Abstract

This article discusses the semantics of verbs of separation in Tidore. Tidore is particularly rich in this domain, with many verbs cross-classifying different aspects of separation events. An empirical investigation into this domain showed that the domain of cutting and breaking verbs as distinct from other verbs of separation (open) is not straightforward in Tidore. In their morphosyntactic behavior the verbs turned out to be unusual because morphological causatives were found with unaccusative as well as with transitive and labile verbs. Furthermore, the labile verbs were shown to express both cutting and breaking semantics.

Keywords: cut and break; separation events; verb semantics; Tidore; Papuan languages; transitivity alternations.

1. Introduction

The semantics of verbs expressing cutting and breaking (C&B, hereafter) events has received some interest in various branches of linguistics, in particular in research on lexical organization and event categorization. It has been proposed that semantic differences between cut-type verbs and break-type verbs yield differences in transitivity alternation patterns (e.g. Bohnemeyer, this issue; Guerssel et al. 1985; Hale and Keyser 1986). Predictions are also made on the likelihood of causative or anticausative marking on such alternations (Haspelmath 1993). This article reports a first exploration of how separation events are encoded in Tidore, a Papuan western outlier spoken in the North Moluccas (Van Staden 2000). An overview of the semantic organization of the domain is followed by a first analysis of the transitivity alternations.
2. Method and data

Data for this paper were collected using the C&B videoclips (henceforth the C&B task) designed by Bohnemeyer et al. (2001; see also Majid et al., this issue). Four consultants provided descriptions of 61 videoclips depicting various events of separation. Consultants first described the clips in terms of what the agent did to the object, and then in terms of what happened to the object. Nine additional clips involving various ways to break, peel, or shell eggs were recorded and discussed with two different consultants. Supplementary data were drawn from a corpus of approximately 15 hours of spoken language and from discussions with native speakers. More than fifty verbs were identified for the description of separation events.

3. The meaning of separation verbs

In a crosslinguistic study of 28 different languages, Majid et al. (2004) found that C&B verbs, i.e., those verbs describing material destruction, formed a distinct group from opening (and peeling) verbs that leave the integrity of the object unscathed (cf. also Majid et al., this issue). In Tidore, however, there is at least one verb that describes both C&B and opening events in this sense. This is the general verb for open, *hoi*, used to describe, e.g., the opening of doors (clip 60) or jars, as well as for gutting fish or for descriptions of decapitations or dismemberment—human or animal. In the C&B task it was given in response to clip 28 that showed cutting off a fish's head and tail. The generalization here is that in all its uses, distinguishable parts of an object are separated from each other. The domain under investigation in Tidore is, therefore, somewhat broader than in most other studies in this issue, including also verbs for opening.

The use of verbs is determined by a number of factors, the most important of which is the instrument used, as for example, *fago* 'break with hands or feet, without the use of an external instrument', *guti* 'cut using scissors',1 *tola* 'cut using a large cutting instrument such as a machete',2 and *taji* 'stab, pierce with a metal spike'. But also the manner in which the separation is brought about, with force as for *tola* 'cut', or swaying the instrument over the shoulder as with *toti* 'fell, hack',3 or even the particular configuration in which the instrument is held determines the use of different verbs. Thus, *tofa* 'stab' is used when the stabbing instrument is held like a dagger, i.e., with the thumb upwards, while *tofo* 'spear' is used when the stabbing instrument is held so that thumb points towards the body, as when holding a spear. A very specific manner verb is *tetu*
that describes the breaking of an egg, as for use in cooking. The Tidore
way is to hold the egg in the hand and tap on it with an instrument (typ-
ically a spoon) until a small hole is created. Then this hole is made larger
with the hand until the contents can be poured out.

A fourth factor is the result state encoded in some verbs, e.g. ciko
‘bend, crack (but not break)’ used with long thin objects such as twigs,
and tuso ‘make a hole in something’. In the case of wayo ‘be scattered’
the result is that the object is scattered all over the place (e.g. dropping a
raw egg on the floor or smashing a carrot). Less commonly, use of partic-
ular verbs depends on the object. For example, yaci can only be used with
cloth. In some cases it is the combination of the object and the manner
that is important, as with noi, which is used only to describe cutting the
ribs out of palm leaves in a particular manner. Another example is reno
‘cutting finely with a kitchen-type knife, holding the object in the hand’.
Finally, orientation may be encoded—of the object or of the cut itself, as
in sepi used to describe diagonal cuts, especially in relation to fish, and
teto used when cutting an object lying horizontally on a plank.

