

On the history of Marind verb stems

In this presentation we take a new look at a subpart of the highly complex verb morphology of Coastal Marind, a Papuan language belonging to the Anim family of south New Guinea (cf. Usher and Suter 2015). Our focus is on the stem alternations realizing person/number of an undergoer participant (roughly corresponding to the patient-like participant of verbs such as ‘hit’ or ‘get hungry’, or the sole participant of middle-like verbs such as ‘turn (oneself) around’). The data come from ongoing fieldwork combined with the rich descriptions by early Dutch missionaries (Geurtjens 1933, Drabbe 1955).

The complicated alternations found in the verb stem, although morphologically less luxuriant than the inflectional prefix complex, present a number of interesting problems in terms of synchronic analysis and diachronic origins. A closer look reveals significant regularities, and we argue that the current system can be traced back to a ‘yesterday’s syntax’ which is not only regular, but also canonical in the Papuan context.

While actor indexing (expressed within the prefixal complex, outside the stem) is obligatory for all verbs, the occurrence of undergoer indexing is restricted to a subset of verbs. This subset is large—ca. 230 of the 500 verbs investigated so far show undergoer indexing—but heterogeneous, and the occurrence of undergoer indexing on a given verb is not straightforwardly predictable on the basis of semantics or possible valency frames.

Verbs belong to one of four inflection classes according to the position of the exponent of undergoer indexing. A relatively simple class, with minimal allomorphy, is the prefixing class, exemplified in (a) below. (Exponents of undergoer indexing are in boldface wherever segmentation is possible.) More remarkable is the large (ca. 200 members) set of infixing stems, where the undergoer markers appear infixated into the onset of the stem-final syllable (b). The remaining classes are small, with 6 members each: the suffixing verbs (c), and a very aberrant class of double-marking verbs combining positions of the previous classes within one stem (d).

‘shoot at U’		‘U to slip’		‘U to crawl’		‘U to disappear’	
sg	pl	sg	pl	sg	pl	sg	pl
1	nas	1	yenab	1	lolon	1	ikneben
2	y as	2	y a yab	2	lolo ɣ	2	iky e bey ɣ
3	w as	3	yeb	3	lolaw	3	ikubaja
	jas		yehab		loloh		ikebeh

(a) Prefixing stem. (b) Infixing stem. (c) Suffixing stem. (d) Double-marking stem.

In our talk, we argue that the prefixing class represents the most archaic type of stem formation in Marind, and that the current system of stem formation can be shown to derive historically from transparent combinations of an invariant complement followed by an auxiliary verb carrying prefixed undergoer indexing. The undergoer infixes would thus be a prime example of entrapment (Ultan 1975, Yu 2007); we further argue that the suffixing and double-marking classes result from processes of erosion and re-analysis of material belonging to the stem. We suggest some tentative reconstructions of auxiliaries that participated in the formation of today’s infixing verb class, such as *ɣ[e]i ‘EAT’ (cf. *dahiy* ‘bite’, *haliy* ‘spit’, *yahwiy* ‘eat’ etc.), and show how a puzzling irregularity in one inflectional subclass can be resolved by taking comparative data from the related Bian Marind language into account. The findings contribute to our knowledge about the development of the Anim family, and illustrate the potential importance of diachrony for understanding synchronic morphological systems.

References

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