

Notes on Transitivity in the Pitjantjatjara Language

(Some details for further consideration)

It is vitally important for the Pitjantjatjara speaker to know whether a verb is transitive or intransitive. Of course, the native speaker knows by intuition without reflecting the matter. The conscious learner will have to be fully aware, for with transitive verbs, the subject or ACTOR must have the *ergative suffix* (the form being called “active form” by some linguists).

Morphologically, it is not obvious from the verb itself, whether it is transitive or intransitive – as it would be the case for many verbs in, say, Semitic languagesⁱ. Hence, transitivity or intransitivity has to be derived from other information, namely the *meaning* of the verb in question. Learners, in case of doubt, would have to consult the dictionaryⁱⁱ.

Meaning is of basic importance for transitivity, as can be seen from so-called “ambitransitive verbs” whose transitivity or intransitivity depends on their own implication, according to different semantic environments (cf. *wangkanyi*, which is *transitive* if used with direct or reported speech:

(1) *Watingku 'Uwa, palya' wangkangu.* The man said, “Yes, good.”

...and *intransitive* if used without:

(2) *Kungka tjuṭa nyaratja wangkanyi.* There are women talking over there.

The verb with its meaning and contextual environment given, it seems to be clear - at first sight - whether to use the *ergative* or not. However, this is not always obvious in complex sentence structures. A subject's predicate can consist of two or more verbs, and they can be different concerning their transitivity - as in the English sentence “He came and took it.”

In Pitjantjatjara serial constructions, where there is only one subject, this subject has to be used in the *ergative* form even if only *one of the two verbs* is transitive:

(3) *Kungka kutjungku nyinara kuliningi...* One woman sat thinking....

...with *nyinanyi* “sit”, an intransitive verb, and *kulini* “think”, a transitive verb.

This rule, however, does not work with constructions where the first part of the sentence has two different subjects and the subject of the “background event” has a nominalised intransitive verb, though followed by another, transitive one. In such case, Pitjantjatjara uses the *neutral* form for the subject of the “background event” – and the second, transitive action is added using the switch conjunction *ka*, as in the example below:

(4) *Tjintu kutjupa paluru piṛuku nguḷura wananu kupi-kupi pulka pitjanyangka, ka palunya tjalira katingu ngura paṭu uru pulkakutu.*

The next day, she chased again after a big whirl wind when it came, and it took her up to a place far away (and threw her) into a big waterhole.

ⁱ cf. Arabic *غَيْر* versus *تَغَيَّر*, to give just one example

ⁱⁱ *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English Dictionary*, Cliff Goddard, IAD Press, Alice Springs, Rev. 2nd ed., 2006