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# Transitivity in Wan

## An overview of constructions and verb classes

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### 1 Introduction

This is a first sketch of a typologically informed survey of transitivity in Wan, a Southeastern Mande language spoken in central Cote d'Ivoire. I focus, in particular, on two issues that are clearly relevant to typology but insufficiently studied, both from the formal theoretic point of view and from the point of view of their cross-linguistic representation. One issue relates to the relationship between transitivity of constructions and transitivity of individual verbs, which varies widely across languages. The other issue has to do with cross-linguistic variation in lexical transitivity classes, and with developing an account able to capture differences in selectional restrictions that different classes of verbs impose on their arguments. I believe that data from Wan –presented here in a cursory fashion due to space limitations – bears on both these issues in interesting ways, suggesting a need for further, more detailed study. First, it presents a case for a rather flexible treatment of verbs with respect to their transitivity: while constructions can be strictly divided into transitive and intransitive ones, the boundary between transitive and intransitive verbs cannot be so easily drawn. Second, Wan makes a distinction between two types of object that has no direct parallel, as far as I can tell, in well-studied European languages; the distinction between the two types of transitive verb turns out to be much more rigid in Wan than the distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 introduces the distinction between transitive and intransitive constructions as it is manifested in Wan and discusses its relationship to lexical transitivity, i.e. to the verb's argument structure. Section 3 describes the phenomenon of ambitransitivity (also known as lability, and widely attested in other Mande languages), which, in Wan, is pervasive and characterized by a relatively flexible association of particular verbs with transitive and intransitive constructions. A distinction is drawn between two different kinds of ambitransitivity, suggesting a need for two different types of formal theoretic account. Section 4 focuses on the special class of transitive verbs that is characterized by certain

selectional properties that are typically associated, in European languages, with verbs taking an oblique argument. Section 5 concludes the paper by addressing cross-linguistic variation in the association between syntactic and lexical transitivity and some other general issues.

## 2. Transitive constructions and transitive verbs

Unlike in many other languages, the distinction between transitive and intransitive constructions in Wan is straightforward (cf. Creissels 2014 on Akhvakh). With finite verbs, the word order is rigid SOVX (1a): subjects and objects precede the verb, and all oblique arguments follow it (Nikitina 2009a). In constructions with so-called predicative markers, illustrated in (1b), a non-finite verb phrase is introduced by an auxiliary-like element expressing temporal and aspectual meanings, and the word order is rigid S-Aux-OVX.<sup>1</sup>

- (1) a.    à       séngè       klā       tābālī é       tā  
           3PL knife       put:PAST   table DEF on  
           ‘They put a knife on the table.’
- b.    Dèlòtó       á       pō       ló       lé  
           D.       COP thing eat   PROG  
           ‘Deloto is eating.’

Argument pro-drop is not allowed, and both subjects and objects must be expressed overtly – at least by a pronoun with an indefinite interpretation or a semantically “empty” noun, as in (1a-b). Due to the obligatory realization of core arguments, transitivity of a construction can be easily determined based on the number of explicit arguments preceding the finite or the non-finite verb.<sup>2</sup>

Unlike constructions, however, verbs cannot be classified easily into transitive and intransitive ones, since a significant proportion of verbs are ambitransitive (*labile*): they can be used transitively or intransitively, with a systematic difference in meaning (as in 2).

- (2) a.    Dèlòtó       séngè klā       tābālī é       tā  
           D.       knife put:PAST   table DEF on  
           ‘Deloto put a knife on the table.’       (causative interpretation)
- b.    yrēé klā       à       tā  
           tree put:PAST   3SG on  
           ‘A tree fell on him.’                       (anticausative interpretation)

As I show in the following section, the situation is further complicated by the co-existence in Wan of two distinct types of ambitransitivity, which are characterized by different properties and associated with different semantic classes of verbs. In this sense, lexical transitivity appears to be rather fluid in Wan, and that fluidity compensates in part for the absence of valence-changing morphology: Wan has no morphological passives, no impersonals, no causatives, and no anticausatives; it also does not have specialized constructions encoding passive, causative or anticausative meanings (impersonals are encoded by transitive constructions with a 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural pronominal subject).