Very often more than one separation verb may be used to describe
a separation event in Tidore. This holds especially true for the non-
prototypical clips in the C&B task, as in the examples below, but complex
descriptions were also frequently attested in spontaneous data:

(1) Una leso wortel dadi wortel toga dadi
he cut carrot so/become carrot break so/become
malofo.
two
‘He cuts the carrot so that the carrot breaks and becomes two.’

(2) Una toga boso sodo boso wayo.
he break pot until pot be.all.over.the.place
‘He breaks the pot so that it is in pieces all over the place.’

(3) Una cako kabaya pake martel sodo kabaya yaci se tola.
he hit dress use hammer until dress tear and cut
‘He hits the dress with a hammer until it tears and cuts (with
force).’

When one of the verbs can be used only transitively (leso in (1)) or intrans-
sitively (wayo in (2)), the use of different verbs is inevitable (cf. Section 5
below). But in general the different verbs are used to express more detail.
In example (3), for example, the verb cako ‘hit’ expresses the manner of
the impact; the second and third verbs describe what happens to the ob-
ject. The verb yaci describes how the fabric tears. This verb encodes infor-
mation about the manner of cutting and the material but does not entail
complete separation into parts. This is described by the final verb, *tola*, which also encodes the use of a large instrument.

4. Hierarchical organization of the domain

When considering some of the meaning descriptions in Section 3 and the different factors that need to be taken into account, it is clear that verb meanings in Tidore may be highly specific. Unlike English, which has several verbs that are applicable to a wide range of events, Tidore forces the use of dedicated verbs. For example, the verbs *cut*, *break* and *open* in English may describe the vast majority of clips in the C&B task, although more specific verbs are also available. But even to account for a majority of the clips described by English *cut*, the use of at least three different verbs is required in Tidore: *leso* ‘cut with a kitchen-type knife’, *guti* ‘cut with scissors’, and *tola* ‘to cut using a large instrument such as a machete’. Similarly, there is no equivalent to generic English *break*. The verb *suka* is used for breaking plates and pots, but it cannot be used for breaking sticks or yarn. Instead, *fago* is used if the object is broken with the hands, or *tofo* or *tofa* if the break is produced through a stabbing or spearing motion.

Within the Tidore language verbs do differ in generality. The question is then to what extent verbs are taxonomically organized so that the more specific verb describes a kind of activity described by the more general verb. To answer this question, the use of the different main verbs in the transitive descriptions in the C&B task were plotted in Figure 1 to show overlapping use.4

This diagram shows that *tola* ‘cut’ is the most generic verb in this domain, used in the description of sixteen different clips and overlapping in use with nine other verbs; *tongo* ‘snap’ (eight clips and overlap with five verbs), and *leso* ‘cut’ (nine clips and overlap with four verbs) are next in generality. At the other extreme, there are several verbs that showed no overlap at all, i.e., all consultants agreed on the use of these particular verbs for a clip or set of clips, e.g., *yaci* ‘tear cloth’, *tawa* ‘open mouth’ and *sawa* ‘open hand’, and the verb *gargaji* ‘to saw’. The verb *toto* ‘crop, cut hair’ is also highly specific, showing overlap only with *guti* ‘cut with scissors’, which is a Malay loan. Then there is a group of verbs formed by *tofa*, *tofo*, *taji*, and *tuso* that all express ‘stabbing’ or ‘piercing’. These together covered a subset of clips in the C&B task. The overlap between *tofo* ‘spear’ and *tofa* ‘stab’ is probably due to the fact that the position of the agent’s hand was not always clear. The other verbs show overlap in use with only one or two other verbs, and are used in the description of one (*tutu* ‘pound’) to six (*toti* ‘fell’, *selo* ‘cut’, *fago* ‘break with hands’).
Figure 1. The use of separation verbs in the C&B task
clips. Truly taxonomic relations appear to hold between only a few verbs:

