

## Transitivity in Tok Pisin

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**Abstract:** This paper examines transitivity in Tok Pisin, the language spoken in Papua New Guinea. Transitive verbs in Tok Pisin can usually be shown by using suffix *-im*, e.g., *kilim* 'kill', *karim* 'carry'. Some transitive verbs do not end in *-im*, e.g., *gat* 'have', *save* 'know'. As far as *wetim* 'wait', *giamanim* 'lie' and so on are concerned, there are two forms exhibiting transitivity. *Wetim* can be *wet long* and *giamanim giaman long*. The paper begins by showing transitivity in Melanesian languages. My view will then be explained. Finally, we use Tsunoda's view and Romaine's observations to analyze Tok Pisin verbs. It is possible to build up some hypothesis about the degree of transitivity signalled by suffixes. Transitive verbs which always have the suffix *-im* can be grouped as the strongest transitivity of Tok Pisin verbs, and transitive verbs which never have the suffix *-im* the weakest. Transitive verbs one with and one without the suffix *-im* are positioned in the middle of transitivity. We will verify this hypothesis as viewed from morphology, syntax and semantics by using Tsunoda's view (1991) and Romaine's observations (1992).

**Key words:** Tok Pisin, transitivity, suffix, Austronesian languages, Melanesian languages

### 1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consider transitivity in Tok Pisin, one of lingua francas in Papua New Guinea. I would like to identify what I mean by the transitive verbs. As Quirk et al. (1985: 53) has stated, "transitive verbs are followed by an object, and occur in types *SVO*, *SVOO*, *SVOC*, and *SVOA* respectively." The study of transitivity has been receiving increasing attention in linguistics. After examining the morphological marking in Melanesian languages, we investigate transitivity in Tok Pisin. Generally, in Melanesian languages the transitivity can be revealed by using suffix. For instance, Tolai language, one of Austronesian languages in Papua New Guinea the suffix *-e* is used for showing transitivity (Mosel 1984). The Nakanamanga language in Vanuatu has suffix *-gi* that mark a verb as transitive (Lynch 1998).

- (a) Dia momo.  
 They / PL drink / ITR  
 ‘They drank (quenched their thirst)’ (Mosel 1984: 147)
- (b) Dia mom = e ra tava.  
 They / PL drink = TR ART water  
 ‘They drank the water.’ (Mosel 1984: 147)
- (c) A ga munu.  
 I INTENT drink  
 ‘I’ll drink.’ (Lynch 1998: 139)
- (d) A ga munu-gi noai naga.  
 I INTENT drink-TRANS water that  
 ‘I’ll drink that water.’ (Lynch 1998: 139)

The Tok Pisin signalles transitive verbs by using a suffix *-im*. It also can be shown without *-im* form. There are various kinds of transitive verbs, however some transitive verbs maintain high transitivity, others do not.

Keesing (1988: 75) says there are two ways for showing transitivity in Proto-Oceanic languages:

Two transitive suffixes are pervasively represented in Oceanic languages. One is the form that appears in the Kwaio examples. In POC, it is reconstructed as *-i*; this transitive suffix seems to have marked the semantic role of the following NP as patient, or less often, as goal or stimulus. A relatively small class of transitive verbs in POC seems to have been marked as such not with the transitive suffix *-i*, but by direct suffixation of the clitic object-referencing pronoun to the verb stem. In some daughter languages (e.g., Kwaio), this pattern has become more generalized.

It should also be added that the suffix *-im* is non-creole-like. The assumption that there are twelve features in creole grammars is now widely accepted (Bickerton 1981, Romaine 1988). It was not stabilized from the earlier stages but several generations later (Keesing 1988: 7). The basic sentence pattern in Cameroon Pidgin English is shown in Todd (1984), but transitivity is not expressed by morphological process.<sup>1</sup> Romaine (1988: 65) reports Norfolk speech displays about ten of the characteristics in creole grammars.<sup>2</sup> Again, transitivity can not be shown in the same way as Tok Pisin. Kriol is one of English-based languages spoken in Australia. There are three allomorphs in the language: *-im*, *-am* and

-um respectively.<sup>3</sup>

Little attention has been given to the point that these transitive verbs are hierarched in transitivity. This paper analyzes the degree of transitivity in Tok Pisin as viewed from morphology, syntax and semantics. On that occasion, what Tsunoda (1991) and Romaine (1992) observed helps account for the result.

Section I and II survey previous studies and the nature of transitivity in Melanesian languages. Section III inquires into kinds of transitive verbs in Tok Pisin and shows my view on the degree of transitivity. Section IV and V make clear the nature of transitivity with special emphasis on what Tsunoda (1991) and Romaine (1992) pointed out.