### 3. Ambitransitive (labile) verbs

#### 3.1. Causative-anticausative lability

The two types of ambitransitivity (lability) differ in the semantic relationship between the transitive and the intransitive use of the same verb, as well as in the role contextual factors play in the choice between transitive and intransitive constructions.

One type of ambitransitivity is based on the causative-anticausative ambivalence: the intransitive use of the verb implies absence of a volitional agent or instigator directly causing the event, which on the transitive use is expressed by the subject. For example, in (1a) the knife is directly manipulated by a man called Deloto, while in (1b), the displacement of the tree is not caused directly by any specific external agent. I will refer to this type as the causative-anticausative lability.<sup>3</sup>

The other type of ambitransitivity differs in the interpretation of agentivity involved in the event: even though there is no explicit mention of any active participant, it is normally presupposed that a specific agent is involved. For example, in (3b), it is presupposed that the food was eaten by someone, and did not disappear by itself. Intransitive uses with such interpretation correspond closely to the use of passive voice in languages with rich morphology. I will refer to this type as passive lability.<sup>4</sup>

- (3) a. Dèlòtó      lónpō é      lɓ  
       D.            food DEF eat:PAST  
           ‘Deloto ate the food.’            (active interpretation)
- b. lónpō            é      lɓ  
           food            DEF eat:PAST  
           ‘The food has been eaten.’      (passive interpretation)

Passive lability varies across Mande languages with respect to the possibility of encoding the agent on the intransitive use (cf., e.g., Creissels 2015 on Bambara vs. Mandinka). In Wan, passive uses do not in general combine with agentive postpositional phrases.<sup>5</sup>

The two types of ambitransitivity are found with different verbs, and are subject to different restrictions. The causative-anticausative lability is found primarily with change of state verbs, typically – with verbs of physical change of state, largely conforming to the spontaneity hierarchy introduced in Nedjalkov (1969) to account for cross-linguistic tendencies in the use of morphological causatives and anticausatives, cf. also Haspelmath (1993). In particular, the intransitive (anticausative) use is most widespread with changes of states that are likely to be brought about spontaneously, without direct involvement of an external agent. Examples of such events are presented below in (4)-(6).

- (4) a.    nàà            sàɓlà            wiá    lé  
           1SG+COP    shoe            enter    PROG  
           ‘I am putting on shoes.’
- b.    è        wiā            kū                    é        wā  
           3SG    enter:PAST    house            DEF    under  
           ‘He entered the house.’
- (5) a.    è        pō        dō        nōnī  
           3SG    thing    one        lose:PAST  
           ‘He lost something.’
- b.    è        nōnī            kālē                    gó  
           3SG    lose:PAST    forest            in  
           ‘He got lost in the forest.’
- (6) a.    à        yò            mù    è        lígī  
           3PL    sacrifice    PL        DEF    burn:PAST  
           ‘They burned their sacrifice.’
- b.    kū            ē        lígī  
           house            DEF    burn:PAST  
           ‘The house got burned.’

Events that require active participation of an external agent (e.g., doing the dishes or cleaning the floor) are typically encoded by strictly transitive verbs which do not allow for intransitive anticausative uses.

Events that typically occur due to internal reasons and are rarely caused directly by external forces (e.g., the events of smiling or greeting or events of communication) tend to be expressed by strictly intransitive verbs which resist transitive uses on a causative interpretation.

The relationship between spontaneity and transitivity can be illustrated by differences in the argument structure of different verbs of motion. Motion caused internally (self-propelled motion) is expressed by strictly intransitive verbs (ex. 7a-b). Such motion can only be caused by external forces in an indirect way, and the subjects of such verbs refer to entities that are capable of moving on their own, such as animate objects and vehicles.

