

TENSE (MIS)MATCHES BETWEEN VERBS AND OBLIQUES IN MALAGASY*

MATT PEARSON
REED COLLEGE
pearsonm@reed.edu

In Malagasy, spatial deictic adverbials, certain prepositions, and other oblique elements may carry the prefix *t-*. This prefix is generally treated as a past tense marker, since oblique predicates take *t-* when denoting past states, while oblique dependents of verbs generally require *t-* when the verb is marked for past tense, as a sort of ‘tense agreement’. Malagasy grammarians tend to assume that tense agreement between verbs and obliques is mandatory. However, I present evidence in this paper showing that while *t*-marked obliques never occur with non-past tense verbs, non-*t*-marked obliques may occur with past tense verbs (‘tense mismatching’). When the oblique denotes the goal of a motion event, mismatching generally indicates that the event took place in the recent past, though in some cases mismatching appears to be linked to non-specificity or discourse backgrounding. When the oblique denotes an instrument, location, source, etc., rather than a goal, tense mismatching triggers a past habitual reading of the clause. Although this paper is largely descriptive, I propose a tentative syntactic analysis of the recent past reading, and some speculative generalizations concerning the different interpretations of the tense mismatching construction.

In this paper I discuss the distribution of the prefix *t-* in Malagasy. This prefix is generally analyzed as a tense or tense agreement marker, which attaches to prepositions and certain adverbials when they occur in a past tense clause, as in (1b) (here and throughout, *t-* is glossed simply ‘T’ in the examples). However, careful investigation shows that *t-* has a more complex distribution than is usually assumed, and in certain cases behaves less like a marker of tense, and more like a marker of aspect, mood, or definiteness. This paper is largely descriptive in focus, though a provisional analysis, covering a portion of the data, is presented in section 4.^{1,2}

- (1) a. Mamaky ny boky any an-tokotany ny mpianatra
AT.read Det book there Obl-garden Det student
‘The student is reading the book in the garden’
b. Namaky ny boky **t**-any an-tokotany ny mpianatra
Pst.AT.read Det book T-there Obl-garden Det student

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¹ This paper is meant to supersede my earlier work on this topic, published as Pearson (2000, 2001), which was based on work with a single speaker in Los Angeles. Subsequent fieldwork with multiple speakers in Madagascar (Antananarivo and Nosy Be) showed that the first speaker’s judgements were rather idiosyncratic, necessitating a complete reassessment of the phenomenon.

² The following abbreviations are used in the examples: 1s = first person singular, 1ex = first person exclusive, 3 = third person (singular/plural) pronoun, AT = actor-topic voice, CT = circumstantial-topic voice, Det = determiner, Foc = focus marker, Irr = irrealis, Obl = oblique case prefix, Pst = past, Top = topic marker, TT = theme-topic voice.

‘The student is reading the book in the garden’

The distribution of the *t-* prefix is discussed in sections 2-7. In section 1 I briefly review the class of elements (here called *obliques*) to which the *t-* prefix attaches.

1. OBLIQUES

The prefix *t-* attaches to a number of different elements, most of them associated with spatio-temporal location. For example, the spatial deictic adverbials, equivalent to ‘here’ and ‘there’ in English, all take *t-*. There are fourteen such elements, of which the ten most common are listed in Table 1. As this table shows, spatial deictics contrast along the dimensions of visibility and proximity to speaker.³ The *t-* prefix is also found on the *wh*-operator ‘where’, as well as certain prepositions and adverbials, such as those listed in Table 2. For convenience, phrases headed by elements in Tables 1 and 2 will be referred to as *obliques*.⁴ Obliques taking *t-* will be called *t-marked*; non-*t*-marked obliques will be referred to as *bare*.

