

## Lability (uncoded valency alternations)

Lability and other morphologically uncoded valency alternations: lability and pseudo-labability; A-labability; P-labability (anticausative labability, passive labability).

### 1. Definitions

Former definitions:

(a) *A labile verb is a verb which can be used transitively or intransitively without any formal change.* (Kibrik et al. 1997, interalia).

(b) *In labile alternations, the same verb is used both in the inchoative and in the causative sense* (Haspelmath 1993a: 92); thus, a labile verb must have one monovalent (inchoative) and one bivalent (causative) use.

### 2. Typological classification (Letuchiy 2009)

Letuchiy (2009): definition (a) does not take into account the difference between so-called  $\text{-agent-preserving}\emptyset$  and  $\text{-patient-preserving}\emptyset$  labability, and definition (b) does not take into account the  $\text{-converse}\emptyset$  labable verbs, in which transitive and intransitive realizations require different participant roles. A typological classification of labile verbs indicates that labile verbs can be classified in terms of anticausative, reflexive, and other subtypes, which are generally isomorphic to the classification of valency derivations

- **Anticausative labability** as in Xârâcùù *b châ -untie* (sth.) $\emptyset$  Lezgian (East Caucasian) *qâin -kill / die* $\emptyset$  etc. English *the cup broke* (intransitive), *I broke a cup* (transitive)

Xârâcùù

- 1a. *Kwii bëchâ.* (spontaneous event)  
 rope untie  
 "The string/rope is coming loose."
- 1b. *Nâ bëchâ kwii rè nâ.* (reflexive value)  
 1SG untie rope POSS 1SG  
 "I untie myself." (lit. je détache ma corde)
- 1c. *Nâ fa-bëchâ kwii rèè.* (causative derivation with other-directed object)  
 1SG CAUS-untie rope POSS+3SG  
 "I untie him." (lit. I make untie his rope)

### - Ambitransitivity and inanimate object

Xârâcùù

- 2a. *Nâ xwêê.*  
 1SG fall  
 $\text{-I fell down.}\emptyset$
- 2b. *Nâ xwêê kwé.* (with inanimate object)  
 1SG fall water  
 $\text{-I am pouring water.}\emptyset$
- 2c. *Nâ fa-xwêê chaa xûûchî.* (causative derivation with animate object)  
 1SG CAUS-fall one child  
 $\text{-I make the child fall down.}\emptyset$

### - Ambitransitivity with animate or inanimate subject

Bauan Fijian (Arms 1974:45)

- 3a. *E s talo oti ko Seru* (active meaning)  
 3SG now ladle finish PERS Seru  
 "Seru has already served."

- 3b. *E s talo oti na yaqona.* (passive meaning)  
 3SG now ladle finish ART kava  
 "The kava has already been served."

- **Middle alternation**

(a). In the transitive construction, the object is the undergoer, whether it refers to an animate (b) or an inanimate (c) and the causative meaning is other-directed.

Xârâcùù

- 4a. *Nâ xii.* (grooming actions)  
 1SG shave  
 -I am shaving.∅
- 4b. *Nâ xii è.* 4c. *Nâ xii nû.*  
 1SG shave 3SG 1SG shave coco  
 -I am shaving him.∅ -I am grating coconut flesh.∅

- **Reciprocal lability**: Estonian (Uralic, Finnic) *suudlema* -kiss (so.)∅ Arabic (Afro-Asiatic, Semitic) *iltaqa*: -meet (smb.)∅ (inherent reciprocity)

Xârâcùù

- 5a. *Ri tôôbùtù.*  
 3PL assemble  
 -They are assembling.∅
- 5b. *Ri tôôbùtù ri.*  
 3PL assemble 3PL  
 -They are assembling them.∅
- 5c. *Ri tôôbùtù köfi.*  
 3PL assemble coffee  
 -They are gathering coffee beans.∅

- **Passive lability**: rare throughout the world, except in Africa (Kabyle, Bambara; Vydrine 1994)

- **Converse lability**: French (Romance) *sentir* -smell (transitive) / smell (intransitive)

Bulgarian (Z. Guentchéva, p.c.) *xaresvam* -please / like∅

- transitive construction

- 6a. *Az te xaresvam.* (= *Az xaresvam te.*)  
 I 2SG.ACC like.PRES.1SG  
 "I like you."

- intransitive construction

- 6b. *Ti mi xaresva-*  
 You 1SG.DAT please.PRES.2SG  
 "I like you." (lit. you are pleasant to me)

- transitive construction

- 7a. *Ti me xaresva-*  
 You 1SG.ACC like.PRES.2SG  
 "You like me."

