

8 *How did Erromangan verbs get so messy?*

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1 Introduction¹

The existence of patterns of oral-nasal grade correspondences in the inflectional paradigms of verbs in many Central Vanuatu languages has been widely reported (Schütz 1968; Lynch 1975; Tryon 1986; Sperlich 1987; Crowley 1991). In these languages, a historically original nasal grade form of the root is generally associated with a variety of markers of realis inflectional categories.

Outside this subgroup, such patterns are rare. A similar sort of pattern is found in Raga (Walsh 1982). This is a Northern Vanuatu language, though it is located immediately to the north of the line separating languages belonging to the Northern and Central subgroups. Lynch (1975:94-95) also notes the existence of oral-nasal grade alternations in some of the Oceanic languages of the Morobe province on Papua New Guinea, though with these languages the nasal grade form of the root is typically associated with the expression of a variety of irrealis rather than realis categories.

Lynch (1975:94) also noted the existence of oral-nasal grade alternations in the forms of verb roots in Erromangan, which belongs in the Southern Vanuatu grouping of languages. None of the other languages of Southern Vanuatu exhibit any parallel patterns in their verbal morphology. Interestingly, the alternation patterns in Erromangan are more similar to the patterns found in Yabêm and Buang in Papua New Guinea than in the adjacent languages to the north, in that the nasal grade forms of the verb are typically associated with irrealis rather than realis categories. Lynch's explanation for the origin of the patterns in Yabêm, Buang and Erromangan involves the parallel phonological fusion of an earlier preverbal irrealis marker **na* with the following verb root.

¹ Many thanks to John Lynch and Bill Palmer for very helpful comments on earlier analyses that formed the basis for the paper, as well as to an earlier version of this paper. Responsibility for all final conclusions remains solely my own.

Since Lynch's original discussion, Lynch and Capell (1983) have gone further in providing a synchronic account of these phenomena in Erromangan. My own work on the language in the period 1994–95 allows for a more detailed account of the synchronic facts (Crowley 1998). At the same time, however, the more detailed synchronic data makes it more difficult to construct historical scenarios that will plausibly account for the inflectional behaviour of Erromangan verbs. Although it is difficult to find convincing evidence that Lynch's explanation is the correct one for Erromangan, I am forced to admit that I have no convincing alternative solutions to offer.

2 Distribution of basic and modified roots

Many verb roots in Erromangan undergo alternations in the shapes of their initial segments according to the nature of the preceding morphological environment. Such verbs, therefore, have two different shapes, which I will refer to as the "basic" root and the "modified" root respectively, following the terminology that has been fairly widely used in discussions of root alternation patterns in North Central Vanuatu languages.

Given the more restricted set of environments in which the modified forms of the root appear, perhaps the easiest way to begin the discussion of this process is to set out first of all the contexts in which the modified forms of the root appear. Corresponding to the basic form of the verb *alei* 'lie down' is the modified form *nalei*. This form appears after the following prefixes (where MR indicates that the verb appears in its modified root form, in contrast to its basic root form, which is marked as BR):

- (i) non-past tense markers. In the following examples, the verb *alei* 'lie down' carries future and present tense marking, and the verb appears in the modified form of the root, which has the shape *nalei*:

- (1)a. *yo-nalei*
3SG.FUT-MR.lie.down
'(s)he will lie down'²
- b. *yam-nalei*
3SG.PRES-MR.lie.down
'(s)he is lying down'

- (ii) echo subject markers in the present or future tense. Thus:

- (2) *m-nalei*
SG.FUT.ES-MR.lie.down
'...and (s)he will lie down'

2 Abbreviations:

BR	basic root	DESID	desiderative	OPT	optative
CAUS	causative	DISTPAST	distant past	PASTHAB	past habitual
COND	conditional	ES	echo subject	PL	plural
CONT	continuous	FUT	future	PRES	present
COUNT	counterassertive	IMP	imperative	RECPAST	recent past
DEPPAST	dependent past	MR	modified root	SG	singular

(iii) conditional markers:

- (3) *yapem-nalei*
1SG.COND-MR.lie.down
'if I lie down'

(iv) past habitual markers:

- (4) *yem-nalei*
3SG.PASTHAB-MR.lie.down
'(s)he used to lie down'

The basic root forms are those which appear in all other morphological contexts in which verb roots can appear in this language, these being the following:

(i) after imperative prefixes:

- (5)a. **Singular imperative**
Ø-nalei
2SG.IMP-BR.lie.down
'lie down!'
- b. **Plural imperative**
w-nalei
2PL.IMP-BR.lie.down
'all/both of you lie down!'

