

# Transitivity alternations in Mandinka

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## 1 Introduction

Mandinka, spoken by approximately 1.5 million speakers in The Gambia, Senegal, and Guinea Bissao, is the westernmost member of the Manding dialect cluster included in the Western branch of the Mande language family.<sup>1</sup> The area where Mandinka is spoken largely coincides with the territory of the pre-colonial state of Kaabu.<sup>2</sup> Speakers of Mandinka call themselves *Mandiŋkóolu* (singular: *Mandiŋkóo*) and designate their language as *mandiŋkakáŋo*.<sup>3</sup> Rowlands 1959 and Creissels 1983 constitute the main references on Mandinka grammar.

The possibility to use the same verbs in their non-derived form in transitive and intransitive constructions is variously regulated in the languages of the world. A striking feature of Manding dialects is that the *transitive vs. intransitive* distinction is particularly clear-cut at construction level, but at the same time a straightforward classification of verbs as transitive or intransitive is made impossible by more or less productive transitivity alternations of various functional types. In particular, Manding dialects attest the typologically exceptional use of verbs encoding two-participant events in intransitive constructions that have all syntactic and semantic characteristics of canonical passives, but involve no morphological marking.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Etymologically, *Mande*, *Manden*, *Manding*, and *Mali*, are variants of the same term, originally a toponym designating the upper valley of the Niger River and a state located in this region, whose capital was Kangaba. In the 13th century the Manding prince Sundiata Keita founded an empire, known as the Manding or Mali empire, that extended over a large area and flourished until the 16th century. In the terminology of linguistics, Mande and Manding have been retained with meanings that must be carefully distinguished. In linguistics, ‘Manding’ refers to a set of closely related dialects resulting from the evolution of the language that was spoken in Manding before the expansion of Sundiata’s empire, whereas ‘Mande’ refers to the language family that includes Manding dialects. It is commonly admitted that the time distance between the most ancient branches of the Mande language family exceeds 5000 years, whereas the time depth of the Manding dialect cluster does not exceed 8 centuries. On the classification of Mande languages, see:

[http://mandelang.kunstkamera.ru/index/langues\\_mande/famille\\_mande/](http://mandelang.kunstkamera.ru/index/langues_mande/famille_mande/)

<sup>2</sup> According to oral traditions, the Kaabu kingdom originated as a province of the Manding empire which was conquered by one of the generals of Sundiata Keita (see footnote 1) called Tiramakhan Traore. After the decline of the Manding empire, Kaabu became an independent kingdom. Mandinka hegemony in the region lasted until 1867, when the Kaabu capital (Kansala) was taken by the armies of the Fula kingdom of Futa Jallon.

<sup>3</sup> *Mandiŋkóo* is the definite form of a noun stem *mandiŋka* resulting from the addition of the derivative suffix *-ŋka* ‘people from ...’ to the geographical term *Mandiŋ*, which primarily refers to the region that constituted the starting point of the Manding expansion (see footnote 1). *Mandiŋkakáŋo* is literally ‘language of the people from Manding’.

<sup>4</sup> For a general presentation of the argument structure of Bambara (the only Manding variety whose argument structure has been studied in some detail so far), see Creissels 2007.

The question addressed in this paper is the classification of Mandinka verbs according to their behavior in transitivity alternations involving no morphological marking. Section 2 provides basic information about the structure of Mandinka clauses. Section 3 discusses the possibility to analyze the transitivity alternations of Mandinka as involving null subjects or objects. Section 4 deals with the transitivity alternations involving no change in the semantic role of the subject (A-lability). Section 5 is devoted to the transitivity alternations in which the semantic role assigned to the subject of the intransitive construction is identical or similar to that of the object of the transitive construction (P-lability). Section 6 deals with verbs lending themselves to multiple alternations. Section 7 summarizes the main conclusions.

## 2. Mandinka clause structure

### 2.1 The prototypical transitive construction

The two nuclear arguments of the prototypical transitive construction A and P obligatorily precede the verb, and A obligatorily precedes P. Assertive and interrogative transitive clauses always include a *predicative marker* encoding TAM and polarity (see Section 2.4), inserted between A and P.

Obliques (most of the time encoded as postposition phrases)<sup>5</sup> usually follow the verb. Some of them (mainly time and place adjuncts) may however occur in sentence initial position. Some verb modifiers are found in pre-verbal position, but with the only exception of the ‘associative construction’ involving accompaniment or manner adjuncts introduced by the associative preposition *núŋ* ‘with’, no full NP can be inserted between P and the verb, or between A and P.

A and P bear no mark of their syntactic role and are not indexed on the verb. Pronouns occupy the same positions as canonical NPs and have the same forms in all their possible functions.

- (1) a. *Wul-óo ye d́ndíŋ-o ḱisá-ndi (dimbáa ma).*  
 dog-DEF PF.POS child-DEF escape-CAUS fire.DEF OBL  
 ‘The dog saved the child (from the fire).’

