System versus Syncretism: Verbal derivation and lability in Estonian

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Outline

1. What is lability?

2. Estonian
   - Background
   - Derivation & valency marking

3. Functional diversity of the -tau- affix

4. The spread of lability in Estonian: a diachronic tale
What is Lability?

• Labile verbs show **valency alternation** with **no formal change** in the verb.

  o **Narrow sense**: verb forms which can be employed both transitively and intransitively.

  o **Broader sense**: ‘lability’ also includes other formally unmarked alternations in diathesis.

Types of Lability across Languages

- **Patient-preserving (P-lability):**
  1.a. Alice *bounced* the ball.
  b. The ball *bounced*.

- **Agent-preserving (A-lability):**
  2.a. Dan’s *moving* the piano.
  b. Dan’s *moving out*.

- **Reflexive:**
  3.a. Simon *turned* the page
  b. Simon *turned left*.

- **Reciprocal:**
  4.a. Jack *kissed* Jill.
  b. Jack and Jill *kissed*. 
Borderline Cases

• Often problematic to distinguish between:
  – A-lability and reflexive lability (agentive S, capable of reflexive activities)
  – A-lability and covert arguments.
  – P-lability and agent omission (esp. ergative languages)

• We do not include:
  – Object ellipsis: *John drinks (beer)*.
  – Object insertion: *John ran (two kilometers)*.
  – Other null objects (referentially distinct implicit object)

• O- and S-ellipsis more productive in Estonian than English

• Patient is more easily recoverable from context in the case of O-omission than in A-lability.
Estonian: Background

- Genetic affiliation: Finno-Ugric < **Uralic**.
- Areal affiliation:
  - "**Circum-Baltic Sprachbund**" (Dahl & Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2001)
  - extensive contacts with Germanic (German, Swedish), Baltic (Latvian) and Slavic (Russian).
- Morphosyntax:
  - more **fusional** and **analytic** than Finno-Ugric in general.
  - high degree of **allomorphy & grammatical syncretism**.
  - **Nominative-accusative** alignment
Valency Marking in Estonian

- Various overt means to mark changes in valency:

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<tr>
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<th>VALENCY INCREASE</th>
<th>VALENCY DECREASE</th>
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<tr>
<td>NON-DERIVATIONAL</td>
<td>Analytic verb phrases</td>
<td>Voice:</td>
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<td>• Inflectional impersonal</td>
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<td>• Analytic passive</td>
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<td>DERIVATIONAL</td>
<td>Causative suffix -ta-</td>
<td>Decausative suffixes:</td>
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<td>-u-, -ne-</td>
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Valency Marking in Estonian

• Derivational affixes for both transitivizing and intransitivizing:

  \[
  \text{TRANS} \rightarrow \text{INTRANS}
  \]
  \[\text{solva-ma} \text{ ‘insult’} \rightarrow \text{solv-u-ma} \text{ ‘take offense’}\]

  \[
  \text{TRANS} \leftrightarrow \text{INTRANS}
  \]
  \[\text{kasva-ta-ma} \text{ ‘grow, tr.’} \leftrightarrow \text{kasva-ma} \text{ ‘grow, intr.’}\]

• This looks like a nice neat paradigm. Indeed, Finnish uses similar affixes regularly and productively – and only has about 10 labile verbs.
Lability in Estonian

• Some preconceptions:

  • Lability is **almost entirely absent** in Uralic languages (Letuchiy 2006: 253).

  • Estonian **is no exception**. Estonian grammatical description is not aware of the range of lability.
    • Some studies mention 5–6 labile verbs.
    • Kasik (2001: 83–84) claims that Estonian does not have any non-derived labile verbs.

  • P-lability is claimed to be typical for erg-abs languages, A-lability for nom-acc languages (e.g. Dixon 1979).
Lability in Estonian

...These preconceptions do not survive closer scrutiny:

- Our Estonian corpus contains over 90 labile verbs, 52 of which are P-labile.
- A majority denote *basic* and *frequent actions/states*.
- The corpus has 39 non-derived labile verbs.

QUESTION: Why has this language with such a regular overt valency-marking system allowed such widespread lability (and resulting ambiguity)?
Lability in Estonian

- All four types of lability are attested; e.g.
  
  **P-lability** (58% of labile verbs in our corpus):

  5. a. Jüri ehmata-s Mari-t
     Jüri.NOM startle-PST.3SG Mari-PART
     *Jüri startled Mari.*
   
   b. Mari ehmata-s
   Mari.NOM startle-PST.3SG
   *Mari started / was startled.*

  **A-lability** (~20%):

  6. a. Jüri jaluta-s koera
     Jüri.NOM walk-PST.3SG dog.PART
     *Jüri walked the dog.*
   
   b. Jüri jaluta-s
   Jüri.NOM walk-PST.3SG
   *Jüri walked.*
Extent of Estonian Lability

• Estonian is **relatively rich** in labile verbs.