(ii) after any of the prefixes marking the recent past, distant past or dependent past. Thus:

- (6)a. *y-nalei*
3SG.RECPAST-BR.lie.down
'(s)he (has just) lay down'
- b. *y-nalei*
3SG.DISTPAST-BR.lie.down
'(s)he lay down'
- c. *yem-nalei*
3SG.DEPPAST.CONT-BR.lie.down
'(while) (s)he was lying down'

(iii) after counterassertive prefixes:

- (7) *yakin-nalei*
1SG.COUNT-BR.lie.down
'I can indeed lie down'

(iv) after optative prefixes, for example.

- (8) *p-nalei*
3SG.OPT-BR.lie.down
'I wish that (s)he would lie down'

- (v) after echo subject prefixes for any of the inflectional categories just presented (which are all marked identically in their echo subject forms, in any case). Thus:

- (9)a. *m-alei*
2SG.IMP-BR.lie.down
'...and lie down!'
- b. *m-la-alei*
PL.DISTPAST.ES-BR.lie.down
'...and we all lay down (some time ago)'

- (vi) after any derivational prefix. Thus, from the basic root of the verb *avan* 'walk' (which has the modified root *navan*) it is possible to add the instrumental prefix (*w*)*or-* to derive (*w*)*or-avan* 'shoes', or the nominalising prefix *n-* to derive the form *n-avan* 'walking, a walk, a trip'.
- (vii) after reduplicated segment of a root. Thus, *alou* 'run' – which has the modified root *nalou* – reduplicates as *alow-alou* 'run all over'.³ It should be noted that even if the reduplicated verb appears in an environment requiring the modified form of the root, only the initial segment is affected. Thus, the reduplicated form of the modified root *nalou* is *nalow-alou*, and not **nalou-nalou*.
- (viii) after a root to which a second verb is phonologically bound. Thus, the bound verb *ovyu-* 'desiderative' can be phonologically attached to *alei*, which appears in its basic root, whether the form *ovyu-* appears in its basic or its modified root form:

- (10) *yam-ovy-alei*⁴
1SG.DISTPAST-BR.DESID-BR.lie.down
'I wanted to lie down'

- (ix) in the causative construction, where the verb appears in a completely uninflected free form state after an inflected causative verb:

- (11) *y-ov-kik* *alei*
3SG.DISTPAST-BR.CAUS-2SG lie.down
'(s)he lay you down'

- (x) when the verb appears as the second member of a compound noun. Thus, from the verb *ayur* 'wilt' – which has the modified root *nayur* – we can derive the following compound noun:

- (12) *neimah ayur*
cassia wilt
'sensitive grass (*Mimosa pudica*)'

From the examples just presented, it may appear that the accretive *n-* in the form *nalei* should not be analysed as part of the root itself, but as part of the subject-tense prefix, followed by an invariant root, or that it may be a separate prefix altogether, expressing a separate meaning of its own. Thus, the form that I segmented above as *yo-nalei* '(s)he will lie down' could be segmented alternatively as either *yon-alei* or *yo-n-alei*. As a putative meaning,

³ The shift from *u* to *w* in this environment is predictable according to the general morphophonemic rules of the language.

⁴ The loss of the final vowel in *ovyu-* is also predictable according to the general morphophonemic rules.

we could suggest that *n-* might express some kind of general irrealis category, though the appearance of this form with the past habitual and the present would be problematic in this regard.

However, there is compelling evidence that there is in fact a genuine alternation between two different shapes of the root, i.e. *alei/nalei*. There are two major classes of verbs in Erromangan, which I refer to as “weak” verbs and “strong” verbs, with the examples presented above belonging to the class of weak verbs, in which root modification is manifested by the addition of *n-* before the root itself. With strong verbs, however, root modification involves a change in the shape of the verb-initial segments themselves, rather than the addition of a prothetic element. Exactly the same sorts of conditions which determine the choice between the root forms *alei/nalei* ‘lie down’ also determine the distribution of the root forms *ehri/ahri* ‘split’ and *oyol/anʒkol* ‘dig’, as illustrated by the following examples:

- (13)a. *y-ehri*
 3SG.DISTPAST-BR.split
 ‘it split’
- b. *yam-ahri*
 3SG.PRES-MR.split
 ‘it is splitting’
- c. *y-oyol*
 3SG.DISTPAST-BR.dig
 ‘(s)he dug’
- d. *y-anʒkol*
 3SG.FUT-MR.dig
 ‘(s)he will dig’

3 The shapes of modified roots

So far, I have only hinted at the formal nature of the root modification process, and root modification is clearly varied in its manifestation. This process involves, in part, the addition of a nasal segment before either the first or second segment of the verb root. Only certain segments appear in modified root environments with a preceding nasal, while other segments cannot be prenasalised. Those segments that are open to prenasalisation in modified root environments are the following:

- (i) any stop, *p, t, k*
- (ii) the two voiced fricatives, *v, ɣ*
- (iii) any vowel, *i, e, a, o, u*
- (iv) the rhotic *r*.

The remaining segments, which remain unprenasalised in modified root environments, are the following:

- (i) any nasal, *m, n, ŋ*
- (ii) the two glides, *y, w*
- (iii) the two voiceless fricatives, *s, h*
- (iv) the lateral *l*.

Such roots are therefore invariant in all morphosyntactic contexts. It should be noted, however, that these categories of verbs constitute a minority of verbs in the language, as the vast majority of verbs begin with those segments which do mutate.

The details of the particular ways in which prenasalisation is manifested in modified root environments with each of those segments that are amenable to this process is dependent on the classification of verbs into the two major classes of weak and strong verbs, to which I referred above.

3.1 Weak verbs

About three quarters of verbs in my Erromangan corpus can be assigned to the class of weak verbs. This category consists of all verbs which begin with the glides, *y-* and *w-*, as well as all verbs which begin with alveolar consonants, *s-*, *l-*, *r-* and *t-*. This group also consists of all verbs that begin with non-mid vowels, *a-*, *i-* and *u-*. Of the remaining verbs, i.e. those which begin with either of the mid vowels *e-* and *o-*, about a third belong in this category of weak verbs, while the remaining two thirds are strong.

Weak verbs are all characterised by the fact that roots beginning with one of those segments described above as being amenable to prenasalisation simply add an accretive *n-* at the beginning of the basic form of their underlying roots in order to produce the appropriate modified root form. Thus, the alternation between *alei/nalei* 'lie down' that was illustrated above is an example of a weak alternation. Roots beginning with *s-*, *l-* and the glides *y-* and *w-* remain invariant in all morphological contexts as these segments are not amenable to prenasalisation, also as indicated above. We therefore find correspondences in form such as those in Table 1, where the third person singular future form illustrates root-initial mutation with those verbs that have separate modified forms of the root.

Table 1: Weak verb modification patterns.

Basic root		3SG.FUT	
<i>tovop</i>	'laugh'	<i>yo-ntovop</i>	'(s)he will laugh'
<i>avan</i>	'walk'	<i>yo-navan</i>	'(s)he will walk'
<i>esomsay</i>	'breathe'	<i>yo-nesomsay</i>	'(s)he will breathe'
<i>itīs</i>	'smile'	<i>yo-nitīs</i>	'(s)he will smile'
<i>omonki</i>	'drink'	<i>yo-nomonki</i>	'(s)he will drink'
<i>uri</i>	'follow'	<i>yo-nuri</i>	'(s)he will follow'
<i>yep</i>	'descend'	<i>yo-yep</i>	'(s)he will descend'
<i>wai</i>	'step on'	<i>yo-wai</i>	'(s)he will step on'
<i>somponj</i>	'snore'	<i>yo-somponj</i>	'(s)he will snore'
<i>lau</i>	'dry'	<i>yo-lau</i>	'(s)he will be dry'

3.2 Strong verbs

While about three quarters of verb roots undergo root modification according to the weak pattern just described, the remaining quarter of verbs undergo a separate set of root modification patterns which I have chosen to refer to as the "strong" pattern. I have chosen

this term because this pattern does not involve the addition of an accretive element only before the root as with the weak pattern, as prenasalisation can also involve changes within verb root itself. The strong pattern also produces a wider range of surface realisations, which gives the impression of greater superficial irregularity.

The difference between basic and modified forms of the roots of strong verbs can be characterised underlyingly in the following ways:

- (i) the nasal *n* is added before any of those root-initial consonants which are amenable to prenasalisation, or between a root-initial vowel and a “nasalisable” consonant, and
- (ii) an accretive *a-* is added before the root.