- b. *A yé a ḱisá-ndi (a ma).*  
 3SG PF.POS 3SG escape-CAUS 3SG OBL  
 ‘He/she/it saved him/her/it from it.’

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<sup>5</sup> In the examples below, postpositions marking oblique arguments are glossed according to the meaning they typically express as heads of postposition phrases in adjunct function, with two exceptions: *la* and *ma*, for which the generic gloss OBL is used. The reason is that the analysis of the uses of these two postpositions as extensions of some ‘central’ or ‘prototypical’ meaning is particularly problematic.

- c. *Jat-óo si dánn-oo barama.*  
 lion-DEF POT hunter-DEF hurt  
 ‘The lion may hurt the hunter.’
- d. *Dánn-oo máŋ jat-óo barama.*  
 lion-DEF PF.NEG hunter-DEF hurt  
 ‘The hunter did not hurt the lion.’
- e. *Íŋ báamaa ka ñéw-o wáafi (lúumoo to).*  
 1SG mother HAB.POS fish-DEF sell market-DEF LOC  
 ‘My mother sells fish (at the market).’

## 2.2 Intransitive predication

The NP representing the single argument S of monovalent verbs precedes the verb. It bears no mark of its syntactic role and is not indexed on the verb. Obliques behave exactly in the same way in transitive and intransitive clauses.

In intransitive predication, the perfective positive is not encoded by the predicative marker *ye* used in transitive predication, but by the verbal suffix *-ta*. The complementary distribution between the two markers of the perfective positive *ye* and *-ta* provides a very simple criterion for recognizing constructions as transitive or intransitive in case of doubt. The other TAM and polarity values are encoded by the same predicative markers in transitive and intransitive constructions. In intransitive predication, the predicative markers common to transitive and intransitive predication are inserted between S and the verb.

- (2) a. *Yír-oo boyí-ta (síl-oo kaŋ).*  
 tree-DEF fall-PF.POS road-DEF on  
 ‘The tree fell down (on the road)’
- b. *Nins-óo si kata.*  
 cow-DEF POT escape  
 ‘The cow may escape.’
- c. *Kew-ô máŋ naa.*  
 man-DEF PF.NEG come  
 ‘The man did not come.’
- d. *New-ó ka kómoŋ (jíy-o kóno).*  
 iron-DEF HAB.POS rust water-DEF inside  
 ‘Iron rusts (in water)’

## 2.3 Intransitive alignment, and the notions of subject and object

Among the coding properties of core NPs, A and P show no contrast in either case marking or indexation, and both precede the verb. The only coding property of A

and P that can be used to characterize Mandinka clause structure with respect to intransitive alignment is that A precedes the predicative markers, whereas P follows them. The fact that A and S equally precede the TAM-polarity markers that are not suffixed to the verb, whereas P follows them, constitutes therefore the only coding property of the core terms of transitive and intransitive clauses on the basis of which a notion of subject conflating S and A can be recognized.

The following formula, in which S, O and X stand for ‘subject’, ‘object’ and ‘oblique’ respectively, summarizes the structure of Mandinka clauses:

S (O) V (X)\*

#### 2.4. Ditransitive alignment

Mandinka clauses cannot include more than two core NPs, in the sense that they never include a third NP whose behavior would be more similar to that of the object than to that of ordinary obliques. In the construction of verbs such as ‘give’, one of the three arguments must necessarily be encoded as a postposition phrase in post-verbal position. Mandinka has two possible equivalents of English ‘give’: in the construction of *dīi* (which by itself implies nothing more than transfer), the gift (alias *theme*) is represented by the object NP (‘indirective’ alignment), whereas in the construction of *só* (which implies that the recipient will remain the possessor of the gift) the object NP represents the recipient (‘secundative’ alignment).

(3) a. *Kew-ó ye kó-d-oo dīi mus-óo la.*  
 man-DEF PF.POS money-DEF give woman-DEF OBL  
 ‘The man gave money to the woman.’

b. *Kew-ó ye mus-óo so kó-d-oo la.*  
 man-DEF PF.POS woman-DEF give money-DEF OBL  
 ‘The man gave money to the woman.’

### 3. Transitivity alternations, or null subjects or objects?

In some languages, transitive and intransitive predications can be analyzed as two varieties of a single predicative construction with an obligatory morphosyntactic slot for S and either A or P (depending on the alignment properties of the language), and an optional slot for the core term of the transitive construction not aligned with S, and the existence of a more or less clear-cut distinction between transitive and intransitive predications conditions the possible analyses of lability.

