

LABILITY OF VERBS AND ITS RELATIONS TO VERB MEANING AND ARGUMENT STRUCTURE (BASED ON THE DATA OF INDO-EUROPEAN, ARABIC, TURKIC AND OTHER LANGUAGES)

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0. Although labile verbs have been an object of linguistic analysis for long time, different meanings of this term have been proposed. The most popular example of lability are labile verbs in Daghestanian languages, that can be used intransitively (for situations with one argument like 'to die'), as well as transitively (in this case they mean causation of one argument situation, like 'to kill').

At the same time, in the grammars of some languages the term "lability" is used in a broader sense. The authors call "labile verbs" all verbs, that can become either transitive or intransitive, like English *knit* (*Mary knits a sweater/Mary knits very well*), even if the transitive meaning is not causative meaning.

Finally, the third meaning of the term "lability" is the most general: in the typological work [Kopchevskaya 1986: 44] the author calls this name "ability for using in several constructions of the sentence without special marking of diathesis change in the verb", without specification of the correlation between these constructions.

All these meanings of the analyzed term are based on the syntactical properties of the verbs, not on the semantic correlations between their two meanings, which can also be important.

Unfortunately, the analysis of lability has been based mainly on the data of ergative languages, excluding the article [Halpelmath 1993], where lability is regarded as one of the types of formal correlations between inchoative and causative verbs, side by side with morphological causatives, morphological anticausatives, suppletive pairs and equipollent pairs, where both members are marked with special markers.

In my report I am going to examine labile verbs from other point of view: the main question is not syntactical transitivity/intransitivity of the verb. I will pay my attention to the following questions:

(1) Which classes of verbs (verbs with which meaning) often become labile? What are the properties of the arguments of these verbs (are they prototypical agents and patients, or not)? How can lability be related to mono-/polypredicativity of the sentences (the main attention will be paid to inchoative verbs like *begin*, Arabic *bada'a* etc.).

(2) What are the main types of semantic correlation between two uses of the verb (reciprocal, reflexive, causative, passive types).

As a matter of fact, I am trying to analyze relations between lability as a syntactical property of a verb, argument structure of a verb, and semantic classes of labile verbs.

The main classes of labile verbs

As it was noticed in many linguistic works, such as [Haspelmath 1993] and [Abraham 1997], labile verbs are typical for some languages and are very rare in other ones. In English most transitive verbs can also be used intransitively, but in other Germanic languages only restricted verb classes has this property. This difference certainly can be more appreciable between languages from different groups and families.

In spite of this, we can argue that there are groups of verbs, which are labile more often, than other ones, so **if there are labile verbs in a certain language, verbs of these groups will likely be labile**. Below I will examine some of these groups.

1. PHASE VERBS. The meanings of the phase of the situation are typically expressed by labile verbs. For instance, in German verbs *beginnen* 'begin (transitive)/be begun', *anfangen* 'begin (transitive)/be begun', *enden* 'finish/be over', *aufhören* 'stop (transitive)/be stopped' and so on.

Although all this verbs are semantically labile (they designate a situation P and its causation), not all of them are syntactically labile: if the first three verbs can be either transitive or intransitive, the last one do not usually govern a direct object:

(1) *Sie fingen die Demonstration an* 'They begin the demonstration' (direct object), *but*

(2) *Ich hörte mit der Arbeit auf* 'I finished the work' (prepositional object).

It is important to say, that lability of prefixal phase verbs does not imply that the initial verb is also labile: the verb *anfangen* ‘begin (transitive)/be begun’ is derived from the verb *fangen* ‘catch’, which can be used only transitively.

In the German language not all of phase verbs are labile: for instance, the verb *beenden* is transitive. But in Bulgarian all of them have the same properties: there is a rule, saying that **all phase verbs must be labile**: for example, *započvam* ‘begin (transitive)/begin (intransitive)’, *prodълžavam* ‘continue (transitive)/be continued’, *svърша* ‘finish/be over’. If a derived phase verb is labile, the initial verb can be labile as well as in German: the verb *върша* ‘do’ can be used only transitively.

The group of phase verbs is not homogenous: inchoative verbs are labile more often than verbs, designating other phases of situation (its end or middle phase). For example, in German the verb *beenden* ‘finish’ has the prefix *be-*, that derives almost only transitive verbs, whereas this way of derivation is not typical for inchoative verbs.

