

## Antipassive derivation in Soninke (West Mande)

Denis Creissels

Lumière University Lyon 2

Soninke, a West Mande language spoken in Mali, Mauritania, Gambia, and Senegal, provides crucial support to the view that accusative languages may have fully productive antipassive derivations. In Soninke, the distinction between transitive and intransitive predication is particularly clearcut. The alignment between transitive and intransitive predication is neutral in indexation, but accusative in flagging, and accusative alignment is found in constituent order too. Soninke has two verbal suffixes that can be involved in antipassivization defined as a morphologically marked alternation by which transitive verbs are converted into intransitive verbs whose sole core argument fulfills the same semantic role as the A argument of the transitive verbs from which they derive. One of these two suffixes is a dedicated antipassive suffix, whereas the other is a multifunction detransitivizing suffix acting as an antipassive marker with a limited number of verbs. In Soninke, there is no interaction between antipassive and aspect, and there is no constraint restricting the use of the antipassive form of transitive verbs to the encoding of habitual events or stereotyped activities either. Antipassive constructions can refer to specific events, provided no specific patient is mentioned. In Soninke, null objects are not allowed, only a tiny minority of transitive verbs can be used intransitively with a subject representing their agentive argument, and the high productivity of antipassive derivation follows from the use of derived intransitive verbs as the preferred strategy for not specifying the patientive argument of transitive verbs. Diachronically, there is evidence that the multipurpose detransitivizing suffix acting as an antipassive marker with a limited number of verbs was originally a reflexive marker, whereas the dedicated antipassive suffix results from the grammaticalization of a verb 'do' in a cross-linguistically common type of antipassive periphrasis.

**Keywords:** Mande, Soninke, antipassive, detransitivization

## 1. Introduction

Soninke, spoken in Mali, Mauritania, Gambia, and Senegal, by approximately 2 million speakers, belongs to the western branch of the Mande language family. The only relatively well-documented Soninke variety is that spoken in Kaedi (Mauritania), for which two comprehensive grammars are available (Diagana O. M. (1984, 1995) and Diagana Y. (1990, 1994)), as well as a dictionary (Diagana O. M. 2011). However, none of the available grammars acknowledges the specificity of antipassive verb forms and of antipassive constructions in the morphosyntax of Soninke. The existence of a productive mechanism of antipassive derivation was first acknowledged in Creissels' (1992) article on the voice system of Kaedi Soninke. (1) reproduces one of the examples quoted in Creissels (1992) to support the recognition of an antipassive voice in Soninke.

- (1) a. *Sámáqqè-n dà léminè-n qíñí.*  
 snake-D CPL.TR child-D bite  
 'The snake bit the child.'
- b. *Sámáqqè-n qíñí-ndì.*  
 snake-D bite-ANTIP  
 'The snake bit (someone).'

Given the topic of the present article and the origin of the data, the following two references are particularly relevant: Creissels & Diagne (2013) on transitivity in Bakel Soninke, and Creissels (2016) on the phonology of Kingi Soninke. Some of the data analyzed here are also discussed in Creissels (2017, forthcoming) and Creissels & Dramé (2018), not to mention conference presentations whose content has been integrated in subsequent publications, but the present article is the first publication specifically devoted to a detailed description of Soninke antipassive.

In the long-standing debate about the relationship between antipassive and accusativity / ergativity, Soninke provides crucial support to the view already suggested by Heath (1976) and discussed in detail by Janic (2016), according to which accusative languages may have fully productive antipassive derivations converting the A argument of transitive clauses into the sole core argument of intransitive clauses, the only differences with antipassive derivations in ergative languages being that:

- a. they are less visible, since in an accusative language, the coding properties of an A noun phrase converted into the sole core argument of an intransitive predication do not change,
- b. one of the functions fulfilled by antipassive derivations in ergative languages (making the A argument of transitive verbs accessible to operations to which the A term of transitive clauses does not have access) has no equivalent in accusative languages.

In this article, building on the works mentioned above and recent fieldwork on Kingi Soninke, I discuss the most salient typological characteristics of Soninke antipassive.

The Soninke examples illustrating the analysis are all from the Soninke variety spoken in Kingi (*Kíngí*), a traditional Soninke province in North West Mali whose main urban center is Nioro (*Ñóoró*), but I am aware of no dialectal variation that would affect the aspects of Soninke morphosyntax discussed in this article.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents the most basic aspects of Soninke clause structure. Section 3 provides additional details on the expression of core arguments and the intransitive use of transitive verbs. Section 4 describes the use of the two verbal suffixes involved in antipassivization. Section 5 discusses the functions and semantics of antipassive constructions. Section 6 discusses the commonalities and differences between antipassivization and object incorporation. Section 7 describes the restrictions to the combination of antipassivization and causativization. Section 8 puts forward hypotheses about the origin of the two suffixes involved in antipassivization. Section 9 summarizes the main conclusions.

## 2. Some basic aspects of Soninke clause structure

### 2.1 Transitive and intransitive verbal predication

In Soninke, as in the other Mande languages, verbal predication is characterized by a rigid constituent order that can be schematized as S pm (O) V (X).<sup>1</sup> The subject (S), a grammatical relation that conflates the A term of the basic transitive construction and the unique core argument of intransitive predication, is the only nominal term of the construction whose presence is an absolute requirement in independent assertive or interrogative clauses. Predicative markers (pm) are grammatical words occupying a fixed position immediately after the subject. They express grammaticalized TAM distinctions and polarity (positive vs. negative), and also participate in transitivity marking.

Examples (2) and (3) illustrate intransitive and transitive verbal predication with the following two predicative markers: *má* ‘completive, negative’, and the locative copula *wá* (negative *ntá*) fulfilling the function of incomplete auxiliary.<sup>2</sup> With

1. Soninke is among the languages in which the recognition of a grammatical relation ‘subject’ conflating transitive agents and sole arguments of monovalent verbs is not problematic, and in this paper, S must be understood as an abbreviation for ‘subject’ (rather than ‘sole argument of semantically monovalent verbs’).