In a language like English, the notion of A-lability is problematic in the sense that it boils down to the optionality / obligatoriness of objects: a verb like *eat* can be simply described as a transitive verb accepting a null object with an unspecific reading. By contrast, the behavior of verbs like *break* cannot be described in a similar way, but only by positing a transitivity alternation by which the subject of an objectless construction is assigned a semantic role similar to that assigned to the

object when an object NP is present. Symmetrically, in languages in which S is fully aligned with P, the notion of P-lability may be problematic, whereas A-lability clearly involves a transitivity alternation.

In Mandinka, the analysis of lability is facilitated by the fact that:

- (a) subjects and objects are distinguished from each other by their position to the left or to the right of predicative markers, and
- (b) one of the TAM-polarity markers (the perfective positive) has two variants conditioned by transitivity.

In Mandinka, a construction with a null subject would be  $\emptyset pm O V$  (where *pm* stands for ‘predicative marker’), with the predicative marker in clause-initial position, and in a construction analyzable as a construction with a null object ( $S pm \emptyset V$ ), the perfective positive would be marked by *ye* immediately preceding the verb. It is easy to establish that these do not constitute possible options, and consequently null subjects or objects (with either an anaphoric or unspecific reading) are absolutely impossible in Mandinka. This must however be emphasized, since at first sight, phenomena that can only be analyzed as transitivity alternations might give the impression of being analyzable in terms of null subjects or objects.

For example, the comparison between (4a) and (4b) might suggest that (4b) includes a null object.

(4) a. *Moó-lu maŋ b́aa tee.*  
 person.DEF-PL PF.NEG river cross  
 ‘The people did not cross the river.’

b. *Moó-lu máŋ tee.*  
 person.DEF:PL PF.NEG cross  
 ‘The people did not cross.’

However, this analysis is contradicted by the fact that the positive sentence corresponding to (4b) includes the variant of the perfective positive marker used in intransitive clauses (*-ta*) – Ex. (4d-e).

(4) c. *Moó-lu ye b́aa tee.*  
 person.DEF:PL PF.POS river cross  
 ‘The people crossed the river.’

d. \**Moó-lu yé tee.*  
 person.DEF:PL PF.POS cross  
 intended: ‘The people crossed.’<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The sequence *Moólu ye tee* is acceptable, but only with the meaning ‘The people should cross’, i.e., if *ye* is interpreted as the hortative marker, which is homonymous with perfective *ye* but can occur in intransitive clauses too, contrary to perfective *ye*.

- e. *Moó-lu teé-ta.*  
 person.DEF:PL CROSS-PF.POS  
 ‘The people crossed.’

Moreover, (4f) shows that the missing argument in the construction illustrated by Ex. (4b) & (4e) can be encoded as an oblique.

- (4) f. *Moó-lu teé-ta b́aa la.*  
 person.DEF:PL CROSS-PF.POS river OBL  
 ‘The people crossed the river.’

There is therefore converging evidence that *tee* ‘cross’ is not a transitive verb compatible with a null object, but a labile verb whose second argument can be encoded as either the object of a transitive construction, or an oblique argument in an intransitive construction. (4b) does not contradict the principle according to which null objects are not allowed in Mandinka, since the missing argument in (4b) is not the object of a transitive clause, but the oblique argument of an intransitive construction of the same verb: comparison with (4c-f) shows that (4b) must be analyzed as *Moólu máŋ tee (b́aa la)*. More generally, the two constructions of *tee* ‘cross’ can be schematized as indicated in (4g).

- (4) g. A *tee* (B *la*) intransitive construction with an optional oblique argument  
 ~ A \*(B) *tee* transitive construction with an obligatory object

Similarly, in Ex. (5b), the absence of anything that could be analyzed as passive marking might suggest the recognition of a null subject with an arbitrary reading. However, if *wotóo* were the object in a transitive construction with a null subject, it should follow the TAM-polarity marker, as in the ungrammatical sequence (5c).

- (5) a. *Kew-ó maŋ wot-ôo dádaa.*  
 man.DEF PF.NEG car-DEF repair  
 ‘The man has not repaired the car.’
- b. *Wot-ôo maŋ dádaa.*  
 car-DEF PF.NEG repair  
 ‘The car has not been repaired.’
- c. \* $\emptyset$  *máŋ wot-ôo dádaa.*  
 PF.NEG car-DEF repair

Consequently, (5b) is not a transitive construction with a null subject, but an intransitive construction in which the subject (*wotôo*) has the same semantic role as the object of the transitive construction (5a). We will return to the analysis of this construction in Section 5, but note immediately that the analysis of (5b) as an intransitive construction in which *wotôo* fulfills the subject function is corroborated

by the fact that the corresponding positive sentence includes the variant of the perfective positive marker used in intransitive constructions – Ex. (5d-e)

(5) d. *Kew-ó ye wot-ôo dádaa.*  
man-DEF PF.POS car-DEF repair  
'The man has repaired the car.'

e. *Wot-ôo dádaa-ta.*  
car-DEF repair-PF.POS  
'The car has been repaired.'

