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Transitivity in Erzya Mordvin

To a very large extent transitivity is a universal category but, as with many other features, the way in which it is manifested is far from uniform. The diversity in transitivity in the Uralic languages suggests that, although they are genetically related, there is no fundamental similarity of such a type between transitive clauses in these languages that would exhaustively explain the characteristics of transitivity on the basis of genetic affinity.

More generally speaking, transitivity is a category that has is intrinsically related to human thought. According to Næss (2007: 1, 217) it belongs to the core of language and is perhaps among the most basic of linguistic categories, and therefore appears to be universal. Havas (2003: 41) emphasises the old age of object as a category and notes that it undoubtedly is older than that of the subject, for instance.

The structural foundations of transitivity may be sought in the opposition between transitive and intransitive, but this distinction is far from unambiguous, because a finite verb of a transitive clause, for instance, often shares the characteristics of an intransitive clause. However, it is assumed that the crucial property in defining a prototypical transitive clause is the maximal distinction from a prototypical intransitive clause (Næss 2007: 23–49). Nevertheless, the large scale of transitive clauses in Erzya demonstrates that in this particular case transitivity embeds a wide array of variation rather than a bicuspid opposition between transitive and intransitive.

Transitivity in the Mordvinic languages and especially in Erzya has been discussed recently mostly in terms of one of the core constituents, that is, either the verb (Alhoniemi 1996, Keresztes 1999a, 1999b, Molnár 2001) or the object (Alhoniemi 1991, Itkonen 1972), but more rarely as a semantic property that entails a larger entity (Salamon 1989). Zaicz (2003) presents a

concise overview of earlier statements on object marking and verb inflection in the Erzya transitive clause. Nonetheless, some earlier observations on Erzya syntax suggest that the clause structure is determined by a mutual dependence between the constituents. Similarly, it has been assumed that definiteness and the development of object conjugation have influenced object marking in the Ugric languages (Honti 1984, Kulonen 1999).

The current paper proposes that the case of object and the selection of conjugation type alone do not determine the way transitivity is expressed in Mordvinic. Furthermore, it can be assumed that the partiality of the object does not play such an important role as in the Finnic languages, although a suffix corresponding to the Finnic partitive is used to mark the object. And last but not least, the role of aspect is always important in expressing the character of the action, but given that aspect is not distinguishable morphologically or syntactically, it is only indirectly involved in the structure of a transitive clause. The discussion concerning the role of aspect would therefore imply a more careful analysis of semantic factors and language-specific changes (cf. Honti 1999, Kiefer & Honti 2003, Metslang 2001, Tommola 1986, 1987). Certain basic rules determine the main types of Erzya transitive clause depending on the definiteness of object and the nature of the process, but in general, there is a lot of construction-specific variation between low and high transitivity.

Transitivity in Mordvinic with respect to other Uralic languages

Typologically, the Uralic languages display three different main patterns in transitive clauses depending on whether the verb or object has clause-specific characteristics that affect the entire transitive clause. In principle, the Uralic languages mark morphologically the basic semantic property of the construction in one way or another and in some cases they even conceptualise more than one participant. Hungarian, Ob-Ugric and Samoyedic languages inflect the verb in an object conjugation, if the clause is transitive and, as a rule, display one object marking case (either the nominative or accusative) and the case of the object does not influence the

degree of transitivity. The Finnic languages display different cases of object depending on the semantic properties of the verb phrase. The Saamic and Permic languages and Mari do not share the more complex types of transitive clause and there is a more opaque relationship between the form of the object and the transitivity of the verb, although it must be noted that the eastern Saamic languages, especially, suggest a more complicated object marking system at an earlier stage.