Table 1. Spatial deictic adverbials

| <i>bare</i> | | <i>t-marked</i> | | |
|----------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <i>visible</i> | <i>invisible</i> | <i>visible</i> | <i>invisible</i> | |
| ety | aty | tety | taty | ‘here’ (in contact with speaker) |
| eto | ato | teto | tato | ‘here’ (close to speaker) |
| eo | ao | teo | tao | ‘here’ (within domain of speaker) |
| eny | any | teny | tany | ‘there’ (away from speaker) |
| ery | ary | terỳ | tarỳ | ‘there’ (far from speaker) |

Table 2. Other oblique elements

| <i>bare</i> | <i>t-marked</i> | |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| aiza | taiza | ‘where?’ |
| aloha | taloha | ‘before, earlier’ |
| aoriana | taoriana | ‘after, later’ |
| amin’ | tamin’ | ‘to, with, at, from’ |

Concerning the elements in Tables 1 and 2, note first of all that *amin’* is a sort of all-purpose preposition in Malagasy. As illustrated in (2), obliques headed by *amin’* express a variety of semantic roles, including instrument, temporal location, goal, and manner.

³ For example, ‘The book is here/there’ would be translated using *ety* if the book were in the speaker’s hand, *eto* if the book were on the table next to the speaker, and *any* if the book were far away and out of sight. See Anderson and Keenan (1985) for some discussion of the semantics of spatial deixis in Malagasy (cf. also Erwin 1994 on the related series of demonstrative pronouns/determiners).

⁴ *Oblique* is used here as a term of art. There are other semantically similar elements in Malagasy which one might pre-theoretically call oblique phrases, but which are never prefixed with *t-* (e.g., phrases headed by *ho an-* ‘for’, which express the benefactee relation). In this paper, only phrases which take *t*-marking are referred to as obliques.

- (2) a. Manoratra taratasy **amin'** ny penina ny mpianatra [instrument]
 AT.write letter with Det pen Det student
 'The student is writing a letter with a/the pen'
- b. Mamelatra ny tsihy **amin'** ny gorodona i Ketaka [goal]
 AT.spread Det mat on Det floor Det Ketaka
 'Ketaka is spreading the mats on the floor'
- c. Miteny **amim**-panetran-tena foana izy [manner]
 AT.speak with-modesty always 3
 'S/he always speaks modestly'

Secondly, note that obliques expressing spatial location must be headed by one of the deictic elements in Table 1. A deictic can occur by itself (5a), or it may select a noun phrase prefixed with the oblique marker *an-* (3b), or a PP headed by a preposition such as *amin'* or *anaty* (3c,d):⁵

- (3) a. **Ety** ny boky
 here Det book
 'The book is here'
- b. Halefan' ny reniny **any** *am-pianarana* ny ankizy
 Irr.TT.send Det mother.3 there Obl-school Det children
 'The children will be sent to school by their mother'
- c. Hihaona **any** *amin'* ny *tetezana* izahay
 Irr.AT.meet there at Det bridge lex
 'We will meet at the bridge'
- d. Halatsany **any** *anaty lavabato* ny vahitady
 Irr.TT.lower.3 there inside cave Det vine.rop
 'The will lower the vine rope into the cave'

The prefix *t-* attaches to the rightmost element in the oblique, as shown below. In (4a) *t-* attaches directly to *amin'*; while in (4b) *amin'* is preceded by the deictic adverbial *ao*, and so *t-* attaches to *ao*, yielding *tao amin'*:

- (4) a. **Tamin'** ny alarobia dia niantsena izahay
 T-on Det Wednesday Top Pst.AT.go.to.market lex
 'On Wednesday we went to market'
- b. **Tao** amin' ny tsena no nahitany ilay zazalahy
 T-there in Det market Foc Pst.CT.see.3 that boy
 'It was in the market where she saw the boy'

2. T-MARKING AND TENSE MATCHING

I now turn to the distribution of t-marking on obliques. Consider first the examples in (5), where the oblique functions as the predicate of a clause (notice that there is no overt copula in these

⁵ See Pearson (2000, 2001) for evidence that the spatial deictic forms a constituent with the following PP.

sentences). When the oblique is bare, the sentence gets a present tense interpretation, as in (5a), while the *t*-marked oblique in (5b) expresses a past state of affairs. This suggests that *t*- is a past tense morpheme.