• Estonian would be placed above the middle point of the scale, closer to Germanic and Romance than its Finno-Ugric relatives.

Scale of languages, from highest to lowest number of labile verbs:

**ENGLISH (>900) > GERMAN, AVAR > SCANDINAVIAN, FRENCH (~200) > Estonian (~90) > BULGARIAN, RUSSIAN (~20-30) > SERBIAN, ROMANIAN, LEZGIAN > POLISH, TURKIC > CZECH, HUNGARIAN, FINNISH (<10).**

(adapted from Letuchiy 2006: 228–229)
Formal Uniformity

• 57% of labile verbs in the corpus are derived verbs;
  cf. Letuchiy’s (2006:256) cross-linguistic generalization:
  “Derived verbs are more often labile than non-derived”.

• All derived labile verbs are derived with the affix -ta
  or with the complex affixes -sta, -nda, -tle, -rda, which
  contain this affixal element.

• 84 % of all A-labile verbs contain the element -ta.
Functional Diversity of -\textit{ta}

- The affix -\textit{ta} derives 3 distinct types of verbs:

1. Denominal/de-adjectival factitives \{32\% of all labile verbs\}
2. Deverbal causatives
3. Punctual (momentaneous) verbs
Functional Diversity of -ta

Denominal/de-adjectival factitives:

Verbs causing participant Y to be S; can also be seen as causatives, e.g. lollitama ‘to fool/be a fool’ (<loll):

7. a. Jüri lolli-ta-b lapsi.
   Jüri.NOM fool-ta-3SG children.PART
   Jüri fools the children.

    b. Jüri lolli-ta-b.  (labile extension of factitive)
   Jüri.NOM fool-ta-3SG
   Jüri behaves like a fool (or: pretends to be a fool).
Functional Diversity of -\textit{ta}

Deverbal causatives:

Verbs causing participant Y to do V, e.g. \textit{liigutama} ‘move, trans.’ (< \textit{liikuma} ‘to move, intr.’):

8. a. Jüri liigu-ta-s ratastooli-s vanaisa.
\hspace{1cm}Jüri.NOM move-\textit{ta}-PST.3SG wheelchair-INE grandpa.PART
\hspace{1cm}\textit{Jüri moved grandpa (who was) in the wheelchair.}

\hspace{1cm}b. Vanaisa liigu-ta-s. \hspace{1cm}(\textit{labile extension})
\hspace{1cm}grandpa.NOM move-\textit{ta}-PST.3SG
\hspace{1cm}\textit{Grandpa moved.}
Functional Diversity of -ta

Punctual (momentaneous) verbs:

Modifies Aktionsart, e.g. prantsatama ‘slam/crash’:

   *Jaan threw the logs in front of the stove.*

   b. Puu-d prantsa-ta-sid põranda-le. *(labile extension)*
      log-PL.NOM crash-ta-PST.3PL floor-ALL
      *The logs crashed onto the floor.*
Functional Diversity of -\textit{ta}

- One third of labile verbs in Estonian are originally derived as deverbal, denominal or de-adjectival causatives.

**Follow-up Question:**

- Why do derived transitives (\textit{ta}-causatives) tend to become labile and not derived intransitives (\textit{u}-decausatives)?
The Diachronic Tale

• Our hypothesis:

The decreased productivity and concomitant reduction in regularity of causative/decausative derivation created semantic gaps in the verbal lexicon that were filled by means of lability.

TRANS $\rightarrow$ INTRANS

\begin{align*}
\text{solva-} & \text{ma ‘insult’} \\
\text{solv-} & \text{u-} \text{ma ‘take offense’}
\end{align*}

TRANS $\leftarrow$ INTRANS

\begin{align*}
\text{kasva-} & \text{ta-} \text{ma ‘grow, tr.’} \\
\text{kasva-} & \text{ma ‘grow, intr.’}
\end{align*}
The Diachronic Tale

• Language speakers would be likely to **resort to lability** in cases where, in a causative/decausative conceptual pair, one verb exists, but its causative or decausative counterpart is missing.

• We looked for evidence in support of this scenario in the documented history of

  ✓ the class of *u*-verbs;
  ✓ the class of *ta*-verbs.
The Diachronic Tale: *u*-verbs

- During the 19th century, the affix *-u*- lost most of its productivity. By 1865–1890, the number of decausatives formed with the affix *-u*- in Standard Estonian had fallen to some 20 verbs (Aavik 1920: 8).

