THE EMERGENCE OF TRANSITIVE VERBAL MORPHOLOGY IN BISLAMA

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Abstract

One of the salient features of Bislama, an English-lexifier pidgin/creole that is spoken in Vanuatu, is the presence of a suffix on transitive verbs of the shape -Vm. This paper traces the historical development of this suffix from its sporadic appearance in the early nineteenth century to its very regular use in present-day Bislama. This paper demonstrates that there has not been a simple progression from occasional use of -Vm to general use over time. Rather, the suffix went through some fits and starts and at one stage almost disappeared before regaining vigour, eventually generalising to the productive pattern that we find today. Substrate languages have played a part in this, though there has not been a single direct substrate parallel. In the earliest years, there was somewhat indirect Australian substrate influence, while only later was there reinforcement from Oceanic substrate patterns. However, purely language-internal pressures also played a part, and the generalisation of the transitive marker was not simply a case of direct substrate modelling.

Introduction [1]

Bislama is a predominantly English-lexifier pidgin/creole [2] that has since 1980 been the constitutionally declared national language of the Republic of Vanuatu, which has more languages per head of population than any other

nation. Bislama—along with Pijin in Solomon Islands and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea—is a variety of Melanesian Pidgin. This is effectively a single language which is made up of three mutually intelligible but separately named and separately standardised varieties of a single language, Melanesian Pidgin.

The 200,000 people of Vanuatu today speak about 80 distinct local languages, all of which belong to the Oceanic subgroup of the much larger Austronesian language family. Oceanic languages are spoken well beyond Vanuatu, however, and extend into much of other parts of Melanesia, and the Polynesian languages are also members of this subgroup. By way of contrast, the indigenous languages of Australia are completely unrelated to Austronesian languages, and they are typologically quite different from them.

A highly salient feature of Bislama—along with other varieties of Melanesian Pidgin—is the presence of a transitive suffix with the canonical shape -Vm. This paper seeks to establish the historical development of this suffix from its sporadic appearance in the earliest multilingual contacts in this part of the world to its highly regularised presence in modern Bislama. Any discussion of the history of transitive marking in Bislama can approach the topic with a variety of questions in mind. Of particular interest, though, are the following:

- Under what kinds of pressures did transitive marking first appear? What are the possible roles played by superstrate and substrate patterns?
- When—and why—did transitive marking develop from an occasional variant into an almost fully regular suffix?

Both of these questions will be addressed in the discussion which follows.

An early form of modern Bislama became established in Vanuatu between the mid-1840s and the 1860s. At that time, trading stations with English-speaking overseers and a linguistically diverse collection of local labour recruits were set up in the islands of southern Vanuatu, along with the Loyalty Islands of neighbouring New Caledonia, to gather, process and trade in sandalwood and sea cucumbers, or bêche de mer (Crowley 1990: 60–65). What initially came to be known as Sandalwood English in southern Melanesia, and later Beach-la-Mar English,[3] quickly developed out of its precursor, often referred to as South Seas Jargon (Clark 1979–80). This was an English-lexifier contact variety which was spoken more widely as a ship-based contact language between multi-ethnic crews and people on shore all around the South Pacific. This variety can in turn be related again to a precursor, which was a contact language which developed for use between Europeans and indigenous

Australians after the establishment of the British colony in New South Wales in 1788 (Baker 1993). This variety spread from Sydney along the outwardly expanding colonial frontier.[4]

The morphological marking of transitive verbs by means of a suffix is attested from quite early on with the shape, and the earliest forms of this suffix are *-im* (e.g. Mühlhäusler 1979, Keesing 1988). This is reflected in modern Bislama examples such as the following:

Mi ridim buk.
'I read the book.'

This suffix made its first appearance very early on in the development of Bislama with occasional recordings of *-im* on transitive verbs before a following noun phrase object from speakers in Vanuatu before the end of the 1860s (Crowley 1990: 286). However, Keesing (1988: 120) notes the occasional use of this transitive suffix from as early as the 1840s in South Seas Jargon elsewhere in the Pacific, and Baker (1993: 41–42) points out that there is evidence for its even earlier use in New South Wales Pidgin in the 1820s.