- (5) a. **Any** anatin' ny ala ny gidro
 there inside Det forest Det lemur
 'The lemur is in the forest'
- b. **Tany** anatin' ny ala ny gidro
 T-there inside Det forest Det lemur
 'The lemur was in the forest'

When the oblique is contained within a larger predicate headed by a verb, the distribution of *t*-marking depends on the tense of the verb. There are three verbal tense forms in Malagasy, the *non-past*, which is unmarked; the *past* (Pst), which is marked by the prefix *n(o)*-; and the *irrealis* (Irr) or future, marked by the prefix *h(o)*-. In the actor-topic (AT) ('active') voice, *n*- and *h*- replace the voice prefix *m*-; while in the theme-topic (TT) ('passive') voice and the circumstantial-topic (CT) voice, *n*- and *h*- are used with vowel-initial stems and *no*- and *ho*- with consonant-initial stems. This is illustrated in Table 3:

Table 3. Tense and voice inflection for *aN-vono* 'kill'

| | AT | TT | CT |
|-----------------|---------------|------------------|------------------|
| <i>non-past</i> | mamono | vonoina | amonoana |
| <i>past</i> | namono | novonoina | namonoana |
| <i>irrealis</i> | hamono | hovonoina | hamonoana |

Among Malagasy grammarians, the conventional wisdom seems to be that the oblique must agree with the verb in tense: if the verb is in the past tense, then the oblique must be *t*-marked, and if the verb is in a non-past tense (either present or irrealis), the oblique must be bare (cf. the examples in (1) above). However, detailed investigation reveals that this tense matching restriction does not hold uniformly. On the one hand, the oblique can never be *t*-marked when the verb is in the present tense or irrealis. This is shown below in (6a) versus (6b), as well as (7a) versus (7b). On the other hand, when the verb is in the past tense, the rule is more complicated: In certain situations, only the *t*-marked form of the oblique is compatible with a past tense verb, as in (6c,d). However, in other cases the oblique can appear *either* in the *t*-marked form *or* in the bare form. This is illustrated by (7c) and (7d), both of which are grammatical.⁶

- (6) a. Mandidy ny mofo **amin'** ny antsy i Naivo
 AT.cut Det bread with Det knife Det Naivo
 'Naivo is cutting the bread with the knife'

⁶ Interestingly, the acceptability of (7d) comes as a great surprise to some native speakers, who were taught in school that the oblique must always agree in tense with the verb. Yet all the speakers I consulted—including those who had learned the tense matching rule—agreed without hesitation that sentences like (7d) are fully grammatical.

- b. *Mandidy ny mofo **tamin'** ny antsy i Naivo
 AT.cut Det bread T-with Det knife Det Naivo
 'Naivo is cutting bread with the knife'
- c. Nandidy ny mofo **tamin'** ny antsy i Naivo
 Pst.AT.cut Det bread T-with Det knife Det Naivo
 'Naivo cut the bread with the knife'
- d. *Nandidy ny mofo **amin'** ny antsy i Naivo
 Pst.AT.cut Det bread with Det knife Det Naivo
 'Naivo cut the bread with the knife'
- (7) a. Miditra **ao** an-trano ilay vehivavy
 AT.enter there Obl-house that woman
 'That woman is going into the house'
- b. *Miditra **tao** an-trano ilay vehivavy
 AT.enter T-there Obl-house that woman
 'That woman is going into the house'
- c. Niditra **tao** an-trano ilay vehivavy
 Pst.AT.enter T-there Obl-house that woman
 'That woman went into the house'
- d. Niditra **ao** an-trano ilay vehivavy
 Pst.AT.enter there Obl-house that woman
 'That woman has gone into the house'

The possibilities are schematized in (8): Present tense and irrealis verbs require bare obliques (8a), while past tense verbs can take either a *t*-marked oblique or a bare oblique (8b,c), depending on the circumstances. I will refer to (8b) as the *tense matching* pattern, and (8c) as the *tense mismatching* pattern.