A complexity of verb and object marking in a transitive clause is intertwined in the Mordvinic languages (Erzya and Moksha). They display both of the two complex transitive clause types that are attested in Uralic which are an alternating case of object and a differentiated verb inflection in a transitive clause. The form of the object depends on several nominal categories, whereas the form of the verb is either in the subject or object conjugation and depends on the degree of transitivity.
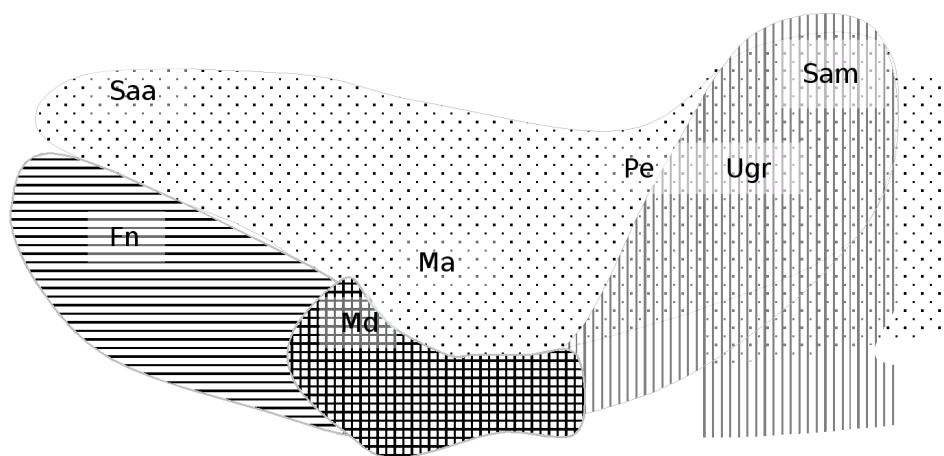

Figure 1. Morphological characteristics of transitive clause in Uralic languages. 1. languages that have a separate subject and object conjugation (Md Ugr Sam); 2. languages that as a rule display one case of object (accusative or nominative) (Saa Ma Pe Ugr Sam); 3. languages that may distinguish between high and low transitivity by means of case marking ((genitive-)accusative, nominative and partitive) (Fn Md). Abbreviations: Saa = Saamic, Fn = Finnic, Md = Mordvinic (Erzya, Moksha), Ma = Mari, Pe = Permic, Ugr = Ugric, Sam = Samoyedic

Semantics is largely considered the starting point for any study of transitivity. However, Kittilä (2002a) claims that semantic definition is not alone sufficient, because all structures that display transitivity are equally transitive. Aspect, for instance, is one of the most significant parameters of the transitive clause that only rarely causes difficulties for the definition of a basic transitive sentence, because imperfective sentences are always less transitive than perfective ones although still transitive. In fact, the definition of transitivity includes a wide array of structures that correspond to the semantic demands of a transitive clause. This is illustratively seen in the transitive clause of the Mordvinic languages that display a considerably larger selection of structurally divergent transitive clauses than other Uralic languages.

In the following, I shall use Erzya Mordvin as an example of the complexity of the transitive clause in the Mordvinic languages. There are some minor differences between the transitive clauses of Erzya and Moksha (cf. GMdJa 1962: 122), but basically, the transitive clauses in the two Mordvinic languages are very similar.

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate the two extremities of the Erzya transitive clause that both display a different form of the object and the verb.

(1) *sajs'*   *t'ejt'er'es'* *duduška* *i*   *s'ed'i* (MSFOu 84: 230)
     take-IMPF.3SG   girl-DEF   whistle   and   play-3SG
     'The girl took a whistle and is playing.'

(2) *pokš bratis'*   *viškin'int'*   *pan'iz'ä*
     big   brother-DEF little-GEN(-ACC).DEF chase-IMPF-3SG/3SG
     'The big brother chased the little one away.' (MSFOu 84: 225)

In example (1) the form of the object *duduška* is the indefinite nominative singular and the verb is inflected in the subject conjugation. In example (2) the form of the object *viškin'int'* is the definite genitive (-accusative) singular and the verb *pan'iz'ä* is inflected in the object conjugation. The first represents a clause that characteristically demonstrates low transitivity. The object is indefinite, the clause semantics and aspect of the verb are imper-

fective. The second is an example of a clause with high transitivity. The object is definite as indicated by the definite declination suffix *-nt'* and the semantic aspect of the verb and the process are perfective.