Documentary sources indicate that the suffix *-im* began as an occasional alternative to zero-marked transitive verbs presumably from the 1820s and gradually increased in its frequency over the following decades. By the end of the First World War among Bislama speakers in Vanuatu, about three-quarters of transitive verbs carried this suffix, including a substantial number of verbs which alternated between having and not having the suffix (Crowley 1990: 287). Over the next half-century or more, the suffix became increasingly associated with transitive marking to the point where in Bislama today all newly incorporated transitive verbs originating from English automatically take the modern reflexes of the suffix, e.g. *imelem* 'email', *daonlodem* 'download'.

However, there is still a handful of transitive verbs which show no evidence whatsoever of a transitive suffix,[5] and there is a slightly larger set of verbs in which a transitive suffix is now optionally present,[6] along with occasional examples where an earlier transitive suffix has become fossilised as a synchronically unanalysable part of the root.[7] Forms such as these vestigially reflect the earlier situation in which transitive marking had not yet become fully systematic (Crowley 1989: 402–406).

The Origin of Transitive Marking

Perhaps the easiest question of all to answer is the possible role of the superstrate in the origin of transitive marking. Mufwene (2001: 25–80), with his Founder Principle, argues that creole development begins with varieties that are relatively close to the superstrate and that they gradually diverge away from the superstrate over time. Superstrate input has often been missed in the study of creoles in general in the past because of a tendency to concentrate on standard varieties of the superstrate, while ignoring the often structurally quite divergent colloquial and non-standard varieties that were part of the actual linguistic mix during the period of initial contact.

With regard to the development of the transitive suffix in Melanesian Pidgin, it would be difficult to find any precursor in non-standard native-speaker varieties of English that might have been used in New South Wales. Thus, while the transitive suffix clearly derives its form from the unstressed and phonologically reduced clitic form of the third person masculine object *him* in spoken English, its function as a transitive marker is very clearly not English.

Obviously, then, we must look elsewhere for a source for this grammatical function. There is a widespread pattern in Oceanic languages by which transitive verbs are formally distinguished from intransitive verbs by means of one of two suffixes which derive from Proto Oceanic **-i* and **-aki(ni)* (Lynch, Ross and Crowley 2002: 44). We find reflexes of the first of these suffixes in Nakanamanga, an Oceanic language that is spoken in central Vanuatu. We therefore find examples such as the following in which there is a correspondence between the intransitive verb *munu* 'drink' and its transitive counterpart *munu-gi* (Schütz 1969: 71, 73). A number of writers have argued that the suffix *-im* represents a direct calque on this kind of transitive marking (Walsh 1978: 191–92, Camden 1979: 92, Keesing 1988: 119–122). Certainly, one of the earlier attestations of the transitive suffix, which happened to be from a speaker of South Seas Jargon in Fiji, could have reflected this kind of influence, as these earlier suffixes represent a pervasive feature of Fijian verb morphology (Schütz 1985: 132–55).

However, there are problems associated with assuming a direct link between Oceanic substrate transitive suffixes and the modern transitive marker in Bislama. For one thing, although transitive suffixes similar to the Nakanamanga example just presented are attested in some Vanuatu languages, they are generally not productive. Schütz (1969: 36–37) points out that in

Nakanamanga, while some transitive verbs do have clearly recognisable cognates of the reconstructible Proto Oceanic transitive suffixes, a great many transitive verbs have no suffix at all, or they have reanalysed the original suffix as a synchronically unanalysable part of the verb root. The predominant pattern—which is the one from which we would expect any calquing to take place—is in fact illustrated by the following where the transitive verb *mari* 'make' has no suffix (Schütz 1969: 39):

Au *mari* *nakoau* *asa*.
1pl make pudding of:3sg
'We make pudding from it.'

There are many other Vanuatu languages in which transitive marking on verbs is either purely vestigial with just a handful of intransitive-transitive pairs, e.g. Paamese (Crowley 1982: 150–51), or synchronically completely non-existent, e.g. V'ënen Taut (Fox 1979: 51) and Raga (Walsh 1978: 191). As more descriptions of Vanuatu languages have become available in recent years, it appears that the retention of productive transitive suffixes very much represents the exception rather than the rule among the Oceanic substrate languages for Bislama. In any case, it will be remembered that the transitive suffix made its first appearance in the precursor to Bislama quite early on in New South Wales Pidgin where there was no possibility of contact with an Oceanic substrate, and Australian languages have no transitive suffixes.

