

2014 · VOLUME 52 · NUMBER 4

LINGUISTICS

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
OF THE LANGUAGE SCIENCES

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**Special Issue: Typology of Labile Verbs:
Focus on Diachrony**

Guest Editors
Leonid Kulikov
and
Nikolaos Lavidas

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Leonid Kulikov* and Nikolaos Lavidas

Introduction

Keywords: lability, labile verbs, transitive, causative, anticausative, voice, passive, Indo-European, historical linguistics, diachrony, typology

DOI 10.1515/ling-2014-0010

The term *labile* refers to verbs or verbal forms that can show valency alternation, i.e., changes in syntactic pattern, with no formal change in the verb. Very often (but not always), the term *labile* is only employed to refer to verbs or verbal forms that can be employed both transitively and intransitively, as in examples (1)–(4) below; some scholars use other, less widely accepted, terms in this sense, such as *ambitransitive* (Dixon 1994) or *optionally transitive* (Miller 1993):¹

(1) English

- a. *John broke the vase.*
- b. *The vase broke.*

(2) English

- a. *John is eating porridge.*
- b. *John is eating.*

(3) Greek

- a. *O Janis anikse to parathiro.*
the.NOM Janis.NOM open.PST.3SG the.ACC window.ACC
'Janis opened the window.'
- b. *To parathiro anikse.*
the.NOM window.NOM open.PST.3SG
'The window opened.'

1 For a brief terminological survey, see Kulikov 1999: 226–228.

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(4) Greek

- a. *O Janis efaje mesimeriano.*
 the.NOM Janis.NOM eat.PST.3SG lunch.ACC
 ‘Janis ate lunch.’
- b. *O Janis efaje.*
 the.NOM Janis.NOM eat.PST.3SG
 ‘Janis ate.’

(1) and (3) exemplify *Patient-preserving lability* (*P-lability*, also labelled *S = O type* in Dixon 1994), while Examples (2) and (4) instantiate *Agent-preserving lability* (*A-lability*, or *S = A type*). Other types of syntactic alternation, such as locative alternation (cf. *John sprayed paint on the wall* vs. *John sprayed the wall with paint*) or dative shift (*Mary gave John an apple* vs. *Mary gave an apple to John*) also meet the broad definition of labile verbs (i.e., valency alternation with no formal change in the verbal form), but they are usually treated separately from P- and A-lability. Of particular interest is P-lability, which is common in ergative-absolutive languages (for instance, in many Daghestan languages). This type of lability is not infrequent in some nominative-accusative languages as well (such as English, Greek, German, or French), but it is rare or almost entirely lacking in many others (e.g., in Slavic or Uralic). There are a number of studies dealing with this phenomenon in individual languages, such as English (McMillion 2006), French (Larjavaara 2000), Greek (Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 2004; Theophanopoulou-Kontou 2004; Tsimpli 2006, among others). Important typological generalizations about labile verbs can be found already in the pioneer work by Nedjalkov (1969), followed by Haspelmath (1993) and Nichols et al. (2004); see also Letuchiy [Letučij] (2009, 2013). Much less attention was paid to the diachronic aspects of labile verbs. As a result, there is a regrettable imbalance between synchronic and diachronic typological research in the field (see Kulikov 2010 for a detailed discussion of this imbalance). A systematic treatment of this phenomenon from a diachronic perspective is lacking: the rise, development, and decline of labile verbs remain on the periphery of typological research. In many cases, we cannot explain why and how the lability emerges and disappears. We do not know why, in several languages, labile verbs become more productive and the class of labile verbs is constantly increasing, as in English, Greek or some Daghestan languages, while in some other languages this class is decreasing, as in Sanskrit, or entirely lacking, as in modern Turkic or Kartvelian languages. Only a few mechanisms responsible for the emergence of lability, such as the phonetic merger of transitive and intransitive forms or the deletion of the reflexive pronoun, attested in the history of English, are mentioned in the literature. The few studies dealing with the diachronic aspects of labile verbs, their

rise, development or decay and loss include Kitazume (1996) and van Gelderen (2011) on English, Kulikov (1999, 2003) on Vedic Sanskrit, and Lavidas (2009) on Greek.