- intransitive construction

- 7b. *Az ti xaresvam.*  
 moi 2SG.DAT please.PRES.1SG  
 "You like me." (lit. I am pleasant to you)

Letuchiy: if one compares *John drinks / John drinks tea* and *The stick broke / I broke a stick*, the verb *break* is treated as labile in the strict sense of the term, since the transitivity change is accompanied by the change of meaning and of the semantic role of the subject; the verb *drink* is regarded as  $\neg$ quasi-labile $\emptyset$  since the intransitive use differs from the transitive use only by its transitivity. Idem for Russian *u it $\emptyset$  teach / learn $\emptyset$*  satisfies only the second criterion:

Russian

- 8a. Ja uč-u anglijsk-ij.  
 I learn-1SG.PRS English-ACC.SG  
 $\neg$ I learn English. $\emptyset$
- 8b. Pap-a uč-it men'a anglijsk-omu.  
 daddy-NOM teach-3SG.PRS 1SG.ACC English-DAT.SG  
 $\neg$ (My) father teaches me English. $\emptyset$

Table 1. Semantic and syntactic classification of labile pairs

Type	Ex.	Intransitive use	Transitive use
Anticausative	Xârâcùù <i>běchâ</i>	$\neg$ untie $\emptyset$ (monovalent)	$\neg$ untie sth. $\emptyset$ (bivalent)
Reflexive	Khwarshi <i>esanho</i>	$\neg$ wash $\emptyset$ (monovalent)	$\neg$ wash $\emptyset$ (bivalent)
Reciprocal	Estonian <i>suudlema</i>	$\neg$ kiss $\emptyset$ (monovalent)	$\neg$ kiss $\emptyset$ (bivalent)
Converse	Bulgarian <i>xaresvam</i>	$\neg$ please $\emptyset$ (bivalent intransitive)	$\neg$ like $\emptyset$ (bivalent transitive)
Passive	Bambara <i>sègin</i>	$\neg$ be returned $\emptyset$ (bivalent intransitive)	$\neg$ return $\emptyset$ (bivalent transitive)

"Lability and valency derivation are simply different mechanisms, which are not obligatorily in complementary distribution in a given language" (Letuchiy 2009:239). "A labile verb is a verb with two uses, which differ in syntactic transitivity and in the semantic role of the subject [í ] lability does not serve to *derive* one variant of the situation from another one. It is rather a kind of polysemy, which *brings together*, in one lexeme, two situations that share significant semantic and syntactic properties" (id.:240).

### 3. Creissels ambitransitivity

D. Creissels subsumes a slight different approach, under the term ambitransitivity, as a particular case of lability, and follows the Dixon (1994) distinction between:

- P-lability or patient-preserving lability as English *I broke the stick / the stick broke*
- A-lability (or agent-preserving lability) as English *John is drinking tea / John is drinking*.

The semantic distinction between *argument structure preserving* and *argument structure modifying ambitransitivity* is defined as follows:

ó in *argument structure preserving* ambitransitivity, the verb in its intransitive use implies the same participants with the same roles as in its transitive use, but in the intransitive use, one of the participants is demoted to oblique or left unexpressed;

ó in *argument structure modifying* ambitransitivity, the intransitive use of the ambitransitive verb implies a single participant whose role may be related in various ways to the roles the ambitransitive verb assigns to two distinct participants in its transitive use.

Creissels distinguishes *weak vs. strong ambitransitivity*, defined as follows:

ó in *weak* ambitransitivity, the only core argument of the intransitive construction is encoded exactly like the argument with a similar or identical role in the transitive construction, and

superficially, the two constructions show no other formal distinction than the presence vs. absence of a noun phrase (as in English *John is drinking tea / John is drinking*).  
Xârâcùù (New Caledonia) (Moyse-Faurie 2010: "object omission")

9a. *Nâ bôô*  
1SG weed.out  
"I am weeding."

9b. *Nâ bôô nècaa rè Fabio*  
1SG weed.out field POSS Fabio  
"I am weeding the field of Fabio."

