

## Questions about the Semantics and the Phonology of Transitivity in Busa (Nigeria)

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This conference - especially with its plans of launching a comprehensive Mandé data base - offers a precious opportunity for finding answers to three questions which arose in 1972, and have been left unanswered since.<sup>1</sup> The present paper provides a few tonological and semantic data from the Bokobaru dialect of Busa (Nigeria), which is the easternmost Mandé language. Its main aim is, however, to solicit explanations for certain semantic and phonological preferences which, in this dialect, characterize transitivity.

### First Question

In the semantics of Busa verbs, many verbs have both transitive and intransitive variants (or homophones): Thus the verb *tá*, when used intransitively, would be glossed as “to leave, disappear” - and this is the unmarked use of the verb. But the same form *tá* can also be used transitively and then would be glossed as “to cover, to let something disappear”. The same kind of semantic relationship - not always as transparent as in this example - is found with many other verbs, such as *m̄* “to come” (intransitive) vs. *m̄* “to swallow something” (transitive).

**Table 1** *Some examples: Lexical entries of intransitive vs. transitive verbs*

Intransitive Verbs		Transitive Verbs	
b̄	1 to go out	b̄	1 to get or send sth. out*
d̄	2 to arrive, get to	d̄	2 to direct sth.
ká	3 to arrive	ká	3 to reach sth.
m̄	4 to come	m̄	4 to swallow sth.
pé	5 to blow	pé	5 to press sth.
tá	6 to go, disappear	tá	6 to close, let sth. disappear
tó	7 to leave	tó	7 to leave sth.

The transitive use of a verb is clearly distinct from the intransitive use of a verb. The morphological and tonal behaviour leaves no doubt about this - compare the following forms:

**Table 2** *Transitivity expressed by pronouns and tones*

Intransitive Use		Transitive Use	
m̄ b̄.	I went out.	à m̄ b̄.	he sent me out.
à b̄.	he went out.	m̄ à b̄.	I sent him out.

It is not clear whether there are any limits to this semantic flexibility, or what sets the limits. The questions therefore are: (1) *How common is this phenomenon across the other groups of Mandé languages?* (2) *Are these verbs just accidental pairs of homophones? - Or is it true that Mandé verbs are systematically flexible in their transitivity, limited only by the fact that some variants would not make sense?*

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<sup>1</sup> In 1972 the author left Nigeria to live in East Africa, and to work on Afro-Asiatic languages exclusively - turning back to Mandé only on occasion of this conference.

## Second Question

As far as the tonology is concerned, Busa verbs either are high tone verbs (H) or mid tone verbs (M) in their lexical, underlying form. Syntax and morphology then assign low tones (L) to certain verb forms. This will be illustrated briefly: For instance, the lexical tone of the verb *b̄* “to go out (intr.) / to send out (tr.)” is a Mid tone (M), and this is the tone which appears in most of the tenses/aspects.

In the “perfect” tense/aspect, however, the verb takes its tone from the preceding pronoun. In transitive clauses, this is the tone of the object pronoun, in intransitive clauses, the tone of the subject pronoun, see table 3 here below.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 3 Aspectual tones copied from pronouns**

### Intransitive

subject M > verb M	mā b̄.	I went out.
subject L > verb L	à b̄.	he went out.

### Transitive

object H > verb H	à ní b̄.	he sent them out.
object M > verb M	à mā b̄.	he sent me out.
object L > verb L	mā à b̄.	I sent him out.

Now, as far as the phonology is concerned, most Busa verbs with a voiced onset are lexically Mid tone verbs, such as *b̄* M “to go out” vs. *pá* H “to sting”, or *gb̄* M “to make a present (?)” vs. *kpá* H “to give” (see also *kú* H “to catch”, Wedekind 1987: 193). An explanation for this preference - about two thirds vs. one third - would probably be the universal “depressor” effect of voiced consonants (Wedekind 1972: 237).

**Table 4 Some examples: voicing and tone\***

Voiced onset	Tone	Transitive: predominantly Mid	Voiceless onset	Tone	Intransitive: predominantly High
b̄	M	1 to say	p̄	M	1 to slander
dā	M	2 to put	tá	H	2 to leave, let disappear
d̄	H	3 to wait	t̄	H	3 to knit, press, tie
dē	M	4 to kill	té	H	4 to follow
d̄	M	5 to dawn	t̄	H	5 to take with
d̄	M	6 to know	t̄	H	6 to sow, plant
gá	H	7 to suck	ká	H	7 to arrive, reach

\* In this table, nasalization is indicated by a subscript tilde

The questions in this case are: (1) *How common is this phenomenon across Mandé languages?* (2) *Is it the “depressor” effect of voicing which accounts for the prevalence of Mid tones after voiced onsets - or is it something else?*

<sup>2</sup> There are complications such as (1) various sets of aspect bearing pronouns, (2) nominal objects spreading low tones, and (3) narrative “serial” constructions. For illustrations, see Wedekind 1972 pp. 21-23, 29, 33 and 210.

### Third Question

The third question starts from an observation which is based on comparatively weak evidence (weakened further by the fact that a number of Busa verbs are both intransitive and transitive). However:

- As far as the semantics is concerned, it is remarkable that the majority of Busa verbs with a voiced onset are, in their unmarked use, transitive verbs - such as **tá** “to leave, disappear” vs. **dā** “to put something somewhere” vs., or **pē** “to slander, gossip” vs. **bē** “to say something”. But an explanation for this preference - again a preference of about two thirds vs. one third - can not be offered.

*Table 5 Some examples: Voicing and transitivity*

Voiceless onset	Intransitive verbs (unmarked use)	Voiced onset	Transitive verbs (unmarked use)
fêré	1 to arise	bē	1 to say sth.
ká	2 to arrive	bī	2 to dig, cross sth.
kē	3 to act	blē	3 to eat sth.
kòtí	4 to turn round	bō	4 to make, build sth.
kú	5 to be there	bō	5 to send out sb.
pē	6 to slander, gossip	dē	6 to surpass sth.
pē	7 to blow	dē	7 to kill sb.

The statistics for this correlation is weaker than for the correlations presented above - but again, here are the questions: (1) *Is this phenomenon common across Mandé languages?* (2) *If the statistics for this opposition turns out to be significant, what would be the explanation for a correlation between voicing and transitivity?*

### References

Wedekind, Klaus, 1972, An Outline of the Grammar of Busa (Nigeria), Thesis, University of Kiel (Germany)

- 1987, Relevance in Conversations in Busa (Nigeria): Barking up the Wrong Moon, *Multilingua* vol. 6 no. 2, 191-195

### Note

For participants of the Mandé Conference, the two analyses of 1972 and 1987 are temporarily available under “Selected Papers (pdf)” at the website “[www.kwedekind.de](http://www.kwedekind.de)”.