The aim of this special issue is to contribute to overcoming this imbalance between synchronic and diachronic studies on lability. It is largely based on the materials of a workshop, organized as part of the 19th International Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (19th ISTAL), at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Thessaloniki, Greece, 3–5 April 2009), which brought together scholars interested in lability and historical syntax to open new horizons in the research of this phenomenon, paying special attention to its diachronic aspects. The topics addressed in the articles of this issue include:

(a) Diachronic aspects of lability: (i) mechanisms of the emergence and expansion of labile verbs (e.g., in English or Greek); (ii) mechanisms of the decay and disappearance of labile verbs (e.g., in Vedic); (iii) semantic and syntactic classes of verbs that tend to become labile or, on the contrary, non-labile; (iv) lability considered as an instance of syncretism (of transitive and intransitive) and its possible relationships with other types of syncretism or grammatical homonymy; (v) the main evolutionary types of lability attested for Indo-European and other language families and groups with a well-documented history; and (vi) the position of Indo-European in a diachronic typological classification of lability types.

(b) Synchronic aspects of typology of lability: (i) semantic and syntactic classes of verbs for which the labile pattern is particularly common or uncommon; (ii) the possibility of correlations between the grammatical characteristics of a form and its lability; (iii) labile patterning of finite vs. non-finite forms (infinitives, participles, etc.); (iv) relationships between labile verbs, voices and valency-changing categories; and (v) types of lability (cf. reflexive lability: *Mary washed the baby* vs. *Mary washed*; reciprocal lability: *Mary and John kissed the baby* vs. *Mary and John kissed*; etc.).

Artemis Alexiadou's article ("The problem with internally caused change-of-state verbs") analyzes the conditions under which the class of internally caused change-of-state (ICCOS) verbs can have transitive counterparts and result in a lability schema. Alexiadou argues that most ICCOS verbs seem to have been misclassified and that, hence, the characterization of verbs as ICCOS does not guide the availability of a transitive construal. With regard to morphology, it is shown that the relevant classification plays a role in determining the morphology of the intransitive variant: ICCOS verbs and cause unspecified verbs in Greek do not surface with non-active morphology, because the presence of non-active morphology signals the absence of an external causer; non-active morphology tends to surface with ICCOS verbs that can have transitive construals.

Denis Creissels (“P-lability and radical P-alignment”) argues that the current definition of P-lability cannot be applied to languages showing a combination of typological features found, among others, in Akhvakh and Avar (Nakh-Daghestanian). Creissels shows that, in such languages, the omission of the agent NP with verbs that have transitive uses, without any other readjustment, is always possible with a passive-like reading. According to Creissels, what is relevant for languages like the ones discussed in the article is the variety of possible readings of potentially transitive verbs in the absence of an agent NP and the division of verbs into the following three sub-classes: (i) those with which the presence of an agent NP must be licensed by causative derivation; (ii) those compatible with an apparently identical argument frame <agent, patient> both in their non-derived and causative form; and (iii) those compatible with the argument frame <agent, patient> in their non-derived form exclusively.

Chiara Gianollo’s article (“Labile verbs in Late Latin”) shows that, in the diachronic development from Classical to Late Latin, a sharp increase in the number of detransitivizations can be observed. According to Gianollo, in this respect, the anticausative construction shifts from a passive-like pattern to an active-like pattern. The author examines the contexts of occurrence of labile patterns, the competing constructions, and the possible causes for the increase of the phenomenon in Late Latin. The main hypotheses for the increase of the labile pattern (omission of the direct complement, omission of the reflexive pronoun, analogy with present participles, morphological decay) are presented as well as some other factors that have more rarely been adduced as possibly relevant triggers (pragmatic factors or contact with Greek). Gianollo argues that the main cause of this increase can be found in the general functional reorganization of the Latin medio-passive voice that was largely independent of morphophonological factors.