#### 4. Transitivity alternations that do not change the semantic role of the subject (A-lability)

Two types of transitivity alternations preserving the semantic role of the subject must be distinguished: in the *object / oblique* alternation (already illustrated above by *tee* 'cross'), the intransitive construction includes an oblique with the same semantic role as the object of the transitive construction, whereas in the *active / introversive* alternation, the argument encoded as the object of the transitive construction cannot be expressed in the intransitive construction.

##### 4.1. The object / oblique alternation

In the object / oblique alternation, the intransitive construction includes an oblique with the same semantic role as the object of the transitive construction. As discussed above on the example of *tee* 'cross', in accordance with the general properties of objects and obliques in Mandinka, the term in question is obligatory in the transitive construction, but can be omitted from the intransitive construction.

Two semantic subtypes of the object / oblique alternation can be distinguished: the *delimitative* alternation and the *applicative* alternation.

##### 4.1.1. The delimitative alternation

In the *delimitative alternation*, the transitive construction encodes the same one-participant event as the intransitive construction; the unique participant is encoded as the subject, and the object encodes the temporal or spatial delimitation of the event. This alternation has been found with movement verbs which do not take a complement encoding the source or the destination of the movement – Ex. (6) & (7).

(6) a. *Kewô táamá-ta.*  
man-DEF walk-PF.POS  
'The man walked.'

b. *Kewó ye wúloo bêe táama.*

man-DEF PF.POS bush:DEF all walk

‘The man walked through the whole bush.’

c. *Kewó ye tili lúulu táama, a máŋ futa saatéwo to.*

man-DEF PF.POS day five wander 3SG PF.NEG arrive village:DEF OBL

‘The man walked five days without arriving at the village.’

(7) a. *Kúnunŋ í yáayí-ta báake.*

yesterday 2SG wander-PF.POS a\_lot

‘You wandered a lot yesterday.’

b. *Musu-kéebaa-lu níŋ deenaan-óo ye saatéw-o bêe yáayi.*

woman-old.DEF-PL with baby-DEF PF.POS village-DEF all wander

‘The old women wandered round the whole village with the baby.’

#### 4.1.2. *The applicative alternation*

In the other cases of object / oblique alternation, the object of the transitive construction represents a second participant treated as an oblique in the corresponding intransitive construction. This alternation, designated as *applicative alternation* for reasons that will be commented below, has already been illustrated with *tee* ‘cross’ (Ex. (4), Section 4). *Sele* ‘climb’, *kacaa* ‘discuss’, and *wíluu* ‘give birth’ provide additional examples.

(8) a. *Sul-óo selé-ta yír-oo sánto.*

monkey-DEF climb-PF.POS tree-DEF on\_top

‘The monkey climbed up the tree.’

b. *I búka yír-oo sele a jamb-óo la.*

3PL HAB.NEG tree-DEF climb 3SG leave-DEF OBL

‘One does not climb a tree by the leaves.’

(9) a. *Ŋ kacáa-ta ñiŋ kúw-o la.*

1PL discuss-PF.POS DEM matter-DEF OBL

‘We discussed this matter.’

b. *Ŋ ŋa ñiŋ kúw-o kacaa.*

1PL PF.POS DEM matter:DEF discuss

same meaning as (1)

(10) a. *Mus-ôo wílúu-ta (súŋkút-oo la).*

woman-DEF give\_birth-PF.POS girl-DEF OBL

‘The woman gave birth (to a baby).’



b. A    *ye*        *súnkút-oo* *le*    *wúluu*.  
       3SG    PF.POS    girl-DEF    FOC    give\_birth  
       ‘She gave birth to a girl.’<sup>7</sup>

A similar alternation has been found with the following verbs:

<i>búsa</i>	‘fall violently on (rain)’
<i>dankeneyaa</i>	‘trust’
<i>díki</i>	‘press, insist’
<i>dúwaa</i>	‘pray for something’
<i>fóloo</i>	‘begin’
<i>jele</i>	‘laugh (at)’
<i>kele</i>	‘fight’
<i>kumboo</i>	‘cry’
<i>lábaŋ</i>	‘be the last one to do something’
<i>mara</i>	‘govern, control’
<i>muña</i>	‘endure, tolerate’
<i>sári</i>	‘shout’
<i>suusuu</i>	‘suck’
<i>taki</i>	‘bump’
<i>túluŋ</i>	‘play’
<i>wúri</i>	‘shout’

This type of alternation is not very productive. It is found with verbs assigning various types of semantic roles to their subject, and it does not seem possible to propose a semantic feature whose presence would automatically license it. An interesting semantic generalization is however possible: in Mandinka, this type of alternation is never found with verbs encoding prototypical events in which a patient undergoes a change of state triggered by a manipulation exerted by an agent.