Koch (2000: 17–28) suggests instead that a somewhat less direct calque on Australian substrate patterns may be involved in the initial development of transitive marking in those early years. Although lacking any formal marking of transitivity, verbs in the substrate languages for New South Wales Pidgin were typical of Australian languages in having a rigid distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs. In many such languages, the shapes of inflectional suffixes often differ according to the transitivity of the verb. For instance, in the Dyirbal language of northern Queensland, the past tense of transitive verbs is overwhelmingly marked as *-n*, while with intransitive verbs, the past tense is overwhelmingly marked by means of - (Dixon 1972: 54–55).

The distinction between transitive and intransitive verbs in Australian languages also has pervasive effects on sentence structure. These are overwhelmingly ergative languages in which the subjects of transitive verbs are formally marked in contrast to the unmarked subjects of intransitive verbs. It could be argued, therefore, that there was a somewhat abstract transfer of the pervasive significance of the transitive-intransitive distinction into New South

Wales Pidgin by means of the suffix *-im* (which alternated in the earlier years also with *-it*).

Once transitive marking became established as a variant in New South Wales Pidgin, its continuation in South Seas Jargon and ultimately Bislama could easily have been reinforced by subsequent exposure to the tendency among some of the early Oceanic substrate languages, such as Fijian, to exhibit productive patterns of transitive suffixation.[8]

The Regularisation of Transitive Marking

What is most interesting, as well as most puzzling, about the development of transitive marking in Bislama, is the pattern of spread of this suffix to its present-day distribution from that of its initial levels of attestation in the 1820s. One might have expected that from initial sporadic use, documentary evidence might point to a gradual increase in the presence of this suffix over the years until it eventually reached the near-categorical use that we find today. In fact, though, this suffix appears to have gone through a series of fits and starts, and at one point appears almost to have disappeared.

Koch (2000: 26) indicates that in the 1820s in the frame VERB + OBJECT, the incidence of transitive marking in New South Wales Pidgin was fairly low and the verb appears with a transitive suffix 19.5% of the time.[9] Over time, this proportion increased and by the 1840s, as New South Wales Pidgin had spread inland, the figure had increased to 61%. However, in the 1840s—keeping in mind the fact that the first of the sandalwood stations were established in Vanuatu in the middle of this decade—transitive marking was attested only as a very occasional variant in early Bislama, with only 3% of verbs recorded this suffix in the frame VERB + OBJECT (Crowley 1990: 287). The scenario presented by Baker (1993) involves some kind of continuity, or at least significant contact, between earlier New South Wales Pidgin, the Pacific-wide South Seas Jargon, and the incipient Sandalwood/Beach-la-Mar English of southern Melanesia.

If the transitive suffix of modern Bislama can indeed be traced back ultimately to New South Wales Pidgin, then we are faced with a substantial drop in the use of this suffix in the sandalwood era in Vanuatu. By the period 1870–1885, however, the incidence of transitive marking in Bislama in Vanuatu had increased to 27%, and from 1885–1900 it increased again to 59% (Crowley 1990: 287). The trend towards greater regularity in the use of the

transitive suffix continued into the early decades of the twentieth century and by the end of the First World War, the proportion of suffixed transitive verbs had increased to 77%. Its presence was clearly still a long way from being categorical, but by the 1920s it must have been getting close.

The drastic reduction in the incidence of transitive marking in the 1840s in Bislama in comparison with New South Wales Pidgin is perhaps not surprising. During this period, there was no longer any direct contact with the Australian substrate and the relatively strong motivation that it provided to develop some kind of strategy towards morphologically marking transitivity. This could be seen as a renewal of influence from the Founder Principle, with greater opportunity for structural influence from the superstrate.

