

**Evidence for a grammaticalization path  
'antipassive marker > event nominalization marker'  
in Manding languages**

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## 1. Introduction

Manding languages are a group of closely related languages included in the western branch of the Mande language family. As regards event nominalization, in Manding languages, morphologically unmarked event nominalization is in competition with the use of a suffix **-ri** or **-li**, whose distribution is however not identical across Manding varieties: in some of them (represented here by Mandinka), the use of this suffix is strictly bound to conditions on transitivity and semantic role assignment, whereas in others (represented here by Bambara) its use is not bound to such conditions. In this presentation, after describing event nominalization in Mandinka and Bambara, I show that internal as well as comparative evidence (mainly from Soninke, a language belonging to another branch of West Mande) suggests that this situation can be explained as resulting from the evolution of an antipassive marker which first lost the ability to derive finite verb forms, subsisting only in event nominalization and in combination with some derivational suffixes, and was subsequently reanalyzed as an event nominalization marker in some Manding varieties.

## 2. Event nominalization in Mandinka

### 2.1. Unmarked event nominalization in Mandinka

With very few exceptions, the verbal lexemes of Mandinka can be found in constructions in which they carry the same reference to event as when used verbally, but behave in all respects like nouns. Ex. (1) illustrates the nominal use of the intransitive verb **filí** 'disappear' and of the transitive verb **jé** 'see' without anything that could be analyzed as a nominalization marker. In this example, like nouns, **jé** and **filí** combine with the default determiner of nouns **-ò** and with a genitival modifier with which they form a noun phrase in subject function.

(1) Mandinka

a. **À jéw-òò díyàa-tá                    ń    yè.**  
3SG see-D be\_pleasant-CPL.INTR 1SG for  
'I am glad to see him.' lit. 'His seeing is pleasant for me.'

b. **À lá fil-òò                    yè                    ń                    jáakáli.**  
3SG GEN disappear-D CPL.TR 1SG bother  
'His disappearance bothers me.'

However, in Mandinka, it is only for intransitive verbs that the morphologically unmarked use of verbal lexemes as event nouns is the only available option, and is always possible without any particular condition. In the case of transitive verbs, unmarked event nominalization is bound to some conditions, and when the conditions in question are not met, the nominalization of transitive verbs involves a suffix **-ri** described in the remainder of this section.

## 2.2. Event nominalization of transitive verbs and the suffix **-ri**

The suffix **-ri** (with the allomorphs **-li** if the stem includes an **r**, and **-diri** if the stem ends with a nasal) is found exclusively with transitive verbs in the conditions described below.

As illustrated by Ex. (1) and (2), this suffix **-ri** does not occur when transitive verbs are used as event nouns in constructions in which the P argument is expressed as a modifier of the nominalized verb, or can be identified to the referent of a noun phrase included in the same construction. If this is not the case, the transitive verb used as an event noun must take the suffix **-ri** in order to be interpreted as an active event noun. In other words, in the absence of **-ri**, it is not possible to assign the role of agentive argument while leaving the patientive argument interpreted as non-specific.

### (1) Mandinka

a. **Kèebâa-lú sòosôo mâṅ bétéyáa.**

elder.D-PL contradict.D CPL.NEG be\_good

‘It is not good to contradict elders.’

(the role assigned to the object of **sòosóo** ‘contradict’ used transitively is assigned to the genitival modifier of **sòosóo** used nominally, and the agentive argument of **sòosóo** is interpreted as non-specific)

b. **Sòosôo mâṅ díyáa Músáa yè.**

contradict.D CPL.NEG be\_pleasant Moussa to

‘Moussa doesn’t like to be contradicted.’

(**Músáa** cannot be identified to the agentive argument of **sòosóo**, since this would leave the role of patientive argument of **sòosóo** unassigned)

b. **Sòosòo-r-ôo díyàa-tá Músáa yè.**

contradict-RI-D be\_pleasant-CPL Moussa to

‘Moussa likes to contradict (people).’

(the adjunction of **-ri** blocks the assignment of the semantic role of patientive argument of **sòosóo**, and **Músáa** can be identified to the agentive argument of **sòosóo**)

### (2) Mandinka

a. **Mùs-ôo bé màani-túw-òo lá.**

woman-D COP rice-pound-D POSTP

lit. ‘The woman is at the rice-pounding.’ → ‘The woman is pounding rice.’

(**màani** ‘rice’ saturates the P valency of **túu** ‘pound’, and the subject of the copula is identified to the unexpressed A argument)

b. **Màan-ôo bé tùw-ôo lá.**

rice-D COP pound-D POSTP

lit. ‘The rice is at the pounding.’ → ‘The rice is being pounded.’