This means that root modification in the case of strong verbs has a dual effect on the root, rather than the single effect that we find in the case of weak verbs, which involve only the addition of accretive initial *n-*.

I will first of all deal with the process of nasal accretion, since the pattern of weak verb alternations that I have already described also involves nasal accretion. As I stated above, *n* is added before the initial segment of a consonant-initial strong verb root. In the case of vowel-initial strong verb roots, however, this accretive segment is inserted within the root itself, between the first vowel and the following consonant. In the case of vowel-initial roots where the following syllable does not begin with a consonant, i.e. where there are two vowels in sequence, there is no place for the nasal to be inserted, so nasal accretion does not apply.

An accreted nasal is then assimilated in place of articulation to the following segment. Specifically, this means the *n* shifts to *m* before labial consonants, and to *ŋ* before velar consonants. Before alveolar consonants, the nasal remains unchanged. Although *m* and *ŋ* with such verbs never appear on the surface as *n*, these are assumed to be at least diachronically – and possibly also synchronically – derived from the same *n* that we find in other modified root forms.

The next stage in the derivation of the modified forms of strong verb roots involves a general process of consonant cluster modification. This involves the shifting of a fricative to a stop immediately after a homorganic nasal, which represents a general process applying when such sequences arise over morpheme boundaries (even though we are dealing with root modification rather than genuine morpheme boundaries in these cases). Thus, sequences of *mv* shift to *mp*, and sequences of *ŋy* shift to *ŋk*.

There is then a process of consonant cluster reduction, by which the following changes apply:

- (i) There is a dissimilatory loss of the initial nasal in sequences of *-ntn-*, giving *-tn-*.
- (ii) In sequences of three consonants, of which the final segment is *s* or *h*, the middle segment is lost. This rule is specifically involved in the following derivations: *ŋkh* → *ŋh*, *ŋks* → *ŋs*, *mph* → *mh*, *mps* → *ms*.⁵

The next stage in the derivation of the modified forms of strong verb roots is to add an accretive *a-* before the root. Of the five vowels, only the mid vowels *e-* and *o-* are found at the beginnings of strong verbs. The resulting underlying sequences of *ae-* and *ao-* are resolved as *a-*, by a general phonological rule which deletes mid vowels after the vowel *a*.

⁵ Interestingly, derivations such as *ŋks* → *ŋs*, rather than the other way around, would appear to run counter to what one might consider to be ordinary phonetic pressure. However, the underlying roots clearly call for segment deletion rather than insertion in accounting for morphophonemic alternations.

The result is the set of derivations involving a representative set of strong verb roots set out in Table 2, with the rightmost form representing the final output of the root modification rules.

Table 2: Strong verb modification patterns.

Basic root	Nasal accretion	Assimilation	Despirantiation	Cluster reduction	a-accretion	Vowel deletion
<i>mah</i> 'die'	–	–	–	–	<i>amah</i>	–
<i>owi</i> 'leave'	–	–	–	–	<i>aowi</i>	<i>awi</i>
<i>olki</i> 'hang'	–	–	–	–	<i>aolki</i>	<i>alki</i>
<i>omurep</i> 'live'	–	–	–	–	<i>aomurep</i>	<i>amurep</i>
<i>ehvo</i> 'white'	–	–	–	–	<i>aehvo</i>	<i>ahvo</i>
<i>elwo</i> 'vomit'	–	–	–	–	<i>aelwo</i>	<i>alwo</i>
<i>emlu</i> 'crazy'	–	–	–	–	<i>aemlu</i>	<i>amlu</i>
<i>eiti</i> 'tie'	–	–	–	–	<i>aeiti</i>	<i>aiti</i>
<i>pat</i> 'blocked'	<i>npat</i>	<i>mpat</i>	–	–	<i>ampat</i>	–
<i>vaŋ</i> 'eat'	<i>nvaŋ</i>	<i>mvaŋ</i>	<i>mpaŋ</i>	–	<i>ampaŋ</i>	–
<i>oruy</i> 'bathe'	<i>onruy</i>	–	–	–	<i>aonruy</i>	<i>anruy</i>
<i>oyep</i> 'fly'	<i>onyep</i>	<i>oŋyep</i>	<i>oŋkep</i>	–	<i>aonkep</i>	<i>aŋkep</i>
<i>okili</i> 'know'	<i>onkili</i>	<i>oŋkili</i>	–	–	<i>aonkili</i>	<i>aŋkili</i>
<i>ovoli</i> 'turn'	<i>onvoli</i>	<i>omvoli</i>	<i>ompoli</i>	–	<i>aompoli</i>	<i>ampoli</i>
<i>etehep</i> 'sit'	<i>entehep</i>	–	–	–	<i>aentehep</i>	<i>antehep</i>
<i>evyah</i> 'defecate'	<i>envyah</i>	<i>emvyah</i>	<i>empyah</i>	–	<i>aempyah</i>	<i>ampyah</i>
<i>etni</i> 'cook'	<i>entni</i>	–	–	<i>etni</i>	<i>aetni</i>	<i>atni</i>
<i>oyhi</i> 'see'	<i>onyhi</i>	<i>oŋyhi</i>	<i>oŋkhi</i>	<i>oŋhi</i>	<i>aonhi</i>	<i>aŋhi</i>
<i>evsor</i> 'wake up'	<i>envsor</i>	<i>emvsor</i>	<i>empsor</i>	<i>emsor</i>	<i>aemsor</i>	<i>amsor</i>