However, as the list of morphosyntactic properties involved in examples (1) and (2) suggests, the number of ways they can be attached to one another is not limited to two. There are several combinations that can be compared to the two extremities and can be posited on a continuum between low and high transitivity.

The parameters of the Erzya transitive clause

The form of the object in Erzya Mordvin is determined using the following parameters that are listed in table 1. I have preferred to label the third object-marking case partitive, although grammars and grammatical descriptions more commonly call it the ablative. Nevertheless, an ablative that indicates a spatial function of the case is not completely adequate either, because it reflects more the historical starting point than the synchronic functions of the case. The shift from spatial relations to more grammatical functions is evident in the light of grammatical descriptions as is seen in the functional description of the partitive (ablative) in Erzya grammars (GMdJa 1962: 115–123, GMdJa 1980: 156, 164–166, ÈK 2000: 84; cf. Itkonen 1972: 169–170, Kont 1961: 194–196).

OBJECT	CASE		
MORPHOSYNTACTIC PROPERTY	NOM	GEN(-ACC)	PART
(INDEFINITE)	x	(x)	x
DEFINITE	(x)	x	(x)
(NON-POSSESSIVE)	x	x	x
POSSESSIVE	(x)	x	(x)
(PRONOUN)		x	

Table 1. Morphological and semantic properties of noun that affect the form of the nominal object and degree of transitivity in Erzya.

In literary Erzya and several dialects the object may occur in three cases which are the nominative (*ved'* 'water'), genitive (-accusative) (*ved'e-n'*) and partitive (*ved'-t'e*). In addition to these, transitive verbs may display a complement that is a spatial postpositional phrase, such as *skalont' ejse* cow-GEN(-ACC).DEF in-INESS (Alhoniemi 1991: 20–21). Furthermore, certain dialects display an inessive complement of a transitive verb (Markov 1961: 43–45, Itkonen 1972: 172). In the current paper the emphasis is on the most characteristic sentence types, and less canonical ways of expressing the object such as with the partitive that has several constraints and locative constructions will not be dealt here in detail here because of the lack of space.

In addition to case definiteness (*ved'-es'* water-DEF) vs. indefiniteness and the marking of the possessor (*ved'-e-nze* water-3SG) or not marking it, are other important morphosyntactic categories that affect the form of the object. Definiteness and possession are both morphologically marked, but do not co-occur. Moreover, definiteness and possessive marking are not obligatory properties in the transitive clause, whereas case and conjugation type (or infinitive) are always manifested in one way or another. In sum, the inflection of the object consists of the possible attachment of definite or possessive suffixes to the case.

Pronouns are a special word-class and not a morphosyntactic property. However, pronouns are indicated in table 1, although pronouns do not always adhere entirely to the same rules as ordinary nouns.

The verb of a transitive clause changes between two distinct inflectional paradigms, namely subject and object conjugation. The third verb category that affects the transitive clause consists of infinitives that have an object complement. So, although there is a specialised verb inflection type, the transitivity of the clause does not automatically trigger the use of the object conjugation paradigm that more alertly refers to the person and number of the object. Likewise, the shift of the verb to the subject conjugation instead of the object conjugation does not automatically detransitivise the verb. In this view, the main property of the object conjugation seems to be its possibility of demoting the subject or object or both and express three-place

structural arguments with one single unit (for more details, see Alhoniemi 1996, Keresztes 1999a, 1999b, Trosterud 2006: 246–303).

