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 *-ta-* 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.

  (cf. Polinskaya 1986: 44, Letuchiy 2006: 12–20)

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:

	VALENCY INCREASE	VALENCY DECREASE
NON-DERIVATIONAL	Analytic verb phrases	Voice: •Inflectional impersonal •Analytic passive
DERIVATIONAL	Causative suffix *-**ta**-*	Decausative suffixes: *-**u**-, -**ne**-*

Valency Marking in Estonian

- Derivational affixes for both transitivizing and intransitivizing:

TRANS	→	INTRANS
solva-ma ‘insult’		*solv-**u**-ma* ‘take offense’
TRANS	←	INTRANS
*kasva-**ta**-ma* ‘grow, tr.’		*kasva-ma* ‘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 wide-spread 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 *-ta*

- The affix *-ta* derives 3 distinct types of verbs:

1. **Denominal/de-adjectival** factitives
2. **Deverbal** causatives
3. **Punctual (momentaneous)** verbs

} **32%** of all labile 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 *-ta*

Deverbal causatives:

Verbs causing participant Y to do V, e.g. *liigutama* 'move, trans.' (< *liikuma* 'to move, intr.'):

8. a. Jüri liigu-ta-s ratastooli-s vanaisa.
   Jüri.NOM move-*ta*-PST.3SG wheelchair-INE grandpa.PART
   Jüri moved grandpa (who was) in the wheelchair.

   b. Vanaisa liigu-ta-s**.** **(labile extension)**
   grandpa.NOM move-*ta*-PST.3SG
   Grandpa moved.

Functional Diversity of *-ta*

Punctual (momentaneous) verbs:

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

9. a. Jaan prantsa-ta-s puu-d pliidi ette.
Jaan.NOM crash-*ta*-PST.3SG log-PL.NOM stove.GEN before
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 -*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 (*ta*-causatives) tend to become labile and not derived intransitives (*u*-decausatives)?

The Diachronic Tale

- <u>Our hypothesis</u>**:**

  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	→	INTRANS
solva-ma ‘insult’		*solv-**u**-ma* ‘take offense’
TRANS	←	INTRANS
*kasva-**ta**-ma* ‘grow, tr.’		*kasva-ma* ‘grow, intr.’

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 20th 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?

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)?

A partial answer:

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

Back to the Questions

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*.

b.Kott mannat **kaalub** 2 kilo. / Ein Sack Griess **wiegt** 2 Kilo.
*A bag with semolina **weighs** two kilograms.*

Language Contact

- 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.:

praadima	*braten*	*'*fry (tr./intr.)'
tüürima	*steuern*	*'*steer (tr./intr.)'
laadima	*laden*	*'*charge (up)/be charged'
moorima	*schmoren*	'stew/be stewed'
kleepima	*kleben*	*'*stick (tr./intr.)'
määrima	*schmieren*	'lubricate/get smeared'

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.

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- **Abbreviations**: ALL – allative, GEN – genitive, INE – inessive, NOM – nominative, PART – partitive, PST – past tense, SG – singular, PL – plural