Verbal prefixes in Susu and lexical features of verbal stems

Susu, like other Mande languages, has a number of verbal prefixes that are locative nouns by origin (cp., for instance, a publication on the origin of the correspondent Bambara prefixes [Bailleul 1986]). Three verbal prefixes in Susu have a high degree of productivity: rá-, má- and í-.

Locative etymology of these prefixes seems to be clear, but many prefixed verbs usually synchronically have no locative semantics. Moreover, their meaning usually seems idiosyncratic and not deriving from the initial meaning of the stem and meaning of the prefix. Meanings of the verbal prefixes are described now either as very general labels (cp. “modalité intentionnelle” for rá-, “modalité itérative” for má- and “valeur d’intensité” for í- in [Houis 1963:75;78]) or as lists of very different possible semantic correspondences between underived and prefixed verbs. See these lists below.

rá- has the following main meanings: causative: bóxún ‘vomit’ > rá bóxún make smb. vomit’; benefactive: bálàn ‘close’ > rá bálàn ‘close for smb. / on smb.’s ask’; attenuative: dìín ‘pound’ > rá dìín ‘push’, fí ‘give’ > rá fí ‘propose’; the meaning of a more definite action: dòx̀ ‘put’ > rá dòx̀ ‘put in a very definite place’.


Although the resulting meaning of a prefixed verb in many cases is evidently idiomatic to some extent, the choice of a meaning of these lists is not accidental for these prefixes and is defined by the lexical meaning and lexical features of the underived verbal stems. For instance, the causative meaning of the ‘causative’ prefix rá- is restricted by intransitive verbs and, on the other hand, triggered by them.

In my talk I am going to discuss the lexical classes of the verbs that are relevant for the semantics of the prefixation and show how these classes predict the semantics of a prefix combined with a specific verb.

References