- *tim* ‘peel’ is a more specific kind of *hoi* ‘open’;
- *tutu* ‘pound’ is a specific kind of *cako* ‘hit’;
- *toto* ‘cut hair’ is a specific kind of *guti* ‘cut with scissors’, but it is unknown whether *toto* entails the use of scissors or whether it is also compatible with use of a razor blade to cut hair, unlike *guti*.
- *toga* ‘cut along long axis’ is a kind of *tola* or *leso*. Whereas the latter two verbs encode the kind of instrument used, *toga* only encodes the orientation of the cut.
- *ciko* ‘crack, bend’ is a more specific kind of *fago* ‘break with hands’ or *tongo* ‘break, snap’ in the sense that the latter two can be used for complete and incomplete separation, whereas the first one encodes a ‘partial break’.

For the majority of clips, however, the overlap in verb use is due to the fact that the verbs cross-classify facets of events. For example, *tuso* ‘make a hole’ overlaps in use with both *taji* ‘pierce with a spike’ and *tofo* ‘stab, spear’, the first focusing on the end state; the second, on the instrument; and the third, on the manner in which the cut is produced.

5. Morpho-syntactic properties of separation verbs

Tidore separation verbs can be divided into three syntactic groups. The first consists of transitive verbs with an agent subject, e.g., *leso* ‘cut’, *tetu* ‘break (an egg for use in cooking)’, and *gargaji* ‘saw’. Verbs of hitting are also in this class. These verbs all lexicalize activities, focusing on the causing event, and typically express information about the manner or the instrument used. Verbs of this type often encode contact information between an instrument and the object in the sense of Guerassell et al. (1985).

The second group are the undergoer intransitive (or unaccusative) verbs with an undergoer subject, e.g., *wayo* ‘be scattered’ and *fao* ‘break (in some unpredicted place)’. The intransitives express state changes, lacking real or apparent agents. While they do not themselves express causing activities, they can be causativized. In that case the verb is first nominalized and then prefixed with causative *so-* , e.g., *popo* ‘be cut (of hair or trouser legs)’ is nominalized to *bopo*, then causativized to become *sobopo* ‘cut (hair or trouser legs)’.

The final group, by far the largest, are the labile verbs, which take both agentive and undergoer subjects without any morphological change. This group contains verbs like *suka* ‘break (of fragile objects)’, and *yaci* ‘tear (of cloth)’ which primarily express result state information, but also verbs
that (in addition) encode agent-oriented information. For example, *ka-lepa* ‘cut in two equal halves’ expresses a result state but also that a precise cut is produced, *fago* ‘break (with hands)’ implies a (human) agent, and *tola* ‘cut with a large instrument/with force’ expresses manner/instrument information.

In a short paper such as this one it is impossible to consider at length the relations between the morpho-syntactic behaviour of verbs and the meanings they encode. Here, just two notable properties are given. The first concerns causative verb formation. Causative marking is found most typically with verbs that lack agent information, when “a process normally goes on without any manipulation from outside” (Haspelmath 1993: 103), such as with the unaccusative verbs above. But in Tidore it is found also with transitive (*lesi* and *solesi* ‘cut’) and labile (*toga* and *sodoga* ‘split along the long axis’) verbs.8

The second interesting property is that some of verbs of cutting allow the causative/inchoative alternation, contrary to what is predicted in the literature (Guerssel et al. 1985; see also Bohnemeyer, this issue). It is assumed that verbs only allow the causative/inchoative alternation when they express state changes that in their intransitive use lack agents, as verbs of breaking do:

(4) a. John breaks the stick. b. The stick breaks.

Verbs of cutting express activities performed by an agent, possibly with the use of an instrument and therefore would not allow the alternation. The most notable exception in Tidore is *tola* ‘to cut with a blow, typically using a large machete-type knife’:

   he cut fire.wood fire.wood that cut
   ‘He cuts fire wood.’ ‘The fire wood cuts.’