## 2. Previous studies

Numerous attempts have been made by scholars to show the nature of transitive verbs with special emphasis on morphology and semantics. We may summarize the previous studies briefly in the following way. (Laycock 1970, Mihalic 1971, Woolford 1979)

- a. transitive verbs which always have the suffix *-im*: *karim* 'to carry', *harim* 'to listen' and so on.
- b. transitive verbs which have two morphological structures (both meanings are the same): *bilipim* / *bilip long* 'to believe', *tokim* / *tok long* 'to say' and so on.
- c. transitive verbs which never have the suffix *-im*: *gat* 'to have', *save* 'to know' and so on.
- d. transitive verbs which have two morphological structures (both meanings are not the same): *skul* 'to learn', *skulim* 'to teach' / *ron* 'to run', *ronim* 'to chase' and so on.

Such is an outline of previous studies on transitivity in Tok Pisin. Traditionally, it is said that whether or not passive transformation is possible is a key to understand transitivity. However, there is no passive voice in Tok Pisin, thus we are not concerned here with passive transformation.<sup>4</sup> So far, little attention has been given to the degree of transitivity in Tok Pisin.

## 3. My view

I would like to assume my view on the degree of transitivity in Tok Pisin as follows:

transitive verbs which always have the suffix *-im* > transitive verbs one with and one without the suffix *-im* > transitive verbs which never have the suffix *-im* (A > B indicates A is much stronger in transitivity than B)

We might say that the obligatory use of *-im* in transitive verbs means those verbs have a stronger degree of transitivity. In fact, some transitive verbs which always have suffix *-im* are weak in transitivity. This question is taken up later. First, take some transitive verbs in this group for example. (*kilim* in sentence (1), *givim* in (2) below). The numbers indicate grammatical acceptability. The number [5] means the sentence is totally acceptable, and [1] not acceptable. I take most of my examples from Ms Betty Pulpulis who studies school curriculum in Osaka, Japan.

( PM = predicate marker, P = preposition, 1sg = first person singular subject, 3sg = third person singular subject, pl = plural, ASP = aspect, Obj = object, 3pl = third person plural subject, NEG = negator, NUM = numeral )

- (1) Wagaia i kilim Gonduan. [5]  
 Wagaia PM kill Gonduan  
 ‘Wagaia killed Gonduan.’
- (2) Em i givim K5,000 long mi. [5]  
 3sg PM give K5,000 P 1sg  
 ‘He gave K5,000 to me.’

If we delete the suffix *-im* in sentence (1), then it would be ungrammatical. The same may be said, no doubt, of the sentence (2).

- (3) \*Em i kil  $\phi$  Gonduan. [1]  
 (4) \*Em i giv  $\phi$  k5,000 long mi. [1]

There are several other examples in this group: *hatim* ‘to heat’, *karim* ‘to carry’, *painim* ‘to find’ and so forth.

Secondly, there are some transitive verbs which have two morphological structures. The following are a few random examples in this group:

- (5) Ol i wetim Wagaia. [5]  
 3pl PM wait Wagaia  
 ‘They waited for Wagaia.’

- (6) Mi skulim ol agrikalsa sumatin. [5]  
 lsg teach pl agriculture student  
 ‘I gave some lectures for the students of the Department of Agriculture.’

The transitive suffix in sentence (5) can be omitted as shown in sentence (7) below. The important point to note is that the preposition *long* is compulsory in this case. It functions as transitive suffix. Without the use of *long*, it would be unacceptable as in (8) below.

- (7) Ol i wet long Wagaia. [5]  
 (8) \*Ol i wet Wagaia. [2]

What has to be noticed is there is little difference in meaning both in (5) and (7). We can recognize from the compulsory use of preposition after the verb that the preposition functions the same as in its transitive role. This transitive verb group should be separated from the one we discussed above in nature. It is because the transitive verbs in the first group can not accept the construction **verb transitive + preposition**. Another example is *giamanim* ‘to lie’ / *giaman long*, *mumuim* ‘cook by steaming’ / *mumu long*.

The sentence (9) is entirely different from the above sentences (7) and (8). It would be unacceptable with the preposition *long*. The sentence (10) without preposition is also unacceptable. Added to this, we have transitive verb like *ronim* ‘to chase’ and *ron* ‘to run away’.

- (9) \*Mi skul long ol agrikalsa sumatin. [2]  
 (10) \*Mi skul ol agrikalsa sumatin. [2]

It seems reasonable to suppose that the first group is much stronger in transitivity than the latter group. It is simply because the second group has two morphological structures: one with *-im* and with a preposition.

