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ON THE MIDDLE VOICE IN AFRICAN LANGUAGES
(FULFULDE AND SOMALI)

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In African languages, tripartite voice systems - comprising Active, Middle and Passive voices - are rare. The paper draws attention to the already well-known fact of the existence of special middle voice verb forms in Fulfulde, a West Atlantic language, and Somali, a language of the Cushitic family, and focusses on their typologically related behaviour regarding transitivity, intransitivity and reflexivity. Special attention is paid to those verbs which are morphologically marked as 'middle' but behave semantically as 'active' (transitive), e.g. Fulfulde **ni wu'yake limsere** 'I borrowed a cloth'.

Dans les langues africaines, des systèmes diathétiques avec trois voix - active, moyenne et passive - sont rares. Cet article attire l'attention sur le fait déjà bien connu de l'existence de formes verbales moyennes en fulfulde (langue ouest-atlantique) et en somali (langue de la famille couchitique). Leurs comportements vis-à-vis de la transitivité, de l'intransitivité et de la réflexivité sont étudiés sur un plan typologique. Une attention particulière est portée aux verbes caractérisés comme moyens mais qui se comportent, sur les plans sémantiques et syntactiques comme 'actifs' (transitifs), par exemple en fulfulde **ni wu'yake limsere** 'j'ai emprunté un habit'.

0. INTRODUCTION

In modern European languages we are used to the opposition of active and passive voice(s) of a verb to the extent that such a binary verbal gender system appears almost to be 'natural'. However, most African languages, as is well known, do not formally distinguish a passive voice form from the usual active one; they often rather express 'passivity'/'passiveness' by a 3rd person plural active rendering, e.g. 'he is beaten' = 'they beat him' or by an impersonal rendering, e.g. 'one beats him'.

On the other hand, there are languages which possess not only active and passive but also a 'middle' voice, as is well known for Greek and Sanskrit. However, E. Benveniste has made it sufficiently clear that the existence of three voices, active, middle and passive, in the verbal system of a given language 'n'a rien d'organique' and that 'le passif est une modalité du moyen'. (Benveniste, 1966:168) Thus, for Indoeuropean linguistics the verbal gender system is not a tri- but a dichotomous one, i.e. consisting of active and middle, referred to more appropriately by Benveniste (ibid:174) as 'diathèse externe' and 'diathèse

interne'. The 'internal voice' comprises middle and passive since in both voices the action is centred on the subject whereas with the 'external voice' the action is directed from the subject towards somebody or something outside the subject.

In African languages, tripartite systems like those found in Greek and Sanskrit are rare; they do exist, however, in two languages which have genealogically nothing in common with one another; these are Fulfulde, a West Atlantic (Niger-Congo) language of West Africa, and Somali, a Lowland East-Cushitic language of East Africa. The fact that we are treating these two languages together does not suggest any genealogical consideration whatsoever; it only intends to draw attention to certain semantic parallels between the two languages, the nature of which obviously lies in the fundamentally similar psychology of human action as expressed in language. It is surprising - or natural? - that approximately 70% of the Somali middle voice verbs are also middle voice verbs in Fulfulde, e.g. F. **ekkitoo**, S. **digo**¹ 'learn'; F. **hammoo**, S. **filo** 'expect', etc. Exceptions include such notions as 'touch', 'allow', 'choose', 'pray', 'crawl' and 'swagger' which are rendered active in Fulfulde but middle in Somali and, on the other hand, 'push', 'follow', 'beg, demand', 'stand up' which are rendered active in Somali but middle in Fulfulde. There are also striking parallels between Fulfulde and/or Somali, on the one hand, and Greek and/or Latin, on the other. Compare for instance:

	Greek	Latin	Fulfulde	Somali
'choose'	haireïsthai		(suða)	dooro
'follow'	hépesthai	sequi	tokkoo	(raa).

1. VOICE CATEGORIES IN FULFULDE

Almost all grammarians specialized in Fulfulde (e.g. Klingenberg, 1963; Arnott, 1965) agree on classifying Fulfulde verbs in three voice categories described as active, middle and passive. Each of these three voices is associated with sets of morphologically distinct tense/aspect and mood suffixes which are attached to verbal bases (stems) as appropriate. Thus with the verbal base **loot-** 'wash (oneself)' we obtain the following paradigm:

	AV	MV	PV
Absol. Pf.	loot-<u>ii</u>	loot-<u>ake</u>	loot-<u>aama</u>
Subjunctive	loot-<u>a</u>	loot-<u>oo</u>	loot-<u>ee</u>
	'wash (something)'	'wash oneself'	'be washed'