There is no semantic basis for predicting which verb roots beginning with mid vowels are going to behave like weak verbs and which are going to behave like strong verbs. Likewise, there is no formal basis for this distinction. There is, in fact, one minimal pair in my data in the form of the weak verb *owi* 'plant' (which has the corresponding modified root *nowi*) and the strong root *owi* 'leave' (which has the modified root *awi*). There is additionally a number of subminimally different pairs of weak and strong verb roots, such as those set out in Table 3.

Table 3: Subminimally different weak and strong verb root modification patterns

Weak verbs		Strong verbs	
<i>omonki/nomonki</i>	'drink'	<i>omol/amol</i>	'fall'
<i>orari/norari</i>	'flow'	<i>orantvi/anrantvi</i>	'cut off'
<i>ovovu/novovu</i>	'play'	<i>ovoŋi/ampoŋi</i>	'give'
<i>ehmin/nehmin</i>	'husk coconut'	<i>ehpi/ahpi</i>	'count'
<i>etete/netete</i>	'sweep'	<i>ete/ante</i>	'stay'

Strong verbs differ from weak verbs not only in their patterns of root modification, as there are also significant differences in the way that the two classes of verbs behave with respect to the addition of inflectional prefixes. When prefixes ending in *u* are added to weak verbs beginning with *o*, the sequence is resolved according to the general morphophonemic rules of the language as *wo*. With weak verbs beginning with *e*, this vowel of the root assimilates to the backness of the prefix-final vowel, and the resulting sequence of *u* and *o* is also resolved as *wo*.

In the case of strong verbs, however, the initial *e* and *o* of the verb root is deleted, while the prefix-final *u* remains unchanged. Thus, the strong verbs behave exceptionally with respect to the application of the general morphophonemic rules of the language. Compare the behaviour of the forms of the strong verbs *owi* 'leave' and *ehpi* 'count' and the weak verbs *owi* 'plant' and *ehmin* 'husk coconut' with the prefixes \emptyset - 'SG.IMP' and *u*- 'PL.IMP' in Table 4.

Table 4: Weak and strong verb inflectional patterns.

	\emptyset - 'SG.IMP'	<i>u</i> - 'PL.IMP'
Weak verbs		
<i>owi</i> 'leave'	\emptyset - <i>owi</i>	<i>wowi</i> (< <i>u-owi</i>)
<i>ehmin</i> 'husk coconut'	\emptyset - <i>ehmin</i>	<i>wohmin</i> (< <i>u-ehmin</i>)
Strong verbs		
<i>owi</i> 'plant'	\emptyset - <i>owi</i>	<i>uwi</i> (< <i>u-owi</i>)
<i>ehpi</i> 'count'	\emptyset - <i>ehpi</i>	<i>uhpi</i> (< <i>u-ehpi</i>)

4 Inflectional marking

I have already indicated that there is a variety of prefixed inflectional categories in Erromangan. I do not propose to present the full paradigmatic sets for the various inflectional prefixes in this discussion as they exhibit a considerable amount of morphophonemic complexity. However, the prefixes mark a variety of subject pronominal categories, as well as a number of tense-aspect-mood categories. There is also a separate verbal prefix marking negation.