In Arabic many phase verbs are semantically labile (they can mean either a situation P or its causation): *tawaqqafa* ‘be stopped/stop’, *istamarra* ‘continue (intransitive)/continue (transitive)’, *bada’* ‘be begun/begin (transitive)’, *ibtada’a* ‘be begun/begin (transitive)’, but only inchoative verbs *bada’a* and *ibtada’a* can be used as bivalent transitive verbs:¹

- (3a) **ibtada’-a** al-‘a:m- ad-dirasiyy-u
 be_begun-3SGM DEF-year-NOM DEF-academic-NOM
 ‘The academic year began’ (monovalent);
- (3b) **na-btadi’-u** dira:sat-a al-luyat-i al-‘arabiyyat-i
 1PL-begin-NOM studying-ACC DEF-language-GEN DEF-Arabic-GEN
 ‘We are beginning studying the Arabic language’ (bivalent transitive);
- (4a) fi: as-sa:‘at-I at-ta:si‘at-I **bada’a-t** al-harb-u
 in det-hour-GEN DET-ninth-GEN be begun-3SGF DEF-war-NOM
 ‘At 9 o’clock the war began’ (monovalent).
- (4b) **bada’-a-** al-‘umma:l-a al-mašru:‘-a
 begin.3SGM DEF-worker.PL-GEN DEF-project-ACC
 ‘The workers began the project (working on the project)’ (bivalent transitive).

But most of phase verbs can govern a prepositional object:

- (5a) ‘intaha: - al-‘i:d-u fi al-layl-i
 be_finished.3SGM DEF-holiday-NOM in DEF-night-GEN
 ‘The holiday was finished at night’ (monovalent);
- (5b) wa ba‘da an intaha: **min** tana:wul-I al-fuṭu:r-I nahada
 and after that be_finished.3SGM from taking-GEN DEF-breakfast-GEN stand_up
 ‘After he finished his breakfast, he stood up’ (bivalent intransitive).

This variant is also possible for inchoative verbs:

- (6) na-bda’-u **bi** ahba:r-I al-yawm-i
 1PL-begin-M with news-GEN DEF-day-GEN
 ‘We are beginning (to discuss) the today’s news.’

Although we can consider that in such cases valency increase is marked with the prepositions like *min* or *bi:*, it is not proved by Arabic data: these prepositions cannot mark causativity or valency derivations in other cases. I suppose, that verbs like *intaha:* tend to change their valency, just like phrase verbs in other

¹ Abbreviations. NOM – Nominative, ACC – Accusative, GEN – Genitive, SG – Singular, PL – Plural, 1, 2, 3 – 1st, 2nd, 3rd person, DEF – Definite.

languages. However, its lability is weaker than lability of verbs like *bada'a* and *ibtada'a*, so it cannot become transitive.

Almost the same situation we can see in Turkish. Prototypically Turkic verbs are not labile, but the Turkish verb *başlamak* can mean either 'begin something.' or 'be begun'. However, in the first meaning it is not transitive, but governs the indirect (dative) object.

2. VERBS WITH A PROTOTYPICALLY PATIENTIVE ARGUMENT. It is well-known that prototypical causative markers can apply to monovalent verbs, that have a patientive argument, but often do not apply to transitive verbs or agentive intransitive verbs like 'go'. [see Nedjalkov, Silnitsky 1969]

It is possible to say that in languages, where most verbs are labile, lability plays the role of a causative marker. Therefore, prototypically patientive monovalent verbs, which typically combine with causative markers, are labile and can be used in transitive or intransitive constructions. For example, in English verbs with patientive arguments often are labile (like *break*) and many verbs of other types are not (cf. *go*, which cannot mean 'make somebody go'). In the Adyghe language the class of labile verbs include most verbs of destruction, which always have a patientive argument.

3. Verbs with semantically close meanings. In languages, where the class of labile verbs is not very big, lability appears, when two meanings — situation with one argument and with two arguments — have some common semantic components.

For instance, transitive verbs in pairs like 'go'/'lead', 'run'/'drive, make run' mean sociative causation [Shibatani 2001]: 'the subject makes P and by this makes the object do P': *lead X* = 'go with X and make X go'. Therefore, transitive and intransitive meanings have common component 'the subject goes'. In Old Greek many of such verbs are labile, cf. *baino* 'go/lead', *ago* 'lead/leave, go out'. Another example of this type is a Russian verb *gnat'* 'drive, make run', which means 'go' in colloquial Russian.

Another type of verbs, which become labile in many languages, are verbs, derived from nouns. In this case transitive and intransitive uses also have common semantic component — the semantic argument: cf. Russian *kapat'* 'fall in drops/spill in drops', Syrian Arabic *naqqata* with the same meanings, where the common component is 'form drops':

Russian

- (7a) s --- kryshi kapay-et vod-a
 from --- roof drop-3SG water-NOM
 'Water fall in drops from the roof';
- (7b) mne --- kazhdyj den' kapay-ut lekarstvo
 to_me --- every day drop-3PL medicine
 'They give me the medicine (in drops) every day.'