Bohnemeyer (this issue) argues that for some languages this alternation with cut verbs may be due to polysemy. The intransitive verb could be interpreted as either an inchoative or a middle voice with an implied agent (cf. also Ameka and Essegbey, this issue). But in Tidore there is no implied agent. It is possible to say that something cuts by itself as in the examples in (6):9

   carrot cut alone carrot spontaneously-cut
   ‘The carrot cuts by itself.’ ‘The carrot spontaneously cuts.’

As an alternative solution, offered specifically for *tola*, Bohnemeyer (this issue) considers the possibility of a semantics that generalizes over the
cut/break difference, e.g., severance against the grain, or messy or incoherent separation. This is an interesting possibility. The generalization, I argue, is however over a different facet of the verb’s meaning. Since Tidore has specific verbs to express cross-grain (e.g., toga ‘split along the long axis’) or cuts with various orientations such as diagonal cuts and native speakers claim that tola expresses a clean blow, the particular semantics that Bohnemeyer offers seems less likely. Possibly, the generality in Tidore is in another domain (perhaps in the predictability of the locus of separation, cf. Majid et al., this issue) or possibly the explanation lies in the highly specific semantics of verbs of separation in Tidore, which do not straightforwardly encode either result state or action, but often a bit of both so that a clear semantic dichotomy between the two groups cannot be made.

6. Conclusion

Tidore is a language that is rich in verbs describing separation events. It has very few general cut and break verbs, but instead forces the use of specific verbs. For example, Tidore distinguishes cutting with a small knife from cutting with a large knife and cutting with scissors. Different factors play a role. Tidore encodes aspects of the orientation of the object, whether the cut is at a diagonal or right angle with the long axis of the object, how the instrument is held, whether the object is held in the hand, etc. The result is that it is often possible to use more than one verb for a specific situation.

Contrary to most languages in the sample (but see Gaby, this issue), Tidore is rather special because it has at least one verb that generalizes over what in many other languages are either C&B or opening events. This verb is used especially when parts of wholes are separated, e.g., in decapitation or shelling of eggs. In addition, Tidore has a group of labile verbs that are not all semantically break type verbs. Contrary to Guerssel et al. (1985) and Haspelmath (1993) some of the labile verbs encode agent-oriented information, such as the instrument used or the manner in which the activity is carried out.

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Notes

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1. Malay loan: *gunting* ‘1. scissors, 2. to cut using scissors’.

2. *Tola* entails complete separation and it implies (at least) ‘a heavy blow’. Typically, the instrument is a large hacking instrument, such as a machete, but it can also be the hand in karate-style hacking. It is incompatible with smaller cutting instruments such as kitchen knives. Cf. also *dzá* ‘slash’ in Ewe with a similar meaning (Ameka and Essegbey, this issue).

3. This verb is also compatible with karate style-hacking. It can refer to a single blow or to repeated blows and does not entail complete separation.

4. Two hitting verbs (*cako* ‘hit’ and *tutu* ‘pound’) frequently appeared in descriptions of separation events.

5. In this figure the same shorthand notation is used as in some of the other papers in this issue. For a full description of the scenes, see Majid et al. (this issue). The arrows indicate doubt as to the correct placement of the clip. There is likewise some doubt whether clip 53 may be described with the verb *tola*. Clearly, if this turns out to be the case, the diagram would have to be thoroughly revised. The broken line in the diagram indicates that although the verb *tim* ‘peel’ was always the first spontaneous response to the opening of both the banana and the orange, all consultants agreed that *hoi* ‘open’ was also a possible description.

6. It is probably a mere coincidence that it does not overlap with *tofa* ‘stab’, considering the meaning of the verb *tuso* ‘to make a hole’.

7. Some examples of causativized verbs outside the C&B domain are *torine* ‘to sit’–*sodorine* ‘cause to be seated’ and *pane* ‘to board (a car or boat)’–*sobane* ‘to load (cargo onto a boat or car)’.

8. The precise differences in meaning or use between the root verbs and their causativized counterparts are still unknown, but it appears that the causative forms foreground the agent and focus on the result state. The difference is then between ‘to cut’ and ‘cause to be cut’.

9. As a verb *maha* means ‘wait’, as an adverb ‘next (thing), suddenly, spontaneously’.

10. Noteworthy here is the use of *tola* to express ‘cutting (i.e. moving) straight across a field or body of water’.

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