The expression of inflectional categories in Erromangan is morphotactically rather complex. The overall morphotactic structure of the verb could perhaps be represented as follows:⁶

$$\text{INFLECTION}_1 + (\text{NEGATION}) + (\text{INFLECTION}_2) + \text{ROOT}$$

All tense-aspect-mood categories in Erromangan are in fact marked discontinuously, involving combinations of the following formal markers:

⁶ In fact, there is a number of categories in addition to negation that can appear between Inflection₁ and Inflection₂, about which fuller details are provided in Crowley (1998:103-106).

- (i) an exponent of the first order prefixes, given above as Inflection₁
- (ii) a pre-root prefix, or the lack thereof, given above as Inflection₂
- (iii) the shape of the verb root itself, i.e. whether the verb appears in the basic or modified root form.

Some pairs of inflectional categories are distinguished exclusively by means of Inflection₁ prefixes, others exclusively by the presence or absence of the Inflection₂ prefix, and others exclusively by the shape of the root itself. Yet other pairs of categories are distinguished by a combination of more than one of these formal markers.

The major analytical difficulty with respect to Erromangan verb morphology is in establishing constant meanings for the various constituent parts of these discontinuous inflectional markers. Lynch and Capell (1983:24-25), for example, note a correlation between realis mode and the basic root form on the one hand, and irrealis mode and modified root forms on the other. Although there is a tendency for irrealis categories to involve root modification, it is in fact nothing more than a tendency. The categories of imperative and optative are semantically irrealis, yet they are marked by verbs in their basic root forms. In addition, the semantically realis categories of past habitual and present are marked by modified forms of the root.

Similarly, the Inflection₂ prefix, which for the sake of convenience at this point I will represent simply as *eme-*, sometimes expresses a distinction between continuous as against punctual aspect. However, in the conditional category, which also involves this prefix, there is clearly no continuous aspect involved.

With five distinct sets of Inflection₁ markers, a two-way distinction in the Inflection₂ slot (i.e. the presence or absence of *eme-*), and two different forms of the verb root, there are a total of twenty logically possible formal distinctions in the inflectional categories of affirmative verbs in the language. Of these, only thirteen combinations are actually utilised in the expression of inflectional contrasts in Erromangan (of which two express the same meaning). The various morphologically marked categories, along with the constituent parts of the discontinuous marking for each, are set out in Table 5.

Table 5: Inflectional categories on Erromangan verbs

Inflection ₁	Inflection ₂	Root Form	Morphological category
<i>yayo-</i> series ⁷	∅-	Basic	Recent past
		Modified	–
<i>yam-</i> series	<i>eme-</i>	Basic	Past continuous
		Modified	Present
	∅-	Basic	Distant past
		Modified	Past habitual
	<i>eme-</i>	Basic	Dependent past
		Modified	Past habitual ⁸
<i>yapi-</i> series	∅-	Basic	Optative
		Modified	–
	<i>eme-</i>	Basic	–
		Modified	Conditional
<i>yoyo-</i> series	∅-	Basic	–
		Modified	Future
	<i>eme-</i>	Basic	–
		Modified	–
<i>yakin-</i> series	∅-	Basic	Counter assertive
		Modified	– ⁹
	<i>eme-</i>	Basic	–
		Modified	–

The dashes in this table indicate those particular conjunctions of morphological categories which do not occur in the language.

⁷ Each of these paradigms is represented by the first person singular exponent in this table. I do not propose to present the full paradigms for each of these sets of inflectional markers in this paper. Crowley (1998:85-114) provides full details.

⁸ Note that past habitual can be expressed either with or without the Inflection₂ marker, i.e. there is no semantic contrast associated with the presence or absence of the *eme-* marker in this category.

⁹ There is historical evidence that there may have been a category that was marked by the *yakin-* series of subject markers with an associated modified, rather than basic, root form. The conditional subordinator *naŋku* ‘if’ would be the regular third person singular form of the verb *oyu* ‘say’ in such a paradigm, and this verb is used in subordinate constructions in a variety of ways that do not directly reflect its quotative lexical meaning. Synchronically, however, there is no complete paradigm of this type.

