, Irina. 2016. Analyses of the semantics of mood. In Jan Nuyts & Johan van der Auwera (eds.), *The Oxford handbook of modality and mood*, 68–85. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
-  Pakendorf, Brigitte. 2017. Lamunkhin Even evaluative morphology in cross-linguistic comparison. *Morphology* 27(2). 123–158.
-  Ponsonnet, Maïa. 2018. A preliminary typology of emotional connotations in morphological diminutives and augmentatives. *Studies in Language* 42(1). 17–50.
-  Ponsonnet, Maïa & Marine Vuillermet. 2018. Introduction. *Studies in Language* 42(1). 1–16.
- Plungian, Vladimir A. 2011. *Vvedenie v grammatičeskuju semantiku: grammatičeskie značenija i grammatičeskie sistemy jazykov mira: Učebnoe posobie [Introduction to grammatical semantics: Grammatical meanings and grammatical systems of the world's languages: Textbook]*. Moscow: URSS.
- Räsänen, Martti. 1955. *Materialien zur Morphologie der türkischen Sprachen (Studia Orientalia 21)*. Helsinki: Societas Orientalis Fennica.

- doi** Rusakov, Alexander & Maria Morozova. 2022. Optative in Albanian. *Syntaxe et Sémantique* 22(1). 29–55.  
Russian National Corpus. <https://ruscorpora.ru/>
- Shimelman, Aviva. 2017. *A grammar of Yauyos Quechua* (Studies in Diversity Linguistics 9). Berlin: Language Science Press.
- doi** Stump, Gregory T. 1993. How peculiar is evaluative morphology? *Journal of Linguistics* 29(1). 1–36.
- doi** Traugott, Elizabeth C. & Richard B. Dasher. 2001. *Regularity in semantic change*. (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 97). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Treis, Yvonne. 2008. *A grammar of Kambaata*. Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.
- doi** Treis, Yvonne. 2016. “Eat me, ground!” – Orders, blessings and curses in Kambaata. *Contemporary Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa*. Handout.
- doi** Tuggy, David. Ambiguity, polysemy, and vagueness. *Cognitive Linguistics*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1993, pp. 273–290.
- doi** Vanhove, Martine & Mohamed-Tahir Hamid Ahmed. 2018. Diminutives and augmentatives in Beja (North-Cushitic). *Studies in Language* 42(1). 51–80.
- Visser, Eline. 2022. *A grammar of Kalamang*. (Comprehensive Grammar Library 4). Berlin: Language Science Press.
- doi** Vuillermet, Marine. 2018. Grammatical fear morphemes in Ese Ejja: Making the case for a morphosemantic apprehensional domain. *Studies in Language* 42(1). 256–293.
- doi** Zariquiey, Roberto. 2018. The encoding of emotions in Kakataibo (Panoan): Morphological markers and prosodic patterns. *Studies in Language* 42(1). 182–201.
- doi** Zuckermann, Ghil'ad. 2006. Direct and indirect speech in straight-talking Israeli. *Acta linguista Hungarica* 53 (4). 467–481.
- Zwicky, Arnold M. & Jerrold M. Sadock. 1975. Identity tests and how to fail them. *Syntax and Semantics* 4. 1–36.

## Résumé

Cet article analyse la façon dont le sens grammatical d'évaluation qualitative est développé dans les optatifs qui dénotent des bénédictions et des malédictions. En utilisant les données de plusieurs formes turciques et de plusieurs constructions russes, l'étude contribue à distinguer le sens grammatical de l'évaluation d'une implication pragmatique survenant dans des contextes particuliers. Elle montre que les éléments grammaticaux qui ont des usages évaluatifs présentent souvent une certaine « fluidité », avec une interprétation positive ou négative spécifiée par le contexte. L'interprétation positive ou négative est un satellite pragmatique, et même si la catégorie penche généralement vers une interprétation négative (ou positive), elle peut, dans certains contextes, afficher l'évaluation opposée. Sur la base de cette approche, l'article propose deux voies différentes de développement des marqueurs grammaticaux dénotant une évaluation qualitative.

## Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag analysiert, wie die grammatische Bedeutung der qualitativen Bewertung in Optativen, die Segen und Fluch bezeichnen, entwickelt wird. Anhand von Suffixen verschiedener Turksprachen und einiger russischer Konstruktionen trägt die Studie dazu bei, die grammatische Bedeutung der Bewertung von einer kontextgebundenen, pragmatischen Implikation zu unterscheiden. Sie zeigt, dass grammatische Elemente, die evaluativ verwendet werden, oft eine gewisse „Fluidität“ aufweisen, wobei die positive oder negative Interpretation durch den Kontext bestimmt wird. Die positive oder negative Interpretation ist ein pragmatischer Satellit, und selbst wenn die Kategorie im Allgemeinen zu einer negativen (oder positiven) Interpretation neigt, kann sie in bestimmten Kontexten die entgegengesetzte Bewertung aufweisen. Auf der Grundlage dieses Ansatzes werden zwei verschiedene Wege der Entwicklung von grammatischen Markern vorgeschlagen, die eine qualitative Bewertung anzeigen.

## Address for correspondence

Nina Dobrushina  
DDL – MSH-LSE  
Université Lyon 2  
14 avenue Berthelot  
69363 LYON CEDEX 07  
France

[nina.dobrushina@gmail.com](mailto:nina.dobrushina@gmail.com)



<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4559-4274>

## Publication history

Date received: 28 April 2023

Date accepted: 6 December 2023

Published online: 20 December 2024