A more exhaustive study on transitivity in Erzya Mordvin should further account for the role of some other morphosyntactic and semantic properties, such as the number of the subject and object, aspect and the animateness or inanimateness of the object. In the Finnic languages the case of object is determined by some semantic properties of the noun depending on whether the target is divisible or not, and especially properties of verb that depend on whether the predicate is affirmative or negative, occurs in an imperative or passive form. However, these categories are not as decisive for the output of the transitive clause in the Mordvinic languages as they are in Finnic. The same is valid to aspect that, as mentioned above, is obviously one of the core characteristics of transitivity but is not overtly marked in Mordvinic, although grammars frequently refer to it. (Mostly grammars published in Russia, presumably partly shaped by grammatical descriptions of the Russian language.) Figure 2 illustrates the composition and the morphosyntactic core properties of the Mordvinic transitive clause.
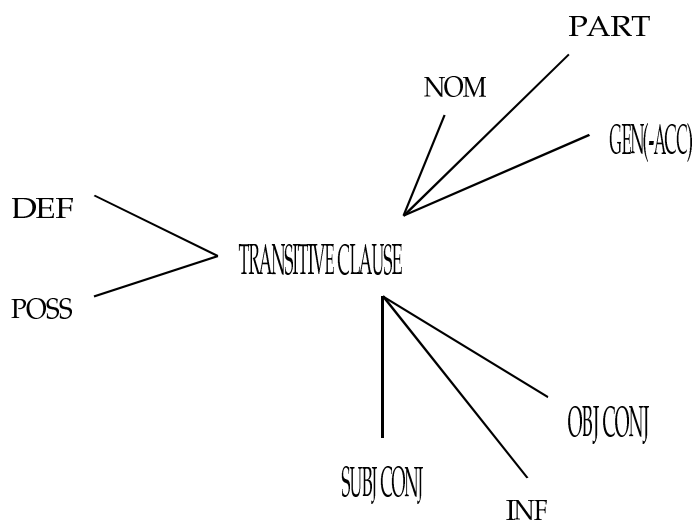

Figure 2. The composition of the transitive clause in Mordvinic according to evidence from Erzya. Inflectional categories involved in the morphosyntax of transitive clause: Abbreviations: DEF = definite, POSS = possessive

suffix, NOM = nominative, PART = partitive (ablative), GEN(-ACC) = genitive-accusative, SUBJ CONJ = subject conjugation, OBJ CONJ = object conjugation, INF = infinitive.

Basically, the rules that determine the combining of different parameters are not arbitrary, but often correspond to the degree of transitivity, which suggests that there is an implicational relationship between the form of the predicate and the object. As Erzya grammars suggest, a typical Erzya transitive clause with low transitivity consists of an indefinite nominative object and a verb that is inflected according to the subject conjugation paradigm as in example (1) above. A typical clause with high transitivity consists of a definite genitive (-accusative) object and a verb that is inflected in the object conjugation paradigm (example (2)). For the sake of comparison, Krämer and Wunderlich (1999) argue that in Yucatec (a Mayan language from southern Mexico), for instance, ergativity is a high-ranking category in transitive clauses and the way the arguments are manifested depends on aspect and tense. This language only allows two structural arguments at once, although the predicate itself would be three-place. As a result, Yucatec has evolved a fully symmetric system between transitivisation and detransitivisation.

Transitivity in Erzya, however, does not function consistently and alternate between transitivisation and detransitivisation or between a binary opposition of high and low transitivity, which means that it is easy to find deviations from a bicuspid classification of high and low transitive clauses. It would not be excluded that object conjugation verbs co-occur with a nominative or indefinite genitive-accusative object (cf. figure 2), a matter which will be discussed in more detail below. I shall next proceed to cast a glance at what Erzya grammars conclude concerning transitive clauses, which will be followed by a short overview of empirical data.

Transitivity in Erzya Grammars

The implied relationship between the form of the predicate and the object is noticeable in those grammatical descriptions that refer to Erzya syntax. Yet, the way it is characterised changes according to author(s). In one of the first extensive Erzya grammars, Wiedemann (1865: 45) approaches the issue from the viewpoint of western European languages and determines a case of object, or more precisely, notes that two cases, the nominative and genitive, correspond to the German accusative. He then claims that the definite accusative [i.e. genitive-accusative] regularly demands a verb in the objective conjugation, whereas an indefinite [i.e. nominative] object requires a verb in the subjective conjugation.