- (7) a.     $\eta$       $g\bar{a}$              $k\acute{u}$              $w\bar{a}$   
           1SG go:PAST    house            under  
           ‘I went into the house.’
- b.    \*Dèlòtó     $\eta$       $g\bar{a}$              $k\acute{u}$              $w\bar{a}$   
           D.            1SG go:PAST    house            under  
           ‘Deloto made me go into the house.’

Motion events that can be caused both internally and externally are described by ambitransitive verbs: intransitive uses refer to spontaneous or self-propelled motion, while transitive uses refer to motion events that are externally-caused. Since intransitive uses of ambitransitive verbs are associated with an anticausative reading, the subjects of the intransitive use are not restricted to objects capable of self-propelled motion, cf. (8a).

- (8) a.     $yr\bar{e}\acute{e}$   $k\bar{e}$       $\acute{e}$       $si\bar{a}$   
           tree that DEF fall:PAST  
           ‘That tree fell.’
- b.     $l\bar{a}$      $\eta$       $p\bar{o}$      $d\bar{o}$      $si\bar{a}$   
           2SG PERF thing one fall:PAST  
           ‘You dropped something.’

Finally, certain types of motion can only occur due to external impact; such events are described by strictly intransitive verbs. Since the event of motion is in that case unlikely to happen spontaneously, such verbs normally do not have an intransitive anticausative use.<sup>6</sup>

- (9) a.    Dèlòtó        $\acute{e}\acute{e}$      $s\acute{e}\eta g\grave{e}$         $\acute{e}$      $b\bar{i}l\bar{a}$         $\acute{e}$      $t\bar{o}\bar{a}$         $g\acute{o}$   
           D.            REFL knife       DEF pull:PAST   REFL pocket    in  
           ‘Deloto pulled out his knife from the pocket.’
- b.    \*  $s\acute{e}\eta g\grave{e}$      $\acute{e}$      $b\bar{i}l\bar{a}$         $t\bar{o}\bar{a}$         $g\acute{o}$   
           knife       DEF pull:PAST   pocket       in  
           ‘The knife got pulled out from the pocket.’

The different syntactic behavior of different motion verbs shows that the causative-anticausative lability is highly sensitive to the verb's meaning, and in particular, to how likely the event is to occur spontaneously, without direct external causation. At the same time, that type of lability is largely context-independent, i.e. the transitive and the intransitive use do not seem to be subject to any additional restrictions, and their distribution does not differ much from the distribution of any other verb with a similar meaning.

In syntactic terms, the causative-anticausative lability can be accounted for in terms of a regular association of some change of state verbs with two different types of argument structure. In one, the argument undergoing the change of state (the patient) is mapped to the subject, and the change of state is described as spontaneous; that argument structure is associated with an anticausative reading. Alternatively, the patient can be mapped to the object, and the agent causing the change of state, to the subject; that argument structure receives a causative interpretation. Since the purpose of this survey is to present a first sketch of two typologically interesting transitivity-related phenomena, I will not formalize any further the difference between causative and anticausative uses in the mapping of arguments to syntactic functions.

### 3.2. Passive lability

Unlike causative-anticausative lability (described in the previous section), passive lability does not depend on the potential spontaneity of change of state events described by the verb. Verbs that are commonly used intransitively on the anticausative reading do not normally allow for a passive reading. In addition, the passive use is subject to complex semantic and contextual restrictions, including restrictions on temporal-aspectual interpretation and information structure. In particular, the passive use does not combine well with the perfect, the prospective, and the progressive aspect (10a-c).<sup>7</sup>

- (10) a.  $\text{??l3np5} \quad \acute{e} \quad \eta \quad \text{l3}$   
 food DEF PERF eat  
 'The food has been eaten.' (perfect)
- b.  $\text{* b3} \quad \acute{e} \quad \text{z3}\eta \quad \text{t3-}\eta$   
 elephant DEF PROSP kill-PROSP  
 'The elephant is going to be killed.' (prospective)
- c.  $\text{* l3np5} \quad \acute{e} \quad \acute{a} \quad \text{dr3} \quad \text{l3}$   
 food DEF COP cook PROG  
 'The food is being cooked.' (progressive)