This observation has an interesting consequence for terminology. From a strictly formal point of view, the alternation presented in this section involves a change in the construction similar to that triggered by applicative as well as antipassive derivations, depending on the choice of one of the two possible orientations. But licensing the presence of an object NP representing a participant that otherwise would not be encoded as a core term of the transitive construction is a typical function of applicative derivations, whereas antipassive derivations are typically used to demote prototypical patients. Consequently, it is consistent to designate as *applicative alternation* a transitivity alternation that does not affect the semantic role of the subject and in which the participant encoded as the object of the transitive construction is never a prototypical patient.

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<sup>7</sup> The same verb *wúluu* is used with reference to the father of a child, and this sentence could equally mean ‘He begot a girl’, since personal pronouns do not indicate the sex of their referent.

#### 4.2. The active / introversive alternation

In the active / introversive alternation, the same semantic role is assigned to the subject in the transitive and intransitive constructions, but the participant encoded as the object of the transitive construction cannot be expressed in the intransitive construction. This alternation has been found with four verbs: *dása* ‘lack’, *karaj* ‘learn’, *kiiliyaa* ‘be jealous’, and *lón* ‘know’.

(11) a. *Jíy-o dásá-ta le.*  
 water-DEF lack-PF.POS FOC  
 ‘Water is lacking.’

b. *Kód-oo ye íj dása.*  
 money-DEF PF.POS 1SG lack  
 ‘I lack money.’

(12) a. *Ñíj kew-ó ye íj loj.*  
 DEM man-DEF PF.POS 1SG know  
 ‘This man knows me.’

b. *Ñíj kew-ô lón-ta báake.*  
 DEM man-DEF know-PF.POS very  
 ‘This man is a very learned person.’

(13) a. *Ñíj kew-ó ye Fúlá-káj-o karaj.*  
 DEM man-DEF PF.POS Fula-language-DEF learn  
 ‘The man learned the Fula language.’

b. *Ñíj kew-ó karán-ta báake.*  
 DEM man-DEF know-PF.POS very  
 ‘The man is a very learned person.’

#### 4.3. A strategy for avoiding expressing objects that cannot be converted into obliques

With verbs used in the transitive construction with an object that cannot be converted into an oblique in an intransitive construction, a construction in which the verb is nominalized constitutes the usual way to leave the object unexpressed. This behavior is illustrated in (14) below with *tábi* ‘eat’.

Mandinka verbs can be used as action nouns without being explicitly nominalized, but with most transitive verbs, apart from control constructions in which the unexpressed patient is identified to a noun present elsewhere in the construction, if the patient is not expressed as an incorporated noun or as a genitival dependent, the addition of the antipassive suffix *-ri* is necessary in order that the

nominalized verb can express an active meaning.<sup>8</sup> As illustrated by Ex. (14d), a construction in which *ké* ‘do’ combines with the antipassive form of the transitive verb in object function constitutes the usual strategy to avoid expressing the patient of transitive verbs in Mandinka.

- (14) a. *Mus-óo ye sub-ôo tábi.*  
 woman-DEF PF.POS meat-DEF cook  
 ‘The woman cooked the meat.’
- b. \**Mus-ôo tábí-ta.*  
 woman-DEF cook-PF.POS  
 intended: ‘The woman did the cooking.’
- c. *Sub-ôo tábí-ta.*  
 meat-DEF cook-PF.POS  
 ‘The meat has been cooked.’
- d. *Mus-óo ye tábí-r-oo ke.*  
 woman-DEF PF.POS COOK-ANTIP-DEF cook  
 ‘The woman did the cooking.’

## 5. Transitivity alternations changing the semantic role of the subject (P-lability)

### 5.1. Two types of P-lability

In the type of transitivity alternation examined in this section, the subject of the intransitive construction has a semantic role similar or identical to that of the object of the transitive construction. Two cases must be distinguished.

In the *causative / anticausative* alternation, the argument structure is affected, in the sense that the intransitive construction does not imply the involvement of a participant with the semantic role assigned to the subject of the transitive construction, and the referent of the subject of the intransitive construction is presented as undergoing a process without any hint at a possible external cause – Ex. (15).

- (15) a. *Máŋk-oo jolón-ta baŋk-óo to.*  
 mango-DEF fall/drop-PF.POS ground-DEF LOC  
 ‘The mango fell on the ground.’

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<sup>8</sup> This suffix differs from the affixes commonly identified as antipassive markers in that it is used almost exclusively in nominalization: *dómo* ‘eat’ is the only Mandinka verb whose antipassive form is used not only as an action noun, but also as a verb. Its effect on verb valency is however consistent with its identification as an antipassive marker.

- b. *Kew-ó ye mur-óo joloŋ baŋk-óo to.*  
 man-DEF PF.POS knife-DEF fall/drop ground-DEF LOC  
 ‘The man dropped the knife on the ground.’

