

On transitivity, case frames and grammaticalisation in Estonian

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This paper examines the case frames of a set of Estonian verbs comparable to the ValPaL list (Haspelmath 2015), studies the morphological encoding of transitivity across various verb classes and meanings, and sets the results against the background of grammaticalisation theory. Traditionally, transitivity in a clause is defined as a phenomenon, where the verb takes, as a minimum, a volitionally acting Agent argument (A) and a more passive Patient/Undergoer (P) as their core arguments (e.g., Hopper and Thompson 1980, Hopper and Traugott 1993, Haspelmath 2011). We investigate the semantic verb types that occur in the transitive case frames, i.e. with arguments encoded like the *hitter* (A) and the *hittee* (P) in the case of the verb *hit*, without ranking them on a scale of affectedness (cf. Tamm 2012, Vaiss 2021). However, we connect the encoding of the P argument of a transitive verb to the degree of grammaticalisation (as described in Hopper and Traugott 1993) of transitivity with that particular semantic verb type. We consider fully grammaticalised transitivity marking to be expressed with the least morpho-syntactic material. In the case of subjects that would be no marking, i.e. nominative case, and in the case of objects that would be the kind of marking that indicates an entity in a perfective and/or telic clause that is fully affected by the activity expressed by the verb. In Estonian that would be morphological genitive (see Metslang et al. 2023: 607-628), as accusative case is not listed in the case inventory.

The Estonian dataset consists of 83 verbs (75 verb meanings) that corresponds to the VALPaL set, and showed that the A argument was unmarked in 96.4% of the cases. The remaining 3.6% of the A-like arguments of the verb surfaced in the oblique cases and occurred with the verbs of liking and in clauses expressing experiences. In regard to the P arguments, the results show that there were no verbs that would take only a genitive case marked P to mark the completely affected object of the transitive verb. The majority of the verbs encoded in the transitive case frame – 63.8% take the genitive marked P in the singular and an obligatory adposition/adjunct, as illustrated in Example (1a). P marked with genitive case on its own

would not signal an identifiable referent that is fully affected by the activity marked by the verb, as shown in (1b):

(1) a. Tüdruk luges raamatu lõpuni.
girl.**NOM** read.PAST.3.SG book.**GEN** end.**TERM**
“The girl read the book till the end.”

(1) b. Tüdruk luges raamatu.
girl.**NOM** read.PAST.3.SG book.**GEN**
“The girl read a/the book (as opposed to e.g. the journal).”

To conclude, the fact that genitive case on its own is not capable of signalling a fully affected P is taken as evidence that the object case marking is still not a completely grammaticalised category in Estonian, as opposed to the marking of the A argument which we consider fully grammaticalised.

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Valency Patterns Leipzig (ValPaL) database - <https://valpal.info/>