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Without going further into the details of this restriction, I assume that two conditions must be met in order for the passive use to be licensed (for a more detailed account, see Nikitina *forthc*). One is a condition on the construction's interpretation; the other one, on information packaging. First, the construction must describe a state resulting from an event in the past, not the event of change of state *per se*. This condition disqualifies the use of the prospective aspect, along with several other TAM forms, from constructions supporting the passive use.

Second, the subject of the intransitive construction is normally discourse-given, and very often topical. Due to that condition, the passive use does not go well with the perfect, which tends to be associated in Wan with a "hot news" reading, and is normally *thetic*.<sup>8</sup> For the same reason, passive uses with newly introduced or focussed participants are ruled out by speakers as inappropriate or strange-sounding.

The relevance of contextual factors for the licensing of passive uses has important consequences for the treatment of transitivity in Wan. In particular, passive lability cannot be described in the same way as the causative-anticausative one, i.e. in terms of a lexical account based on a regular association of the same verb with two different argument structures (such an account may be applicable to the virtually unrestricted passive alternations attested in Central Mande languages, see Creissels 2007 on Bambara, Creissels 2015 on Mandinka, Lüpke 2005: 7.3.2, Cobbinah & Lüpke 2008 for a discussion of related theoretical issues).<sup>9</sup> Extending the lexical account to passive lability in Wan would be problematic, since that simple account would not capture the difference in contextual restrictions between the causative-anticausative and the passive lability. The restrictions on the passive use need to be specified as additional restrictions on the subject of the transitive use and the construction's temporal-aspectual meaning. In other words, the passive use should make reference both to the construction-specific TAM meaning and to the information-structural notion of topic.

More generally, the distinction between the two types of ambitransitivity complicates the phenomenon of transitivity in Wan. On the one hand, the syntactic manifestation of transitivity is very rigid: pro-drop of neither subjects nor objects is allowed, and all arguments must be encoded explicitly in the sentence structure, even if non-specific, irrelevant or easily recoverable. In this sense, the distinction between transitive and intransitive constructions is very clear. On the other hand, the lexical distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs is rather vague, and a large proportion of verbs are compatible with a transitive or an intransitive argument structure, and correspondingly, can be used transitively or intransitively, on a causative or an anticausative reading, respectively. Flexibility of the distinction



between transitive and intransitive verbs is complemented by the phenomenon of passive lability, which is determined by a combination of lexical and contextual factors. The interaction of different factors in licensing transitive and intransitive uses points to a complex relationship between argument structure (e.g., which verbs are compatible with the passive use) and highly context-specific restrictions on argument realization (e.g., in which types of construction the passive use occurs). A separate study is needed to explore this interaction in further detail, taking into account the full spectrum of lexical meanings (cf. Malchukov et al. 2015).

#### 4. Transitive verbs with restricted objects

Another aspect of transitivity in Wan that deserves to be mentioned in this survey is the way the language draws the distinction between objects and oblique arguments. Given the rigid S-(Aux)-OVX word order, that distinction is, in principle, rather straightforward: objects always precede the verb, while oblique arguments follow it; oblique arguments, moreover, are normally realized as postpositional phrases, while objects are encoded by noun phrases. Across languages, verbs selecting for an oblique argument often specify the adposition that introduces that argument, especially in cases where the argument does not have a spatial meaning. That selectional pattern is also commonly found in Wan; in (11a-b), for example, the postpositions *lé* ‘at’ and *lènŋ* ‘to’ are the expected markers that introduce, with the verbs *bènì* ‘fear’ and *sò* ‘please’, the stimulus and the experiencer, respectively.

