Introduction to the templatic verb morphology of Birhor (Birhoɽ), a Kherwarian Munda language

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Birhor (Birhoɽ) is a Kherwarian Munda language spoken in small enclaves in India, primarily in Hazaribagh, Ranchi, and Singhbhum districts and other small pockets in Jharkhand state. Birhor has to date been poorly documented, and even the basic properties of its core grammatical systems remain largely undescribed. All data used in this study come from field notes collected in several trips dating back to 2015. This paper is a preliminary attempt to identify the basic templatic structures of positive and negative finite conjugations in Birhor of both monovalent and polyvalent predicates. We discuss here two basic intersecting inflectional oppositions in the grammar of Birhor: (i) between perfective and imperfective tense-aspect forms (the imperfective includes imperfective and imperfect forms, and the perfective includes the past, the anterior and the perfect); and (ii) between monovalent predicates and polyvalent ones. Like all Kherwarian languages, Birhor has a nominative-accusative alignment of argument indexing and a complex templatic verb structure. It encodes subjects with monovalent stems. Polyvalent predicates encode two arguments, a first argument/syntactic subject and a second argument/syntactic ‘object’ following a primary object pattern. A complex array of different templates is thus found across positive and negative conjugations that contrast polyvalent vs. monovalent imperfective, perfective, and imperative forms. Many different formal templatic patterns are attested within each of the paradigmatic oppositional sets in Birhor. There are two formal subtypes of monovalent predicates. They contrast in both positive and negative conjugations, for both the imperfective and the perfective series of inflections. Polyvalent predicates also contrast the imperfective and the perfective series. Lastly, there are distinct templates for imperative and prohibitive of monovalent and polyvalent predicates as well.

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