(if none of the arguments of **túu** ‘pound’ is expressed, in the absence of **-ri**, the subject of the copula is identified to the unexpressed P argument)

c. **Mùs-ôo bé tùu-r-ôo lá.**

woman-D COP pound-RI-D POSTP

lit. ‘The woman is at the pounding-RI.’ → ‘The woman is pounding.’

(-ri saturates the P valency of **tùu** ‘pound’, and the subject of the copula is identified to the unexpressed A argument)

To summarize, when a transitive verb is used as an event noun, in the absence of **-ri**, the rule in semantic role assignment is that the semantic role assigned by the verb in question to its object in the transitive construction has priority over that of the subject of the transitive construction. By contrast, in the presence of **-ri**, the only semantic role available is that of the subject of the transitive construction, and the patientive argument of the transitive verb must be interpreted as non-specific. In other words, in event nominalization, the *ri*-form of transitive verbs behaves as if it were the nominalized form of an intransitive verb with the A argument of the transitive verb as its sole core argument.

### 2.3. Uses of **-ri** in derivational operations marked by suffixes

The suffix **-ri** is involved, with exactly the same consequences on semantic role assignment, in several types of deverbal derivation. In all cases, **-ri** precedes the suffix marking the derivational operation in question:

- in the formation of a non-finite form expressing temporal simultaneity, marked by a suffix **-too**, as in (3b);
- in agent nominalization, marked by a suffix **-laa ~ -naa**, as in (4b);
- in instrument nominalization, marked by a suffix **-raŋ ~ -laŋ ~ -daŋ**, as in (5b);
- when the verb is the first formative of a nominal compound in which a verb restricts the meaning of a noun, as in (6b);
- in causative derivation: the causative suffix **-ndi** attaches directly to intransitive verb stems, but with most transitive verb stems, it must be preceded by **-ri**, as in (7b).

(3) Mandinka

a. **Đá mùs-ôo màani-tùu-tôo jé.**

1SG.CPL woman-D rice-pound-SIMULT see

‘I saw the woman pounding rice.’

b. **Đá mùs-ôo tùu-rì-tôo jé.**

1SG.CPL woman-D pound-RI-SIMULT see

‘I saw the woman pounding.’

(4) Mandinka

a. **màani-tùu-láa**

rice-pound-AGNR

‘person who pounds rice’

b. **tùu-rì-láa**

pound-RI-AGNR

‘person who pounds’

(5) Mandinka

a. **màani-tùu-ráŋ**

rice-pound-INSNR

‘rice-pestle’

b. **tùu-rì-láŋ**

pound-RI-INSNR

‘pestle’

(6) Mandinka

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>a. <b>màani-tùu-dúláa</b><br/> rice-pound-place<br/> ‘place dedicated to rice pounding’</p> | <p>b. <b>tùu-rì-dúláa</b><br/> pound-RI-place<br/> ‘place dedicated to pounding’</p> |
|--|--|

(7) Mandinka

- a. **Mùs-ôo yè dèndìk-ôo nó-ndì.**  
woman-D CPL shirt-D get\_dirty-CAUS  
‘The woman soiled the shirt.’ (lit. made the shirt get dirty)
- b. **Mùs-ôo yè dín-dí-ò tùu-rì-ndí.**  
woman-D CPL child-D pound-RI-CAUS  
‘The woman made the child pound.’

Note that the use of **-ri** in causativization is consistent with the fact that, in the construction illustrated by Ex. (7b), the object slot is filled by the causee, not by the patient of **tùu** ‘pound’. In this example the patient of **tùu** is left unexpressed; it could also be expressed, but only as an oblique: **Mùs-ôo yè dín-dí-ò tùu-rì-ndí màanôo lá.**

#### 2.4. The ri-form of transitive verbs in predicative constructions

The effect of the suffix **-ri** on valency and semantic role assignment in the constructions described in Sections 2.2 and 2.3 is exactly that expected of an antipassive marker. Moreover, the derivational suffixes that can be preceded by **-ri** in the derivational operations presented in Section 2.3 are suffixes that normally attach to verbal stems. Consequently, the ri-form of Mandinka transitive verbs could be expected to act also as the verbal predicate in an antipassive variant of transitive predication. Moreover, this would be consistent with the fact that, as a rule, the intransitive use of transitive verbs implies a passive reading. However, **dómò** ‘eat’ is the only transitive verb of Mandinka whose ri-form can be used in such a way – Ex. (8).

(8) Mandinka

- a. **Dín-dí-ò yè mbúur-òo dómò.**  
child-D CPL.TR bread-D eat  
‘The child ate the bread.’
- b. **Mbúur-òo dómò-tá.**  
bread-D eat-CPL.INTR  
‘The bread was eaten.’
- c. **Dín-dí-ò dómó-rì-tá.**  
child-D eat-RI-CPL.INTR  
‘The child ate.’

