

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 (*vuna*; 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 2004) 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) *Ka daa xuzin a pasin i pan a selapiu*

3SG FUT tell-IN ART custom POSS by ART pig-hunting

‘He will describe the custom of pig-hunting’

(1b) *Ga daa xus-xus-aai pan a varam taatei*

1SG FUT REDUPL-tell-AAI by ART big man

‘I will talk about a big man’

(1c) *Di ve-xus-aai*

3PL RECIPROCAL-tell-AAI

‘They talk with each other’

(2) *Di ma-maraa-iaai revin*

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) *A flu akam u ribotin-aan*

ART house this 3PL forbid-AAN

‘They have forbidden (to enter) this house’

(4) *A bina u va-kaalivut-aan pan a buna zaat*

ART village 3PL CAUS-be.round-AAN by ART people bad

‘The village is surrounded by enemies’

(5) *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 *-aai* and *-aan* - has not yet been described in detail. The transitivity suffix *-(a)an* is found in other languages of the area, Tungak-Lavongai (Stamm 1988), Tigak (Beaumont 1979) and Kara (Dryer 2003); in the latter *-aan* also forms agentless passives. However, in these languages, *-aan* is the only transitivity suffix. In Loxodumau, instead, the general transitivity function is performed by *-in* (cf. *-ing* in neighboring Nalik; Volker 1998), while *-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

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