Although there was presumably some continued contact with New South Wales Pidgin via Sydney-based vessels which would have called on a regular basis to the southern Melanesian sandalwood stations, the social networks would necessarily have been fairly diffuse. In southern Melanesia, there was also minimal exposure to reflexes of the Proto Oceanic transitive suffixes, as the languages of the Loyalty Islands and southern Vanuatu show only vestigial retention of the original system. It could be argued that on those early sandalwood stations, circumstances were ripe for transitive marking to have withered away and died. In fact, it seems that it very nearly did so.

However, it clearly picked up again after the 1870s and regained strength. The question is why. One possible explanation involves exposure to the influence of a slightly different substrate. Between the late 1860s and the turn of the century, after the decline of the sandalwood industry, many thousands of Ni-Vanuatu[10] were recruited to work on plantations outside Vanuatu, most of them in Queensland (Crowley 1990: 87–96). Although Ni-Vanuatu constituted the majority of Melanesian labourers there between the late 1860s and the mid-1890s, the largest minority were Solomon Islanders (Dutton 1980: 112). After 1895, Solomon Islanders began to outnumber Ni-Vanuatu until the cessation of recruiting in 1904. The Oceanic languages of Solomon Islands differ from the languages of Vanuatu and the Loyalty Islands in that they largely retain productive reflexes of the Oceanic transitive suffixes, e.g. Kwaio (Keesing 1985: 38–44), Roviana (Corston-Oliver 2002: 483–84), Gela (Crowley 2002: 531–32), Longgu (Hill 2002: 547–49), Arosi (Lynch and Horoi 2002: 568).

Prior to 1885, Solomon Islanders never constituted more than a quarter of the plantation labour population in Queensland (Dutton 1980: 112). It is difficult to say whether such a proportion of people speaking typologically

fairly uniform languages would have been sufficient on its own to motivate the reinvigoration of transitive marking. It must be remembered, though, that up to this point in time, the attested incidence of transitive marking among Ni-Vanuatu in Vanuatu itself was still fairly low.

It may be that the upsurge in transitive marking was associated in part with renewed contact at that time with Australian Aboriginal Pidgins. While in Queensland, Ni-Vanuatu labourers also came into contact with indigenous Australians. They would have been using a late nineteenth-century descendant of early New South Wales Pidgin which had spread northwards along the ever-expanding frontier of European settlement. Koch (2000: 26) indicates that by the turn of the century, speakers of Aboriginal Pidgin in Queensland had quite a high proportion of transitive marking (55.5%).

Thus, the reintroduction of transitive marking may have involved two rather different sources, i.e. the relatively restricted exposure to the Solomon Islands substrate, along with a certain amount of interaction with speakers of Queensland Aboriginal Pidgin. The spreading transitive suffix could have received a substantial boost from substrate pressure in the final decade of labour recruiting from the mid-1890s, when Solomon Islanders were very much the demographically dominant group in Queensland. It was during this approximate period that we see the incidence of transitive marking among Bislama speakers in Vanuatu more than double.

After the cessation of recruiting to Queensland with the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, there was wholesale repatriation of Ni-Vanuatu labourers. Many of these labourers continued to work in the cash economy on plantations that had by that time also been established within Vanuatu. It was precisely during this period that the incidence of transitive marking increased most dramatically. Again, however, we must ask ourselves why. Given that transitive marking showed signs of withering when it was introduced into southern Melanesia in the 1840s, why did it do just the opposite when it was reintroduced from the 1870s, when the pressure locally from the substrate to maintain (and even expand) the pattern was once again removed.

My answer to this question relates to the attested incidence of transitive marking that was available for importation from Australia in the two different periods. In the early period, New South Wales Pidgin was still spoken in coastal areas around Sydney. This is presumably the variety with which sandalwood stations in southern Melanesia would have been in closest contact, rather than varieties spoken later along the inland frontier. In the earlier years around Sydney, the incidence of transitive marking was still

relatively low. If a maximum of 19.5% of VERB + OBJECT constructions showed evidence of transitive suffixes on the verb, it is difficult to imagine how newly exposed speakers of Oceanic languages could have recognised a viable pattern from which to generalise the suffix, particularly given the lack of strong substrate reinforcement in their own languages.