In the *active / passive* alternation, the intransitive construction is interpreted as implying the same participants as the transitive construction, but the participant encoded as the subject of the transitive construction is left unexpressed. This alternation has already been illustrated by Ex. (5) above. Ex. (16) & (17) provide additional illustrations.

- (16) a. *Mus-óo ye ñoó tuu.*  
 woman-DEF PF.POS millet.DEF pound  
 ‘The woman has pounded the millet.’

- b. *Ñoó tuú-ta ka baŋ.*  
 millet.DEF pound-PF.POS INF finish  
 ‘The millet has already been pounded.’

- (17) a. *Íŋ ŋa wo kúm-oo moyí le.*  
 1SG PF.POS DEM word-DEF hear FOC  
 ‘I have heard about this.’

- b. *Wo kúm-oo moyí-ta le baŋ?*  
 DEM word-DEF hear-PF.POS FOC Q  
 ‘Did people hear about this?’ lit. ‘Was this word heard?’

## 5.2. The active / passive alternation

The existence of an active / passive alternation giving rise to morphologically unmarked passive constructions, as illustrated by Ex. (5), (16) & (17) above, constitutes the most original aspect of Manding argument structure. In spite of the absence of anything that could be analyzed as passive morphology, the construction illustrated by sentences (5b&e), (16b) & (17b) is passive in the sense that the patient is the subject of an intransitive construction in which the agent is demoted but not deleted from argument structure.

It is important to observe that, in Mandinka, the passive reading of intransitive clauses is not bound to any particular condition on aspect, mood, or referentiality. Sentences such as (5b&e), (16b) or (17b) are used in Mandinka in the same conditions and with the same semantic implications as agentless passive clauses in languages that have canonical passive constructions, and are synonymous with transitive clauses in which a third person plural pronoun in subject role receives an arbitrary reading.

Additional examples of intransitive constructions with a passive reading are given in (18). They have been found in news bulletins from the Gambian website *mandinka.org*. The passive construction is particularly frequent in titles, and it is interesting to observe that the same piece of information is sometimes repeated in

the same bulletin in the shape of a transitive clause with a third person plural pronoun in subject role.

- (18) a. *A tombón-ta pérésídán-o ti.*  
 3SG choose-PF.POS president-DEF ESS  
 ‘He **was elected** president.’
- b. *Feer-ôo ñán-ta sití-la.*  
 plan-DEF must-PF.POS tie-INF  
 ‘A plan must **be elaborated**.’
- c. *Búl-oo-lu ñán-ta kuú-la níj i maarii táa-ta kam-óo to.*  
 hand-DEF-PL must-PF.POS tie-INF if 3PL owner go-PF.POS toilet-DEF LOC  
 ‘Hands must **be washed** after going to the toilet.’
- d. *A tuumí-ta kó a ye jamfáa le siti.*  
 3SG accuse-PF.POS QUOT 3SG PF.POS plot FOC tie  
 ‘He **was accused** of plot.’
- e. *Ñíj kibáar-oo yitandí-ta nuj kibaari-káyít-oo to Observer.*  
 DEM news-DEF announce-PF.POS PST news-paper-DEF LOC Observer  
 ‘This news **had been announced** in the newspaper *Observer*.’
- f. *Jat-ôo méj kaná-ta béeyám-mará-dúlaa,*  
 lion-DEF REL escape-PF.POS animal-hold-place  
 ‘The lion that escaped from the zoo
- a jé-ta bâa dáala.*  
 3SG see-PF.POS river-DEF beside  
**was seen** on the river bank.’
- g. *Táayí-wáafílaa sorón-ta.*  
 narcotic-dealer lock-PF.POS  
 ‘A narcotic dealer **was put in prison**.’
- h. *Yaamár-oo díi-ta seneláa-lu la.*  
 advice-DEF give-PF.POS farmer-DEF-PL OBL  
 ‘Advice **was given** to farmers.’
- i. *Káyírá-díyáam-oo báayí-ta le.*  
 peace-negotiation-DEF cancel-PF.POS FOC  
 ‘The peace negotiations **have been canceled**.’
- j. *Boyiŋkan-náa-lula maaboo-dúlaa wáañáarí-ta le.*  
 attack-AGNR-DEF-PL GEN hide-place discover-PF.POS FOC  
 ‘The hiding place of the bandits **was discovered**.’

There is however an important difference between Mandinka and other Manding dialects in the syntactic possibilities of the passive construction. In other Manding dialects, a decisive proof of the passive nature of the construction follows from the possible addition of an oblique representing the participant encoded as the subject of the corresponding transitive construction, as in Ex. (19) from Bambara.

(19) a. *Wùlu má sògo dún.* [Bambara]  
 dog.DEF PF.NEG meat.DEF eat  
 ‘The dog did not eat the meat.’

b. *Sògo má dún (wùlu fê).* [Bambara]  
 meat.DEF PF.NEG eat dog.DEF by  
 ‘The meat has not been eaten (by the dog).’