This three-matrix categorization holds only if we assume that all or the majority of Fulfulde verbal bases behave like **loot-**. But the facts speak for the opposite. For as far as possibilities of combination with voice suffixes are concerned, the Fulfulde verbal bases, within the active and middle voice categories, can be further divided into three combinatory classes:

- i. Those which combine only with the active voice suffixes (**activa tantum**). They constitute more than a half of the total number of Fulfulde verbal bases.² Examples are **nyaama** 'eat', **nana** 'hear', etc.;

- ii. those which combine only with the middle voice suffixes (**media tantum**)³ such as **joodoo** 'sit', **daanoo** 'sleep', etc.;
- iii. those which combine with both the active and middle voice suffixes, i.e. of the **loota/lootoo** type, such as **ngaarsa/ngaarsoo** 'scratch (oneself)', **wu'ya/wu'yoo** 'lend/borrow' etc.

Each of the above three combinatory classes includes 'transitive' as well as 'intransitive' verbal bases. Examples:

Active voice verbs:

Trans.:	nyaama	'eat'	jannga	'read, study'
	yara	'drink'	wadda	'bring'
Intrans.:	yaha	'go'	wara	'come'
	disla	'sneeze'	jala	'laugh'

Middle voice verbs:

Trans.:	jaaloo	'defeat'	jogoo	'hold, seize'
	lumnoo	'smell'	wu'yoo	'borrow'
Intrans.:	yinoo	'swim'	hunoo	'swear'
	heditoo	'listen'	badoo	'approach'

As for the verbal bases included in the third group (**loot-** type), these can be transitive or intransitive-reflexive according to the voice in which they are used, i.e. active or middle, respectively.

From the above information we realize that the suffixes of each of the main voice categories, i.e. active and middle, operate with their specific corresponding verbal bases both in transitive and intransitive forms. The suffixes of the passive voice, on the other hand, as noticed by Abu-Manga (1968:160), are not associated with a specific group of verbal bases. Their combination is limited to the transitive verbal bases of the two major categories including all those of the above-mentioned third group provided that they are used actively, i.e. transitively. Therefore the Fulfulde voice paradigm known so far and which is provided above, is to be restructured, thus placing the passive at a different level from the other two major voices as follows:

	<u>Only active</u>		<u>Passive</u>
Trans.:	nyaam-a	'eat'	nyaam-ee
	janng-a	'read, study'	janng-ee
	yar-a	'drink'	yar-ee
Intrans.:	yah-a	'go'	---
	war-a	'come'	---
	disl-a	'sneeze'	---
	<u>Only middle</u>		
Trans.:	jog-oo	'hold, carry'	jog-ee
	lumn-oo	'smell'	lumn-ee
	wu'y-oo	'borrow'	wu'y-ee
Intrans.:	yin-oo	'swim'	---
	jood-oo	'sit down'	---
	daan-oo	'sleep'	---

Active & middle

loot-a/-oo	'wash (oneself)'	loot-ee/---
nawn-a/-oo	'hurt (oneself)'	nawn-ee/---
bangt-a/-oo	'raise (oneself)'	bangt-ee/---

2. VOICE CATEGORIES IN SOMALI

In Somali, C.R.V. Bell (1953) recognizes three groups of verbs. His classification is based primarily on the final sounds of the verbs in the imperative and infinitive forms as illustrated below:

	<u>Imper. Sing.</u>	<u>Imper. Plur.</u>	<u>Infin.</u>
Group I	<u>-Ø</u>	<u>-a</u>	<u>-i</u>
'go'	tag	tag-a	tag-i
'bring'	keen	keen-a	keen-i
'look at'	eeg	eeg-a	eeg-i
Group II	<u>-i/-ee</u>	<u>-iya/-eyya</u>	<u>-in/-eyn</u>
'cook'	kar-i	kar-<u>iya</u>	kar-<u>in</u>
'cause to stop'	jooj-i	jooj-<u>iya</u>	jooj-<u>in</u>
'clean'	saf-ee	saf-<u>eyya</u>	saf-<u>eyn</u>
'perform'	sam-ee	sam-<u>eyya</u>	sam-<u>eyn</u>
Group III	<u>-o</u>	<u>-da</u>	<u>-an</u>
'sleep'	seeh-o	seeh-<u>da</u>	seeh-<u>an</u>
'seat oneself'	faddis-o	faddis-<u>ta</u>	faddis-<u>an</u>
'catch/seize'	qab-o	qab-<u>ata</u>	qab-<u>an</u>

According to the semantic properties of verbs in each group, I and II fall together and constitute the active voice, while III appears to conform with what is known as middle voice. The author himself states that the basic meaning associated with the last group of verbs is 'to do something for yourself'. As in Fulfulde, each of the active and middle voice Somali groups of verbs contain both transitive and intransitive verbs. Examples (henceforth cited in imperative singular only):

