(Quasi)middle voice in Bantu: The "neuter" suffix -ik- in a typological perspective

Sebastian Dom^a, Leonid Kulikov^b, Koen Bostoen^a

^a KongoKing research group, Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University, ^b EVALISA research group, Department of Linguistics, Ghent University

Sebastian.Dom@ugent.be; Leonid.Kulikov@UGent.be; Koen.Bostoen@ugent.be

This paper focuses on the verbal category known in Bantu scholarship under a number of terminological labels such as 'neuter', 'neuter passive' and 'derived intransitive', among many others, and expressed by the suffix -ik-. Although this category is well-attested in virtually all Bantu languages, its functional status is not very well understood.

We subject to critical analysis the traditional analyses of this category as a peculiar variety of passive or 'neuter voice', elucidating its basic typologically relevant features, establishing its status within the linguistic system and explaining its origin. Special attention is paid to the analysis of data available from synchronic grammatical description in a diachronic (historical) and typological perspective. Concentrating on the domain of the middle voice and valency-changing categories and integrating data from Bantu with evidence from non-Bantu languages which attest similar phenomena, we uncover the main mechanisms explaining diachronic scenarios documented for the history of these linguistic categories.

We argue that there are good reasons to qualify the morphological category under study as middle voice, although it is quite different from the canonical middle (as known from Indo-European languages). Its functional domain commonly encompasses a number of intransitive (de-agentive) derivatives such as agentless (1) and/or potential passive (2) and anticausative (3), but not reflexive and reciprocal, thus being somewhat narrower than the domain of the canonical middle, as shown in the following examples:

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(1) Chichewa (N31b) (Dubinsky & Simango 1996: 751)

m-bale zi-na-tsuk-ik-a (*ndi Naphiri).

NP<sub>10</sub>-plate SP<sub>10</sub>-PST-wash-NT-FV by Naphiri

'The plates were washed (*by Naphiri).'
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(2) Chichewa (N31b) (Dubinsky & Simango 1996: 759) mu-ana uyu n-di wo-kumbatil-ik-a.

NP1-child DEM SP1-be ATTR1-embrace-NT-FV

'This child is embraceable.'

(3) Bena (G63) (Morrison 2011: 370) u-tu-bihi a-haa-deeny-**ih**-ile igólo. $AUG_{13}\text{-NP}_{13}\text{-tree} \qquad SP_{13}\text{-PST-break-NT-FV yesterday}$ 'The twig broke yesterday.'

Special attention is also paid to valuable evidence furnished by this morphological category for a typological analysis and better understanding some basic mechanisms of the rise and evolution of the middle voice.

We argue on the basis of a detailed typologically-oriented analysis of the Bantu verbal forms with the 'neuter' suffix -ik- that its underdeveloped 'quasi-middle' status may be due to the existence of competing derivatives (with the prefix -i- and suffix -an-) that express a variety of intransitive

functions (such as reflexive, reciprocal and antipassive) and thus usurp some parts of the middle domain.

Focusing on data from a wide variety of Bantu languages, discussing similarities and differences between these 'quasi-middle' derivatives from a cross-linguistic perspective, we elucidate the functional status of this verbal category and conclude that is should be qualified as 'quasi-middle' voice. On the basis of a diachronically-oriented typological analysis of the forms with the suffix -ik-we arrive at the conclusion about the origin of this category from a certain variety of passive or anticausative.

References

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