

Dogon reversive verbs

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In English, reversive verbs are derived by prefixing *un-*, *dis-*, or other prefix to the base verb: *un-tie*, *dis-entangle*. Reversive verb derivations are not very common in non-Indo-European languages, and are absent in most African languages we are familiar with. However, this derivation is productive in Dogon languages.

morphology

The reversive is expressed by a productive derivational suffix, added to the verb stem with no intervening derivational suffixes. The tones of derivational suffixes are predictable in each Dogon language, so we do not worry about tones here. The vocalism is also frequently predictable. The basic reversive suffixes are those in (1), where “v” is a variable vowel. In some languages there are messy interactions between the suffix-initial liquid and a preceding stem-final *l(v)* or *r(v)*. Automatic phonological processes such as nasalization of /r/ to *rⁿ* after a nasal syllable are disregarded here.

(1)	language	primary allomorph	other allomorphs
	eastern		
	Toro Tegu	-rv	-nv (after nasal)
	Bankan Tey	-rv	
	Ben Tey	-rv	-dv (<i>in tím-dí</i> ‘remove lid’)
	Nanga	-ri	-li (after liquid)
	Jamsay	-rv	-lv (after <i>l</i>)
	Togo Kan	-rv	-lv (after <i>rv</i> , which drops)
	Tommo So	-(i)rɛ	
	Donno So	-lv	
	Yorno So	-lv	-rv (after <i>lv</i>)
	Tomo Kan	-li	-ni after nasal
	northwestern		
	Najamba	-lɛ	
	Tiranige	-lo ~ -lɔ	
	Dogul Dom	??	
	Tebul Ure	-li	
	Yanda Dom	-lv	

southwestern	
Bunoge	<i>-lv</i>
Mombo	<i>-le ~ -le</i>
Ampari	<i>-re</i>
Penange	<i>-lv</i>

One can reconstruct **-lv* and regard *-rv* as secondary (it occurs chiefly in languages that have undergone considerable consonantal lenition). In languages with *-rv*, the reversive is at some risk of confusion with the transitive suffix that occurs in mediopassive/transitive paired forms. Such confusion would be especially problematic with verbs of wearing garments ('put on hat', 'put on shoes', etc.), which lend themselves to both reversive ('take off hat') and transitives ('put hat on [sb]').

semantics

Relatively complete lists of attested reversives are listed in the chapter on verbal derivation in most of the grammars, so the semantics can be studied in some depth.

The sense of a reversive verb in Dogon is similar to that observed with English *un-* and *dis-*. Typical glosses of Dogon reversives include 'untie', 'unlock', 'unhook', 'remove inserted blade (e.g. in hoe or axe handle)', 'uncover', 'unfold', 'untangle (=disentangle)', 'disenter', 'dislodge (sth stuck)', 'get unstuck', and 'unroll (turban)'.

Each pair of underived verb and its reversive denotes two distinct states of the theme (usually a direct object, but sometimes an intransitive subject). In pairs like 'tie' and 'untie', the event corresponding to the first verb creates a highly marked state for the theme (here, being tied), while the event corresponding to the second verb undoes this action and restores the theme to a neutral state. The same is true for 'cover'/'uncover' in the sense 'put a blanket over (e.g. a child, at night)', since the neutral state for a human being is clearly not being under a blanket.

However, in other cases the asymmetry between a marked and a neutral state may not be so clear. Consider 'cover'/'uncover' in the context 'put the lid on (a waterjar)'. Large waterjars, which are found in every Dogon home, spend more time covered than uncovered, and the lid could be considered part of the jar. However, here Dogon languages agree with English in using the underived 'cover' verb to denote the action of putting the lid (back) on the jar, so 'uncover' denotes the action of taking the lid off. (In Dogon, different 'cover' verbs are used in the blanket and waterjar contexts, but in both cases the reversive has the same sense as in English).

Of course Dogon languages do not always agree with English, or even with each other, in the precise set of meanings involved. For example, 'straighten out (a bent rod)' is expressed in some Dogon languages as 'un-bend'; other Dogon languages have a morphologically unsegmentable verb meaning 'undo (in general)'.

The following simple/reversive pairs occur in one or more Dogon languages studied to date. The ‘un-’ glosses in English are mostly non-words, but they do bring out the Dogon semantics. The first two are especially interesting.

- (2) ‘forget’ vs. ‘un-forget’ (= ‘remember’)
 ‘shut (door)’ vs. ‘un-shut’ (=‘open’)
 ‘flip over’ vs. ‘un-flip’ (=‘right, set right-side-up’)
 ‘be lost’ vs. ‘be un-lost’ (=‘[lost item] be recovered’)
 ‘build’ vs. ‘un-build’ (=‘take apart [sth built]’)
 ‘put on (garment.)’ vs. ‘take off (garment)’
 ‘step on’ vs. ‘un-step on’ (=‘take one’s foot off of’)
 ‘extend, hold out (arm)’ vs. ‘un-extend’ (=‘pull back, retract’)
 ‘put up’ vs. ‘un-put up’ (=‘take back down’)
 ‘fence in (put a fence around)’ vs. ‘un-fence’ (=‘remove fence from’)
 ‘drive in (nail)’ vs. ‘un-drive in’ (=‘remove, pull out [nail]’)
 ‘become caught (e.g. in tree branches)’ vs. ‘become un-caught’ (=‘free oneself’)

In cases like ‘go in, enter’ vs. ‘go out, exit’, ‘go up’ vs. ‘go down’, and ‘sleep’ vs. ‘awaken’, no reversive derivations have been observed, although these pairs can represent cyclically alternating states. Rather, each of these senses has a dedicated lexical item.

chaining with ‘exit’ verb

The verb ‘exit, go/come out’ (*gǒ:* or similar in most languages) can be chained with a preceding intransitive verb to emphasize the reversive sense. The preceding verb may already be a reversive, or it may be a regular verb, in which case *gǒ:* carries the reversive sense by itself. Transitive verbs can be chained to a following ‘cause to exit, take out, remove’ verb (*gò-ndó* or similar) for the same purpose.

compatibility with other derivational suffixes

The reversive suffix cannot follow other derivational suffixes, but it may be followed by mediopassive and/or causative suffixes.