

Tongan -'i: Increasing Transitivity in Valency and Aspect

The Tongan verbal suffix -'i has been variously described as a transitivity marker (Churchward, 1953; Otsuka, 2000), a perfective aspect-marker (Tchekhoff, 1973, 1981), a passivizer (Lynch, 1972), and as a modifier of verbal semantics (Dukes, 1996, 1998). Each of these characterizations corresponds to one of the functions of -'i, which also has a causative function and a variety of effects on theta-roles. I will demonstrate that with a proper understanding of transitivity and of Tongan argument structure, these apparently diverse functions of -'i can be unified within a single analysis of the suffix as a transitivity marker.

The transitivity marker function of -'i is perhaps its most salient. Affixed to an otherwise intransitive verb, it licenses the addition of a second argument, so that a predicate that would otherwise appear with a single, absolutive argument (1a) or with an absolutive argument and an oblique goal (2a), may appear with two arguments: one absolutive and the other, ergative (1b, 2b). The result often involves an alteration of the semantics of the predicate, rendering it either more agentive or more affective. In this, -'i functions much as a causative or a transitivity marker applicative morpheme. These semantic alternations are not due to specific semantic content of -'i but are simply the most natural interpretations of these predicates in a transitive frame.

The apparent passivizing function of -'i arises when the verb to which it is affixed appears with an absolutive argument alone. Tongan verbs can be classed according to the theta-role they assign to a single, absolutive argument (S): Some must assign this argument an internal theta-role, others an external theta-role (3a), and still others may assign either. Any verb to which -'i is affixed, however, must assign an internal theta-role to its absolutive argument; when this argument appears alone, the result is semantically similar to a passive sentence (3b). Again, I argue that this can be accounted for by analyzing -'i as a transitivity marker. An -'i-marked verb *must* take two arguments, ergative A and absolutive O. The absolutive argument that appears alone with an -'i-marked verb is not S but O; it has a null ergative counterpart to which the external theta-role has been assigned.

When added to an already-transitive verb with two overt arguments (4a), the suffix has no effect on valency or theta-role assignment; its primary function in such a case is to impart an Aspect which has been called “executive” (Churchward, 1953), “factual” (Tchekhoff, 1973), and “perfective” (Tchekhoff, 1981) (4b). This Aspect, which I refer to as *telic*, is a semantic feature of -'i and is consistent with the analysis of this morpheme as a transitivity marker. Hopper & Thompson (1980) demonstrate that perfective or telic aspect is a semantic correlate of transitivity; thus, the aspectual effect of -'i on an already-transitive predicate is evidence that the suffix is rendering it even more transitive.

Adapting Bowers' (2000) syntactic analysis of transitivity, I conclude that -'i occupies the head of a transitivity projection (TrP). This projection checks ergative Case and thus licenses a second argument. As such, -'i alternates with a null transitive head, \emptyset . The latter may occur with a limited subset of verbs (those which are transitive in the unmarked case) and serves only to check ergative Case; it is thus a marker of minimal transitivity. The suffix -'i may occur with any verb; in addition to checking ergative Case, it possesses a bundle of semantic features which correspond to Hopper & Thompson's (1980) correlates of high transitivity. This feature bundle, which I will refer to as [HIGH TRANS], distinguishes -'i from \emptyset and gives the suffix its Aspectual sense.

Data

- (1)a. *'E mohe 'a Sione.*
FUT sleep ABS Sione
“Sione will go to sleep”
- b. *'E mohe'i 'e Sione 'ae 'aho kakatoa.*
FUT sleep+ 'i ERG Sione ABS day whole
“Sione will sleep the whole day away”
[Tchekhoff, 1981:40]
- (2)a. *Na'e tokoi 'a Sione ki he faiako.*
PAST help ABS Sione OBL DET teacher
“Sione helped the teacher”
(Lit: Sione helped to the teacher.)
- b. *Na'e tokoi'i 'e Sione 'ae faiako.*
PAST help ERG Sione ABS+ DET teacher
“Sione helped the teacher”
(...and Sione's help was beneficial.)
[Otsuka, 2000:51-52]
- (3)a. *Na'e tamate a Mele.*
PAST kill ABS Mele
“Mele killed.”
- b. *Na'e tamate'i a Mele*
PAST kill+ 'i ABS Mele
“(x) killed Mele” hence, “Mele was killed.”
[Tchekhoff, 1981:42]
- (4)a. *Na'e fana 'e Sione 'a Mele.*
PAST shoot ERG Sione ABS Mele
“Sione shot Mele”
- b. *Na'e fana'i 'e Sione 'a Mele.*
PAST shoot+ 'i ERG Sione ABS Mele
“Sione shot Mele (and got her)”
[Tchekhoff, 1981:33]

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