2. Although cognate with the locational copula *wá* / *ntá*, the incomplete predicative marker *wá* / *ntá* has several properties that require treating it as a distinct unit in a synchronic description of Soninke.

the locative copula used as an incomplete auxiliary, the verb is in the form I call gerundive, otherwise it occurs in its bare lexical form. In the glosses, superscript L indicates a tonal modification of the verb (replacement of the lexical contour by an all-low contour) triggered by some predicative markers.

- (2) a. *Ké yúgó má qàrà.*  
 DEM man CPL.NEG study<sup>L</sup>  
 S pm V  
 ‘This man did not study.’
- b. *À wá táaxú-nú dàagó-n kànmá.*  
 3SG ICPL sit-GER mat-D on  
 S pm V X  
 ‘He is sitting on the mat.’
- (3) a. *Lémúnù-n má qálisí kità.*  
 child.PL-D CPL.NEG money get<sup>L</sup>  
 S pm O V  
 ‘The children haven’t got money.’
- b. *À wá dòròkê-n qóbó-nó yàxàré-n dà.*  
 3SG ICPL dress-D buy-GER woman-D for  
 S pm O V X  
 ‘He will buy a dress for the woman.’

The full list of the predicative markers is given in Tables 1 and 2 below.

**Table 1.** The predicative markers combining with the bare form of the verb

	Intransitive	Transitive
completive positive	∅	dà
completive negative		má
instructive positive		ná
instructive negative		ntá
subjunctive positive	nàn	nà
subjunctive negative		nàn máxà
imperative positive	∅	∅/dà <sup>3</sup>
imperative negative		máxà

3. In the imperative singular, the positions of the subject and of the predicative marker are left empty. In the imperative plural, the 2nd person plural pronoun occupies the subject slot; the predicative marker slot is left empty in intransitive constructions, whereas in transitive constructions, it is occupied by a predicative marker *dà* homonymous with that used in the completive positive – cf. Example (8) below.

Table 2. The predicative markers combining with the gerundive

	Intransitive	Transitive
incompletive positive		<i>wá</i>
incompletive positive in focalization context	$\emptyset$	<i>nà</i>
incompletive negative		<i>ntá</i>
past incompletive positive		<i>`ńí</i>
past incompletive negative		<i>má ńí</i>
ostensive		<i>háyi</i>

## 2.2 Indexation and flagging of core syntactic terms

In Soninke, there is no indexation of the core syntactic terms S and O. As regards flagging, as illustrated in (4), Soninke has a differential subject marking mechanism involving an enclitic *-n* (glossed SBJF for ‘subject flag’) which occurs exclusively in two contexts: with interrogative phrases in subject function, and with subject noun phrases marked as focalized by the focus marker *yà/yá*.<sup>4</sup> Note that, when the subject or the object is focalized, the verb undergoes the same tonal modification (indicated in the gloss by superscript L) as in combination with the predicative markers *má* (completive negative) and *ntá* (incompletive negative).

- (4) a. *Kó-n lì?*  
 who-SBJF come<sup>L</sup>  
 ‘Who came?’  
*Múusá yà-n lì.*  
 Moussa FOC-SBJF come<sup>L</sup>  
 MOUSSA came.
- b. *Kó-n dà Hàatú yàxì?*  
 who-SBJF CPL.TR Fatou marry<sup>L</sup>  
 ‘Who married Fatou?’  
*Múusá yà-n dà Hàatú yàxì.*  
 Moussa FOC-SBJF CPL.TR Fatou marry<sup>L</sup>  
 ‘MOUSSA married Fatou.’
- c. *Án dà kó qìrì?*  
 2SG CPL.TR who call<sup>L</sup>  
 ‘Who did you call?’

4. This subject marker, glossed SBJF (‘subject flag’) must not be confused with the definiteness marker (or rather default determiner) -`n, which has the same segmental form but different tonal properties (and a very different distribution).

*Ń dà Múusá yà qirì.*  
 1SG CPL.TR Moussa FOC call<sup>L</sup>  
 'I called MOUSSA.'

- d. *Án góllí kó dànná?*  
 2SG work who for  
 'For whom did you work?'  
*Ń góllí Múusá yà dànná.*  
 1SG work Moussa FOC for  
 'I worked for MOUSSA.'

### 2.3 Alignment

In Soninke, the alignment between transitive and intransitive predication is neutral in indexation, but accusative in flagging. Moreover, accusative alignment is found in constituent order too, since as can be seen from (2) and (3) above, the subject (be it the unique core argument in intransitive predication or the A term in transitive predication) invariably precedes the predicative markers, whereas the object invariably occurs between the predicative markers and the verb.

### 2.4 Oblique arguments

Predicative constructions with two or more terms encoded in the same way as the patient of typical monotransitive verbs (so-called 'multiple object constructions') are not possible in Soninke, and in the construction of semantically trivalent verbs like *kíni* 'give' in (5), one of the arguments (here, the recipient) is an 'oblique argument' that nothing distinguishes from adjuncts: like adjuncts, oblique arguments are encoded as postpositional phrases that follow the verb.

- (5) *Múusá dà qáliší-n kíni Dénbà yí.*  
 Moussa CPL.TR money-D give Demba POSTP  
 S pm O V X  
 'Moussa gave the money to Demba.'

Oblique arguments are found with some semantically bivalent verbs too. In Soninke, not all bivalent verbs can be constructed transitively: some of them, like *mùngú* 'forget' in (6), select an 'extended intransitive' coding frame with one of the two arguments encoded as the subject, and the other one encoded as an oblique.

- (6) a. *Ń Ø mùngú dò ké léminé tòxó-n ñà.*  
 1SG forget with DEM child name-D<sup>LH</sup> POSTP  
 S pm V X  
 'I have forgotten the name of this child.'