> "Den Accusativ anderer Sprachen als Objectcasus, welcher fast allen finnischen Sprachen fehlt, drückt man im Mordwinischen theils durch den Nominativ, theils durch den Genitiv aus, aber mit genauer Unterscheidung. Der deutsche Accusativ wird durch den Genitiv ausgedrückt, wenn der Gegenstand ein bestimmter ist, also auch immer, wenn das Wort Possessivsuffixe hat oder der bestimmten Declination angehört, durch den Nominativ, wenn er ein unbestimmter ist, also wenn das Wort zur unbestimmten Declination gehört und im Deutschen keinen oder nur den unbestimmten Artikel haben würde. Den bestimmten Accusativ regiert dann regelmässig das objective, den unbestimmten das subjective Verbum. –– Eine scheinbare Ausnahme findet bei den Infinitiven und Participen Statt, welche als Nomina das von ihnen abhängige Object natürlich nicht im Nominativ, sondern immer im Genitiv zu sich nehmen, mag es bestimmtes oder ein unbestimmtes sein." (Wiedemann 1865: 45)

This analysis of Wiedemann is based on a functional description of each case. He lists several examples of partitive-governing (in Wiedemann's terminology, ablative) verbs and presents examples of transitive clauses in which the object is in the partitive, but does not connect this with transitivity or with object marking (Wiedemann 1865: 37–38).

The interrelation between the form of the predicate and the object is more explicitly outlined in the works of Koljadenkov (Koljadenkov 1954, 1959;

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GMdJa 1962) that promoted the syntactic research of the Mordvinic languages at a linguistically relatively early stage in a seminal way. The positions taken by Koljadenkov are repeated and slightly modified in later Erzya grammars written by native speakers published in Russia (the Soviet Union). The major statements will be presented in list form in order to illustrate the generalisations concerning the morphosyntactic pattern of the Erzya transitive clause.

- – If the object is indefinite, it is in the nominative and the verb is inflected in the subject conjugation (Koljadenkov 1954: 133, 1959: 202).
- – If the object is definite, includes a possessive suffix or is a pronoun (with the exception of *mez'e* and *mezt'*) or a person name, it is in the genitive and the verb either in the object or subject conjugation. (Koljadenkov 1954: 133, 1959: 202)
- – Object conjugation forms indicate the perfective aspect of the verb (Koljadenkov 1954: 193, ÈK 2000: 173).

These generalisations were modified and enhanced in the Erzya grammar published in 1962 (GMdJa 1962) edited by Koljadenkov and, as a rule, followed the path of Koljadenkov's two earlier works.

- – The nominative object may be definite, if it is a complement of an infinite verb (GMdJa 1962: 108).
- – The partitive (ablative) occurs as the case of the object of verbs denoting the topic of speech (not in Moksha) (GMdJa 1962: 122).

The positions taken by Koljadenkov were adopted in research on the Mordvinic languages. The mutual liaison between the form of verb and object was repeated in comments on Mordvinic syntax, and definiteness was considered the prior property of the object and decisive for the entire transitive clause. Matjuškin (1973: 85), for instance, states that "It is well known that the decisive factor in the choice of subject or object conjugation is the definiteness or indefiniteness of the complement [object]. If the object is definite, the verb is conjugated in the object conjugation, whereas an

indefinite object occurs with a verb in the subject conjugation." However, it is frequent in both dialectal and literary language for this rule not to hold.

In the latest extensive grammar of Mordvinic published in Russian, three parameters are considered decisive for the case of object, namely the verb, the transitivity of the verb and the definiteness of the object (GMdJa 1980: 317). According to this volume, the definiteness of the object is manifested in the following ways. It may be:

- – an indefinite genitive form of proper nouns that as such are definite
- – a definite declination genitive form of common nouns
- – a common noun that displays a possessive suffix
- – a genitive form of pronouns
- – a comitative [!] form of common nouns

More generally speaking, the guidelines given for object marking in Mordvinic are looser in the grammar published in 1980 than in the earlier grammars. The authors claim that the object occurs either in the indefinite nominative, genitive (only proper nouns) or ablative (partitive), if it is indefinite, or is definite genitive or a possessive form, if the object is definite (GMJa 1980: 322). In the latest co-authored Erzya grammar (ÈK 2000: 84) the authors first refer to the partitive (ablative) as the case of a partial object used as the topic of discussion, or to put it more precisely, in connection with certain speech-act verbs. The statement in Erzya grammar is independent of the discussion of some earlier authors on the partiality of the Mordvin object (Itkonen 1972: 170–171).