With all the other transitive verbs, such a verbal use of the ri-form is impossible, and the construction commonly used to avoid specifying the patientive argument is an antipassive periphrasis in which the ri-form of the transitive verb used nominally is the object of **ké** ‘do’ – Ex. (9).

(9) Mandinka

- a. **Mùsôo yè sùb-ôo tábì.**  
child-D CPL.TR meat-D cook  
‘The woman cooked the meat.’

b. **Sùb-ôo tábì-tá.**

meat-D cook-CPL.INTR  
 ‘The meat was cooked.’

c. \***Mùsôo tábí-rì-tá.**

woman-D cook-RI-CPL.INTR  
 intended: ‘The woman did the cooking.’

d. **Mùsôo yè tábí-r-òo ké.**

child-D CPL.TR cook-RI-D cook  
 ‘The woman cooked the meat.’

### 2.5. Conclusion of Section 2

The Mandinka suffix **-ri** can be analyzed as an atypical antipassive marker, since on the one hand it is found exclusively with transitive verbs and operates on their valency and semantic role assignment properties exactly like canonical antipassive markers, but on the other hand, with the only exception of **dómò**, the *rí*-form of Mandinka transitive verbs cannot be used as a finite verb form.

At this point I leave open the question of the diachronic interpretation of the verbal use of **dómó-rì** as an isolated and accidental innovation, or a vestige of a formerly regular verbal use of *ri*-forms. We will return to this question later.

### 3. Event nominalization in Bambara

Like Mandinka, Bambara (aka Bamanan) belongs to the Manding dialect cluster. A suffix **-li** cognate with Mandinka **-ri** and also involved in event nominalization can be found in Bambara, but the details of its distribution are different. Crucially, morphologically unmarked event nominalization is possible in Bambara too, but verbs used nominally without any overt nominalization marker are much less frequent in Bambara than in Mandinka, and the distribution of **-li** is not bound to the conditions on valency and semantic role expression described in Section 2 for Mandinka (Dumestre 2003: 74-5).

A first crucial observation is that, contrary to Mandinka **-ri**, Bambara **-li** can attach to intransitive verbs used nominally. Forms like **sìgì-lí** < **sìgí** ‘settle’ or **nà-lí** < **nă** ‘come’ are perfectly correct (and usual) in Bambara, whereas in Mandinka, intransitive verbs like **sĩ** ‘settle’ or **năa** ‘come’ simply cannot combine with the suffix **-ri**.

The second crucial observation is that, in Bambara, **-li** is compatible with the expression of the patientive argument of transitive verbs. For example, in the nominalization of transitive verbs, Bambara and Mandinka make the same distinction between direct genitives (simply juxtaposed to their head) referring to the patientive argument of the transitive verb, and indirect genitives (marked by **ká** (Bambara) or **lá** (Mandinka)) referring to the agentive argument. However, in Mandinka, this distinction correlates with the absence vs. presence of the **-ri** suffix, whereas there is no such correlation in Bambara – Ex. (10)

(10) Mandinka (a) / Bambara (b)

a. **jàt-ôo fââ**

lion-D kill.D

‘the fact that the lion was killed’

vs. **jàt-ôo lá fàa-r-ôo**

lion-D GEN kill-RI-D

‘the fact that the lion killed (someone)’

b. <b>jàrà</b>	<b>fàgà-lí</b>	vs.	<b>jàrà</b>	<b>ká</b>	<b>fàgà-lí</b>
lion.D	kill-LI.D		lion-D	GEN	kill-LI-D
'the fact that the lion was killed'			'the fact that the lion killed (someone)'		

Consequently, contrary to Mandinka **-ri**, there would be no justification for analyzing Bambara **-li** as a kind of antipassive marker. Bambara **-li** can only be analyzed as an event nominalization marker. The only problem in the description of Bambara **-li** is that the choice between morphologically unmarked event nominalization and event nominalization marked by **-li** shows puzzling fluctuations. It is however interesting to observe that **-li** is obligatory precisely in the conditions that trigger the use of **-ri** in Mandinka, and optional in the conditions that rule out the use of **-ri** in Mandinka.

#### 4. The diachronic relationship between Mandinka **-ri** and Bambara **-li**

As regards the relationship between Mandinka **-ri** and Bambara **-li**, two simple hypotheses can be imagined:

- either **-ri** was formerly a plain event nominalization marker, like Bambara **-li**, and its use has been restricted to constructions meeting the conditions described in Section 2,
- or **-li** had formerly the same distribution as Mandinka **-ri**, but the conditions that limited its use have been relaxed, resulting in its reanalysis as a plain event nominalization marker.