- b. \**Ń dà ké léminé tòxó-n mùngú.*  
 1SG CPL.TR DEM child name-D<sup>LH</sup> forget  
 S pm O V

## 2.5 Transitivity marking

A salient feature of Soninke is the particularly clearcut distinction between transitive and intransitive predication, due to the interaction between TAM-polarity marking and transitivity:

- in the completive positive and in the imperative plural, the slot for predicative markers is left empty in intransitive constructions, but is occupied by a morpheme *dà* in transitive constructions – Examples (7) and (8);<sup>5</sup>
- the subjunctive positive is marked by *nà* in transitive constructions and *nàn* in intransitive constructions – Example (9);<sup>6</sup>
- in clauses including a focalized term, the incompletive marker has two variants depending on the transitivity of the construction:  $\emptyset$  in intransitive constructions, and *nà* (homonymous with the subjunctive positive marker) in transitive constructions – Example (10).

- (7) a. *Ń gidá Ø dàgá Hàrànci.*  
 1SG elder\_brother<sup>LH</sup> CPL.INTR go France  
 ‘My elder brother went to France.’

- b. *Yàxàré-n dà tíyè-n qóbó sàxà-n ñá.*  
 woman-D CPL.TR meat-D buy market-D POSTP  
 ‘The woman bought meat at the market.’

- (8) a. *Qà Ø táaxú!*  
 2PL.IMP IMP.INTR go  
 ‘Sit<sub>pl</sub> down!’

- b. *Qà dà léminè-n dèemá!*  
 2PL.IMP IMP.TR child-D help  
 ‘Help<sub>pl</sub> the child!’

- (9) a. *Lémúnù-n nàn táaxú yittè-n ñuré.*  
 child.PL-D SBJV.INTR sit tree-D under  
 ‘The children should sit under the tree.’

5. In some Soninke varieties, this predicative marker occurs as *dè* or *dí*.

6. The form labeled here ‘subjunctive’ combines with noun phrases in subject function in uses broadly similar to those fulfilled by forms traditionally labeled ‘subjunctives’ in grammars of European languages, but it is also found without an overt subject in uses broadly similar to those of European infinitives.

- b. *Lémúnù-n nà tíyè-n ñígá.*<sup>7</sup>  
 child.PL-D SBJV.TR meat-D eat  
 ‘The children should eat meat.’
- (10) a. *À wá sállì-ní.*  
 3SG ICPL pray-GER  
 ‘He is praying.’
- b. *À Ø sállì-ní yà.*  
 3SG ICPL.FOC.INTR pray-GER FOC  
 ‘He is PRAYING.’
- c. *À wá hàrê-n gáagà-ná.*  
 3SG ICPL donkey-D sell-GER  
 ‘He is selling the donkey.’
- d. *À nà hàrê-n gáagà-ná yà.*  
 3SG ICPL.FOC.TR donkey-D sell-GER FOC  
 ‘He is SELLING the donkey.’

### 3. Constraints on the expression of subjects and objects, and on the intransitive use of transitive verbs

In independent assertive or interrogative clauses, null subjects or objects are not allowed: the subject position to the left of predicative markers cannot be left empty, and an overt object phrase must obligatorily be present between the predicative markers that unambiguously belong to the transitive paradigm and the verb. This means that, whenever a potentially transitive verb is found in a construction with just one NP to its left, the construction cannot be analyzed as a transitive construction with a null subject or object, and must be analyzed as an intransitive construction with the sole NP to the left of the verb in subject function.

A crucial point in the analysis of the predicative constructions of Soninke is that the position occupied by the predicative markers rules out an analysis according to which clauses such as (11b), with a bivalent verb preceded by a single noun phrase representing the patient-like participant, might have a transitive construction with a null subject. In such clauses, the predicative markers occur after the unique noun phrase preceding the verb, not before it, as it should be the case if this noun phrase occupied the object position in a transitive construction with a null subject. Moreover, the analysis of clauses such as (11b) as intransitive clauses with the patient in subject function is confirmed by the absence of *dà* in the

7. *Yígá* ‘eat’ occurs here as *ñígá* because of an alternation that automatically modifies the initial of Soninke words in contact with a nasal belonging to the preceding word. In this context,  $r \rightarrow l$ ,  $w \rightarrow \eta$ ,  $y \rightarrow \tilde{n}$ ,  $s \rightarrow c$ ,  $h \rightarrow p$ , and an initial  $\eta$  is added to the words that have no initial consonant.



corresponding completive positive clause (11e), and more generally by the choice of the intransitive variant of the predicative markers that have distinct forms in transitive and intransitive clauses.

- (11) a. *Múusá wá ké dáagó bàyi-ní.*  
 Moussa ICPL DEM mat lay\_out-GER  
 ‘Moussa will lay out this mat.’
- b. *Ké dáagó wá bàyi-ní.*  
 DEM mat ICPL lay\_out-GER  
 ‘This mat will be laid out.’
- c. \* $\emptyset$  *Wá ké dáagó bàyi-ní.*  
 ICPL DEM mat lay\_out-GER
- d. *Múusá dà ké dáagó bàyi.*  
 Moussa CPL.TR DEM mat lay\_out  
 ‘Moussa laid out this mat.’
- e. *Ké dáagó  $\emptyset$  bàyi.*  
 DEM mat CPL.INTR lay\_out  
 ‘This mat was laid out.’

In other words, *bàyi* must be analyzed as a P-labile verb whose intransitive construction has a passive reading.

Similarly, in (12), the absence of the transitivity marker *dà* in the completive positive (12d) shows that (12b) is not a transitive construction with a null object, but rather an intransitive construction. In other words, *sòxó* is an A-labile verb whose intransitive construction has an unspecified object reading.