Recently, Bartens has discussed different object marking strategies in the Mordvinic languages and proposed the following rules that affect the case of object and the transitive clause (Bartens 1999: 91–94, 175):

- – The case of an indefinite total object is nominative.
- – The case of a definite total object is genitive-accusative which triggers the object conjugation. Cognitive-perceptive verbs that are aspectually imperfective may occur in this context and are an exception to the rule.

– The imperfective aspect is marked, if the object is in the genitive-accusative, but the verb occurs in the subject conjugation.
– Certain verbs such as *jarsams* 'eat' and *s'imems* 'drink' differentiate between total and partial object.
– The indefinite genitive (-accusative) is, exceptionally, the case of object only.

Conclusively, the transitive clause in Mordvinic is basically reported to follow certain rules that determine the possible combinations between the relevant parameters (cf. table 1 and figure 2 above). However, the authors of these grammatical descriptions are also keenly aware of possible deviations and the prerequisites for generalisations concerning the structure of the transitive clause. The vast majority of empirical data actually supports what is written in the grammatical descriptions. However, there are also counterexamples that scrutinise the symmetry of indefinite object and subject conjugation verb vs. definite object and object conjugation verb. This suggests that actually the variation in the Erzya transitive clause partly reflects different degrees of transitivity rather than a bipolar system. I shall next proceed by presenting empirical data that illustrate the basic rules.

Structural diversity in the light of empirical data

The first examples illustrate the variation in the Erzya transitive clause based on the case of object. Examples (3–4) correspond to example (1) above in that they are prototypes of low transitivity and have a nominative object, while examples (5–9) correspond to example (2) above. In these cases the object is in the genitive-accusative and the definite form increases the transitivity of the clause. Examples (10–14) demonstrate those possibilities that occur if the predicate is an infinite and, finally, examples (15–16) are deviations from the main rules that combine the characteristics of high and low transitivity in Erzya.

(3)   *baba*   *a*   *baba*   *i*   *ton'ent'*   **kalt**   **tuin'**
        i   **rives'** **tuin'** (MSFOu 84: 274)
        wife   oh   wife   and   you-DAT   fish-PL   bring-
IMPF-1SG   and   fox   bring-IMPF-1SG
        '*Dear wife, I brought fish and a fox.'

(4) *jakas'* *jakas'*, **koz'äjka**   **äz'**   **mujä** (MSFOu 84: 236)
    go-IMPF.3SG   go-IMPF.3SG   wife   NEG-IMPF.3SG   find
    '*He went on and on but did not find a wife.'

The number of the object does not play any role in case marking or definiteness, as the coordinated singular (*rives'*) and plural (*kalt*) objects demonstrate in example (3). In example (4) the nominative object is a complement of a negative predicate (cf. examples (6–7) below). In both sentences the verb is in the subject conjugation, although one might assume that transitivity and the presence of the object complement would trigger object conjugation. However, this is not the true which shows that ultimately verb inflection and the choice of conjugation type do not basically affect the transitivity of these clauses at all. Consequently, in these cases the transitivity of the clause is only based on the semantics of the verb and manifested in its object complement.

(5)   *tago*   *son*   *ves'e*   **a-mazigatn'en'**   **čavinz'e**
(MSFOu 84: 216)
        again   (s)he   all   NEG-beautiful-PL-DEF-GEN(-ACC)   hit-IMPF-
3SG/3SG
    'Again (s)he killed all the devils.'

(6) *a*   **skalcint'**   **äst'**   *pot'a* (MSFOu 84: 239)
    but   cow-GEN(-ACC).DEF   NEG-IMPF.3PL   milk
    'But they did not milk the cow.'

(7) *kudazoros'*   *vasn'a* **ez'iz'e kemt'** **robotn'ikent'** (MSFOu 84: 342)
    host-DEF   first   NEG-3SG/3SG   believe   worker-
GEN(-ACC).DEF
    'at first the master didn't believe the workman.'

