Maa “Epenthetic” Final Consonants

In Maa (Maasai, Eastern Nilotic), some suffixes appear to trigger epenthesis of the coronal consonants *t, j [dʒ], n, r [ɾ]* and velar *k* at their left edge. This is seen in *aɪrɔwúá* ‘to be hot’ versus *aɪrɔwua**j**ú* ‘to become hot’, *adɔ́* ‘to be red’ versus *ado**r**ú* ‘to become red’, etc. Native speakers dis-prefer dictionary forms that represent these consonants as belonging to the morpheme before the suffix, for example rejecting *aɪrɔwúáj* or *aɪrowuá(j)* for ‘to be hot’. This paper, however, argues that the seemingly epenthetic consonants belong to the preceding morpheme and that the relevant process is consonant deletion.

In line with native speaker intuition, Tucker & Mpaayei (1955) discuss the emergent consonants as belonging to the beginning of certain suffixes. This results in a large number of consonant-initial allomorphs. For example, they present the ‘passive’ suffix as having variants *-i, -ni, -ri,* and *-ki*. But what native speaker intuitions and Tucker & Mpaayei’s analysis do not reflect is that the particular emergent consonant consistently depends on the *preceding* morpheme. After the dative suffix *-oki,* the emergent consonant is always /n/: *-ni* ‘passive’, *-na/-no* ‘middle, *-nʊ/-nu* ‘ventive’, *-nu* ‘inchoative’, *-ɲie* ‘instrumental applicative’ (if parsed in accord with Tucker & Mpaayei’s analysis). After the root *lo* ‘go.sg’, the emergent consonant before the relevant affixes is always /t/, seen in (1b-c). Similar facts can be shown for the other listed consonants above.

(1) a.	a-**ló**	b.	a-**lo-tu**	c.	a-**lo-tíé**
	INF-go		INF-go-VENTIVE		INF-go-INSTRUMENT
	‘to go’		‘to come’		‘to go with/by means of’

Recently available data from other Eastern Nilotic languages shows cognates with reflexes of the Maa emergent consonants in (near)-final morpheme position. For instance, cognate with Maa *lo* ‘go’, we find Ateso *à-tò-**lòt*** ‘cause to walk’ and *kò-**lòt**ò* ‘walk (imperfective)’ (Barasa 2017); Lopit has *ò-**lót*** ‘s/he walks/goes’, ***lot**on* ‘walking (noun)’, and *lo-**lot**-ije* ‘way of walking’ (Moodie 2019).

Both the Maa-internal and the comparative facts strongly argue that the appearing/disappearing consonants historically pertain to the preceding morpheme. Compounding this revised analysis, however, are the facts that (a) some morphemes never lose final coronal or /k/ consonants (e.g. *amán* ‘to surround’, *apét* ‘to plaster with mud’); and (b) certain suffixes never trigger consonant emergence. Suffixes that do not include *-a(k)/-o(k)* ‘perfect(ive), *-akɪ(n)/-oki(n)* ‘dative’, and *-a(r)/-o(r)* ‘itive’, among others. While most affixes in this group begin with *a/o*, we find the ‘middle (non-perfect) suffix *-a(r)/-o(r)* in the group that does trigger consonant emergence.

Altogether, suffixes that trigger appearance of the consonants appear to be older than those that don’t. That is, the process that deleted the consonants in word-final position developed after the triggering elements had become well established as suffixes. When followed by these suffixes, the consonants were impervious to deletion. The suffixes which do not trigger the consonants, and those morphemes which never drop their final consonants may have became part of the system later, whether via borrowing, grammaticalization, or new coinages/lexicalizations. Finally, the wordforms affected by deletion are sufficiently frequent such that native speakers have lexicalized them as cognitively basic.

References

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