- (12) a. *Múusá wá ké té sòxò-nó.*  
 Moussa ICPL DEM field cultivate-GER  
 ‘Moussa will cultivate this field.’
- b. *Múusá wá sòxò-nó.*  
 Moussa ICPL cultivate-GER  
 ‘Moussa will cultivate.’
- c. *Múusá dà ké té sòxó.*  
 Moussa CPL.TR DEM field cultivate  
 ‘Moussa has cultivated this field.’
- d. *Múusá  $\emptyset$  sòxó.*  
 Moussa CPL.INTR cultivate  
 ‘Moussa has cultivated.’

To summarize, in Soninke, the absence of an object NP in a clause whose nucleus is a potentially transitive verb implies that the verb in question is labile, and that the TAM-polarity markers sensitive to the transitive vs. intransitive distinction have the form characteristic of intransitive predication.

In the lexicon, the distinction between strictly transitive verbs, A-labile verbs, P-labile verbs, and A/P-labile verbs (which have the ability to be used intransitively in their underived form with a subject representing either of their two core arguments), is quite rigid. A-labile and A/P labile verbs are very few in the verbal lexicon of Soninke,<sup>8</sup> which means that almost all the verbs that have the ability to be used transitively are either strictly transitive verbs or P-labile verbs. In both cases, they are incapable of expressing non-specificity of their patientive argument by being simply used intransitively with their agentive argument in subject function, and this is where antipassive derivation comes in.

#### 4. The derivational suffixes involved in antipassive constructions

Soninke has three verbal suffixes encoding operations on the valency of the verb. One of them is a causative suffix, the other two are valency-decreasing suffixes. Both valency-decreasing suffixes can be involved in antipassivization, but one of them is a dedicated antipassive suffix, whereas the other is a multipurpose detransitivizing suffix acting as an antipassive marker with a limited number of verbs. There is no semantic distinction between the antipassive constructions involving these two suffixes, and the choice is just a lexical property of the individual verbal lexemes.

##### 4.1 The detransitivizing suffix *-i*

Most verbs that have a transitive stem ending with *a*, *o*, or *u* also have an intransitive stem that can be analyzed as derived from the transitive stem by the addition of a tonally neutral detransitivizing marker whose underlying form is /i/. However, this detransitivizing marker surfaces as a distinct segment (*-yi*) with monosyllabic stems only (for example *tù-yí* ‘be known’ < *tú* ‘know’). With non-monosyllabic stems, its presence is manifested by the following changes in the last vowel of the stem (and sometimes also in the preceding vowel):

- a + i* → *e* as in *káré* ‘break (intr.)’ < *kárá* ‘break (tr.)’
- o + i* → *e* as in *sòxé* ‘be cultivated’ < *sòxó* ‘cultivate’
- u + i* → *i* as in *kátí* ‘be hit’ < *kátú* ‘hit’

---

8. The full list of the A-labile or A/P-labile verbs I am aware of in Kingi Soninke is as follows: *dàntáxi* ‘explain’, *gòró* ‘pound’, *hàyi* ‘steal’, *kítí* ‘judge’, *másála* ‘talk’, *mini* ‘drink’, *mùllí* ‘be careful (about something)’, *mùñí* ‘endure’, *nònjó* ‘draw (water)’, *qàrà* ‘learn’, *sègé* ‘climb’, *sòxó* ‘cultivate’, *tángí* ‘fish’, *tógí* ‘hunt’, *wú* ‘cry’.

One can therefore argue that the impossibility of forming distinct detransitivized forms of non-monosyllabic verbs ending with *e* or *i* by means of this suffix follows from the fact that the phonological process manifesting its presence would apply vacuously to such stems. This explanation is consistent with the fact that all the potentially transitive verbs ending with *e* or *i* are P-labile.

Functionally, *-i* may express various detransitivizing operations, but is not equally productive in all its possible uses. Agent demotion is by far its most productive use. Two semantic subtypes can be recognized. In the anticausative subtype, the agent is suppressed from argument structure, and the event is presented as occurring spontaneously, or at least without the involvement of an agent, as in (13b). In the passive subtype, the agent is semantically maintained, but it is not expressed, as in (14b).

- (13) a. *Lémínè-n dà qóllè-n kára.*  
 child-D CPL.TR calabash-D break  
 ‘The child broke the calabash.’  
 b. *Qóllè-n karé.*  
 calabash-D break.DETR  
 ‘The calabash broke.’
- (14) a. *Yàxàré-n dà yillé-n gòró.*  
 woman-D CPL.TR millet-D pound  
 ‘The woman pounded the millet.’  
 b. *Yillé-n gòré.*  
 millet-D pound.DETR  
 ‘The millet was pounded.’

This distinction between agent-backgrounding and agent-suppressing deagentive derivation is not rigid. With many verbs, both readings are equally available, depending on the context. What seems to be crucial is the semantic distinction between processes likely to occur for a variety of reasons that are not always easy to identify (such as ‘break’), and processes that require the intervention of an agent (such as ‘become pounded’).

With a few verbs among those that can combine with the detransitivizing marker *-i* in deagentive function, the same form also has a reflexive or autocausative use, as illustrated by *bóorè* ‘undress oneself’ < *bóorà* ‘undress (tr.)’ in (15).<sup>9</sup>

9. Soninke has two pronouns used productively to express reflexivity: *i* is a long-distance reflexive used in logophoric contexts, and as a reflexive possessive (as in (15a)), whereas *dú* is a local reflexive used for object or oblique reflexivization.

- (15) a. *Yúgò-n dà í rèmmê-n bóorà.*  
 man-D CPLTR REFL SON-D<sup>LH</sup> undress  
 ‘The man undressed his son.’
- b. *Yúgò-n bóorè.*  
 man-D undress.DETR  
 ‘The man undressed.’