(8)   **mijik** sirä   **skalint'** (MSFOu 84: 245)
   sell-IMP   old   cow-GEN(-ACC).DEF
   'Sell the old cow!'

(9) konata   ikel'e pešt'asi   pargondo,   **s'en'** ikel'e **makssa**
              mird'en'en' (MSFOu 84: 258)
   which   before fill-3SG/3SG   basket-3SG   it-GEN before give-
1SG/3SG   man-DAT
   'The one who will first fill her basket will first be married off.'

In examples (5–9) the object is in the genitive-accusative which, as a rule, indicates higher transitivity and co-occurs with a verb that displays object conjugation. Furthermore, the object form is definite genitive-accusative as is *a-mazigatn'en'* in example (5), *skalcint'* in example (6) and *skalint'* in example (8). In examples (5) and (7–9) the predicate is inflected in the object conjugation: *čavinz'e* in example (5), *mijik* in example (7), the past tense negative verb *ez'iz'e* in example (8) and *makssa* in example (9). In example (6), however, the negative predicate *äst'* displays the subject conjugation. In principle, it is claimed that negativity decreases the transitivity of the clause (Kittilä 2002b: 121–123), and all Finnic languages for instance, systematically replace the genitive-accusative object with a partitive object in negative clauses. In Erzya, however, the negative verb shares several inflectional categories with other verbs and displays object conjugation forms as well (Bartens 1999: 143–144). Thus, negativity does not automatically eliminate the object conjugation nor the definite genitive-accusative form of the object as example (7) demonstrates. In example (9) the object *s'en'* is a pronoun that unlike other nominal constituents never displays definite suffixes. The deictic reference of pronouns is always concrete and there is no functional need to the use a definite suffix in parallel clause constructions.

In principle, an infinitive predicate is semantically less transitive than a predicate that is inflected in the object conjugation, because infinitive forms do not determine the aspect of the process. In other words, infinitive verbs do not express a finished action and a perfective aspect, whether they are transitive and demand a complement or not.

(10) *Buti   t'e   fasol'es'   n'evt'ems   kin'en'gak* (GMdJa 1962: 108)

   if this bean-DEF   show-INF   somebody-DAT-ENCL
   'Suppose one should show this bean to somebody' [inf + def]

(11)   *karmas'   sr'ipkando   lac'eme* (MSFOu 84: 259)
   begin-IMPF.3SG   violin   play-INF
   'She began to play her violin.' [poss (cf. example (5)]

(12) *koda   sovast'   fed'an'   karmast'   čauma* (MSFOu 84: 226)

   as   enter-IMPF.3PL Fedya-GEN begin-IMPF.3PL hit-INF
   'When they entered, they began to hit Fedya.' [proper noun]

(13) *čovdava   st'irs'   tus'   burl'aga   babat'i   pr'akan' salama* (MSFOu 84: 232)

       dawn   girl-DEF   leave-IMPF.3SG   Burlyaga aunt-DATpie-GEN   stole-INF
       'At dawn the girl left for aunt Burlyaga's to steal a pie.'

(14) *kadik   i   sin'   piks   ponit'   skalint'   ker'čams* (MSFOu 84: 245)

       IMP   and   they   rope   twist-3PL cow-GEN(-ACC).DEF tie-INF
       'Let them twist the rope to tie up the cow, too.'

In example (10) the object *fasol'es'* is in the nominative but has a definite suffix and is preceded by the demonstrative pronoun *t'e*. In example (11) the object *sr'ipkando* has a possessive suffix that, on the one hand, eliminates the difference between the nominative and genitive-accusative but, on the other, is compatible with the use of pronouns and semantically embeds definiteness and higher transitivity. In example (12) the object *fed'an'* is a proper noun which eliminates the possibility of a definite case form and, basically, can be compared to the use of pronouns and their semantic properties. Finally, in example (13) the object *pr'akan'* is in the genitive-accusative, but indefinite. The structural diversity of the Erzya transitive clause is illustratively seen in the variation of the case of object that is subordinated to an infinitive verb. Interestingly, examples (10) and

(13) demonstrate two different ways of affecting the degree of transitivity. In the previous one the case of the object is the nominative but the noun displays a definite form, whereas in the latter the object is in the genitive-accusative, but indefinite. In example (14) the object *skalint'* displays the definite genitive-accusative which suggests that, actually, the definiteness of the object does not depend so much on the verb as the thematic structure.

