

Workshop

Typology of labile verbs: Focus on diachrony

Call for papers

The term ‘labile’ refers to verbs or verbal forms which 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) which can be employed both transitively and intransitively, as in (1-2); some scholars use other, less widely accepted terms in this sense, such as ‘ambitransitive’ (R. M. W. Dixon 1994) or ‘optionally transitive’ (J. G. Miller 1993):

(1) English

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

(2) Greek

- a. O Janis *efage* mesimeriano
the:NOM Janis:NOM ate:3SG lunch:ACC
‘Janis *ate* lunch’
- b. O Janis *efage*
the:NOM Janis:NOM ate:3SG
‘Janis *ate*’

(1) exemplifies Patient-preserving lability (P-lability), while (2) instantiates an Agent-preserving lability (A-lability). Other types of syntactic alternation, such as locative alternation (cf. John *sprayed* paint on the wall ~ John *sprayed* the wall with paint) or dative shift (Mary *gave* John an apple ~ Mary *gave* an apple to John) are usually treated separately from P- and A-lability. Of particular interest is P-lability, common in ergative-absolutive languages (for instance, in many Daghestan languages), quite frequent also in some nominative-accusative languages (such as English, Greek, German or French), but (almost) entirely lacking in many others (e.g. in Slavic or Uralic).

Although there are a number of studies dealing with this phenomenon in individual languages, such as English (e.g. Keyser & Roeper 1984; McMillion 2006), French

(Larjavaara 2000), Greek (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 1999, 2004, Theophanopoulou-Kontou 1983-4, 2004, Tsimpli 1989, 2006) and some others, a cross-linguistic study of lability is rather neglected (with a few exceptions such as Letuchiy 2006). Even less attention has been paid to the diachronic aspects of labile verbs. 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 (on English), Kulikov 2003 (on Vedic Sanskrit) and Lavidas 2004 (on Greek).

The idea of our workshop is to bring together scholars interested in lability and to open up new horizons in the research of this phenomenon, paying special attention to its diachronic aspects. The issues to be addressed include:

- theoretical and descriptive aspects of a study of labile verbs:
 - should such verbs be treated as one lexical unit with two different syntactic uses or as two separate lexical units,
 - which of the two constructions may be considered as basic (transitive or intransitive)?
- issues in a synchronic typological study of lability:
 - for which semantic and syntactic classes of verbs is the labile pattern particularly common or uncommon?
 - are there any correlations between the grammatical characteristics of a form and its lability?
 - labile patterning of finite vs. non-finite forms (infinitives, participles etc.)
 - relationships between labile verbs, voices and valency-changing categories
 - types of lability (cf. reflexive lability: *Mary washed the baby* ~ *Mary washed*; reciprocal lability: *Mary and John kissed the baby* ~ *Mary and John kissed*; etc.)

Particularly encouraged are papers dealing with

- diachronic aspects of lability:
 - mechanisms of the emergence and expansion of labile verbs (as e.g. in English or Greek)
 - mechanisms of the decay and disappearance of labile verbs (as e.g. in Vedic)

- which semantic and syntactic classes of verbs tend to become labile or non-labile
- lability considered as an instance of syncretism (of transitive and intransitive) and its possible relationships with other types of syncretism or grammatical homonymy
- what are the main evolutionary types of lability attested for Indo-European and other language families and groups with a well-documented history?
- what is the position of Indo-European in a diachronic typological classification of lability types?

The workshop will be organized within the 19th International Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (ISTAL 19), Thessaloniki, Greece, 3-5 April 2009. Please visit <http://www.enl.auth.gr/symposium19>, where you will also find practical information.

Only electronic submissions by e-mail will be considered. Abstracts should be 300-500 words long, not exceeding one page (A4). Please send the one-page abstract of your paper by 15 December 2008 to: L.Kulikov@hum.leidenuniv.nl and kulikovli@gmail.com. Applicants will be notified on abstract acceptance by 20 January 2009.

Leonid Kulikov
Nikolaos Lavidas

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