The detransitivizing marker *-i* may also have an antipassive (depatientive) function, but in comparison with the intransitive verbs derived by means of *-i* used in anticausative or passive function, those used in antipassive function are not very numerous. Table 3 gives the list of the transitive verbs whose form derived by means of the detransitivizing suffix *-i* is attested in my data with an antipassive function.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 3.** The transitive verbs whose form derived by means of the detransitivizing suffix *-i* may have an antipassive function

Transitive	Antipassive	
<i>bàtú</i>	<i>bàtí</i>	‘follow’
<i>jànbá</i>	<i>jànbé</i>	‘betray’
<i>hàámù</i>	<i>hàámi</i>	‘understand’
<i>híccà</i>	<i>híccè</i>	‘vomit’
<i>jónnà</i>	<i>jónnè</i>	‘begin’
<i>kàrá</i>	<i>kàré</i>	‘cross’
<i>nàhá</i>	<i>nàhé</i>	‘provide service’, ‘be useful’
<i>ñáagà</i>	<i>ñáagè</i>	‘beg’
<i>sàará</i>	<i>sàaré</i>	‘give birth’
<i>ságára</i>	<i>ságaré</i>	‘pick’
<i>sòró</i>	<i>sòré</i>	‘cook’
<i>sùgú</i>	<i>sùgí</i>	‘suck’
<i>yígá</i>	<i>yígé</i>	‘eat’

As illustrated by *yígé* < *yígá* ‘eat’ in (16), most of the intransitive verbs derived by means of *-i* that can be used in antipassive function also have an anticausative or passive use.<sup>11</sup>

10. In addition to this list, there are also some intransitive verbs that can be analyzed etymologically as resulting from the lexicalization of the antipassive use of the detransitized form of a transitive verb, such as *kité* ‘make a fortune’ (cf. *kitá* ‘get’).

11. On the *y ~ ñ* alternation affecting the initial consonant of this verb, see footnote 7.

- (16) a. *Lémúnù-n dà tíyè-n ñígá.*  
 child.PL-D CPL.TR meat-D eat  
 ‘The children ate the meat.’
- b. *Lémúnù-n ñígé.*  
 child.PL-D eat.DETR  
 ‘The children ate.’
- c. *Tíyè-n ñígé.*  
 meat-D eat.DETR  
 ‘The meat was eaten.’

Diachronically, a plausible scenario is that this suffix started as a reflexive marker (possibly resulting from the grammaticalization of a reflexive pronoun in object function) whose uses extended to the coding of other semantic types of detransitivization (including antipassivization), a scenario widely attested or reconstructed in the languages of the world (e.g. Indo-European). Cf. Creissels (forthcoming) for a discussion of this hypothesis.

#### 4.2 The antipassive suffix *-ndì* ~ *-ndí*

This suffix has dissyllabic allomorphs with monosyllabic stems (for example *kà-yindí* < ‘ká ‘insult’). With non-monosyllabic stems, it may surface as *-ndì* or *-ndí* (depending on the tone pattern of the stem), and triggers no segmental modification of the stem. Its two allomorphs are conditioned as follows: *-ndì* if the tone pattern of the stem includes no LH sequence, *-ndí* if the tone pattern of the stem includes a LH sequence.

This suffix is exclusively used in antipassive function, as in (1), reproduced here as (17), and it is very productive. The transitive verbs that can be used intransitively in their underived form with a subject representing the agent are very few, the transitive verbs with which the detransitivizing marker *-i* can be used in antipassive function are not very numerous either (cf. Section 4.1, Table 3), and all the transitive verbs that do not belong to one of these two subsets are compatible with the antipassive marker *-ndì* ~ *-ndí*.

- (17) a. *Sámáqqè-n dà léminè-n qíñí.*  
 snake-D CPL.TR child-D bite  
 ‘The snake bit the child.’
- b. *Sámáqqè-n qíñí-ndì.*  
 snake-D bite-ANTIP  
 ‘The snake bit (someone).’

## 5. The function and semantics of antipassive derivation

In Soninke, transitive verbs whose patientive argument is a discursively salient entity (either speech act participant or previously introduced participant) cannot occur in an antipassive construction. In such conditions, the only available option is a transitive construction in which the patientive argument is minimally represented by a personal pronoun in object function. By contrast, patientive arguments that do not fulfill this condition are commonly omitted whenever the speaker estimates that specifying them is not relevant in the given context.

The frequency of antipassive constructions in Soninke is entirely due to their use as a strategy making it possible to use transitive verbs without specifying their patientive argument. It must be remembered that, in addition to a morphologically marked distinction between transitive and intransitive predication, Soninke has a strict ban on null objects in transitive constructions, and except for a small minority of A-labile verbs, transitive verbs cannot feature in an intransitive construction with their agentive argument in subject function.

Interestingly, such constraints are quite common in Mande languages, but the strategies commonly used in the other Mande languages to get around them are the use of maximally vague nouns ('thing', 'people') in object function, or periphrases in which the nominalized transitive verb is the object of a verb 'do'. Antipassive uses of detransitivizing derivations also found in other functions are attested in some Mande languages (in particular in Bozo, the closest relative of Soninke), but they are always limited to a subset of transitive verbs. To the best of my knowledge, Soninke is the only Mande language that has developed a fully productive antipassive derivation. A historical explanation will be put forward in Section 8.

Accessibility to some syntactic operations is not a possible motivation of antipassive constructions in Soninke, since there is no restriction to the accessibility of transitive subjects to any kind of syntactic operation, which is of course not surprising in a morphologically accusative language.

Soninke has no interaction between antipassive and aspect either. This may seem more surprising, but in fact, this lack of interaction between antipassive and aspect is consistent with the use of antipassive constructions as the preferred strategy for not specifying the patientive argument of transitive verbs in a language that has strict requirements on the expression of core arguments and very few A-labile verbs: if the use of antipassive constructions were bound to conditions on aspect, other strategies should have been developed in complementarity with antipassive constructions, which is not the case.