4. LABILITY OF DERIVED VERBS. Arabic data show that derived verbs, formed by the markers of valency derivations easily become labile. For example, lability is very typical for verbs of the "third pattern" with the meaning of reciprocity or symmetric action: cf. qa:raba 'come nearer/draw nearer', ma:tala 'compare/be alike', sa:wa: 'level/become equal' and so on. This tendency can be explained by the fact that the component of symmetrical action, which is added to the meaning of the verbs by the derivation is the main component. Causativity and transitivity are less important, so they can vary from use to another.

Types of semantic correlation between two meanings of labile verbs

All aforementioned verbs were examples of case, when a verb can mean **the situation P** or **causation of the situation P**. This type of semantic correlation between two meanings of labile verbs is the most widespread, but there are other types as well. The types of lability are:

1. Causative lability. *One verb means 'P' and 'cause P'. What is necessary to add to aforesaid, it is important, which type of causation do we mean: for example, in Old Greek 'P' and 'associative causation of P' often are designated by the same labile verb, and in Arabic symmetrical action and its causation tend to be expressed by the same verb.*

2. Reflexive lability. Reflexive and reciprocal types of lability were first examined in [Liutikova 2002]. Reflexive type (the same verb expresses meanings 'X P Y', where X is the subject and Y is

the object, and ‘X P X’, where X is the subject and the object) is found in English (The mother washes the baby/John washes ‘washes his face’) and Estonian (pesema ‘wash something/wash oneself’). What is the most interesting, in some languages the reflexive type of lability is the main type: in Alutor, ergative language, closely related to Chukchi, most labile verbs are from this type: cf. ilγ̣tav- ‘wash something/wash oneself’, tivla- ‘beat by a stick (a carpet)/beat oneself by a stick’, pseṭwa- ‘take smb.’s shoes off/take one’s shoes off’ etc. Since both causative and reflexive types of lability combine with verbs, that have animated arguments, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish these types, like in case with Russian povernut’ ‘turn something/turn (to the right)’:

Russian:

- (8a) on povernu-l ruchk-u dver-i
 he turn-PAST.SG.M handle-ACC door-GEN
 ‘He turned the door-handle’;
 (8b) my povernu-l-I napravo
 we turn-PAST-PL right
 ‘We turned right’.

The intransitive use do not have the reflexive meaning, but the subject is animated and he acts consciously, and it is not typical for the causative type of lability.

3. Reciprocal lability. The same verb means ‘X P Y’ and ‘X and Y P each other’. This type of lability is not widespread in the languages of the world. We can see it in English (*meet*: *I met her/We meet in the street* ‘meet each other’) and Arabic (*tala:qa* ‘X meets with Y’/‘X and Y meet’):

Arabic:

- (9a) t-atala:qa al-juhu:d-u al-huku:miyyat-u wa al-ahliyyat-u
 3F-meet.SG DEF-efforts-NOM DEF-governmental-NOM and DEF-people’s-NOM
 ‘The Government and the people make efforts to achieve one purpose’ (literally ‘efforts of the Government and the people meet’).
 (9b) y-atala:qa:-hu fi: yawm-I as-sabt-i
 3M-meet.SG-3SGM in day-GEN DEF-saturday-GEN
 ‘He will meet her (with her) in Saturday.’

This type of lability usually occurs when the action, expressed by the verb, is semantically reciprocal in both meanings: if *X meets Y*, it means that in fact *Y meets X*.

4. Passive (conversive) lability. Passive lability is the case when a verb can designate the situation P, using different participants as subjects: cf. Bulgarian *xaresam* ‘A likes B/B attracts A’ and Arabic *tahaddada* ‘threaten/be under the threat’:

- (10a) ad-dawlat-u al-‘arabiyy-at-u t-atahaddad-u-hu
 DEF-state-NOM DEF-Arabic-F-NOM 3F-threaten-SG-3SGM
 ‘The Arabic state threatens him.’
 (10b) at-tama:suk-u al-waṭan-iyy-u y-atahaddad-u min
 DEF-solidarity-NOM DEF-motherland-REL-NOM 3M-threaten-SG
 ru:h-I --- al-’in’iza:l-i
 from --- spirit-GEN DEF-isolation-GEN
 ‘Solidarity of our motherland is under the threat of isolationism.’

Verbs like these are close to prototypical converse verbs, like *buy/sell*. The difference is that the arguments of verbs like *tahaddada* are not so similar as two agents of verbs like *buy*: the argument, which is under the threat is less agentive than the other, which threatens. Besides that, we can use the criterion of transitivity: the verbs *tahaddada* and *xaresam* are transitive in the “agentive” meaning and intransitive in the “patientive” one, so we can consider these verbs labile. This type of lability is found quite rarely and does not occur, when

one of the participants is a prototypical agent and the other is a prototypical patient (there are not verbs, which can mean either 'A kills B' or 'B is killed by A'), so we can suppose that it is between prototypical passive and prototypical conversive.

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