

Transitive verbs as lexical affixes in Coptic?

As Næss (2018) points out, bound lexical forms are challenging for morphosyntactic typology, as there is a general expectation that lexical meanings are associated with roots rather than with affixes; moreover, since the root-affix distinction is basic to many approaches to morphosyntactic typology, bound lexical forms raise fundamental questions.

This abstract presents a cross-linguistically rare linguistic property: in Coptic (Afroasiatic, Egypt), transitive verbs have multiple stems: a free form and two bound forms. The free form (Σ^1 for Stem 1) occurs when a P argument is absent or is a full case-marked noun phrase (1), and the bound forms occur when a P argument is a bound person marker (Σ^2), as in (2) or a noun phrase without case marking (Σ^3), as in (3).

- (1) a-te-shime=de kô n-tes-hudria
PST-DEF-woman=and leave. Σ^1 ACC-her-water_jug
'And the woman left her water-jug.'
- (2) a-pnoute kaa-u hn-t-ekklêsia
PST-God leave. Σ^2 -3PL in-DEF-church
God left them in the church.'
- (3) a-f-ka-p-têu
PST-3SGM-leave. Σ^3 -DEF-breath
'He expired (lit. left the breath).'

The verb stem in (3) represents the entire class of native transitive verbs: all native transitive verbs have a bound variant that occurs under specific grammatical conditions, generally related to definiteness, aspect, and information structure (Layton 2004, Grossman 2019). Such bound verb stems are prefixed to the P argument; they cannot occur on their own. The construction in (3) has been treated in previous literature as noun incorporation (Grossman 2019). However, it is cross-linguistically rare for incorporation constructions to involve bound forms of the verb, rather than the incorporated noun. For the basic inflectional classes, see Table 1 below.

Unlike lexical affixes described for Bella Coola and other indigenous languages of the Americas (Mithun 1997) or some Austronesian languages (Ozanne-Rivierre & Rivierre 2004), these bound verb stems are a basic feature of the lexicon, as they occur for every transitive verb, and they are generally identical in meaning to the free forms, i.e., their occurrence does not entail lexicalization or grammaticalization. In other words, they are bound lexical forms (Naess 2018), which are semantically lexical but morphosyntactically bound.

From a diachronic perspective, these bound lexical forms are but a single layer in a millennia-long process in which stable VSO order facilitates the cyclical accumulation of morphosyntactic complexity in the verb.

References

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Table 1: Transitive verb stems in Coptic

Inflectional classe	1	2	3	4	5	6	Irreg.
	'choose'	'built'	'turn'	'comfort'	'inform'	'find'	'do'
Free form (Σ^1)	<i>sôtp</i>	<i>kôt</i>	<i>pôône</i>	<i>solsl</i>	<i>tamo</i>	<i>cine</i>	<i>eire</i>
P index (Σ^2)	<i>sotp-</i>	<i>kot-</i>	<i>poone</i> -	<i>slsôl-</i>	<i>tamo-</i>	<i>cnt-</i>	<i>aa-</i>
Incorporated P (Σ^3)	<i>setp-</i>	<i>ket-</i>	<i>pene-</i>	<i>slsl-</i>	<i>tame-</i>	<i>en-</i>	<i>r-</i>