This means in particular that Soninke has no tendency to restrict the use of the antipassive form of transitive verbs to the encoding of habitual events or stereotyped

activities. In Soninke, antipassive constructions are quite common in reference to specific events that are occurring at utterance time or have just occurred, and involve patientive participants whose identity is known to the speech act participants. As already mentioned above, with transitive verbs whose patientive argument is a discursively salient entity, antipassive constructions are impossible, and the use of object pronouns is obligatory, but I am aware of no other restriction on the use of antipassive constructions, apart from the obvious fact that the choice of an antipassive construction implies that the speaker estimates that, for any reason, the identity of the patientive participant need not be made explicit.

Example (18b–c) further illustrates the ability of antipassive constructions to refer to specific events, provided the speaker decides for any reason that any precision about the patientive participant would be superfluous. This example also shows that antipassive constructions in which the patientive argument is expressed as an oblique are possible, at least with some verbs.

- (18) a. *Hàatú dà yúgó sàará dáàrú.*  
 Fatou CPL.TR male give\_birth yesterday  
 ‘Fatou gave birth to a boy yesterday.’  
 (transitive construction)
- b. *Hàatú sàaré dáàrú.*  
 Fatou give\_birth.DETR yesterday  
 ‘Fatou had a baby yesterday.’  
 (antipassive construction with unexpressed P argument)
- c. *Hàatú sàaré tì lénńúgó yì.*  
 Fatou give\_birth.DETR with son POSTP  
 ‘Fatou gave birth to a son.’  
 (antipassive construction with demoted P argument)

There is no obvious semantic difference between antipassive constructions such as (18c) and transitive constructions, apart from the fact that backgrounding the patientive participant automatically highlights the involvement of the agentive participant in the event. Antipassive constructions with the patientive argument expressed as an oblique are however rare in spontaneous discourse and do not seem to be possible with all verbs. This question would require further investigation, but within the limits of the data I have been able to gather, antipassive constructions with the P argument expressed as an oblique are only attested with antipassive forms derived by means of the detransitivizing suffix *-i*, never with antipassive forms derived by means of the dedicated antipassive suffix.

## 6. Antipassive and object incorporation

In Soninke, incorporation can be defined as a morphological operation that creates compound verbal lexemes by attaching the non-autonomous form of a nominal lexeme to the left of a verbal lexeme. Incorporated nouns precede the verbal lexeme with which they form a compound, and the distinction between incorporated nouns and nouns occupying a syntactic position immediately to the left of the verb is ensured by the following two particularities of nominal and verbal morphology in Soninke:

- a. most nouns have a non-autonomous form distinct from their free form, and this non-autonomous form is used whenever nouns occur as non-final formatives within compound or derived lexemes. For example, the non-autonomous form of *sélinjé* ‘chicken’ (plural *sélinjú*) is *sélin-*;
- b. in some conditions (for example, in combination with some negative markers) the inherent tonal melody of the verb is replaced by an entirely low melody, and this tonal change affects incorporated nouns as part of a compound verb stem, but not nouns occupying a syntactic position immediately to the left of the verb, as in (19).

- (19) a. *Ì wá sélinjú-n gáagà-ná.*  
 3PL ICPL chicken.PL-D sell-GER  
 ‘They are selling the chickens.’
- b. *Ì ntá sélinjú-n gàagà-nà.*  
 3PL ICPL.NEG chicken.PL-D sell-GER<sup>l</sup>  
 ‘They are not selling the chickens.’
- c. *Ì wá sélin-gáagè-né.*  
 3PL ICPL chicken-sell.DETR-GER  
 ‘They sell chickens.’
- d. *Ì ntá sèlin-gàagè-nè.*  
 3PL ICPL.NEG chicken-sell.DETR-GER<sup>l</sup>  
 ‘They don’t sell chickens.’

In addition to the neutralization of the singular vs. plural distinction (in the sense that, contrary to what the translation might suggest, clauses such as (19c–d) carry no implication about the singularity / plurality of objects), a general characteristic of incorporation is that it excludes the presence of the various types of adnominals that may modify non-incorporated nouns.

Three functional subtypes of incorporation can be distinguished in Soninke: possessive incorporation, object incorporation, and oblique incorporation:

- in possessive incorporation, the construction with an incorporated noun can be paraphrased by a construction in which this noun is the nucleus of a noun



- phrase in subject function, with a genitival modifier corresponding to the subject of the compound verb, as in (20);
- in object incorporation, the construction with an incorporated noun can be paraphrased by a construction in which this noun is the nucleus of a noun phrase in object function, as in (21);
  - in oblique incorporation, the construction with an incorporated noun can be paraphrased by a construction in which this noun is the nucleus of a noun phrase in oblique function, as in (22).

- (20) a. *Múusá bùttê-n bí.*  
 Moussa liver-D<sup>LH</sup> burn  
 'Moussa got furious.'  
 lit. 'Moussa's liver burnt.'
- b. *Múusá bùttí-n-bí.*  
 Moussa liver-EP-burn<sup>12</sup>  
 'Moussa got furious.'  
 lit. 'Moussa liver-burnt.'
- (21) a. *Yàxàrú-n dà kónpè-n cèllà.*  
 woman.PL-D CPL.TR room-D sweep  
 'The women swept the room.'
- b. *Yàxàrú-n kónpó-sèllè.*  
 woman.PL-D room-sweep.DETR  
 'The women did room sweeping.'
- (22) a. *À yàxí qòò qùsò.*  
 3SG get\_married like girl.D  
 'He got married like a girl (i.e. very early).'
- b. *À qùsù-n-ñàxí.*  
 3SG girl-EP-get\_married<sup>13</sup>  
 'He got married like a girl (i.e. very early).'
- lit. 'He got girl-married.'

Possessive incorporation and oblique incorporation do not modify the transitivity properties of verbs. By contrast, object incorporation detransitivizes transitive

12. In possessive incorporation and oblique incorporation, an epenthetic *-n-* is inserted between the incorporated noun and the verb. This epenthetic *-n-* also occurs in some types of nominal compounds, but as discussed by Diagana (1995), its occurrence cannot be predicted by a general rule. It must be emphasized that it is probably not cognate with the determination marker *-n* suffixed to nouns, since the determination marker includes a floating L tone, whereas the epenthetic *-n-* is tonally inert.

