

The Semantics of Malagasy Actor Voice Prefixes

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This paper examines the voice system of Malagasy with a particular focus on actor voice morphology. A common assumption in much of the literature on Malagasy verbal morphology is that actor voice affixes are “semantically neutral” (Keenan and Polinsky 1998:591, 598). The evidence discussed in this paper, however, shows that Malagasy actor voice morphology on the verb reflects basic semantic features (following Dez 1980). Through a cross-linguistic comparison of voice marking in other western Austronesian languages (specifically Tagalog), we want to show that a semantic analysis of the Malagasy voice marking facts can be straightforwardly accounted to use available semantic systematizations, primarily the typology of western Austronesian voice systems.

1. Introduction

Malagasy has an actor voice paradigm, very similar to that found in Tagalog. We shall here study in detail the semantic behavior of the different formatives for the actor voice of Malagasy, comparing it with Tagalog and with what may be supposed to be Proto-Austronesian. However, before studying the Malagasy actor voice verb forms in detail, it is necessary to consider some important features in the verbal morphology of the language.

2. Major verbal alternation

Malagasy marks event types as dynamic and non-dynamic like so many other western Austronesian languages (see Himmelmann 2005:165-166 for a recent summary). Besides (dynamic) *an-dio* ‘cleanse, purify’ or (dynamic) *i-dio* ‘cleanse oneself, to wash’ < *dio* ‘cleanliness’, Malagasy has (non-dynamic) *a-dio* ‘clean’. *a-* forms non-dynamic (stative) verbs from nominal roots.¹ Similar verbal forms are found in Philippine languages (Rasoloson and Rubino 2005:473). Because “expressions for dynamic events typically refer to actions which involve a volitional agent who is in control of the action” (Himmelmann 2005:165), we infer from this verbal alternation that the regular formation of actor voice verb forms in Malagasy is with the prefixes *aN*², and *i-*. Indeed, “*i-* and *aN-* prefixation are highly productive” (Keenan and Polinsky 1998:592), as in (1-2).³

(1) M-anao anentana ny boky izy.
PRS-AV.stack DET book 3S
‘He stacks the books.’

(2) M-itondra fehezantaratsy roa izy.
PRS-AV.carry stacks.of.letters two 3S
‘He is carrying two stacks of letters.’

Note that *manao* (m-aN-tao with nasal substitution) and *mitondra* (m-i-tondra) are present tense. In the past tense the initial *m* of all these prefixes is replaced by *n*, and in the future tense by *h*, i.e. *nanao* vs. *hanao*, and *nitondra* vs. *hitondra*.

3. The Semantics of *aN-* and *i-*

This section begins with the semantic behavior of the actor voice formed with *aN-* and *i-*. Following that is a proposal for the development of *i-* as actor voice morpheme.

¹ *a-* occurs also in potentive verbs, e.g. *atahotra* ‘be afraid of’ < *tahotra* ‘fear’.

² *a-* with nasal assimilation or substitution.

³ The following abbreviations are used: AV = actor voice, DET = determiner, ERG = ergative, FOC = focus, OBL = oblique, PAN = Proto Austronesian, PRS = present tense, S = singular, UNF = unfocussed

Under the heading “Signification des formes en mi- et man-” Dez (1980:54-55) writes: “Man- signifie que le sujet accomplit le mouvement décrit par le radical en agissant sur un destinataire dont la situation se trouve ainsi modifiée. Le préfixe exprime l’idée de création d’une situation nouvelle grâce à l’action”, as for example in (3).

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| (3) | <i>anoroka</i> ‘to kiss’ | < <i>oroka</i> ‘kiss’ |
| | <i>andidy</i> ‘to command’ | < <i>didy</i> ‘command’ |
| | <i>anonitra</i> ‘compensate, pay damages’ | < <i>onitra</i> ‘compensation, restitution’ |
| | <i>andatsa</i> ‘to reproach’ | < <i>latsa</i> ‘reproach’ |
| | <i>ananatra</i> ‘advise’ | < <i>anatra</i> ‘advice’ |
| | <i>amotsy</i> ‘whiten’ | |
| | <i>ameno</i> ‘fill’ | |
| | <i>andrehitra</i> ‘burn, set fire to’ | |
| | <i>andrava</i> ‘destroy’ | |
| | <i>amoha</i> ‘open’ | |

The interpretation of *aN-* given by Dez is that the first five forms construct the dynamic event “sur un destinataire”, i.e. the person to which it is directed, and should be considered as ‘addressee oriented’. The last forms construct it as “une situation nouvelle”, i.e. the entity is directly effected by the dynamic event, e.g.