- (8) a. **PRES/IRR-Verb ... Ø-Oblique** [*tense matching*]
 b. **PAST-Verb ... T-Oblique** [*tense matching*]
 c. **PAST-Verb ... Ø-Oblique** [*tense mismatching*]

For the remainder of this paper, I will focus on the distribution of tense matching and tense mismatching in past tense sentences ((8b) versus (8c)). For the most part, speakers agree that the presence or absence of *t*- makes a difference to the interpretation, but the exact nature of the difference seems to vary, depending largely on the semantic role of the oblique. In sections 3 and 4 I discuss the semantic contrast most frequently reported by my speakers, and outline a tentative analysis which accounts for this contrast. Then in sections 5-7 I present some other cases of mismatching which do not seem to fit the most frequent pattern. How to integrate these patterns into a unified analysis of the function of the *t*- prefix remains a challenge for future research.

3. RECENT PAST VERSUS REMOTE PAST

First, consider again the examples in (7c,d), repeated below as (9): Here, the oblique occurs with a verb of motion, and expresses the goal or endpoint of the movement. In such cases, the form of the oblique depends on something like the ‘present relevance’ of the goal: In (9b), with a bare oblique, it is understood that the woman is still in the house at the moment of speaking; while in (9a), with a t-marked oblique, there is no such implication: more likely she has already left the house. Hence, (9b) would be an appropriate answer to the question ‘Where is the woman now?’, whereas (9a) would not. (This difference is reflected in an approximate way by the English glosses, simple past ‘went’ versus present perfective ‘has gone’.)

- (9) a. Niditra **tao** an-trano ilay vehivavy
 Pst.AT.enter T-there Obl-house that woman
 ‘That woman went into the house’
 b. Niditra **ao** an-trano ilay vehivavy
 Pst.AT.enter there Obl-house that woman
 ‘That woman has gone into the house’

A similar pair of examples is given in (10): (10b) would be used if the lemur is currently at the top of the tree, *or* is on his way there as we speak. On the other hand, (10a) would be used if the event is ‘more in the past’, to quote one speaker. With (10a) there is no implication that the lemur is still in the tree when the sentence is uttered.

- (10) a. Niakatra **teny** amin’ ny tompon’ ilay hazo ilay gidro
 Pst.AT.ascend T-there at Det top that tree that lemur
 ‘That lemur went to the top of that tree’
 b. Niakatra **eny** amin’ ny tompon’ ilay hazo ilay gidro
 Pst.AT.ascend there at Det top that tree that lemur
 ‘That lemur { has gone / is going } to the top of that tree’

Finally, consider the examples in (11), containing a transitive motion verb. Here, (11a) would be used if the speaker assumes that the children are no longer at school at the time when the sentence is uttered, while (11b) would be used if the speaker assumes that the children are at school at that moment, or are on their way.

- (11) a. Nalefako **tany** am-pianarana ny ankizy
 Pst.TT.send.1s T-there Obl-school Det children
 ‘The woman sent the children to school’
 b. Nalefako **any** am-pianarana ny ankizy
 Pst.TT.send.1s there Obl-school Det children
 ‘The woman has sent the children to school’

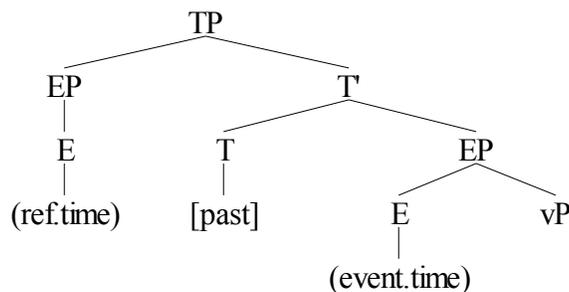
In general, then, when the verb is past tense and the oblique denotes a goal, the oblique will be in its bare form if the event was initiated in the recent past, such that the theme is presumably

still at the goal, or has not yet reached it. Otherwise, the oblique will be t-marked. A preliminary account of this contrast is provided in the next section.