Steffen Heidinger (“The persistence of labile verbs in the French causative-anticausative alternation”) argues that the diachronic development of French labile verbs in the causative-anticausative alternation is best described with the notion of persistence, i.e., “endurance under concurrence”. Heidinger shows that labile verbs had a serious rival at their side: from Old to Modern French, the labile pattern was gradually replaced by a pattern with a marked anticausative. The empirical evidence for the persistence of the labile pattern, which the author provides, rests on the following four observations: (i) there are still more than 300 labile verbs in present-day French; (ii) labile verbs are not just remnants from an older stage of the language; (iii) the decrease of lability is a slow process; and (iv) unmarked anticausatives still appear in the same semantic contexts as reflexive anticausatives.

Eleni Karantzola and Nikolaos Lavidas (“On the relation between labilizations and neuter gender: Evidence from the Greek diachrony”) examine Greek

dialectal texts from the 16th and 17th centuries, a period of Turkish and Venetian occupation in Greece. On the basis of Early Modern Greek dialectal texts, Karantzola and Lavidas provide evidence for the tendency in Greek toward the increase of lability in causative-anticausative alternations. According to the authors, lability in Early Modern Greek dialects is the result of the following: (i) causative extension on the basis of initial intransitive types of active morphology; and (ii) changes in the voice morphology of the anticausative type. Both changes leading to lability in causative-anticausative alternations are correlated with the role of neuter NPs, which appear to trigger a type of split ergativity in Greek. Karantzola and Lavidas argue that neuter NPs (bearing the same suffixes as subjects and objects) provide evidence in favor of split ergativity analyses of the causative-anticausative alternation on the basis of NP (gender) features.

Petar Kehayov and Virve Vihman's article ("The lure of lability: A synchronic and diachronic investigation of the labile pattern in Estonian") provides a general descriptive account of lability in the Estonian verbal system, and identifies the factors responsible for the rise and spread of lability in Estonian. Kehayov and Vihman show that Estonian, with at least 90 verb pairs, is relatively rich in labile verbs, contrary to older assumptions. The article also presents the particular conditions that have triggered the reanalysis of verb valency; these include the phonetic merger of distinct derivational affixes, the reanalysis of derivatives, and the contact with languages rich in lability. Kehayov and Vihman conclude that language-external factors contributing to the development of lability in Estonian should be taken seriously, on par with language-internal factors.

Artemij Keidan ("Direct and indirect evidence for lability in Middle Indo-Aryan") demonstrates that many phonological transformations and morphology restructuring processes favored the deletion or the semantic obscuring of causative and anticausative markers in the diachrony of the Middle Indo-Aryan languages. According to Keidan, the derivation system renovated continuously, so that a paradigmatic environment for the zero-marked forms was consistently provided. On the other hand, it is shown that the resulting labile verbs are semantically not distinct from those met with also in other languages. Finally, the author provides examples of how the writings of the grammarians of the school of Pāṇini can be a good source for the study of the lability as a synchronic syntactic rule.

Leonid Kulikov, in his article, "The decline of labile syntax in Old Indo-Aryan: A diachronic typological perspective", offers a general survey of the development of labile syntactic type in one of the oldest attested Indo-European languages, Vedic Sanskrit. The author argues for the secondary character of this phenomenon in Old Indo-Aryan. He demonstrates that the majority of types of lability attested in Vedic must be due, in particular, to grammatical homonymy of

some verbal formations and only in relatively rare cases represent remnants of an earlier system, probably partly going back to Proto-Indo-European.

This special issue collects articles dealing with different language families and groups (mainly Indo-European). The contributors offer a broad overview of the history of the characteristics and development of labiality in languages (language groups) with a well-documented history, such as Greek, Romance, Indo-Aryan, or in languages that were less examined in this aspect until now, such as Estonian or Akhvakh and Avar. A number of articles offer valuable observations and generalizations that are relevant for historical linguistics and the study of syntactic change as well as on synchronic typology and syntactic theory. The editors hope that the diachronic typological approach can later be extended to other linguistic categories, which will result in the systematization of our knowledge of the history of the language categories, opening new perspectives for research in the field.

We would like to thank all anonymous reviewers for their contribution to improving the articles submitted to this issue. We also would like to thank Johan van der Auwera and Ann Kelly for their patience and assistance in preparing this volume.

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