- (4) Rakoto no m-amaky kitay amin’ny famaky.
 Rakoto FOC PRS-AV.cut fuel with’DET axe
 ‘It is Rakoto who cuts firewood with the axe.’
 (Dahl 1995:177, ex. 19e)

Many western Austronesian languages have similar constructions, for instance Sama Bangingi’ (Sulu Archipelago in the south-western Philippines), with

- (5) Kamaya’ kaa angehet mampallam pasal laring-u ato:m.
 be.careful 2S.ERG AV.cut mango because knife-that sharp
 ‘You be careful cutting mangoes because that knife is sharp.’
 (Gault 2002:370, ex. 8)

And in these languages both we have actor voice prefixes *aN-* with nasal substitution, Malagasy *amaky* (aN-vaky) and Sama Bangingi’ *angehet* (aN-kehet). In addition, we present Malagasy actor voice verb forms expressing the dynamic event to a goal (affected), as in (6).

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| (6) | <i>andrakotra</i> ‘to cover’ | < <i>rakotra</i> ‘cover’ |
| | <i>andona</i> ‘to knock’ | < <i>dona</i> ‘knock’ |
| | <i>amefy</i> ‘fence in’ | < <i>fefy</i> ‘fence, enclosure’ |
| | <i>amono</i> ‘wrap’ | < <i>fono</i> ‘cover or wrapping’ |

Dahl (1995:174) has reconstructed *maN-* as PAN **maŋ-*. As further evidence for our argumentation we include a small comparison of Malagasy and Tagalog verbal morphology that there is a striking similarity between Malagasy *aN-* and Tagalog *mang-*. Compare the following examples:

Table 1. Correlations between Malagasy dynamic verbs formed with *maN-* and Tagalog ones formed with *mang-*

Gloss	Malagasy dynamic verb (PRS.AV)	Tagalog dynamic verb (AV, basic)
disturb	manabataba	mangguló
annoy	manorisory	manginís
prevail	mandresy	manaíg
criticize details, find fault	manakiana	mamintas
oppress	mampahory	mangapí
beg somebody for alms	mangataka	manglimos

Proto-Malayo-Polynesian actor voice affixes are represented by **-um-* and **maN-* (see Ross 2002:452, tab. 2). Whereas the bulk of western Malayo-Polynesian languages feature these two morphemes, uniformly, Malagasy seems to have only the latter one at first sight. Thus we have to clarify the status of *i-*.

In a first approach we can pick out three special verbal forms that contain the petrified infix *-um-* and in addition to that prefix *m-i-*. In Malagasy dialects there are still very few cases of this. In Sakalava (western dialect) we have *l-om-aŋo* ‘swim’, *t-om-any* ‘cry’, *h-om-ehe* ‘laugh’.⁴ These three forms are also considered as roots in Malagasy, and form actor voice (and present tense) with the complex prefix *m-i-*: *m-i-lomano* ‘swim’, *m-i-tomany* ‘cry’, *m-i-homehy* ‘laugh’. In Tagalog, the actor voice infix *-um-* has the same function as the Malagasy complex prefix *m-i-*. Compare the following examples:

Table 2. Correlations between Malagasy dynamic verbs formed with *mi-* and Tagalog ones formed with *-um-*

Gloss	Malagasy dynamic verb (PRS.AV)	Tagalog dynamic verb (AV, basic)
sneeze	mievina	bumahín
bark	mivovò	tumahól
cough	mikohaka	umubó
breathe	miaina	humingá
smile	mitsiky	ngumití
swallow	mitelina	lumunók
chew	mitsako	ngumuyâ

We must assume that *i-* represents a secondary development that has replaced the older formative *-um-*. Malagasy *i-* is then **t-om-elina* > *mi-telina* following the same process of development as above. This implies that the comparison of Tagalog and Malagasy above shows a clear correspondence between *-um-* and *i-*.