The third group shown below does not retain the suffix *-im* originally.

- (11) Wagaia i gat tripela brata. [5]  
 Wagaia PM have NUM brother  
 ‘Wagaia has three brothers.’

- (12) Wagaia i no save Gonduan. [5]  
 Wagaia PM NEG know Gonduan  
 ‘Wagaia does not know Gonduan.’

Let us take the last group which is weaker in transitivity.

- (13) Em i dai pinis. [5]  
 3sg PM die ASP  
 ‘He has died.’
- (14) Mi go long haus sik. [5]  
 1sg go P hospital  
 ‘I go to the hospital.’

Similar examples are abundant: *kam* ‘to come’, *muv* ‘to move’ and so on.

Now let us consider Tok Pisin case in detail by using Tsunoda’s theory of transitivity in the next section.

#### **4. Discussion: Tsunoda’s view**

Using the Tsunoda’s model (1991), we will investigate transitivity in Tok Pisin. In Tsunoda’s view, the traditional view on transitivity is quite unsatisfactory. Tsunoda (1999) defined the transitive prototype as ‘There are two (or more) participants: the agent and the patient. The agent’s action impinges on the patient and causes a change of state in it.’ (p. 5)

For the moment let us look closely at the Tok Pisin case. The first question to be discussed is of participants. In (1), (2), (5), (6), (11), (12), there are two (or more) participants. In (13), there is only one participant. In (1) and (2), it is considered that the agent’s action impinges on the patient and causes a change of state in it as Tsunoda defined.

The transitive verb in sentence (1) and (2) take the suffix *-im*. Tsunoda (1991: 73) pointed out that ‘kill’, ‘break’ and ‘give’ are prototypical transitive verbs. Perhaps it is right to say at the outset that the suffix *-im* is the most likely candidate for transitive prototype.

Let me summarize the main points in Table 1 that have been made in this section. It is clear that what I examined here in Tok Pisin coincide with Tsunoda’s analysis as far as semantic characteristics are concerned. My belief is that the morphological characteristics are the same as Tsunoda’s view, but our result in Tok Pisin show that it was much more gradual in transitivity.

**Table 1** Transitivity in Tok Pisin

Ex.	(1)	(2)	(5)	(6)	(11)	(12)	(13)
<u>semantic aspect</u>							
• two (or more) participants	○	○	○	○	○	○	×
• the agent's action impinges on the patient	○	○	×	×	×	×	×
• causes a change of state in it	○	○	×	×	×	×	×
<u>morphological aspect</u>							
• -im	○	○	△	△	×	×	×

Tsunoda (1991: 90) discussed arguments in the Japanese case.<sup>5</sup> We will begin by considering classification of two-place predicates based on Tsunoda (1991: 95). In Tok Pisin, our studies indicate that it is likely to show some tendency. Let us have a look at the Table 2 from top to bottom. I used Tsunoda's frameworks on the meanings in Table 2. It indicates the use of the suffix *-im* is decreasing as we move towards the last example. To put it the other way round, if we look at Table 2 as we move towards the top we will notice the patient is affected more at the top of the Table, but it tends to be affected less as we move towards the down. The transitive verbs with the suffix *-im* like '*kilim*', '*karim*' and so on are compulsory at the top. In the middle of Table 2, there are some transitive verbs with the suffix *-im* and without *-im*: *wetim*, *ronim*, *skulim*, *giamanim*. I am in agreement with Tsunoda here. We are sure that the nature of Tok Pisin in two-place predicates is the same as in Japanese and English.

**Table 2** Classification of two-place predicates in Tok Pisin

Meaning	Examples		
Direct effect on patient			
IA Resultative	○kilim (kill) ○hatim (heat) △brukim (break) △bagarapim (ruin)		
IB Non-resultative	○kikim (kick) △paitim (hit)		
Perception	○lukim (see) △lukluk (look) ○harim (hear)		
Pursuit	△wetim (wait for) ○painim (find) △lukautim (look for)		
Knowledge	× save (know) △lusim (forget) △tingim (remember)		
Feeling	△laikim (love) △skulim (reprimant) △krosim (scold) △pretim (frighten)		
Relationship	× gat (have) △kamap (come to)		
Ability	× strongpela (strong) × gutpela (good)		
Transitive case frame			
Direct effect on patient			
IA Resultative	N -im / N <sub>N</sub> long		
IB Non-resultative	N -im / N <sub>N</sub> long		
Perception	N -im / N long		
Pursuit	N -im / N long		
Knowledge	N -im / N long / N φ		
Feeling	N -im / N long		
Relationship	N -im / N long / N φ		
Ability	N long		
○	means the affixation is compulsory	△	means it has both -im and without -im form
×	means the affixation is not compulsory	N	Nominative Case
-im	Transitive suffix	long	Preposition
.....	non-productive		