However, by the time that Ni-Vanuatu were returning from Queensland towards the end of the nineteenth century, they had been exposed to substantially higher proportions of transitive suffixes of well over 50%. Such a level of transitive marking would surely call for some kind of evolutionary response as the language continued to be spoken. Two logical possibilities suggest themselves. Firstly, the suffix could have begun to wither and die as it had showed signs of doing during the sandalwood era. However, the earlier motivation for the loss of the suffix was presumably the inability to generalise a pattern from the relatively low levels of incidence of *-im*. By the late 1800s, however, speakers were exposed to much higher levels of transitive marking.

It seems to me that a second outcome is more likely, with speakers recognising that *-im* had a grammatical function that could be generalised to substantially reduce the number of apparent exceptions. Thus, *-im* had an opportunity to spread in Bislama in the late 1800s which it did not have in the 1840s. What is interesting here, of course, is that the spread of *-im* in Bislama is now not being described as a development that is motivated by pressure from the superstrate, or from the substrate. It had become, in fact, a purely language-internal development of a kind that could have taken place in any language, whether pidgin, creole or neither. This contrasts with what appear to be widespread views of pidgin and creole morphology primarily as representing superstrate input (e.g. DeGraff 2001) or as directly reflecting substrate patterns (e.g. Keesing 1988).

Conclusions

If we return to the two questions that I posed at the beginning of this paper, it will be seen that some problems have been solved with greater confidence than others. One question asked about the time-frame in the development of productive transitive marking in Bislama. The discussion showed that there has not been a simple progression from occasional use to general use. Rather, the suffix went through some fits and starts, apparently losing strength at one stage and nearly disappearing, and then regaining vigour after a period of

re-exposure to Australian Pidgin, eventually gaining sufficient momentum to be generalised as the productive pattern that we find today.

The role of the substrate in this case is particularly complex. There is clearly no single direct substrate parallel, but a case can be made that it was the earliest Australian substrate rather than the later Oceanic substrate which produced the greatest pressure for some kind of overt marking of transitivity to develop. While there was eventually some reinforcement from Oceanic substrate patterns, exposure to the productive transitive suffixes found in some Oceanic languages was probably not sufficiently pervasive to have exerted strong pressure in the development of *-im*. However, once a sufficient number of transitive verbs had come to be marked with *-im* via Australian Pidgin, the form acquired a momentum of its own whereby it could be generalised purely on language-internal grounds.

Notes

1 Many thanks to John Lynch and Jeff Siegel for helpful comments to earlier versions of this paper. Final responsibility for the contents of the paper, however, rests solely with the author.

2 It makes little sense to attempt to uniquely apply either of the terms 'pidgin' or 'creole' to Bislama. About 10% of the total population of about 200,000 grows up speaking Bislama as their primary language, but of the 90% who primarily speak one of the 80 or so local languages, there is little (or nothing) that distinguishes their Bislama from that of the 10% for whom Bislama is the primary language.

3 Beach-la-Mar—ultimately Bislama—obviously derives from the term *bêche de mer* 'sea cucumber'.

4 In heavily settled New South Wales this pidgin was ultimately replaced by English. Even the indigenous languages have now also largely disappeared.

5 These are *kakae* 'eat, bite', *save* 'know', *lego* 'leave, release', *tingbaot* 'remember', *tokbaot* 'discuss', *gat* 'have', *se* 'say'.

6 This includes *dring* 'drink', *luk* 'see', *singaot* 'call', *selaot* 'remove (copra from shell)', *seraot* 'distribute', *belaot* 'bail (canoe)', *lukaot* 'look for'.

7 For example, *somap* 'sew'.

8 Crowley (1990: 294) argues that there could have been a less direct influence in the retention of transitive marking from the similarly rigid distinction in many Oceanic substrate languages between transitive and intransitive verbs, even where there was no longer any transitivity marking or morphological ergativity on associated subject noun phrases. This seems, in retrospect, to have been grasping somewhat at straws.

9 I have conflated Koch's figures for the early competing transitive suffixes *-im*

and *-it*, of which the latter variant disappeared completely very early in the Pacific, and eventually also in Australia.

10 People from Vanuatu are referred to today as Ni-Vanuatu.

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