In comparison to example (14), a similar deviation from the rule may take place the other way round as example (15) well demonstrates. The verb *s'ovniz'e* is inflected in the object conjugation which would basically imply a definite genitive-accusative form of the object. However, this is not the case, because the object *ver'giz'en'* is indefinite.

(15)   *rives'*   **s'ovniz'e**   *ver'giz'en'* (MSFOu 84: 279)
        fox   curse-IMPF-3SG/3SG wolf-GEN
        'The fox cursed the wolf.'

As a matter of fact, Koljadenkov, for instance, is keenly aware of these kinds of deviations. His observations concern the choice of conjugation and the eventual variation between the subject and the object conjugation as the two alternatives in example (16) show (Koljadenkov 1954: 193).

(16)   **ved'ent'**   **kandin'**   ~   **ved'ent'**
            kandija (Koljadenkov 1954: 193)
        water-GEN(-ACC).DEF   carry-IMPF-1SG   water-GEN(-
ACC).DEF   carry-IMPF-1SG/3SG
        'I was bringing the water'   ~   'I brought the water'

Ultimately, however, those examples that do not follow the mainstream outlined above are exceptions to the rule. They are not as frequent as those that follow the basic morphosyntactic patterns. Furthermore, the less frequent morphosyntactic patterns are not repeated as regularly, but rather simply diverge from the main patterns.

Conclusions

Summing up the diversity of the Erzya transitive clause, several more aspects should be taken into consideration. Most notably, the impact of the non-canonical object marking cases such as the partitive (ablative) and the use of the inessive in some dialects increases the number of possible combinations between the morphosyntactic core categories. Figure 3 illustrates the role of the core properties of the verb and the object, which influence the degree of transitivity.
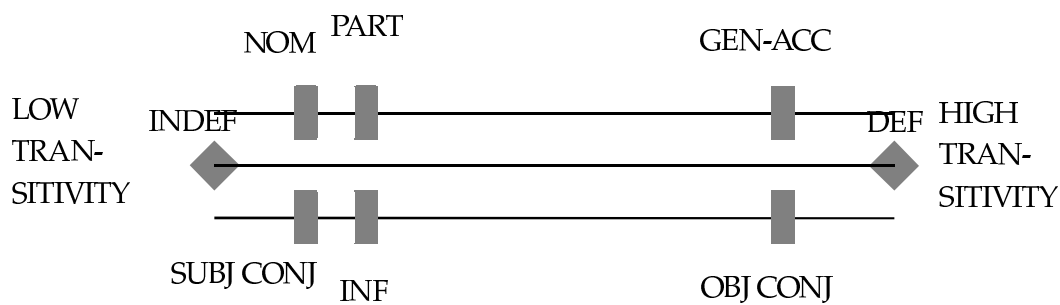

Figure 3. The core parameters of the Erzya transitive clause and their influence on the degree of the transitivity of the clause.

Definiteness is strictly a dichotomic property, because the object is either definite or indefinite, although there are many possibilities to choose the case or verb form. In the light of applied data the way in which high transitivity is manifested is more uniform than the variation between various constructions that characteristically display lower transitivity. It must also be noted that verb inflection is not as decisive as the inflection of the object, because very frequently subject conjugation forms are used in a transitive clause, although they basically correspond to the forms of an intransitive clause.

Erzya demonstrates a special multi-level system of transitivity that is based on a high number of possibilities for combining properties of the object with properties of the verb. The relationship between the verb and its obligatory complement is exclusively bilateral and other nominal constituents such as the subject (agent) do not have much bearing on the

structure of the Erzya transitive clause. However, despite the obvious interdependence between verb and object, there is a relatively large amount of clause and construction-specific variation. Ultimately, it demonstrates the possibilities of a dynamic system between two extremities of high and low transitivity compared to a stable pattern and a network of rules that decide on the form of the verb and object.

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