4. TOWARDS AN ACCOUNT OF THE RECENT PAST READING

This account builds on two main assumptions. First, following Zagona (1990) and Stowell (1995, 1996), I assume that the tense head T is a two-place predicate which orders the time of the event denoted by the clause with respect to some reference time (in main clauses, the utterance time). For instance, when T has the feature PAST, it orders the event time after the reference time. The event time is encoded by a phrase which Stowell calls *zeit phrase*, but which I will call *event phrase* (EP), following Travis (1994). EP contains the VP/vP and binds the verb's temporal argument, and is in turn selected as the complement of T. A second (null) EP, binding the reference time, merges in SpecTP. This is schematized in (12):

(12)

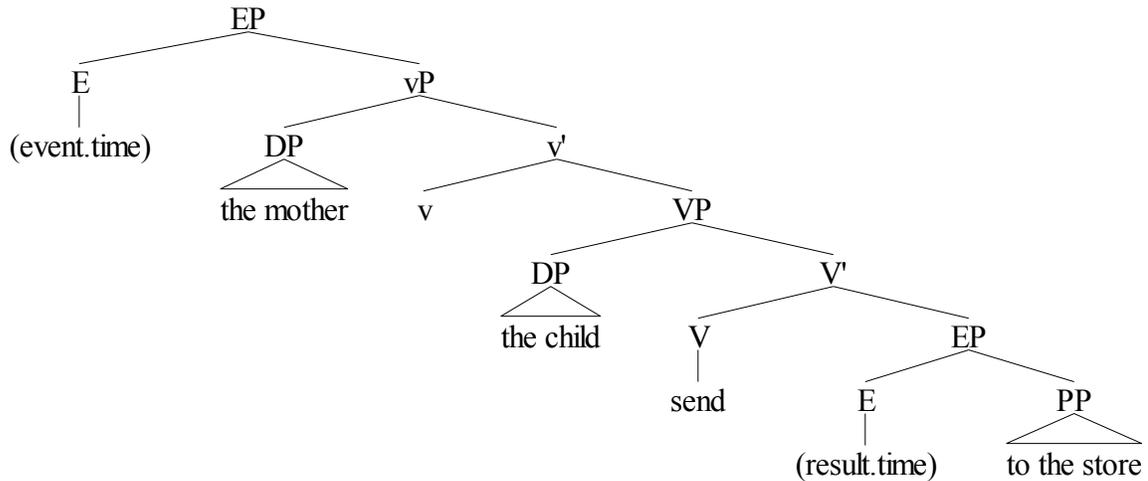


Secondly, I assume that goal obliques are small clauses generated in the complement of V. Goal small clauses function as delimiters of telic predicates, much as resultative small clauses do: Just as the adjective phrases in (13a,b) express the state of the patient as a result of the change-of-state event denoted by the verb, so the PPs in (13c,d) express the location of the theme as a result of a change-of-location event:

- (13) a. The tire went [_{AP} PRO *flat*]
 b. He pounded the metal [_{AP} PRO *flat*]
 c. The child went [_{PP} PRO *to the store*]
 d. The mother sent the child [_{PP} PRO *to the store*]

Suppose that, in its capacity as a delimiter, a goal small clause introduces its own temporal argument (call it the *result time*), bound within its own EP which is in turn selected as the complement of the verb, as in (14):

(14)



Telic predicates, denoting an activity which terminates in a change of state or location, thus contain two temporal arguments, event time and result time. These arguments are ordered with respect to each other, the transition from one to the other marking the change event. In the case at hand, the event time denotes the time during which the theme is in motion, while the result time denotes the time during which the theme is at the endpoint location. If we reconsider examples like (5), (7), (9), and (10) in terms of this analysis, we reach the following generalization: T-marking occurs when the oblique's temporal argument—that is, the result time—is ordered after the reference time (i.e., the theme is no longer at the location in question), while the oblique remains unmarked otherwise (i.e., when the theme is currently at the location, or has not yet arrived at the location).

