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## **Applicative Suffix in Tumbuka**

### **1. Introduction**

This paper is an investigation of the applicative verb suffix morpheme in Tumbuka, a Bantu language spoken in the Kuronga district of Malawi. Siegfried, a native speaker of Tumbuka, kindly allowed us collect the following data as part of a semester long Field Methods course at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. The main goal of this paper to accurately explain the function of the applicative morpheme in Tumbuka and describe how this morpheme interacts with other verb suffixes suffix is used in relation to these other suffixes. The following is a list of the affixes which are used in this paper:

Verb Suffixes	Gloss
il/el:	applicative
thu:	presistative (before expected/appointed time)
ko:	On someone's behalf/place indicator ("there")
esh/ish:	To make do something/overdo

In section 2, verbs are presented with the applicative suffix I attempt to explain how a generalized definition of the applicative suffix relates to the more specific meanings seen in the glosses. In section 3, one verb root (gona) is presented in relation to non-

applicative suffixes and an attempt is made to explain how the applicative suffix combines with non-applicative suffixes.

## 2. Data and Analysis: The Applicative Suffix

Root Verb	Root Verb Gloss	Root Verb + Applicative	Gloss
Gon-a	To sleep	Gon-el-a	To sleep on...
Gegesh-a	To wash	Gegesh-el-a	To wash with...
Vot-a	To vote	Vot-el-a	To vote for...
Kuthimb-a	To fight	Kuthimb-il-a	To fight with...
Lemb-a	To write	Lemb-el-a	To write with...
Gwil-a	To work	Gwil-il-a	To work for...

### 2.1 Morpheme Order and Vowel Harmony

This table presents the root verb with a mood marker (Gon-a), the gloss of this root verb (to sleep), the root verb combined with the applicative (gone-el-a), and the gloss of the root verb and the applicative (to sleep on).

The applicative comes after the root verb, splitting the root and the mood marker (in these cases the mood marker is always “a”). Its vowel changes as a result of vowel harmony. If the preceding vowel in the verb root is a mid-vowel, the vowel in the applicative is “e.” If it is any other type of vowel, the vowel in the applicative is “i.” This implies that “il” is probably the underlying form of the suffix since it occurs in many contexts with regard to vowel height, whereas “el” occurs in only one context in regards to vowel height.

## **2.2 Interpretations of the Applicative**

As is seen in the table, the applicative suffix can carry a variety of meanings depending on the verb it combines with. With “Gon-e-la” it carries the locative interpretation, which is equivalent to the English preposition “on.” With “Gegesh-el-a” it carries the instrumental interpretation, which is equivalent to the English preposition “with.” With “Vot-el-a” it carries the benefactive interpretation, which is equivalent to the English preposition “for.” Since these differences in interpretation are not explicit within the context of the applicative, it is helpful to explain how they occur.

## **2.3 Applicative as Transitivity**

Although it is helpful for English speakers to think of this applicative suffix as a preposition when glossing words, this leads to a somewhat mistaken interpretation of the applicative’s true nature. In order to get a better grasp of the applicative suffix, it helps to define it as a “transitivity”. When the applicative is added to a verb, an object noun phrase is needed to qualify the verb. In other words, the most generalized quality of the applicative suffix is the fact that it transitivizes verbs. The meaning of the applicative suffix becomes more specific because the verb root and object narrows its scope. For instance, when one says “Gonela mpando” it means “to sleep on a chair” because the relation between “to sleep” and “chair” narrows the scope of meaning from a generalized relation between the verb and its object to a relation that is most logical in the conceptual database of speakers of the language .

Let us pretend that there only existed one preposition in English (this is, in fact, untrue for both Tumbuka and English). We can arbitrarily call this preposition “with.” Now we will attempt to construct some sentences using our only preposition:

“Joshua sat with the chair.”

“Joshua died with our sins.”

“Joshua voted with the best candidate.”

As native English speakers, these sentences appear to be ambiguous and/or metaphorical. But let’s imagine that when an English speaker is exposed to “with” (“with” being the only preposition in English) the speaker automatically chooses a meaning based on the context and logic of the statement. Now let’s take this one step further and imagine that an English speaker would not even have to make a choice when confronted with these statements. If they were presented only with the phrase “to sit with” it would unambiguously mean “to sit ON something.” This is how Tumbuka speakers perceive the applicative. Their language has developed in such a way that all that is needed to sufficiently narrow the scope in meaning of the applicative (so that it is unambiguous in meaning) is the verb root.

The specific nature of the relation between the verb and its object is evinced simply by the verb root that precedes the applicative. For instance, when Siegfried was asked for the meaning of “Gonela” he always stated that it meant “to sleep on something.” (the locative interpretation). He didn’t state that it could either mean “to sleep on something or to sleep with something.” (neither simultaneously or separately). This implies that only the verb root is needed in order for the applicative to be completely unambiguous in meaning. It should be noted that, even with the absence of an actual

object in a verb root + applicative construction, there is always the implication that an object exists.