This possibility does not exist in Mandinka. Interestingly, the passive construction of Mandinka is compatible with obliques marked by the same postpositions as those used to encode the agent in other Manding dialects (i.e., postpositions whose basic meaning is that the event occurs within the personal sphere of an individual), but in the passive construction of Mandinka, such obliques are interpreted as referring to a person who is concerned by the event but does not play an active role in it, or to an involuntary agent, as in Ex. (20).

(20) *Kód-oo dómó-ta ń fee.*  
 money-DEF spend-PF.POS 1SG beside  
 ‘The money was spent without my knowing.’ or ‘I spent the money, but I did not do it on purpose.’

The active / passive alternation is particularly productive with verbs whose object in the transitive construction represents a prototypical patient, i.e., with verbs that cannot be involved in the kind of transitivity alternation presented in Section 5. Some of the examples given above show however that it is not limited to such verbs.

### 5.3. The causative / anticausative alternation

In the causative / anticausative alternation, the relationship between the two constructions is of the type expressed in other languages, either by a transitivizing derivation of the causative type, or by a de-transitivizing derivation of the anticausative type. Its productivity is limited not only by the possibility to conceive events as more or less spontaneous processes affecting a single participant, but also by the existence of a causative derivation making explicit the involvement of an agent.

*Duj* ‘enter’ illustrates the case of a verb lending itself to the causative / anticausative alternation – Ex. (21a-b), which however also has a morphologically marked causative form – Ex. (21c).

- (21) a. *Wul-óo duń-ta búŋ-o kóno.*  
 dog-DEF enter-PF.POS house-DEF inside  
 ‘The dog went into the house.’
- b. *Baá ye miráŋ-o duŋ a díŋ-o búlu.*  
 mother-DEF PF.POS bowl-DEF enter 3SG child-DEF POSS  
 ‘The mother put the bowl into the hands of her child.’
- c. *Mus-óo ye kew-ó du-ndi búŋ-o kóno.*  
 woman-DEF PF.POS man-DEF enter-CAUS house-DEF inside  
 ‘The woman let the man into the house.’

The competition between the causative / anticausative alternation and the causative derivation is one of the trickiest aspects of Manding grammar. Their respective productivity shows important dialectal variations (and Mandinka is one of the dialects in which causative derivation is particularly productive), but even within the limits of a given dialect, relatively important fluctuations can be observed in the use of causative forms and in the speakers’ judgments. Lexicalization also plays an important role in the use of causative forms. An unquestionable regularity is however that, as already illustrated by Ex. (21), the use of causative forms tends to correlate with less direct causation, a relatively high degree of agentivity of the causer, and the ability of the causee to control the process and/or to oppose the manipulation exerted by the causer. Ex. (22) provides another illustration.

- (22) a. *Suw-ó borí-ta.*  
 horse-DEF run-PF.POS  
 ‘The horse ran.’
- b. *Kew-ó ye suw-ó bori-ndi.*  
 man-DEF PF.POS horse-DEF run-CAUS  
 ‘The man made the horse run.’
- c. *Kew-ó ye suw-ó bori.*  
 man-DEF PF.POS horse-DEF run  
 ‘The man rode the horse.’

Note that the active-passive alternation is totally productive with causative verbs, giving rise to intransitive constructions in which the presence of the causative marker unambiguously triggers a passive-like reading, whereas the non-derived verb used intransitively has a spontaneous event reading, as in Ex. (19).

- (23) a. *Moó-lu beń-ta.*  
 person-DEF-PL gather-PF.POS  
 ‘The people gathered.’

b. *Alikáal-oo ye moó-lu be-ndi.*  
 chief-DEF PF.POS person.DEF-PL gather-CAUS  
 ‘The chief of the village gathered the people.’

c. *Moó-lu be-ndí-ta.*  
 person.DEF-PL gather-CAUS-PF.POS  
 ‘The people were gathered.’

## 6. Multiple alternations

With some of the verbs having transitive uses, the active-passive alternation is the only possible transitivity alternation. The intransitive use of such verbs always implies an unexpressed participant that would be treated as the subject of the corresponding transitive construction. This kind of behavior is typical of verbs referring to prototypical actions resulting in a change of state of a patient that cannot be conceived without the intervention of an agent.

But there are also cases of intransitive constructions whose correspondence with the transitive construction of the same verb lends itself to several interpretations. In particular, verbs involved in transitivity alternations that preserve the semantic role of the subject may also have intransitive uses in which their subject is assigned the same semantic role as the object of the transitive construction.