Active voice

Trans.:	un	'eat'	qor	'write'
	akhri	'read, study'	dan	'drink'
Intrans.:	tag	'go'	qufa'	'cough'
	qarraqan	'sink'	kalaay	'come'

Middle voice

Trans:	qabo	'carry, hold'	urso	'smell'
	adkaw	'defeat'	ammaaho	'borrow'
	(= adka-o)			
Intrans.:	faddiso	'sit'	maid'o	'bathe'
	dabaalo	'swim'	daaro	'swear'

3. MIDDLE VOICE FUNCTIONS

3.1 MIDDLE VOICE AND TRANSITIVITY

The category of the transitive middle voice verbs in both Fulfulde and Somali deserves our special attention. Most linguists distinguish the active and the middle voice categories of verbs on the basis of their semantic content. E. Schwyzer (1950:228) states that, in Greek, all the verbs in middle voice '...haben vorwiegend lebende Subjekte, in deren Bereich der Verbalinhalt bleibt.'

Following the same line of definition, Klingenberg (1963:178) writes: 'Das Medium betont die Beziehung der Handlung zum Subjekt des Satzes und hat oft intransitiv--reflexive Bedeutung.' For M. Pei (1966:163), the middle voice is 'a verbal form expressing that the action denoted by the verb is dynamic (performed by the agent for himself, or generally affecting the agent); or reflexive (with the agent and the object being the same)...' In the same respect H. Krahe (1972:15) says: 'Es drückt die intensive Beteili - gung des Subjekts an der Handlung aus.'

All the above definitions emphasize the tight relation between the agent and the action, and the reflexive and intransitive nature of the middle voice verbs. Both Fulfulde and Somali display a good number of verbs which conform well with the basic principles of the above definitions. These are the intransitive middle voice verbs in both Fulfulde and Somali and the medially used verbal bases of the Fulfulde third group (active and middle). But apart from that, both Fulfulde and Somali yield another group of middle voice verbs which combine with all the suffixes of the middle voice in all tense/aspects and moods yet without a minimum conformation with the above stated semantic characteristics of the middle voice. These are the transitive middle voice verbs in both languages. In view of their importance for this study, we find it pertinent to present a fuller list of them here:

<u>Fulfulde</u>	<u>Somali</u>	
jogoo	qabo	'seize, hold'
lumnoo	urso	'smell'
jaaloo	adkaw	'defeat'
wu'yoo	ammaaho	'borrow'
hammoo	filo	'expect'
ɓornoo	gasho	'put on clothes'
tubboo		'push'
tokkoo		'follow'
dujjoo		'neglect'
sigoo		'save for future use'
hooloo		'trust in, confide in'
wakkoo		'carry on the shoulders'
toroo		'beg'
	dooro	'choose'
	ɗufo	'pull with a jerk'
	dunko	'kiss'
	goo	'cut'
	guurso	'marry'
	siiso	'pay'

In Fulfulde, all these verbs can also be rendered into passive, a process which does not apply with the middle voice as it is defined above.

Examples:

Ful.: mi <u>jogake</u> sawru	sawru <u>jogaama</u>
'I carried a stick'	'a stick was carried'
Ful.: mi <u>lumnake</u> faandu	faandu <u>lumnaama</u>
'I smelled a bottle'	'a bottle was smelled'
Ful.: mi <u>wu'yake</u> limsere	limsere <u>wu'yaama</u>
'I borrowed a cloth'	'a cloth was borrowed'

The above sets of verbs and sentences stand in opposition to the semantic features of the middle voice contained in the above cited definitions, in that the action in them is not limited to the agent but involves a third element, i.e. a patient (object). Therefore, at least as far as Fulfulde and Somali are concerned, it is obvious that neither the 'tight link between the action and the agent' nor the 'dynamism of the verb and its intransitive nature' are sufficiently useful criteria for the distinction of the active and middle voices.

3.2 MIDDLE VOICE AND INTENSITY OF ACTION

Fulfulde displays some pairs of verbs whose members are almost synonymous, yet each member belonging to a different voice category. Examples:

<u>Active voice</u>	<u>Middle voice</u>
faama 'understand'	maandoo 'bear in mind'
yi'da 'like, want, love'	beegoo 'love earnestly'
waawa 'learn'	ekkitoo 'learn a technique/art'
nana 'hear'	heditoo 'listen attentively'

The members of the above pairs share almost all semantic properties except for intensity of action, which is generally associated with the middle voice counterparts. The same applies to a special grammatical process whereby verbal bases are used with the middle voice suffixes to express intensity of action. Sentences thus constructed often stand in the absolute perfect tense.⁴ Examples:

mi nyibii saare, nde nyibake boo⁵
'I built a house and it is well built'

min piyii gujjo, o fiyake boo
'we beat the thief and he is severely beaten'

o habbii nage, nge habbake boo
'he tied the cow and it is tightly tied'.⁶

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The above observations on the structure and semantics of voice in Fulfulde and Somali provoke a comparison with the status and evaluation of the voice system in Indoeuropean languages and, consequently, lead to an interpretation of voice characteristics in general.

