Notes on the verbal morphology of Loxodumau, an Oceanic language of Papua New Guinea

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In this paper I will present some aspects of the verbal morphology of Loxodumau (Meso-Melanesian, Western Oceanic), a still undescribed language spoken in New Ireland (Papua New Guinea) by approximately 800 people. In the past, it has been defined as a ‘transitional language’ between Nalik (its southern neighbor) and Kara (its northern neighbor; Volker 1998:3). All data come from my own field notes (2017).

As most Western Oceanic languages, Loxodumau has a rich system of pre-verbal particles denoting tense and aspect. The simple past tense is always unmarked, but a special form is dedicated to the near past (‘I have just X’). The present may occasionally be signaled by the particle nga; future reference is obligatorily marked by the particle daa. Loxodumau verbs distinguish an inceptive (valaa), habitual (una; morphological reduplication), completive (kaavus) and perfective (asang) aspect. Imperative, prohibitive, desiderative moods are distinguished; there are no native deontic modals, but the verbal particle pu is found, expressing epistemic possibility; directional serial verb constructions are widely used.

As for valency-changing operations, in Loxodumau, two valency-increasing (va-, -in) and two valency-decreasing affixes (ra(la)-, -aai) are found. Va- (<POC *paki-; Ross 2004) is a causative prefix that attaches to intransitives (umaan ‘lie’ – va-umaan ‘make lie down’); I only have one example of a transitive base: vatangin ‘show’ < tangin ‘find’. The suffix -in (maybe <POC *-i; Ross 1988) is an applicative that attaches to both intransitive and transitive bases: vaaigot ‘ready’ – vaaigotin ‘prepare’, vaabus ‘eat’ – vaabusin ‘eat something with something else’ (vaabusin licenses a comitative adjunct). The suffix -aai (<POC *-a(k)i; Ross 1988) has an antipassive function. The direct object of the transitive base (1a) is either demoted to an oblique introduced by the instrumental preposition pan (1b), cancelled (1c) or incorporated (2):

(1a) 3SG FUT tell-IN ART custom POSS by ART pig-hunting

‘He will describe the custom of pig-hunting

(1b) 1SG FUT REDUPL-tell-AAI by ART big man

‘I will talk about a big man’

(1c) 3PL RECIPROCAL-tell-AAI

‘They talk with each other’

(2) 3PL REDUPL-buy-AAI woman

‘They buy brides’

The prefix ta(la)- (<POC *ra-; Ross 2004) forms intransitives from root transitives: buak ‘break.TRANS’ – talabuak ‘be broken, break.INTR’. Finally, the very rare suffix -aan is a transitivizer and has the pragmatic function of a passive. It is always used in passive-like fronting constructions (3, 4) and passive (5):

(3) ART house this 3PL forbid-AAN

‘They have forbidden (to enter) this house’

(4) ART village 3PL CAUS-be.round-AAN by ART people bad
‘The village is surrounded by enemies’

(5) \textit{Akamaam a pet-aan pan a maase}

This 3SG say-AAN by ART maase

‘That is called ‘maase’’

All these morphological devices are typical of other languages of New Ireland (Ross 1988). However, their use – especially of the suffixes -\textit{aai} and -\textit{aan} - has not yet been described in detail. The transitivizing suffix -\textit{(a)an} is found in other languages of the area, Tungak-Lavongai (Stamm 1988), Tigak (Beaumont 1979) and Kara (Dryer 2003); in the latter -\textit{aan} also forms agentless passives. However, in these languages, -\textit{aan} is the only transitivizing suffix. In Loxodumau, instead, the general transitivizing function is performed by -\textit{in} [cf. -\textit{ing} in neighboring Nalik; Volker 1998], while -\textit{aan} is restricted to clauses with fronted objects; moreover, the structure exemplified in (4), with an overt demoted agent NP, seems to be unique in the region.

References