- (11) a.    *yāá*            *bènì* *lé*    *sógò* *mù*    *è*    *lé*  
           3SG+COP    fear    PROG horse PL    DEF    at  
           ‘She is afraid of the horses.’
- b.    *yrē*    *ló*    *sò-ŋ*                            *à*    *lènŋ*    *ǰ*  
           work do    please-HAB2            3SG    to    NEG  
           ‘He does not like working.’

Very similar, but somewhat more unusual, is the pattern commonly observed in Wan with transitive verbs: just like the verbs specifying that their oblique argument must be introduced by a particular postposition, some transitive verbs require that their object be introduced by a particular locative noun. In (12a-c), for example, the verbs’ objects must be headed by the particular locative nouns – and those nouns must be present, at least on the given meaning of the verb.

- (12) a.    *ŋ*    *klē*    *é*    *wā*            *gōnā*  
           1SG    stone DEF    bottom    raise:PAST  
           ‘I lifted the stone.’
- b.    *è*    *éŋ*    *é*    *tā*                            *klā*

- 
- 3SG voice DEF upper.surface put.down:PAST  
 ‘He lowered the sound.’
- c. è dùṅgbèn è lé lō  
 3SG door DEF surface remove:PAST  
 ‘She opened the door.’

Since locative nouns are a common source of spatial postpositions, many of such nouns are homophonous with a postposition, to the extent that one could have an impression that the examples in (12a-c) feature a postpositional argument in a preverbal position, not a noun phrase headed by a locative noun (Nikitina 2008a). In fact, the phenomenon goes beyond those nouns that have a postpositional counterpart, and as we will see below, beyond locative nouns in general. In addition, several locative nouns differ from their corresponding postpositions in tone, and the tonal evidence supports the nominal status of the preverbal element in examples such as (12a-c).

The restricted objects of the type illustrated above are very prominent in Wan. Some of the verbs can take different kinds of object (headed by different locative nouns), with minor changes in the meaning (as in 13a-c). With some verbs, the locative noun can be omitted (13c), and with others, it must always be present.<sup>10</sup>

- (13) a. lā ̄ mī pòlí  
 2SG hand external.surface wash  
 ‘Wash your hands.’
- b. gà plēti mu è gò pòlí  
 go plate PL DEF inside wash  
 ‘Go do the dishes.’
- c. mī mū é tēŋ é pōlí tó è gó  
 person PL DEF all REFL wash:PAST river DEF in  
 ‘All the people bathed in the river.’

Locative nouns typically refer to the part of the object that is physically affected by the event (e.g., in 13a-b it is the external surface vs. the internal parts of the object); but there are also cases where the event does not involve any physical impact, at least not in the literal sense (14).

- (14) à ñ tā lō  
 3PL 1SG upper.surface eat:PAST  
 ‘They deceived me.’

The restrictions imposed on the head of the object noun phrase are in some respects similar to case restrictions imposed by many European verbs on their oblique argument. There are, however, significant differences that undermine that parallel.

Firstly, the locative noun in question shows no signs of being syntactically different from any other noun; for example, it can appear in all nominal positions. Even if the noun is assumed to function in some way as a “case marker”, that marking must be at such an early stage of grammaticalization that there are in fact no indications of an ongoing process of grammaticalization.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, and more significantly, the same locative noun is retained – in the subject position – when the verb is used intransitively, on an anticausative or a passive reading (see the previous sections on lability). In (15b), for example, the verb is used intransitively, and the patient is realized as the subject. Yet the locative noun introducing the patient is retained, which is rather unexpected on an account treating the locative noun as some kind of oblique case marker. The position of the predicative marker in (15b) (which always follows the subject) also rules out the possibility of treating the locative noun as a prefix on the verb.

- (15) a.    èé            gó            flē̄  
           3SG+REFL    inside        breathe:PAST  
           ‘He had rest.’
- b.    à        gò            ŋ        flé̄  
           3SG    inside        PERF    breathe  
           ‘He is rested.’