5 A historical explanation for the mess in Erromangan?

In world terms, the inflectional morphology that I have described here for Erromangan is not particularly complicated. This language is, after all, not as complex as Navajo or Inuit. However, having come to Erromangan from previous work on Northern and Central Vanuatu languages, it is certainly a messy system by comparison. One of the distinguishing typological features of the languages of Southern Vanuatu is their relatively complex verbal morphologies, and Erromangan is similar in its level of morphological complexity to the languages of Tanna and Aneityum.

It is probably not so unusual that Erromangan marks inflectional categories discontinuously, by means of root modification and prefixes. Many of the Central Vanuatu languages, of course, do exactly the same. However, Erromangan does add another level of complexity in that its verbal inflections are marked by tripartite forms, rather than just by forms consisting of two parts.

The patterns of verb root modification themselves are also formally rather more diverse than we find in most of the languages of Central Vanuatu. Admittedly, there is a common theme involving the addition of an accretive nasal element, which is also something that is common in the languages of North Central Vanuatu. But this accretive segment is added before some roots (which seems perfectly natural, assuming that it began as an affix of some kind), while it is placed *inside* others (which seems somewhat less natural, given the preference in languages for uninterrupted constituents).

Moreover, the process of root modification for what I have called strong verbs itself has two separate phonological effects, i.e. the addition of this accretive nasal *and* the addition of an accretive *a* before the root (which then interacts with underlying root-initial vowel). The addition of this vowel, and the addition of a nasal share nothing in common as phonological processes, so we can hardly treat this as some kind of single prosodic process (as would be possible, for example, if root modification involved a combination of nasal accretion and subsequent nasalisation of other parts of the root, or if it involved the addition of an accretive *a*, and subsequent lowering of other vowels in the root). What this language has done is to latch on to two seemingly unrelated formal processes to do a single job.

Of course, this is not the end of the messiness in Erromangan verbal morphology. There appears to be little rhyme or reason for the fact that certain combinations of morphological forms are possible as expressions of inflectional categories, while others appear to be impossible.

The idea that languages exhibit an overriding tendency to develop towards symmetry is perhaps oversimplistic. Thurston (1987) distinguishes between exoterogeny and esoterogeny in language change. Exoterogeny is the sum of those processes that result in an originally complex language being more easily learned by outsiders who use it in contact situations. Esoterogeny, on the other hand, refers to the kinds of processes that are undergone by a language that is seldom used except as an in-group language.

On Erromango in the 19th century, there were originally four or five distinct languages. During the latter part of the century, these gave way to the single Erromangan language that is spoken today (Crowley 1997). This linguistic redistribution took place as a result of massive depopulation caused by disease and famine, as well as resettlement at the behest of the Christian missionaries. These kinds of circumstances would have almost certainly resulted in considerable contact between speakers of the various original languages. For one of these languages to have won out over the others presumably means that it had been used

exotically, so modern Erromangan could perhaps be expected to exhibit exoteric simplification.

If this has happened, then Proto Southern Vanuatu should have been considerably more complex in its morphology than Erromangan is now. However, comparing Erromangan to the other languages of Southern Vanuatu, there is no real evidence for more structural complexity than we find at present.

Synchronic messes obviously have to have some kind of diachronic explanation. Before I begin to look at the question of the prothetic nasal element, I will briefly examine the behaviour of verb-initial *o-* and *e-*. It will be remembered that with weak verbs, these initial segments behave fully like an inherent part of the root. In the case of strong verbs, however, these initial segments are somewhat less strongly “attached” to the root, in that they are deleted following certain prefix-final segments.

Lynch (1992) discusses the behaviour of verb-initial vowels in the languages of Southern Vanuatu generally, noting that there appears to have been a general process of initial vowel accretion. He was unable to provide a full explanation of what has happened, or why, and I am certainly in no position to attempt to take this discussion any further.

One thing that is clear, however, is that the different languages of the Southern Vanuatu subgroup appear to have incorporated these accretive vowels to differing extents as part of the root itself. In the Tannese languages, these historically accreted vowels are invariably treated as part of the verb root, and there is no context in which this vowel is separable from the root. In Anejoñ, there is a highly restricted range of morphological contexts – in the derivational, but not the inflectional, morphology – in which the accreted vowels may be separated. Finally, in Erromangan, the accreted vowels are systematically lost in a fairly wide range of inflectional contexts. Thus, Erromangan has incorporated these vowels as part of the root to the least extent of all of the Southern Vanuatu languages.