Suppose that the *t*-prefix (and its null counterpart found on bare obliques) are generated in the E head which selects the oblique. In the spirit of Stowell's treatment of English tense morphology, one might argue that the *t*-prefix is a *past polarity item*, licensed in the scope of the PAST tense predicate, while its covert counterpart is an anti-polarity item which must be interpreted outside the scope of PAST. In the case of, say, (11a), both the verb and the oblique are within the scope of PAST, such that the event time and the result time both properly precede the utterance time—that is, the motion event and its result are both construed as over: the theme reached the goal and is now no longer there. (11b), on the other hand, might be treated similarly to Stowell's treatment of the 'double access' reading for present-under-past sentences such as *John said that Bill is sick* (cf. Enç 1987): Here the oblique is unmarked, and so must appear outside the scope of PAST. Perhaps an unpronounced copy of the lower EP, which binds the result time, merges in a position outside TP to satisfy this requirement. Consequently, the result time is interpreted as following the event time, but *not* properly preceding the utterance time. In other words, the motion event (or at least the beginning point of the motion event) is over, but the resulting state is not: the theme has reached the goal and is still there, or is currently on the way to the goal. This gives us the 'recent past' construal associated with tense mismatching.

This analysis covers most of the data I collected. However, a few cases seem to require a different treatment. I consider these in sections 5-7.

5. HABITUAL ASPECT

On the basis of contrasts like those between (6) and (7) above, I reported in Pearson (2000, 2001) that tense mismatching in a past tense clause is allowed only if the verb denotes a motion event and the oblique the goal of that motion event. However, further research has revealed that tense mismatching is also possible, at least for some speakers, when the oblique denotes an instrument, location, or source. Here, however, mismatching does not mark the event as being in the recent past, or having present relevance, but instead something more like habitual aspect.

Compare the sentences in (15), containing an oblique headed by *amin'*, which here denotes the instrument with which the action is carried out. (15a) gives a present tense sentence, while (15b,c) give sentences in the past tense, the former with tense matching and the latter with mismatching. While (15b) describes a particular event in the past, (15c) does not, but instead means that the speaker was in the habit of cutting wood with an axe:⁷

- (15) a. Mikapa hazo **amin'** ny famaky aho
 AT.chop wood with Det axe 1s
 'I { chop / am chopping } wood with a/the axe'
- b. Nikapa hazo **tamin'** ny famaky aho
 Pst.AT.chop wood T-with Det axe 1s
 'I chopped wood with a/the axe'
- c. Nikapa hazo **amin'** ny famaky aho
 Pst.AT.chop wood with Det axe 1s
 'I { would / was wont to } chop wood with a/the axe'

With non-goal-denoting obliques, the bare form seems to be used specifically when the speaker does not have a particular event or time-frame in mind. Consider the sentences in (16), where the oblique headed by *amin'* denotes a source: (16a) again gives a sentence in the present tense (with no t-marking on the oblique) and (16b) its counterpart in the past tense (with t-marking). The latter normally denotes a particular event. Notice that when an adverb like *foana* 'always' is added, which blocks the sentence from referring to a single event, the bare form of the oblique is possible, as shown in (16c). According to one of my speakers, (16c) sounds like a complaint about Naivo—that he would routinely borrow other people's pens because he couldn't be bothered to buy his own. Contrast (16c) with (16d), where the oblique is again in the t-marked form: With (16d) the speaker has a particular period of time in mind during which Naivo regularly borrowed pens. Hence, (16c) might be taken to denote a property of Naivo, while (16d) denotes a temporally bounded series of events.

⁷ In light of examples like (15c), it is likely that (6d) above is not ungrammatical so much as pragmatically deviant: It is hard to imagine somebody habitually cutting a particular loaf of bread.

- (16) a. Mindrana penina **amin'** ny namako i Naivo
 AT.borrow pen from Det friend.1s Det Naivo
 'Naivo is borrowing a pen from my friend'
- b. Nindrana penina **tamin'** ny namako i Naivo
 Pst.AT.borrow pen T-from Det friend.1s Det Naivo
 'Naivo borrowed a pen from my friend'
- c. Nindrana penina **amin'** ny namako foana i Naivo
 Pst.AT.borrow pen from Det friend.1s always Det Naivo
 'Naivo was always borrowing pens from my friend(s)'
- d. Nindrana penina **tamin'** ny namako foana i Naivo
 Pst.AT.borrow pen T-from Det friend.1s always Det Naivo
 'Naivo always borrowed pens from my friend(s)'

