

Verbal noun or gerund? The Mwan language case

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Mwan (South Mande < Mande < Niger-Congo) displays many properties characteristic for isolating languages: tones, tendency to single metric foot words, unclear border between inflection and derivation, as well as between compound words and combinations of free words, and so on. However, it has certain features that are untypical for an “ideal” isolating language. It concerns the absence of a regular (or quasi-regular) verbalization/ substantivation via conversion. A Mwan verb cannot be converted into noun without any marker. There is a whole range of nominalized forms in Mwan. Here, only one type of nominalization will be discussed, namely, forms with the suffix -lē.

This element should be regarded as a true agglutinative suffix: it has no proper lexical meaning, it cannot be used independently; it is not obviously related to any lexical item; it cannot be separated from the verb by any element.

Forms with the suffix -lē can be derived from any verb in a regular way, their meaning is utterly predictable. Therefore, these are inflected non-finite verb forms.

These forms retain certain verbal properties and, in the same time, acquire properties of both nouns and adjectives.

Properties of nouns: they may occupy nominal syntactic positions of subject, direct or indirect object; they go together with the referential article and with postpositions.

There are certain nominal properties that these forms do not share. They cannot be used as substantive modifier (“possessor” in genitive construction) or be modified by adjectives, they can go together neither with the plural marker nor with the diminutive suffixoid.

These forms also have properties characteristic of adjectives. They can occupy syntactic position of a noun modifier and of the predicative with the copula of existence ò . When used as a predicative, verbal form with -lē functions in the same way as “true” adjectives.

However, this form retains strong verbal characteristics when forming a “verbal noun construction”. The construction itself functions as a NP, but its head may have all the arguments of the finite verb in a clause. When studying constructions with nominalized verbs, three arguments are usually taken into account: S (subject of an intransitive clause); A (subject of a transitive clause) and P (direct object of a transitive clause). In Mwan the constructions in question should be classified as “possessive-ergative” as they code S and P in the same way – as Genitives (possessive construction). If both A and P are overtly expressed, Mwan uses the strategy of the “split possession”. Two different types of possessive constructions are used for marking different arguments (cf. in English Peter’s eating of a pie).

Mwan forms with -lē therefore cannot be classified as typical verbal nouns. There is a whole range of linguistic terms designating verbal non-finite forms which combine properties of verbs and words of other classes: verbal noun, participle, gerund, gerundive and so on. None of these terms is exact to describe the form in question. However, I propose the term Gerund though having in mind functions of so called “-ing-form” of English.