Thirdly, while the locative noun is obligatory, its possessor can sometimes be omitted. In (16), the addressee of the curse is nonspecific, and the corresponding argument of the nominalization is omitted. The fact that the locative noun is used independently of the argument it introduces suggests once again that it differs in its function from markers of oblique arguments.

- (16) lē                    tá    wā    é    wō            é    kpālé            yā  
       upper.surface    close NMLZ DEF    make:PAST    REFL    hard            with  
       ‘The curse had serious consequences.’

All the properties reviewed above suggest that locative nouns selected by transitive verbs function syntactically as heads of the object noun phrase; yet some other properties of the construction point in a different direction. I will introduce here briefly two such properties, just to illustrate one aspect of a mismatch between the construction’s syntax and its semantic properties.

First, locative nouns selected by verbs cannot be modified in any way. For example, in (17), even though the quantifier ‘all’ could be expected to follow the locative noun, since it quantifies, semantically, the entire object noun phrase (‘spent all of the inside of the money’). Instead, the quantifier must follow the possessor

noun phrase, suggesting that the semantic argument of the verb is ‘the money’ (‘spent the inside of all of the money’).

- (17) è zòŋ àà gòlí tēŋ gò sé-ŋ  
 3SG PROSP 3SG:ALIEN money all inside spoil-PROSP  
 ‘He is going to spend all his money.’

Second, while it is in general possible in Wan to coordinate objects of transitive verbs, it is not possible to do that with objects introduced by locative nouns. Instead of coordinating two noun phrases headed by identical locative nouns, coordination applies to the noun’s possessors, suggesting again that the locative nouns cannot be analyzed as full-fledged heads of the object noun phrase.

- (18) a. yàá yī péé gbō trōŋ gò bō lé  
 3SG+COP water and pot clay inside pass PROG  
 ‘She is mixing water and clay.’  
 b. \*yàá yī gò péé gbō trōŋ gò bō lé  
 3SG+COP water inside and pot clay inside pass PROG  
 ‘She is mixing water and clay.’

In short, the behavior of locative nouns selected by transitive verbs is characterized by a mixture of properties some of which suggest that the locative noun is part of the object, and some, that the locative noun is not a full-fledged nominal head. The correct analysis of such constructions needs to account for that mixture (possibly along the lines of an incorporation account, but I cannot spell out the details of such an account here due to space limitations).

The phenomenon of “restricted” objects is complicated by further interaction with transitivity. As discussed in the previous section, many verbs in Wan cannot be assigned to the transitive or the intransitive class. Hence, verbs selecting for a particular locative noun as their object can alternatively be viewed as verbs selecting for a locative noun as their subject, based on the anticausative or the passive use. For example, in (19)-(20) the same verb is used transitively and intransitively, retaining its selectional properties: the locative noun is the head of the object in one case and the head of the subject in the other. There seems to be no way to tell whether the verb actually imposes restrictions on the object or on the subject in that case.

- (19) a. è sō é mì zīā  
 3SG skirt DEF side descend:PAST  
 ‘She lowered her skirt.’  
 b. pá é mì ŋ zīà  
 wind DEF side PERF descend

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- (20) a. è dùṅgbèn è lé lō  
 3SG door DEF surface remove:PAST  
 ‘The wind has diminished.’  
 ‘She opened the door.’
- b. kū lāgā ē lé ŋ ló  
 house mouth DEF edge PERF remove  
 ‘The door has opened.’

The decision to describe the selection of locative nouns as a property of transitive or intransitive uses ultimately depends on which use is regarded as basic, and I do not see any principled arguments for treating one of the uses as such. Semantics is not of much help in this question, since the verb’s meaning is systematically related to the verb’s transitivity, and it does not provide a clue as to whether the verb’s “basic” meaning implies the presence of an agent/cause. Syntactically, too, there is no a priori reason to believe that one of the uses is derived from the other.