I am not sure yet how this fact is involved in the behaviour of root modification patterns, or even if it is involved at all. However, the odd behaviour of initial *a-* in the root modification process suggests that this component of the root modification process perhaps has as its origin the same source as this accretive segment. The problem, of course, is in explaining why the accretion should apply only in modified root environments with *a-*, and in basic root environments with accretive *e-* and *o-*. The fact that *a-* replaces *e-/o-* when they come into contact in modified root environments may be of some significance, though I am not yet sure what this might be. It must also be remembered that when *a-* is accreted to a root beginning with *e-* or *o-*, that vowel is itself often historically accreted, so arguing that the addition of *a-* is part of the same process is suggesting a double accretion. I find this argument less than persuasive.

One possible explanation for this phenomenon¹⁰ is that *a-* presumably had some specific function in Proto Southern Vanuatu (although that function is probably unrecoverable now). Subsequently, some instances of this *a-* shifted to either *e-* or *o-*, possibly determined by the nature of the following consonant and vowel (but with the conditioning factors not yet established). If the resultant *e-* or *o-* then came to be reanalysed as more integrally part of the verb root rather than some kind of a bound morpheme, those instances of still unshifted *a-* may have been reanalysed as some kind of general verb “marker”. This might then explain how “unverby-looking” *e-* or *o-* initial roots may have attracted an additional *a-*, as this would have made these forms look like proper verbs again. The weakness with this argument, of course, is the fact that *i-* and *u-* initial roots were not similarly affected.

¹⁰ For which I owe thanks to a suggestion from John Lynch.

Another major issue that needs to be resolved is the source of the accretive nasal that is added in modified root environments. The fact that root modification involves an element of prenasalisation is surely too similar to what happens in many of the languages of Central Vanuatu (and which can be reconstructed with some antiquity in these languages) to be due to chance. At the same time, the nasal grade increment in the languages of Central Vanuatu is typically associated with the expression of realis categories, whereas in Erromangan, it is more frequently associated with irrealis categories. The association between root modification and irrealis categories in Erromangan may perhaps be a natural development out of the Central Vanuatu in which it is typically realis roots that are morphologically marked. In universal terms, of course, we would expect realis to be the least marked category, which is precisely what we do find in Erromangan.

If there were to be some kind of special connection between Erromangan and the Central Vanuatu languages, this would not be the only point of similarity. Alone in the languages of Southern Vanuatu, the Erromangan languages have object suffixes on verbs, which is also a widespread feature of Central Vanuatu languages. Erromangan also has a preposed first person possessive marker *nan̄ku*, which is used alongside the directly inherited postposed possessive forms *horuŋ* and *enyau*. The form *nan̄ku* looks suspiciously like possessive forms in some of the languages to the north. Lynch (in this volume) also points to a number of other unique similarities between Erromangan and the languages of Central Vanuatu, including a few possible irregular lexical developments from Proto Oceanic.

However, the genetic distance between Southern Vanuatu and Central Vanuatu is quite great. Moreover, as Lynch (1975) shows, superficially similar sorts of root modification patterns involving prenasalisation in the verbal systems of genetically quite distant languages can arise independently from quite different sources, as Yabêm and Buang in Papua New Guinea have also acquired such patterns. In fact, prenasalisation seems to be one of the recurring preferences for languages in which root modification patterns have evolved. Note, for example, the existence of nasal mutation in the nominal morphology of the historically quite unrelated Celtic languages.

What makes the question more interesting in the case of Erromangan is whether or not it is purely geographically accidental that Erromangan is the only Southern Vanuatu language that is spoken adjacent to languages belonging to the North Central Vanuatu subgroup. That is, could the development of nasal accretion have been the result of diffusion?

Linguists often speak of some linguistic features as being relatively easily diffusible, while others appear to be relatively immune to borrowing. Of course, there are all sorts of problems with any kinds of generalisations on this topic, but my gut feeling is that root modification patterns **should** be relatively – perhaps even extremely – hard to borrow, without at least borrowing a whole lot of other verb morphology, and probably also a lot of vocabulary. However, apart from this pattern of root modification, the verb morphology and the lexicon of Erromangan both look, for the most part, **very** different to anything we find in North Central Vanuatu. This seems hardly the stuff on which to base a hypothesis of major structural diffusion. However, if diffusion is involved, then Erromangan has at least done the universally preferred thing in associating the modified root forms with the marked irrealis types of categories.

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