It follows from what has been said that our research into the nature of Tok Pisin in transitivity has yielded similar results with Tsunoda's observations in natural languages. That is, if we look at case frame from the top of the Table to the bottom, Tok Pisin can have more than one transitive case frame. In other words, some transitive verbs are far from the characteristics of transitive prototype especially in the third group. What is true for transitive prototype Tsunoda observed is to a considerable extent true for Tok Pisin as well.



Tsunoda (1985: 390) showed the degree of likelihood of the occurrences of transitive case frames.

In every language, Subtype-1A verbs are according to our definition, prototypical transitive verbs and take the respective transitive case frames. But as we go down the scale, transitive case frames are less likely to occur, and we tend to have some other case frames in addition to, or in place of, them. In Type-7, at the right end, the transitive case frames do not occur as far as English and Japanese are concerned. Table I thus demonstrates the transitivity scale in terms of transitive case frames as well.

A general view of the transitive prototype in Tok Pisin reveals a significant characteristic. The affixation is compulsory in prototypical transitive verbs. The classification of two-place predicates in Tok Pisin shows the similar tendency as Tsunoda discussed.

Related work is discussed in the following section.

## 5. The relation between verb and predicate marker

The previous discussion leads us to explore the relation between verb and predicate marker. Predicate marker is one of the Melanesian particles. Let us now look at transitivity in detail in a new light. Woolford (1979) and Romaine (1992) report that the transitive verbs with suffix *-im* do not occur with predicate marker very often as compared with the intransitive verbs.

For the present, it may be useful to look more closely at some of the more important features of the relation between transitive verbs and predicate marker. It is desirable to investigate into colloquial text for the analysis. Most of the material treated herein are derived from the cartoon column of Wantok Niuspepa, the only paper written in Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea. (Wantok Niuspepa 1972, 1973, 2004). Furthermore the text *Beginning Tok Pisin* which was published by the author in 2005 was added.

I was careful when I collected linguistic data as follows: to begin with, the sentences which do not include auxiliary verbs such as *'mas'* and *'ken'* and negator *'no'* are collected by the author. This treatment can avoid phonological influences. For example it is likely that the predicate marker occurs before the auxiliary verb: *em (i) inap long lukim gem*. 'He is able to watch the game.' Thus I collected the data as the following conditions: (a) sentences where the subject is a noun, (b) sentences where the third person singular or plural subject is used, (c) sentences where the first person plural (exclusive) or the second person plural subject is used. Finally when it is a complex sentence, the main clause is

analyzed and when it is compound sentence, only the first clause is examined.

I collected 13 random examples of transitive verbs where the suffix *-im* is compulsory, and examined the nature in relation to predicate markers. It demonstrates the relationship between transitive verbs where the suffix *-im* compulsory and predicate markers is weaker. Of 35 occurrences, 26 occurred with predicate markers (74.3%).

Furthermore I collected random examples of transitive verbs with and without *-im*, and examined the nature in relation to predicate markers. It shows that the relationship between transitive verbs in this group and predicate markers is in between. Of 172 occurrences, 138 occurred with predicate markers (80.2%).

The rest of them are 31 random examples of transitive verbs without the suffix *-im*, and examined the nature in relation to predicate markers. It highlights that the relationship between transitive verbs where the suffix *-im* is not compulsory and predicate markers is the strongest. Of 114 occurrences, 101 occurred with predicate markers (88.6%).

The above descriptions can be best summarized in the following Table 3.

**Table 3 Occurrences of the particle ‘i’**

Linguistic environment	Occurrences of ‘i’ (%)
Verbs the affixation of <i>-im</i> are compulsory	74.3%
Verbs with or without <i>-im</i>	80.2%
Verbs the affixation of <i>-im</i> are not compulsory	88.6%

The result we uncover is broadly consistent with what Woolford (1979) and Romaine (1992) explored in detail in the past. It has also been proved that my view is correct. It is generally agreed that the particle ‘*i*’ does not occur with transitive verbs with the compulsory affixation, but it is not always understood why this should be so. As far as this result is concerned, we need to be very careful.

It appears that intransitive verbs such as *stap*, *go*, *gat* often occurs with the particle *i*. The word *stap* originally means ‘to stay’ or ‘to reside’. With the particle *i*, it acquires a grammatical function as an aspectual marker. *I stap* indicates progressive aspect.