Finally, although this section focused on the selection of locative nouns, the phenomenon of object-restricting verbs seems to be much more general. In particular, combinations of verbs and relational nouns (i.e. argument-taking nouns, see Nikitina 2008b: Ch. 3 for syntactic details) very often correspond in Wan to meanings expressed by proper verbs in European languages. Some examples of such combinations are given below.

- (21) a. yāá bí -tà lé  
 3SG+COP dance? weave PROG  
 ‘She is dancing.’
- b. yāá yí tē lé  
 3SG+COP sleep kill PROG  
 ‘He is sleeping.’
- c. è yrē lō sá glā  
 3SG work do base take:PAST  
 ‘She started working.’

The combinations vary in the degree of integration of the two parts. In some cases, the nominal is no longer attested on its own, and the only indication of its earlier independent status is its use in other compounds or some tonal clues that suggest that the segment was not originally part of the verb.<sup>12</sup> In others, the nominal retains a certain degree of independence, as illustrated in example (22b) with passivization, which is parallel to examples with locative nouns in (19b), (20b). It is also common to find variation across speakers in that some use such combinations as fully lexicalized verbs, while others still treat them as consisting of a verb and a nominal

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object. Sometimes the same combination behaves differently depending on subtle contextual factors, such as the argument’s definiteness. For example, both (22a) and (22b) are attested intransitive uses of the verb ‘start’; in (22a), the verb is treated as a lexicalized whole (hence the marker of perfect precedes it), while in (22b), it behaves as a noun+verb combination (hence the marker of perfect follows the noun, since it must appear in the post-subject position, before the verb phrase).

- (22) a. yrē    η        sá-glà  
          work PERF base-take  
          ‘Work has started.’
- b. yrē    ē        sā    η        glà  
          work DEF base PERF take  
          ‘The work has started.’

The syntactic behavior of combinations of transitive verbs and object nouns selected by them is similar to that of combinations of verbs with locative nouns, and they probably need to be accounted for in similar terms. It is common, of course, for verbs in European languages to select for particular objects or even subjects on idiomatic readings, but in Wan the selection of particular subject and object heads does not seem to be closely related to idiomaticity. Rather, it appears to reflect a more flexible, as compared to European languages, association between arguments and syntactic functions: just as many verbs cannot be classified as transitive or intransitive, verbs can impose restrictions on the heads introducing an argument independent of whether that argument is an oblique argument, an object or a subject (something that typically occurs in European languages with oblique arguments only).

More generally, the unusual class of transitive verbs with lexically restricted objects – described here for Wan, but common across Mande languages, even though such restricted objects are often treated as some sort of “prefixes” – illustrates the dangers of relying on intuitive judgments in analyzing argument structure in a foreign language: despite their semantic similarity to European verbs with locative prefixes, such verbs turn out to behave quite differently with respect to their syntax.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this brief survey was to give an overview of the interaction between syntactic and lexical transitivity in Wan, focusing in particular on two aspects of transitivity that are interesting from a typological and a formal-theoretic point of view. First, while transitivity is well-defined for constructions, it is not an inherent property of individual lexical items. A large number of verbs are flexible with respect

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to transitivity, and can be freely used in transitive or intransitive constructions. There are further subtypes of such uses, some of which are more context-independent than others. Overall, the choice between transitive and intransitive uses depends on a number of factors, including the event's perceived degree of spontaneity, change of state semantics, tense and aspect, and information-structure properties of the clause. The resulting interaction of factors is rather complex, and a fuller study would require the use of corpus data.

Second, a significant portion of verbs in Wan specify the particular head that must be used to introduce an argument. In European languages, this is typical of verbs selecting for oblique arguments, but in Wan, that phenomenon is more general and seems to be independent of transitivity proper. Objects are as likely as oblique arguments to be introduced by particular pre-selected types of head: with oblique arguments, these are postpositions, but with objects, these are typically locative nouns. As a result, transitive verbs – or rather, transitive uses of verbs – can be classified in Wan into those that do not restrict the way their object is encoded, and those that require the object to have a particular lexical head. The phenomenon is further complicated in light of the general lack of a rigid transitive/intransitive distinction: for many verbs, it is hard to tell whether the restrictions are imposed on the encoding of the object or on that of the subject.