6. BACKGROUNDING AND FOCUS

When the oblique again denotes the goal of a motion event, speakers occasionally articulate the difference between tense matching and mismatching sentences in terms of something like specificity or focus. Consider the examples in (17): One speaker described the difference between (17a) and (17b) as having to do with how precise or deliberate the event is. (17a) would be used if the speaker were aiming for a particular basket, while (17b) might be used if the basket just happened to be there. Another speaker reported that sentences like (17a) focus on the goal, while sentences like (17b) focus on the action—perhaps in the sense of Erteschik-Shir and Rapoport's (1999) notion of *aspectual focus*.

- (17) a. Natsipiko **tao** anaty harona ny vato
 Pst.TT.throw.1s T-there inside basket Det stone
 'I threw the stone into a/the basket'
- b. Natsipiko **ao** anaty harona ny vato
 Pst.TT.throw.1s there inside basket Det stone
 'I threw the stone into a/the basket'

Or consider (18): One speaker reported that (18a) sounded more 'precise' than (18b), such that (18a) would be preferred if the speaker had a particular book in mind. On another occasion, she suggested that (18b) might appear as part of a list of actions, as in (19)—say, when recounting what a person did during the day.

- (18) a. Nametraka boky **teo** ambonin' ny latabatra aho
 Pst.AT.put book T-here on.top Det table 1s
 'I put { a book / books } on the table'
- b. Nametraka boky **eo** ambonin' ny latabatra aho
 Pst.AT.put book here on.top Det table 1s
 'I put { a book / books } on the table'

- (19) Nametraka boky **eo** ambonin' ny latabatra, namafa ny trano
 Pst.AT.put book here on.top Det table Pst.AT.sweep Det house
 aho, dia avy eo natory
 1s and.then come here Pst.AT.sleep
 'I put (the) books on the table, swept out the house, and then went to sleep'

Interestingly, this same speaker, when asked to translate the sentences in (18) into French, distinguished them through the choice of verb form, selecting the *passé composé* for (18a) (= (20a)) and the *imparfait* for (18b) (= (20b)):

- (20) a. Nametraka boky **teo** ambonin'ny latabatra aho
 'J'ai posé le livre sur la table'
 b. Nametraka boky **eo** ambonin'ny latabatra aho
 'Je posais le livre sur la table'

In narratives, the *imparfait* is commonly used to background an event while the *passé composé* foregrounds an event, so perhaps the choice of (18a) or (18b) is determined in part by the discourse function of the sentence. Whether (19) represents a backgrounded use, as this hypothesis predicts, is unclear to me. Impressionistically, the emphasis in (19) is on what kinds of things the speaker did, which certainly accords with the judgement that sentences with bare obliques focus on the action rather than on the goal.

Note that when the theme ('book') is made definite and the sentences in (18) are placed in the theme-topic form ('passivized'), as in (21), the emphasis-on-goal versus emphasis-on-action distinction seems to disappear, and the more familiar remote past versus recent past distinction emerges: (21b) would be used if the books were still on the table at the moment of speaking, and otherwise (21a) would be used. Unfortunately, I do not have enough data to determine whether the voice of the verb has a systematic effect on the interpretation of t-marking.

- (21) a. Napetrako **teo** ambonin' ny latabatra ny boky
 Pst.TT.put.1s T-here on.top Det table Det book
 'I put the book(s) on the table'
 b. Napetrako **eo** ambonin' ny latabatra ny boky
 Pst.TT.put.1s here on.top Det table Det book
 'I have put the book(s) on the table'

The distribution of t-marking in past tense sentences is summarized in Table 4: If the oblique denotes a goal, tense matching occurs when the theme is no longer at the location denoted by the goal, or when the clause is construed as 'specific' or focused on the goal (event is foregrounded?). Tense mismatching occurs when the theme is still at the location denoted by the goal, or the clause is 'non-specific' or focused on the action (event is backgrounded?). When the oblique denotes an instrument, location, or source, tense mismatching occurs when the predicate denotes a habitual activity.