A synchronic description of *i-* in Malagasy yields the following semantically based overall picture as given by Dez (1980:54): “*Mi-* signifie que le sujet accomplit de lui-même (et souvent sur lui-même ou pour lui-même) le mouvement ou l’activité décrits par le radical, ou, qu’ayant accompli ce mouvement ou cette activité, il se trouve dans la situation réalisée à leur achèvement”, i.e. actor voice formed with *i-* is ‘auto-causative’⁵ (“de lui-même”), reflexive (“sur lui-même”), and self-benefactive (“pour lui-même”).

⁴ These forms are present tense.

⁵ Term taken from Geniušienė (1987).

- (7) *iadana* ‘go slow’ < *adana* ‘slowness’
ialoka ‘go into the shade’ < *aloka* ‘shade, shadow’
iantso ‘proclaim’ < *antso* ‘call’
izara ‘distribute’ < *zara* ‘division’
iamboho ‘turn the back on’ < *voho* ‘back side’
isasa ‘wash oneself’ < *sasa* ‘washing’
ianatsimo ‘go to the south’ < *atsimo* ‘the south’

It is possible that this is due to Philippine patient voice prefix *i-*. Compare for instance Hiligaynon (Central Visayan) in (8-9):

- (8) I-lígid sang táwo ang úlo sa íya asáwa.
 1S-roll UNF person FOC head OBL 3S.UNF wife
 ‘The man will roll the head to his wife.’
 (Spitz 2002:396, ex. 53)
- (9) I-bú’bo’ sang dóktor ang kapé.
 1S-pour UNF doctor FOC coffee
 ‘The doctor will pour out the coffee.’
 (Spitz 2002:396, ex. 54)

The morpheme of patient voice marking in Philippine languages is *i-* in almost all languages where it occurs, and this has also been supposed to be its PAN form (see Pawley and Reid 1976:55). Dahl (1995:174), however, reconstructed Malagasy *mi-* < PAN **may-*. However, we do not find his reconstruction sufficiently motivated, and prefer a kind of ‘voice marking shift’ with the following motivation: We maintain that based on the evidence given above, Malagasy actor voice prefix *i-* rather has its origin in Philippine patient voice prefix *i-*. Therefore we present a small comparison of Malagasy and Tagalog verbal morphology by assuming that there is a striking similarity between Malagasy actor voice marking and Tagalog patient voice marking, in the narrow sense for moved themes.

Table 3. Correlations between Malagasy dynamic verbs formed with *i-* and Tagalog ones formed with *i-*

Gloss	Malagasy (AV)	Tagalog (PV)
pull	isarika	itabóy
sell	ivarotra	itinda
proclaim	iantso	ihayág
spread, distribute	izara	ikalat
put away, store	itahiry	itinggál
straddle and block the way	ibahana	ihalang
rub against	ikasoka	ikiskís
move wings	ikopaka	ipagaspás
transport something	itakona	ilulan
keep back, something for oneself alone	ibodo	ilihim
put on	itafy	isuót

In analogy to section 2, where we presented dynamic vs. non-dynamic alternations of the same root, we now can contrast also *i-* and *aN-* alternations of identical roots.

Table 4: Dynamic verb alternations in Malagasy and Tagalog

Malagasy (PRS.AV)	Gloss	Malagasy (PRS.AV)	Gloss
Tagalog (AV, basic)		Tagalog (AV, basic)	
miafina	hide	manafina	hide, keep a secret
kumanlong		magkanlong	
miainga	get up	manainga	lift up
bumangon		magbangon	
mivoha	open	mamoha	open something
bumukas		magbukas	
miverina	return	mamerina	give back
bumalik		magbalik	
miaika	tight	manaika	tighten
humigpit		maghigpit	

4. Conclusion

Malagasy and Philippine languages have in common that they mark different thematic roles on the verb. It is evident that, in one case, actor voice marking of both branches goes back to a common Austronesian root, that is **maN-*. It can also be observed that the common Austronesian (and Philippine) *-um-* formative once existed in Malagasy, but finally was replaced by *m-i-*. Comparing these formatives it becomes clear that Malagasy *m-i-* and, for instance, Tagalog *-um-* show obvious distributional similarities. One way to account for the origin of Malagasy *m-i-*, is to trace it back to the common Austronesian object-prefix *i-*, which, in a kind of shift, took over the function of the Malagasy actor voice marking, and now covers the same semantic functions as Tagalog *-um-*.

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