13. See Footnote 11.

verbs. Syntactically, all the mechanisms sensitive to transitivity unambiguously show that object incorporation yields intransitive compound verbs, and this is consistent with the fact that, as can be observed in (19c–d) and (21b) above, object incorporation triggers detransitivization marking.

There is an obvious functional similarity between object incorporation and antipassive derivation, since both operations create intransitive verbs without modifying the semantic role assigned to the subject. The only difference is that antipassivization does not affect the denotation of the verb (for example *gágándì* ‘sell (antip.)’, exactly like *gágà* ‘sell’, can be used to encode any event categorizable as a selling event), whereas incorporation restricts the denotation of the verb (for example, *sélingágè* ‘do chicken selling’ can only refer to selling events involving patientive participants categorizable as chickens). In both cases, the resulting intransitive verb can be used with reference to real events involving identifiable patientive participants, depending only on the speaker’s judgment about the relevance of providing more or less precisions about the patientive participant.

The detransitivization marking observed in object incorporation is consistent with the functional similarity between object incorporation and antipassive derivation. There is however an important difference which justifies maintaining the distinction: detransitivization triggered by object incorporation is always marked by the multipurpose detransitivization marker *-i*, never by the dedicated antipassive marker *-ndì ~ ndí*. For example, the antipassive form of *séllà* ‘sweep’ is *séllá-ndì*, as in (23c), but the incorporation of the object triggers the use of the detransitized form *séllè*, as in (23b). In the absence of an incorporated noun, *séllè* can only have a passive reading, as in (23d).

- (23) a. *Yàxàrú-n dà kónpè-n céllà.*  
 woman.PL-D CPL.TR room-D sweep  
 ‘The women swept the room.’
- b. *Yàxàrú-n kónpó-séllè.*  
 woman.PL-D room-sweep.DETR  
 ‘The women did room sweeping.’
- c. *Yàxàrú-n céllá-ndì.*  
 woman.PL-D sweep-ANTIP  
 ‘The women did the sweeping.’
- d. *Kónpè-n céllè.*  
 room-D sweep.DETR  
 ‘The room was swept.’

A consequence of this rule is that detransitivization marking in object incorporation is not apparent with verbs ending with *i* or *e*.

## 7. Causativization of antipassive verbs and antipassivization of causative verbs

Although the causativization of derived antipassive forms encoding patient demotion is perfectly conceivable semantically (‘a causer makes a causee act on an unspecified patient’), it does not seem to be possible in Soninke.

By contrast, derived verbs with an ending decomposable as ‘causative suffix’ + ‘antipassive suffix’ are possible, and the antipassive marker operates on causative verbs in the same way as on non-derived transitive verbs: the meaning of such forms is that a causer manipulates an unspecified causee, as in (24).

- (24) a. *Té-n bònó.*  
 field-D become\_spoilt  
 ‘The field was spoilt.’
- b. *Nàa-nú-n dà té-n bònò-ndí.*  
 COW-PL-D CPL.TR field-D become\_spoilt-CAUS  
 ‘The cows caused damage to the field.’
- c. *Nàa-nú-n bònò-ndí-ndí.*  
 COW-PL-D become\_spoilt-CAUS-ANTIP  
 ‘The cows caused damage.’

It is however striking that antipassivization of causative constructions is not frequent in spontaneous discourse, and not always easily accepted in elicitation. My discussions with consultants suggest that this may be due to the fact that speakers find it difficult to process forms including two successive suffixes that have the same segmental form and express distinct operations on valency.

## 8. The origin of the suffixes involved in antipassivization

Comparative evidence suggests that the multifunction detransitivizing suffix *-i* was originally a reflexive marker (possibly cognate with a reflexive pronoun *\*i*) that developed anticausative, passive, and antipassive uses. For a detailed account of the evidence supporting this hypothesis, see Creissels (forthcoming).

As regards the dedicated antipassive suffix *-ndí* ~ *ndí*, the crucial question is whether the formal similarity with a causative marker found as *-ndí* in Soninke, *-ndi* in Mandinka, and *-ni* in Bozo (the closest relative of Soninke) is due to chance, or must rather be analyzed as evidence for a common etymology.

Of course, a purely accidental similarity cannot be excluded. But if we could find also a formally similar lexical item reconstructable at Proto-West-Mande level with a meaning that would make it a possible source of both causative and antipassive

markers, the hypothesis that precisely the lexical item in question constitutes the common source of all these suffixes would become highly plausible.

Verbs with the meaning ‘do, make’ commonly occur in causative periphrases, and constitute a well-known source of causative markers. But such verbs are also very commonly involved in constructions that can be viewed as antipassive periphrases, although they are not commonly referred to as such, and the possibility that verbs with the meaning ‘do, make’ involved in such constructions grammaticalize as antipassive markers must be considered.

For example, French has a causative construction in which *faire* ‘do, make’ combines with the infinitive of the verb expressing the caused event, as in (23a), but the use of *faire* with a deverbal event noun in object role is also a very common strategy to avoid specifying the object of transitive verbs with which the mere omission of the object phrase does not constitute the normal way to simply omit specifying the object, as in (23b), and similar antipassive periphrases can be observed more or less systematically in other European languages.

(23) French

- a. *La femme a fait acheter le pain par son fils.*  
the woman has made buy the bread by her son  
‘The woman made her son buy the bread.’
- b. *La femme a fait des achats.*  
the woman has made some buying  
‘The woman did some shopping.’

