

# Transitivity and labile verbs in typological and diachronic perspectives: Indo-European and beyond

**Keywords:** lability, valency orientation, diachrony, lexical semantics, morphosyntactic alignment

## Workshop organizers:

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The aim of the workshop is to investigate the encoding of transitivity oppositions, with a special focus on lability and labile verbs over time. While numerous works address synchronic syntax of transitivity and labile verbs in the languages of the world, the diachronic aspects of these phenomena are often neglected or underestimated in linguistic and typological research. We invite proposals addressing topics related to transitivity and lability in synchronic and particularly in diachronic perspective within different methodological frameworks, in order to uncover and clarify the paths and mechanisms of the emergence and disappearance of labile verbs as well as morphological and syntactic changes in the domain of encoding of transitivity oppositions in the languages of the world.

## DESCRIPTION AND AIMS

The term ‘labile’ refers to verbs or verbal forms which can show valency alternation, i.e. changes in syntactic pattern, with no formal change in the verb, as in Eng. “The door opened” ~ “John opened the door”. Very often it is only employed in narrower sense, to denote the verbs which can be employed both transitively and intransitively, as in (1-3) exemplifying Patient-preserving lability (P-lability) or in (4) illustrating Agent-preserving lability (A-lability):

(1) English

- a. Peter *broke* the cup
- b. The cup *broke*

(2) Latin (first century BCE)

- a. Non enim atomus (...) declinat.  
not for atom.NOM.SG deviate.IND.PRS.3SG.ACT  
‘For the atom does not *deviate* [intransitive].’ (Cic fat. 22)
- b. causa (...) quae declinet atomum  
cause.NOM.SG REL.NOM.SG deviate.SBJV.PRS.3SG.ACT atom.ACC.SG  
‘(...) the cause that *makes* the atom *deviate* [transitive-causative].’ (Cic fat. 46)

(3) Vedic Sanskrit

- a. rudrā ṛtāsya sádaneṣu vāvṛdhuḥ  
Rudra.NOM.PL truth.GEN.SG residence.LOC.PL grow.PERF.3PL.ACT  
‘Rudras *have grown* [intransitive] in the residences of the truth’.
- b. índram ukthāni vāvṛdhuḥ  
Indra.ACC.SG hymn.NOM.PL grow.PERF.3PL.ACT  
‘The hymns *have made* Indra *grow* [transitive-causative].’

- (4) English
  - a. John *ate* porridge
  - b. John *ate*

Other types of syntactic alternation, such as locative alternation (cf. John *sprayed* paint on the wall ~ John *sprayed* the wall with paint) or dative shift (Mary *gave* John an apple ~ Mary *gave* an apple to John) are usually treated separately from P- and A-lability, the former of which is of particular interest for typology.

The recent decades are marked with a considerable progress in typological study of the encoding of transitivity oppositions in general (see Geniušienė 1989; Kittilä 2002; Naess 2007, among others) and the systems of labile verbs in particular, both in individual languages, such as English (e.g. Levin & Rappaport Hovav 2005; McMillion 2006) or French (Larjavaara 2000), and in cross-linguistic perspective (Nichols et al. 2004; Letuchiy 2013). Impressive results are achieved in the synchronic study of the systems of the categories responsible for encoding transitivity oppositions, such as voice and other valency-changing categories: causative, anticausative, passive, reflexive, reciprocal etc. By now, we have at our disposal rich catalogues of the morphological, syntactic and semantic features of these categories in the languages of the world. Thanks to these studies, our understanding of transitivity phenomena has dramatically increased. Since the seminal work by Hopper & Thompson (1980), the concept of transitivity has played a major role in the study of these and related categories. Moreover, studies in basic valency orientation (cf. Nichols et al. 2004) have proposed a typological classification of languages based on their preferred patterns of encoding valency increase and reduction.

Of special interest in this domain is the phenomenon of P-lability common in ergative-absolutive languages or languages showing semantic alignment (for instance, in many Daghestanian languages and Late Latin), but it is also quite frequent in some nominative-accusative languages (such as English or Greek), though (almost) entirely lacking in many others (e.g., Turkic or Uralic). The interrelation between morphosyntactic alignment and the presence or absence of lability in a crosslinguistic perspective has been explored over the last few decades (Dixon 1994; Nichols et al. 2004). Creissels (2014) made this relationship explicit by distinguishing between strong and weak lability, based on alignment patterns in a language and the syntactic differences between the alternants. Within the framework of unaccusativity theory, the intransitive usages of P-labile verbs instantiate unaccusatives. In languages with semantic alignment, the sets of unergative and unaccusative verbs identified at the alignment level and via lability are not always identical.

Much less attention was paid to the diachronic aspects of transitivity oppositions, in particular, to the mechanisms of the evolution of labile verbs. We do not know why in several languages labile verbs become more productive and the class of labile verbs is constantly increasing (as in English or Greek), while in some other languages this class is decreasing (as in Indo-Iranian languages) or entirely lacking (as in Turkic languages). Only a few mechanisms responsible for the emergence of lability (such as the phonetic merger of transitive and intransitive forms or the deletion of the reflexive pronoun, attested in the history of English, changes in morphosyntactic alignment) are mentioned in the literature. The few studies dealing with the diachronic aspects of labile verbs, their rise, development or decay and loss include Kitazume 1996 (on English), Kulikov 2003 (on Vedic Sanskrit), Lavidas 2004 (on Greek), Ongenaes 2024 (on the rise of lability in relation to the

development of alignment in Latin) and Kulikov & Lavidas (eds) 2014 (labile verbs in cross-linguistic perspective).

The aim of the workshop is to bring together scholars working on lability and other phenomena related to encoding of transitivity oppositions, paying special attention to its diachronic aspects and thus opening up new horizons in the research of these phenomena in both (1) languages (language families) with well-documented history (such as, in particular, Indo-European, Sino-Tibetan or Semitic) and (2) languages which furnish less historical evidence but, nevertheless, can provide us with some valuable data on the basis of comparison of daughter languages and linguistic reconstruction (such as Uralic).

Possible **TOPICS** to be addressed at the workshop include (but are not limited to):

- theoretical and descriptive aspects of a study of labile verbs;
- correlation between lability and morphosyntactic alignment;
- the diachrony of labile verbs in a particular language or in a crosslinguistic perspective;
- lability replacing or being replaced by other valency-changing constructions;
- types of lability (e.g. reflexive lability: *Mary washed the baby* ~ *Mary washed*; reciprocal lability: *Mary and John kissed the baby* ~ *Mary and John kissed*; etc.) in synchronic and diachronic perspective;
- mechanisms of emergence or decline of labile verbs;
- syntactic constraints on lability;
- verbal classes where lability is common or rare;
- the role of language contact and other language-external factors in the development of lability;
- corpus-based approaches to the diachrony of lability.

## **CALL FOR ABSTRACTS**

We invite submission of **abstracts up to 300 words** (references not included), describing original, unpublished research related to the topics of the workshop. Please submit your abstracts in Word and PDF format to the workshop organizers.

The **DEADLINE FOR THE SUBMISSION** of abstracts is **10 November 2024**.

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