Table 4. Interpretation of tense matching and mismatching patterns

| <i>function of oblique</i> | <i>marking pattern</i> | |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| | <i>tense matching</i> | <i>tense mismatching</i> |
| goal complement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ theme no longer at location denoted by goal ➤ event is ‘specific’ (foregrounded?) ➤ focus on goal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ theme still at location denoted by goal, or not yet reached it ➤ event is ‘non-specific’ (backgrounded?) ➤ focus on action |
| non-goal | ➤ past non-habitual | ➤ past habitual |

At this point I can offer no explanation for why we get the pattern in Table 4, except to point out that sentences with tense matching are consistently more Transitive (in the sense of Hopper and Thompson 1980) than those with mismatching. Whether this observation can form the basis for an analysis remains to be determined.

7. ONE ADDITIONAL CASE

I conclude my discussion with one final pair of examples which I find especially intriguing: In (22) a past tense predicate containing a goal oblique is embedded under *manandrana* ‘try’. In both sentences, it is understood that the driver failed to get the car in the garage, but according to three of my speakers the sentences differ with respect to the reason for the failure. In (22a), the fault lies with the car, while in (22b), the fault lies with the garage. For example, (22a) would be used if the car wouldn’t start, while (22b) would be used if the garage were too small for the car to fit in it.

- (22) a. Nanandrana nampiditra ny fiara **tao** anaty garazy ny mpamily
 Pst.AT.try Pst.AT.put.in Det car T-there inside garage Det driver
 ‘The driver tried [and failed] to put the car in the garage’
- b. Nanandrana nampiditra ny fiara **ao** anaty garazy ny mpamily
 Pst.AT.try Pst.AT.put.in Det car there inside garage Det driver
 ‘The driver tried [and failed] to put the car in the garage’

On the one hand, this seems at odds with pairs like (17) and (18), where the t-marked variant is used when emphasis is being placed on the goal. Yet from another perspective, (22) does seem consistent with earlier examples. According to one of my consultants, (22b) is preferred when what is at issue is some ‘permanent property’ of the location—that is, a property which held in the past and continues to hold now: If the car wouldn’t go in because the garage was too small, this state of affairs could be expected still to hold at the moment when the sentence is uttered. On the other hand, if the car wouldn’t go in because it wouldn’t start, it is conceivable that that state of affairs no longer holds. Hence, inasmuch as the condition of the garage is at issue in (22b), the goal could be said to have ‘present relevance’, much as it does in sentences discussed earlier, where the bare oblique is used when the theme is currently at the location denoted by the goal.

8. SUMMARY

In this paper I gave a descriptive overview of the distribution of the prefix *t-* in Malagasy. Traditionally, *t-* has been treated as a past tense (or tense agreement) marker on obliques, required when the oblique is the dependent of a verb in the past tense. However, I showed that *t-* is required with past tense verbs only in certain cases; in other cases the oblique is bare, yielding a ‘tense mismatching’ pattern. When the oblique denotes the goal of a motion event, tense mismatching generally signals that (the inception of) the motion event was in the recent past, such that theme is still at the goal at the moment when the sentence is uttered, or is on the way there. In other cases mismatching appears to signal that the event is backgrounded or ‘less specific’, and/or that the speaker is focusing on the action rather than the goal. When the oblique denotes an instrument, location, source, etc., rather than a goal, tense mismatching triggers a past habitual reading of the clause.

A complete analysis of the *t-* prefix, which unifies the different interpretations of tense (mis)-matching, has yet to be developed. However, I noted that sentences with tense mismatching are uniformly less Transitive (in the sense of Hopper and Thompson 1980) than those with tense matching. To account for the recent past reading, I proposed that *t-* is a PAST polarity item (cf. Stowell 1995, 1996), used when the temporal argument associated with the goal oblique (the *result time*) properly precedes the reference time—that is, when the endpoint (or terminal state of a telic motion event, whereby the theme occupies the location denoted by the goal) is in the past. Whether this approach can be extended to cover other functions of *t-* remains a question for further research.

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