In most Mande languages, the verbs expressing ‘do, make’ are reflexes of two Proto-Mande roots reconstructable as *\*ma* and *\*kɛ*, which quite obviously cannot be the source of the suffixes we are dealing with. But *\*ma* and *\*kɛ* are not the only roots reconstructable at least at Proto-West-Mande level with the meaning ‘do, make’. In Mandinka, ‘do’ is commonly expressed as *ké*, but Mandinka also has a verb *tîŋ ~ tinnà ~ túnnà* ‘cause’, and this verb is probably cognate with Bozo Jenaama *tîn* (compl.) *tíná* (incompl.) ‘do’. Given the position of Mandinka and Bozo in the genealogical tree of Mande languages, a Proto-West-Mande root *\*tin* ‘do’ can be reconstructed, and the hypothesis I propose is that all the suffixes mentioned above result from the grammaticalization of *\*tin* ‘do’, either in causative periphrases or in antipassive periphrases.

The grammaticalization processes in question may have occurred at different periods, and we will probably never be able to reconstruct the details of the source constructions, and of the phonological processes responsible for the precise forms taken by the suffixes in question, but this hypothesis provides at least a plausible explanation for a formal similarity between antipassive and causative markers that otherwise would remain unexplained.

Moreover, the hypothesis that the dedicated antipassive marker of Soninke is the reflex of a 'do' verb which originally acted as a light verb in combination with the nominalized form of transitive verbs is supported by the fact that, across Mande languages, antipassive periphrases in which a nominalized form of transitive verbs is the object of a light verb ('do' or other) are common. For example, in Sooso (West Mande), transitive predication is characterized by the same ban on null objects as in Soninke, but contrary to Soninke, the verbal lexemes of Sooso can be used freely as event nouns without any formal modification, and in their use as event nouns, they are not subject to any constraint on the expression of the patientive argument. Consequently, in Sooso, transitive verbal lexemes can be used as event nouns in light verb constructions including no mention of the patientive argument, and this is a common strategy to avoid expressing the object argument of transitive verbs. For example, when Sooso *xèébú* 'greet' is used by itself as the predicative nucleus of a clause, it is impossible not to mention its patientive argument, but this is possible with the light verb construction *xèébú t̄i* lit. 'raise greeting', where *xèébú* used nominally occupies the O slot in the construction of *t̄i* 'raise' in light verb function. My proposal is that the dedicated antipassive marker of Soninke results from the grammaticalization of a light verb 'do' in an antipassive periphrasis of this type.

## 9. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to put forward a description of Soninke antipassive emphasizing aspects particularly relevant for a general typological discussion of antipassive constructions. Synchronically, the crucial point is that the productivity of antipassive derivation in Soninke follows from the use of antipassive constructions as the preferred strategy for not specifying the patientive argument of transitive verbs in a language in which null objects are not allowed, and only a tiny minority of transitive verbs can be used intransitively with a subject representing their agentive argument. Diachronically, one of the two verbal suffixes used to mark antipassive derivation is a multipurpose detransitivizing suffix whose probable origin is the well-known grammaticalization path from reflexive to other semantic varieties of detransitivization (including antipassive). The other one is a dedicated antipassive suffix whose probable origin is the grammaticalization of a verb 'do' in a cross-linguistically common type of antipassive periphrasis in which a transitive verbal lexeme in nominalized form is treated syntactically as the object of 'do'.

## Abbreviations

The glosses follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules, additional abbreviations are as follows:

CPL	completive	LH (superscript)	low-high morphotoneme
D	default determiner	pm	predicative marker
DETR	detransitivization marker	POSTP	multifunction postposition
EP	epenthetic <i>n</i>	PROH	prohibitive
GER	gerundive	SBD	subordination marker
H (superscript)	high morphotoneme	SBJF	subject flag
ICPL	incompletive	V	verb
L (superscript)	low morphotoneme	X	oblique.

## References

- Creissels, Denis. 1992. La voix en soninké. *Mandenkan* 23: 1–24.
- Creissels, Denis. 2016. Phonologie segmentale et tonale du soninké (parler du Kingi). *Mandenkan* 55: 3–174.
- Creissels, Denis. 2017. Atypical objects in Soninke (West Mande). *Italian Journal of Linguistics* 29(1): 25–52.
- Creissels, Denis. Forthcoming. Reconstructing the history of the Soninke voice system. In *Voice Systems in Diachrony*, Michela Cennamo (ed.). <[http://www.deniscreissels.fr/public/Creissels-Soninke\\_voice\\_in\\_diachrony.pdf](http://www.deniscreissels.fr/public/Creissels-Soninke_voice_in_diachrony.pdf)> (9 April 2020).
- Creissels, Denis & Diagne, Anna Marie. 2013. Transitivity in Bakel Soninke. *Mandenkan* 50: 5–37. <https://doi.org/10.4000/mandenkan.211>
- Creissels, Denis & Dramé, Djibril. 2018. Transitivity and incorporation in Soninke. In *Transitivity in African Languages*, Rose-Juliet Anyanwu (ed.), 37–54. Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Diagana, Ousmane Moussa. 1984. Le parler soninké de Kaédi, syntaxe et sens. Habilitation thesis, Paris Descartes University.
- Diagana, Ousmane Moussa. 1995. *La langue soninkée: Morphosyntaxe et sens*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Diagana, Ousmane Moussa. 2011. *Dictionnaire soninké-français (Mauritanie)*. Paris: Karthala.
- Diagana, Yacouba. 1990. Éléments de grammaire du soninké. PhD dissertation, INALCO, Paris.
- Diagana, Yacouba. 1994. *Éléments de grammaire du soninké*. Paris: Association Linguistique Africaine.
- Heath, Jeffrey. 1976. Antipassivization: A functional typology. In *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistic Society*, Henry Thompson, Kenneth Whistler, Vicki Edge, Jeri J. Jaeger, Ronya Javkin, Miriam Petruck, Christopher Smeall & Robert D. Van Valin, Jr. (eds), 202–211. Berkeley CA: BLS.
- Janic, Katarzyna. 2016. *L'antipassif dans les langues accusatives*. Brussels: Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0352-6598-9>