4.1 In ancient Indoeuropean the basic opposition was not between active and passive but between active and middle whereby '...le passif est une modalité du moyen' (Benveniste 1966:168). In Fulfulde also, the passive voice can no longer be interpreted as an equal member of a tripartite voice system but must be seen as a secondary counterpart of both transitive active and transitive middle voice verbs. This is supported by the fact that all middle voice verbs of a transitive notion can be transformed into the passive voice, i.e. the same passive voice construction that active voice verbs can be transformed into (cf. pp. 3 and 5 ff).

4.2 Ancient Indoeuropean languages distinguish three types of verbs of which one is always active, the other middle whereas the third may be either active or middle depending on the requested notion of the particular verb; e.g. (quoted from Benveniste, op.cit.: 171ff):

<u>Only active</u>	<u>Only middle</u>	<u>Both active and middle</u>
eat (Gk. esthíein)	be born (Lat. nasci)	carry (Gk. phérein/phéresthai)
drink (Lat. bibere)	follow (Lat. sequi ; Gk. hépesthai)	detach (Gk. louéin/loústhai)

This finding is well paralleled by the three Fulfulde combinatory classes as outlined above (Sect.1.).

4.3 All languages discussed above display the particularly remarkable feature that (for us) obviously active verbal notions may be rendered by a middle voice form and vice-versa, for instance, Fulfulde **jogoo**, Somali **qabo** (middle voice) 'to hold, carry' and F. **wara**, S. **kalaay** 'to come', Latin **vivere** 'to live', Greek **einai** 'to be'. We may well be misled here by the (semantic) structure and contents of the (modern) English (or German or French) rendering. Our (often simplified) translation sometimes neglects more refined shades of meaning which are contained in the notion of a verb in a given language. Thus, F. **wu'yoo** 'to borrow' is, of course, transitive insofar as it may be followed by a direct object, e.g. 'o **wu'yoo deftere** 'that he borrows a book'; however, the action together with the object ultimately returns to the subject. Characteristically, in German the equivalent of 'to borrow' is 'sich borgen' (reflexive). Let us also be aware of the fact that the degree of 'activeness' of a verbal notion may greatly vary from one 'active' verb to another. Thus, in English, 'to smell' and 'to eat' are both grammatically classified as 'active', although 'eating' certainly implies and requires more 'activeness' than 'smelling'. Accordingly, Fulfulde and Somali render 'to smell' as 'middle', namely **lumnoo** and **urso**, respectively, and 'to eat' as active, that is F. **nyaama** and S. **'un**, respectively.

NOTES

¹Fulfulde verbs are quoted in the subjunctive mood, Somali verbs in the imperative form.

²E.g. all Fulfulde denominal verbs (derived from both substantives and adjectives) belong to this class.

³Contrary to Fulfulde, in the Indoeuropean languages verbal bases included in the first and second classes are not very many and thus are often ignored by linguists while describing voice categories. Cf. Benveniste (op.cit.:171).

⁴When certain verbal bases attach the middle voice suffixes in the future/habitual tense/aspect form, the resulting construction expresses the idea of 'possibility of doing' (Machbarkeit, Tubarkeit?). E.g. *deftere nde'e nde janngoto?* 'Is this book readable?'

⁵The medially constructed verbs under this process lean more towards the passive than the middle proper (of the *lootake*-type). The same applies in note 4.

⁶It is worth noting that in Hausa, a Chadic language, which does not distinguish a special middle voice verb form, this kind of construction is also well known and these are rendered by a particular secondary verbal grade form, that is in *-u* (often labelled as passive-intransitive); e.g. *nāa gīna gidāa yāa ginū* 'I built a house and it is well built'. On the other hand, we suspect that many typically 'medial' verbs are, especially because of their 'intensity' semantics, accommodated within grade II (cf. Lukas 1963/4); e.g. 'kiss' *sumbāntaa*; cf. Somali *dunko*.

⁷It is noteworthy that Greek *osphrainesthai* and Latin *odorari* are equally rendered as middle. Cf. 'to borrow' Gk. *daneizesthai* or *khrésasthai*, Lat. *mutuari*; 'to put on clothes' Gk. *amphi-hérnusthai*. The authors express their gratitude to Dr. U. Tichy, Marburg, for her friendly advice and help, especially in matters Greek.

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