- The extent of labile verbs at the end of the 19th century was greater than now (Wiedemann 1875, Aavik 1920)

  ➢ The **vacuum** left by the lack of productive decausative derivation was **compensated for** by lability.
**u-verbs**

- In the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, language reformers tried to revive the decausative suffix. New coinages were created to fill lexical gaps.

- Usage of *u*-decausatives gained further ground in the Soviet period through frequential copying from Russian reflexive derivation (Hint 1990).
  - This in turn **reduced the need** for lability.
  - The suffix *-u-* **never regained** full productivity and the need for labile verbs **never disappeared**;
  - Nevertheless its semantics **are accessible** and **neologisms occur** and are easily understood.
The Diachronic Tale: \(ta\)-verbs

- Over half of labile verbs are coinages of \(-ta\).

- **Affix syncretism:** The synchronic functional diversity of \(-ta\) reflects varied diachronic sources.
  1. Denominal/de-adjectival factitives
  2. Deverbal causatives
  3. Punctual (momentaneous) verbs
**ta-verbs**

- In South-Estonian dialects and in Finnish the formal difference between (1–2) factitive/causative and (3) momentaneous suffixes is still preserved;

- In Standard Estonian it has been lost.

  ➢ This resemblance in form in Standard Estonian has allowed the **reinterpretation** of derived causatives as intransitives and vice versa.
**ta-verbs**

- **Lexicalization and opacity**: Verbs originally derived with the suffix *-ta* are often lexicalized. Hence, the internal structure of such verbs is no longer transparent.

- As a result, the derivational pattern itself becomes opaque, and *-ta* becomes less tightly connected to its (mostly causative/transitive) semantics.

  - This in turn permits reanalysis of the valency patterns of *ta*-verbs.
Back to the Questions

Q1: Why has a language with such plentiful means to overtly mark valency allowed such wide-spread lability (and resulting ambiguity)?

Q2: Why do ta-causatives tend to become labile and not u-decausatives?
Q1: Why has a language with such plentiful means to overtly mark valency allowed such wide-spread lability (and resulting ambiguity)?

A partial answer:

- The spread of lability in Estonian \textit{compensates} for the relatively low productivity and usage frequency of morphological causatives/decausatives.
- A \textit{phonetic merger} of different derivational affixes and lexicalization triggered the reanalysis of verb valency.
Q2: Why do *ta*-causatives tend to become labile and not *u*-decausatives?

Answer:

• *u*-verbs are more transparent than *ta*-verbs in contemporary Estonian: *u*-derivation is not as frequent nor as polyfunctional, therefore its derivations are less prone to lexicalization.
Additional Factors: Language Contact

- **German influence:**
  - Borrowings of labile verbs and the labile pattern.
  - The **lability match** bw Estonian and German is striking:

  10.a. Ta **kaalus** kaks kilo mannat. / Er **wog** zwei Kilo Gries.
  
  *He weighed two kilograms of semolina.*

  
  *A bag with semolina **weighs** two kilograms.*
Many other verbs have **matching lability**, and...

Half of these verbs in Estonian are **German loans**, giving additional weight to the hypothesis that lability was directly borrowed, e.g.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Estonian</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>praadima</td>
<td>braten</td>
<td>‘fry (tr./intr.)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tüürima</td>
<td>steuern</td>
<td>‘steer (tr./intr.)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laadima</td>
<td>laden</td>
<td>‘charge (up)/be charged’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moorima</td>
<td>schmoren</td>
<td>‘stew/be stewed’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kleepima</td>
<td>leben</td>
<td>‘stick (tr./intr.)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>määrima</td>
<td>schmieren</td>
<td>‘lubricate/get smeared’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Language Contact: Conclusions

• The labile pattern can be borrowed across languages.

  – A language rich in labile verbs (German) loaned its labile syntax to a language (Estonian) which can be assumed (genetically) to have been poor in labile verbs. Recently also labile loans from English, e.g.:

  11. a. Ma logi-n sind välja.
     I.NOM log-1SG you.PART out
     I (will) log you out.

  b. Sa logi-d välja.
     you.NOM log-2SG out
     You (will) log out.
Conclusions

• **Sources of lability**: A majority of Est. labile Vs are derived, and most of these are originally *causatives*.

• **Internal motivation**: The spread of lability in Estonian *compensates* for low productivity and usage frequency of morphological causatives/decausatives. A *phonetic merger* of derivational affixes and lexicalization triggered the reanalysis of verb valency.

• **External contributing factors**: Language contact has supported the rise and spread of the labile pattern.
References

• Polinskaya Maria S. 1986: Diffuznyie glagoly v sintaksise ergativnyh jazykov. Moskva: AKD.