The second is that *go* stands for a motional verb from the start to the goal. It acquires grammatical function as a directional marker when it is used with the particle *i*. Besides, the reduplication is one important grammatical device in Melanesian languages. The continuation can be shown by reduplication in Tok Pisin (Mühlhäusler 1975: 206).<sup>7</sup>

The third is that *gat* means ‘to have’ but when it occurs with *i*, it has an existential function.<sup>8</sup>

The point I want to make is that Tok Pisin expanded its grammatical function by combining a Melanesian particle with intransitive verbs. Due to the background, intransitive verbs came to occur with the particle. We must consider pidginization and creolization in the formation of Tok Pisin in order to explain the difference in the three linguistic environments in Table 3. Under these circumstances, intransitive verbs occur with the particle *i* in the normal context.

Reflection on some of these will make clear that we need to be very careful in saying that transitive verbs with *-im* do not occur with the particle *i*. In fact, if we consider those intransitive verbs without *go* and *stap*, the degree of the co-occurrences in transitive verbs with *-im* comes closer to that of intransitive verbs.

## 6. Conclusive remarks

In this study I examined transitive verbs, and revealed that prototypical transitive verbs have the strongest transitivity of all Tok Pisin verbs. Firstly, we explored in detail about semantic characteristics in Tok Pisin. Secondly, we classified two-place predicates and transitive case frames in Tok Pisin. Finally, we observed that the transitive verbs with suffix *-im* do not occur with predicate marker very often. It should be concluded, from what has been said above, that the author’s view on transitivity in Tok Pisin is proven, taking advantage of Tsunoda (1991) and Romaine (1992). That can be summarized in three points:

- (1) Transitive verbs which always have the suffix *-im* are the strongest in transitivity.
- (2) Transitive verbs which never have the suffix *-im* are the weakest in transitivity.
- (3) Transitive verbs one with and one without the suffix *-im* are positioned in the middle of the continuum.

This result shows that Tok Pisin is the same as Japanese and English typologically.

## Notes

1. Todd (1984: 135)

Chop! (= Eat!)

Chop di fufu. (= Eat the fufu.)

2. Romaine (1988: 65)

For example, it uses adjectives as verbs, preverbal negation (though no negative spread), bimorphemic question words (eg *whatawe* [what way] = ‘how’), lack of inversion in questions, and existential / possessive *get*. The base form of the verb is the same as the infinitive and is

used to express the simple present, past and future. The plural marker, where it occurs, is derived from the plural pronoun *them*, eg *em gel* – ‘the girls’. It also lacks the copula and passive construction; relatives are not overtly marked.

3. Hudson (1983) considered transitivity possibilities as viewed from semantics. She says, ‘Some stems with intrinsic transitivity require obligatory transitive marking...’ (p. 163) The meaning of ‘intrinsic’, however is not well explained.
4. Tolai, one of Austronesian languages in PNG which provides 15% of Tok Pisin vocabulary layers does not have passive construction. It is no wonder there is no passive voice in Tok Pisin. There are lots of languages which have no passive voice. The passive construction cannot be formed even if by using prototype transitive verbs. There is no indirect passive voice as well. The following examples are scored by Ms Pulplis as well.

(1) Wagaia    i            kilim        Gonduan. [5]  
       Wagaia    PM          kill         Gonduan  
       ‘Mr Wagaia killed Ms Gonduan.’

(2) Gonduan   i            kilim        long        Wagaia. [1]  
       Gonduan   PM          kill         P            Wagaia  
       ‘Ms Gonduan was killed by Mr Wagaia.’

5. Examples abound: ‘kizutsukeru’ (injure) ‘tsukuru’ (make) ‘kairyosuru’ (reform) ‘fuyasu’ (increase) ‘herasu’ (decrease) ‘ugokasu’ (move) ‘tomeru’ (stop) ‘tokasu’ (melt) ‘atatameru’ (heat) ‘kakusu’ (hide) ‘oou’ (cover) ‘okuru’ (send) and so on.
6. It is pointed out by Dr Tsunoda (1991) there are more than six case frames in Japanese two place predicates. (p. 91)
7. Mühlhäusler (1975: 206) says ‘duration is expressed either by repeating certain verbs (*go, kam, stap*) after the predicate or by repeating phrases and sentences several times,’  
*Mipela wokabaut i go i go i go i go* ‘we kept walking for a long time’
8. Okamura (2005: 53)  
 I no gat poka masin hia. ‘There is not a poker machine here.’

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