For example, *wúluu* ‘give birth’ has been mentioned as illustrating the applicative alternation, in which the semantic role of the subject does not change, and the object of the transitive construction has the same semantic role as an oblique in the intransitive construction – Ex. (10a), repeated here as (24a). The same verb is used intransitively with the meaning ‘be born’, i.e., with a subject receiving the same semantic role as the object of the transitive construction – Ex. (24b).

(24) a. *Mus-ôo wúlúu-ta (sínkút-oo la).*  
 woman-DEF give\_birth-PF.POS girl-DEF OBL  
 ‘The woman **gave birth** (to a baby).’

b. *Íj wúlúu-ta Seejó le.*  
 1SG give\_birth-PF.POS Sédhiou FOC  
 ‘I **was born** in Sédhiou.’

*Kacaa* ‘discuss’ provides another example.

(25) a. *Íj kacáa-ta ñiñ kúw-o la.*  
 1PL discuss-PF.POS DEM matter-DEF OBL  
 ‘We **discussed** this matter.’

b. *Kúu-kúmmaa sabá le kacáa-ta ñiñ beŋ-ó to.*  
 matter-important three FOC discuss-PF.POS DEM meeting-DEF LOC  
 ‘Three important questions **were discussed** at this meeting.’



As for the existence of verbs participating both in the causative / anticausative and active / passive alternations, it seems that speakers tend to avoid using potentially ambiguous passive constructions with verbs that participate in the causative / anticausative alternation. For example, *faa* '(tr.) kill, (intr.) die' is rarely used intransitively with the meaning 'be killed'. If nothing in the context contradicts this interpretation, *faa* used intransitively is spontaneously interpreted by speakers as 'die' – Ex. (26a), and the usual translational equivalent of *be killed* in Mandinka is a transitive construction in which the subject is a third person plural pronoun with an arbitrary reading – Ex. (26b). It is however possible to find *faa* used intransitively in contexts triggering a passive reading, as illustrated by Ex. (26c).

(26) a. *Saajíy-o faá-ta le.*  
 sheep-DEF die/kill-PF.POS FOC  
 'The sheep died.'

b. *I yé saajíy-o faá le.*  
 3PL PF.POS sheep-DEF die/kill FOC  
 'The sheep was killed.' litt. 'They killed the sheep.'

c. *Janníy i ká deenaan-ôo tóo fo,*  
 before 3PL HABP baby-DEF name.DEF tell  
 'Before telling the name of the baby,

*saajíy-o fóloo le ká faa.*  
 sheep-DEF first FOC HABP die/kill  
 'the sheep is killed first.'

With other verbs involved in the causative / anticausative alternation, the meaning of the NP in subject function may help to disambiguate the construction, and it is easy to find the same verb with intransitive uses in which the process undergone by the referent of the subject necessarily implies an unexpressed agent, and others referring to a process devoid of any external cause, as illustrated by *loo* 'rise' – Ex. (27).

(27) a. *Kew-ó loó-ta.*  
 man-DEF rise-PF.POS  
 'The man rose.'

b. *Kew-ó ye búŋ-o loo.*  
 man-DEF PF.POS house-DEF rise  
 'The man built a house.'

c. *Búŋ-o loó-ta.*  
 house-DEF rise-PF.POS  
 'The house has been built.'

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have tried to analyze the regularities in the possible correspondences between the transitive and intransitive uses of Mandinka verbs. The main conclusions are as follows:

- In Mandinka, constructions differing in the number of arguments overtly expressed as core NPs can never be analyzed in terms of null subjects or objects.
- A-lability and P-lability are not mutually exclusive, and some verbs can be used intransitively, without any morphological marking, with a subject corresponding to any of the two core terms of the corresponding transitive construction.
- Prototypical transitivity as discussed by Næss 2007 is crucial in understanding the behavior of Mandinka verbs in transitivity alternations.
- A-lability is found only with verbs whose transitive use does not involve a prototypical patient.
- There is no general restriction on P-lability, but P-lability is particularly productive with verbs used transitively to encode actions involving a prototypical patient, including causative verbs.
- In transitivity alternations affecting the semantic role of the subject, the participant encoded as the subject of the transitive construction is not necessarily absent from the argument structure underlying the intransitive construction, which means that intransitive clauses may have passive-like readings without necessitating any kind of morphological marking; however, contrary to other Manding dialects, this passive-like use of morphologically unmarked intransitive constructions is not corroborated by the possibility to encode the agent by a postposition phrase in oblique role.

## Abbreviations

AGNR: agent nominalizer, ANTIP: antipassive, CAUS: causative, DEF: definite, DEM: demonstrative, ESS: essive, FOC: focalization, GEN: genitive, HAB: habitual, INF: infinitive, LOC: locative, NEG: negative, OBL: postposition in oblique marker function, PL: plural, PF: perfective, POS: positive, POSS: possessive postposition, PST: past, Q: interrogative particle; QUOT: quotative, REL: relativizer, SG: singular.

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