ó in *strong* ambitransitivity, the two constructions differ formally in other respects than the mere presence vs. absence of a nominal term:

- different encoding with a similar or identical role in the transitive construction (as *the vase* in English *The vase broke / The child broke the vase*<sup>1</sup>)
- transitivity marking, as in:

Mandinka

10a. *Mòôlú yè bâa t e.* (yè  $\rightarrow$ completive positive $\emptyset$  in transitive use)  
people.D.PL CPL.TR river.D cross  
 $\rightarrow$ The people crossed the river. $\emptyset$

10b. *Mòôlú t e-tâ.* (tâ  $\rightarrow$ completive positive $\emptyset$  in intransitive use)  
people.D.PL cross-CPL.INTR  
 $\rightarrow$ The people crossed. $\emptyset$

Ergative language: the intransitive use of A-labile verbs triggers a change in the flagging of A which is converted into the U (absolutive) term of an intransitive predication (11b):

East Uvean (Moyse-Faurie 2016:139)

11a.  $\emptyset E$  *huo e Soane tana g ueŋaga ŋufi.*  
NPST weed ERG Soane his field yam  
 $\rightarrow$ Soane is weeding his yam field. $\emptyset$

11b.  $\emptyset E$  *huo ia Soane.*  
NPST weed ABS Soane  
 $\rightarrow$ Soane is weeding. $\emptyset$

Creissels then distinguishes different semantic types of lability:

### 1. Two semantic types of P-lability

ó (*anti*)causative lability (English *break*) if the U term of the intransitive construction represents a participant undergoing the same process as the P argument of the transitive construction, but not necessarily as the result of the action of an agent,

ó *active / passive lability*, if the intransitive construction implies the participation of an unexpressed agent.

### 2. Two semantic types of A-lability

Most of the A-labile verbs are equally bivalent in their transitive and intransitive uses.

Argument structure modifying A-lability can however be illustrated by A-labile verbs that are clearly monovalent in their intransitive use, such as French *pleurer*  $\rightarrow$ cry $\emptyset$  used transitively with the meaning  $\rightarrow$ lament someone's death $\emptyset$

<sup>1</sup> Haspelmath inchoative/causative verb pairs (1993:90), defined semantically: "it is a pair of verbs which express the same basic situation (generally a change of state, more rarely a going-on) and differ only in that the causative verb meaning includes an agent participant who causes the situation, whereas the inchoative verb meaning excludes a causing agent and presents the situation as occurring spontaneously:

- a. (inchoative) The stick broke.                      The snowwoman melted.  
b. (causative) The girl broke the stick.        The sun melted the snowwoman.

### 3. Underspecified ambitransitivity

Case of verbs that can be used in three different ways without any specific morphological marking: transitively, intransitively with the U term corresponding to the A term of the transitive construction, or intransitively with the U term corresponding to the P term of the transitive construction.

East Futunan (Moyse-Faurie)

- 12a. *E kaiø le toe.* (U = A or U = P)  
 NPST steal SPC child  
 "The child steals" (is a thief) or "The child was stolen."
- 12b. *E kaiø e le toe le f fala.* (U = A)  
 NPST steal ERG SPC child SPC CLS pineapple  
 "The child is stealing a pineapple."
- 12c. *E kaiø le toe e le tagata fili.* (U = P)  
 NPST rob SPC child ERG SPC man enemy  
 "The enemy is robbing the child."

- A-P reversal: a type of valency alternation also known as ðsubject-object reversalø  
 Tswana (Creissels pers.doc.)

- 13a. *Mètsí á-t éts-í lí-tâ:m .*  
 (CL6)water A.CL6-fill.PRF-FV CL5-dam  
 ðThe water filled the dam.ø
- 13b. *Lí-tám lí-t éts-í mèt:tsí.* (the demoted A argument in the P slot)  
 CL5-dam A.CL5-fill.PRF-FV (CL6)water  
 ðThe dam is full of water.ø

- **A~X labilty**, morphologically uncoded valency alternations in which both alternative constructions are transitive, and a participant encoded as an oblique in one of them is encoded as A in the other:

- 14a. *I opened the front door with this key.*  
 14b. *This key opens the front door.*

- **Impersonal labilty**, as for example in presentational constructions:

French

(i) impersonal construction

- 15a. *Il est venu deux femmes.*  
 A.3SGM be.PRS.3SG come.PTCP.SGM two woman.PL  
 ðTwo women came.ø (lit. It came two womenø)

(ii) canonical predication

- 15b. *Deux femmes sont venues.*  
 two woman.PL be.PRS.3PL come.PTCP.PLF  
 ðTwo women came.ø

- **Goal labilty**, known as ðdative-shiftø in English grammar:

- 16a. *John gave the book to Mary.*  
 16b. *John gave Mary the book.*

- **Locative labilty**, morphologically uncoded valency alternations in which one of the alternative constructions is clearly intransitive, and a participant encoded as a locative adjunct in this construction is encoded as A or U in the other.

- 17a. *John smeared paint on the wall.*  
 17b. *John smeared the wall with paint.*