More generally, the data discussed in this report supports the view that transitivity is not a uniform phenomenon; languages vary both with respect to how transitivity is manifested and with respect to the role it plays in the grammar (Nichols 2004, Haspelmath 2015, *inter alia*). Within a single language, the choice between transitive and intransitive constructions can be determined by a complex interaction of lexical and contextual factors. The differences between subtypes of labiality and differences in selectional properties among transitive verbs in Wan illustrate some aspects of that complexity.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Tonal realizations are marked by diacritics: á (high), ā (mid), à (low). Nasalization is marked by a tilde: ɲ. Abbreviations used in the glosses are: ALIEN – alienable possessor pronoun, COP – copula,

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DEF – definite marker, HAB2 – second habitual, NEG – negation, PAST – past tense, PERF – perfect, PL – plural, PROG – progressive, PROSP – prospective, REFL – reflexive, SG - singular.

<sup>2</sup> The only exception is the situation in which the subject of an embedded clause is controlled by an argument of the matrix verb, but I assume that such situations are determined by the lexical properties of controlling verbs, which specify the type of control as part of their argument structure. This difference from pro-drop makes clauses with controlled subjects irrelevant to the issue of surface transitivity.

<sup>3</sup> For different typologies of lability, see Letuchiy 2009, Creissels 2014.

<sup>4</sup> The two kinds of ambitransitivity attested in Wan represent different subtypes of P-lability, where the argument encoded by the intransitive subject corresponds to the object of the transitive use of the same verb. Some Central Mande languages such as Bambara present evidence for several different kinds of A-lability, where the subject of the intransitive use corresponds to the object of the transitive use (Creissels 2007 discusses examples of the delimitative, resultative, applicative, and reciprocal alternations). In Wan, A-lability is virtually unattested, i.e. there are only a couple of verbs that can be used with or without an object, without a change in the subject's role.

<sup>5</sup> This restriction may have to do with the semantics of postpositions, rather than with properties of passive uses per se: in Wan, there is no agentive postposition, and the postposition *ɔ̃nlé*, used to introduce causes (e.g., with anticausative uses), cannot be extended to agents.

<sup>6</sup> Note that Wan does not mark the difference between static locations, sources, and goals of motion; that distinction is partly encoded in the argument structure of the motion verb and partly inferred from the context (Nikitina 2009b).

<sup>7</sup> On the meaning and structure of major temporal-aspectual forms, see Nikitina 2007.

<sup>8</sup> There is, however, some variation in the use of the perfect across generations of speakers and dialects, which I cannot go into here.

<sup>9</sup> For Northwestern Mande, see Blecke 1996, Creissels & Dramé 2015; for Southeastern Mande, see an overview in Nikitina *forthc.*

<sup>10</sup> The locative nouns selected by transitive verbs are easily confused with prefixes, due to apparent similarity to objects of verbs with spatial prefixes in European languages. In other Mande languages, such nouns have been persistently analyzed as prefixes or “semi-grammaticalized prefixes”, cf., *inter alia*, Nikitina 2008a. As I show below, such an account cannot be upheld, at least in Wan, given the evidence from passivization.

<sup>11</sup> Note again that the locative noun also cannot be easily analyzed as a postposition, for two reasons. First, some of the nouns that are “selected” by transitive verbs have no corresponding postposition. Second, some of the nouns differ from their corresponding postposition in tone, suggesting that one was derived from the other, but at present, the noun and the postposition are not identical.

<sup>12</sup> In Wan, tonal realization is intimately related to syntax, especially when it comes to the realization of the underlying “Defective High” tone, which follows a complex set of rules and depends both on surrounding tones and on syntactic configuration.

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