### 3. How other Suffixes Interact with the Applicative suffix

**Root: Gona                      Gloss: to sleep**

Root verb w/ Suffix(es)	Gloss
Gon-el-a-thu	Sleep in order to prepare.
Gon-el-a-ko	To go to a place and sleep there
Gon-esh-el-a	To make someone sleep on something
Gonesha	To make someone sleep or to oversleep
*Gon-thu-a	
*Gon-a-thu	
*Gon-ko-a	
*Gon-a-ko	

#### 3.1 Explanation of Table

The preceding table is meant to elucidate what ways the applicative suffix interacts with some other verb suffixes. The first verb in the table is a combination of the morphemes “Gon” “a” “el” and “thu”, where “Gon” is the root, “a” is the mood marker,

“el” is the applicative, and “thu” is a suffix which indicates preparation. The applicative comes after the root, the mood marker after the applicative, and the “-thu” suffix after the mood marker. The same order can be seen for “Gonelako,” but there is a difference in “Goneshela,”: the “-esh” suffix comes directly after the verb root, followed by the applicative, which is then followed by the mood marker. The ungrammatical examples which follow show that verb roots require an applicative in order to use certain suffixes, namely “thu” and “ko.” The suffix “-esha,” on the other hand, combines with the applicative suffix, but can also stand on its own, combining only with the verb root and mood marker (“gon-esh-a”). Furthermore, the il/el construction always occurs before the mood-marker, regardless of the position of the other suffixes. Let’s look more closely at the suffixes where four morphemes are combined (gon-el-a-thu, gon-el-a-ko). One could make the claim that there are only two morphemes, the verb root and the suffix and that the suffix is “elathu” or “elako” as opposed to “el-a-ko” or “el-a-thu.” This can easily be dismissed, however, because the mood marker “a” comes in between the two suffixes, and this mood marker is always present as a morpheme after the verb root. Since it is always present in the verb root (there are no instances where this morpheme is absent from a verb), then an interpretation of the verb “gonelako” as “gon-elako” must be wrong because this mood marker exists in every verb.

### **3.2 Constraining Meaning and Differences with Persistative Suffix**

Unlike the persistative suffix, these suffixes retain literal meanings across a wide variety of verbs. Some of the suffixes have two meanings and one meaning is chosen over another based on context. For instance, the verb “gonelako” means “to go to a place

and sleep there”, with “ko” referring to the concept “there” or “place.” The suffix “ko” can also mean “to do on someone’s behalf”, a benefactive, but, according to Siegfried, it would be strange to say “to sleep on someone’s behalf.” Therefore, concerning the verb “gona,” the interpretation of “ko” as a benefactive suffix is typically ruled out. Of course, there are other instances where it is equally plausible for a verb suffix to carry both meanings. In the preceding table, “Gonesha” can mean either “to oversleep” or “to make sleep.” The largest difference between interpretations of the persistative and the suffixes presented in this paper is that the meanings of these suffixes are very predictable, while the meaning of the persistative suffix varies a lot and can be quite unpredictable.

### **3.3 Why Some Suffixes Require the Applicative, but Others Do Not**

In what ways can we evaluate the necessity of “il/el” in regards to the suffixes “ko” and “thu”? First of all, we should go back to the notion of the applicative as a generalized transitivizer. That is, we should view the applicative in with its most generalized scope so that we can explain its function in every the situation in which it appears. First, let’s take a look at “gon-el-a-ko” The gloss given for this is “to go to a place and sleep there” The applicative morpheme tells us that the verb is transitivized, so that there must be an object it is relating to. The “ko” morpheme contains the meaning “place” or “there” in this context, so perhaps the applicative is used to relate the verb to this suffix. Now, let’s look at the verb “gon-el-a-thu” It describes the relation between sleeping and the suffix “thu,” so that in English the equivalent to “gon-el-a-thu” would roughly be “sleep-to-[mood]-prepare.” Why, however, wouldn’t the applicative, in these instances, describe the relation between the verb and an object outside the verb? First of

all, we should look at the order of the phrase. In “Gon-el-a-thu”, “el” the applicative and the mood marker occur *before* the suffix “thu.” In “gon-esh-el-a” however, the applicative and mood marker occur *after* the suffix. “goneshela” means “to make someone sleep on something” In this case, the applicative is describing an implied object, outside the verb and does not need to occur before the suffix “esh” because it is not describing the relation between the verb and “esh.” (esh doesn’t serve as an object). In fact, “el” is not required in this verb construction at all because the suffix “esh” is not related to the verb as an object. The suffixes “ko” and “thu”, however, are related to the verb as an object and require the applicative to indicate their transitive relation to the verb.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper was an attempt to describe the function of the applicative in Tumbuka and its relation to other suffixes. It has been established that the applicative can carry a variety of meanings in Tumbuka, such as locative, benefactive, and instrumental. These meanings are chosen through the relation of the applicative to the verb it is modifying. In order to clarify its interpretation, I classified the applicative as a “transitivizer.”

Furthermore, the applicative combines with a variety of other suffixes. With some of these suffixes, the applicative is required for the very reason that it is a transitivizer. That is, when a suffix is acting as an object to the verb root (-ko, -thu), the applicative is required in order to demonstrate the transitivity necessary for the relation between a verb and an object.