The second scenario seems more plausible, since generally speaking, there is nothing strange in the relaxation of constraints that initially limit the use of a marker, whereas it is difficult to imagine a motivation for the introduction of conditions on transitivity and semantic role expression in the use of a nominalization marker initially devoid of such restrictions.

Moreover, as observed by Dumestre (2003: 75), there is evidence that the extension of the use of **-li** is a recent phenomenon in the history of Bambara. The point is that the tendency to use event nominalization marked by **-li** rather than morphologically unmarked event nominalization is much stronger in 'Modern' Bambara (the language of media, governmental communication, functional literacy, etc.) than in Bambara as it is spoken in traditional setting.

The conclusion I propose is therefore that, in the history of Manding languages, unmarked event nominalization is ancient, and an atypical antipassive marker of the type still found in Mandinka has been reanalyzed in some Manding varieties as a plain nominalization marker.

The question that arises at this point is whether it would be possible to go further in the reconstruction of the history of this atypical antipassive marker. In the following section I'll try to show that, in addition to internal evidence, other Mande languages provide comparative evidence supporting the hypothesis that the ancestor of this atypical antipassive marker reanalyzed as a nominalization marker in some Manding languages was a plain antipassive marker.

### 5. A possible etymology of Manding **-ri** / **-li**

#### 5.1. Internal evidence that the **ri**-forms of transitive verbs were initially verbal

Internal evidence that the **ri**- forms of Mandinka transitive verbs were originally verbal comes from the fact that **-ri** can precede derivational suffixes that attach to verbal stems to mark simultaneous action, agent nominalization, instrument nominalization, and causativization (cf. Section 2.3). This strongly suggests that the verbal use of **dómó-rì** (Ex. (8) above) is a vestige of a formerly fully verbal use of **ri**-forms, rather than an accidental innovation.

## 5.2. Comparative evidence from Soninke

As illustrated by Ex. (11), among the other West Mande languages, Soninke has a canonical (and fully productive) antipassive marker **-ndì / -ndí** (the choice between the two allomorphs of this suffix depending on the tone pattern of the stem to which it attaches).

(11) Soninke

a. **Yàxàré-n dà kónpè-n cèllà.**  
 woman-D TR room-D sweep  
 ‘The woman swept out the room.’

b. **Yàxàré-n cèllá-ndì.**  
 woman-D sweep-ANTIP  
 ‘The woman did the sweeping.’

This canonical antipassive marker is probably cognate with Mandinka **-rí** and Bambara **-li**, since alternations between **r**, **l**, **d**, and **nd** are very common in Mande languages (and in other West African language families). In other words, comparative evidence from Soninke converges with internal evidence that the Mandinka *ri*-forms of transitive verbs were initially canonical antipassive verb forms that have ceased to be used as finite verb forms and have only subsisted in event nominalization and in some derivational operations.

## 5.3. West Mande evidence for ‘do’ as a possible source of antipassive markers

If we accept the hypothesis that Manding **-ri** or **-li** is a former antipassive marker cognate with the Soninke antipassive marker **-ndì / -ndí**, the following 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 Ex. (12a), but the use of **faire** with an 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 does not constitute the normal way to simply omit specifying the object, as in Ex. (12b).

(12) 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 **tɪŋ ~ tɪnnà ~ túnnà** 'cause', and this verb is probably cognate with Bozo Jenaama **tɪn** (compl.) **tɪná** (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 these suffixes result from the grammaticalization of \***tin** 'do', either in causative periphrases or in antipassive periphrases.

These grammaticalization processes may have occurred at different periods, and we will probably never be able to reconstruct the details of the constructions in which they occurred, 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.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to show that internal as well as comparative evidence supports the hypothesis of the following evolutions in the history of West Mande languages:

1. The grammaticalization of a verb 'do' in causative periphrases on the one hand, and in antipassive periphrases on the other hand, resulted in the creation of causative and antipassive suffixes.
2. The antipassive suffix resulting from this evolution is still found as a canonical antipassive marker in Soninke, whereas in Manding languages, the former antipassive verb forms have lost the ability to be used verbally, and the antipassive marker has only subsisted in event nominalization and in some derivational operations.
3. In some Manding varieties (represented here by Bambara), the former antipassive marker whose use had first been restricted as indicated in 2 has ceased to be sensitive to the conditions on transitivity and semantic role expression that initially restricted its use, and has been reanalyzed as a mere event nominalization marker.

## Abbreviations

AGNR: agent nominalizer, ANTIP: antipassive, CAUS: causative, COP: copula, CPL: completive, D: default determiner, GEN: genitive, INSNR: instrument nominalizer, INTR: intransitive, NEG: negative, PL: plural, POSTP: postposition, SG: singular, SIMULT: simultaneous, TR: transitive.

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