

An uncommon type of valency operator in Wolof

In addition to verbal suffixes encoding common types of valency changes (middle *-u*, causative *-e*, *-al*, *-lu*, *loo*, and *-le*, applicative *-e* and *-al*, co-participative and/or reciprocal *-andoo*, *-oo*, *-e*, and *-ante*, and antipassive *-e*) (see Voisin, 2002), Wolof uses a specialized and synchronically unanalyzable verbal suffix to code a type of valency change that does not seem to be coded by means of an unanalyzable marker in any other language. This ‘possessive’ marker enlarges the argument structure of the verb, but differs from causative and applicative markers, which constitute the commonest types of valency-increasing operators. Starting from an intransitive verb, it derives a transitive verb with the following argument structure:

- an additional argument with the semantic role of possessor is introduced in subject function;
- the object of the derived possessive verb cumulates the role of possessum and the semantic role assigned to the subject in the construction of the non-derived verb.

- (1) a. Woto bi gaaw na.
 car DEF be.fast PFT3S
 The car is fast.
- b. Sàmba gaaw-le na woto.
 Sàmba be.fast-POSS PFT3S car
 Sàmba has a fast car.

This operation is possible with a limited class of intransitive verbs that can be characterized as unaccusative, since a feature common to all verbs compatible with possessive *-le* is the non-agentivity of the subject. However, if most unaccusative verbs accept this marker, it seems to be more productive with stative verbs, in particular with verbs of quality.

The construction of these derived ‘possessive’ verbs can be compared with so-called external possession, i.e. "constructions in which a semantic possessor-possessum relation is expressed by coding the possessor (PR) as a core grammatical relation of the verb and in a constituent separate from that which contains the possessum (PM)." (Payne et Barshi, 1999: 3). In (1b), the possessor *Sàmba* (subject) and the possessum *woto* ‘car’ (object) are two distinct constituents, treated as nuclear arguments of the verb *gaawle*.

However, if the construction of Wolof possessive verbs shares some features with the possessor-possessum relation described by Payne & Barshi in EP constructions, it is nevertheless distinct from the different external possession strategies they describe.

Synchronically, the mere fact that Wolof does not have passive derivation makes it impossible to analyze the valency change encoded by the possessive suffix as a combination of applicative and passive, as for example in Tswana. A plausible diachronic explanation is however that Wolof possessive *-le* results from the grammaticalization of a complex marker, with applicative *-al* as its first formant, and with a second formant **-e*, at a stage of the evolution of Wolof when passive was coded by a suffix **-e*. An evidence supporting this hypothesis can be found in the related language Buy, which has a passive marker *-e* (Doneux 1991: 62).

References

- PAYNE, D. L. & BARSHI, I. (1999) *External possession*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- VOISIN (NOUGUIER), S. (2002) *Relations entre fonctions syntaxiques et fonctions sémantiques en wolof*. PhD thesis. University of Lyon.