Although labile verbs have been an object of linguistic analysis for a long time, different meanings of this term have been proposed. One of the most popular examples of lability are labile verbs in Daghestanian languages, which can be used intransitively (for situations with one argument like ‘to die’) as well as transitively (in which case they mean the causation of a one-argument situation, like ‘to kill’).

At the same time, in the grammars of some languages the term “lability” is used in a broader sense. The authors call “labile verbs” all verbs that can be either transitive or intransitive, like English knit (Mary knits a sweater/Mary knits very well), even if the transitive meaning is not causative.

Finally, a third meaning of the term “lability” is the most general: in typological work [Polinskaya 1986: 44] the author uses this term to denote the “ability to be used in several constructions of the sentence without special marking of diathesis change in the verb”, without specification of the semantic correlation between these constructions.

All these meanings of the analyzed term are based on the syntactic properties of the verbs, not on the semantic correlations between their two meanings, which can also be important. Unfortunately, the analysis of lability has been based mainly on the data of ergative languages, excluding the article [Haspelmath 1993], where lability is regarded as one of the types of formal correlations between inchoative and causative verbs, alongside morphological causatives, morphological anticausatives, suppletive pairs and equipollent pairs, where both members are marked with special markers.

In this paper I will examine labile verbs from another point of view: the main question is not the syntactic transitivity/intransitivity of the verb. I will devote my attention to the following questions:

(1) Which semantic classes of verbs frequently become labile? What are the properties of the arguments of these verbs (are they prototypical agents and patients, or not)? How can lability be related to mono-/polypredicativity of the sentences (the main focus will be on inchoative verbs like begin, Arabic bada’a etc.)?

(2) What are the main types of semantic correlation between the two uses of the verb (reciprocal, reflexive, causative, passive types)?

My goal is to analyze the relations between lability as a syntactic property of a verb, the argument structure of the verb, and semantic classes of labile verbs.

The main classes of labile verbs

As has been noticed in many linguistic works, such as [Haspelmath 1993] and [Abraham 1997], labile verbs are typical for some languages and are very rare in others. In English most transitive verbs can also be used intransitively, but in other Germanic languages only restricted verb classes have this property. The difference between languages from different groups and families can be more striking still.

In spite of this, we can argue that there are groups of verbs which are labile more often than others, so that if there are labile verbs in a certain language, verbs of these groups will likely be labile. Below I will examine some of these groups.

1. Phase verbs. The meanings of the phase of the situation are typically expressed by labile verbs - for instance, in German the verbs beginnen ‘begin (transitive)/be begun’, anfangen ‘begin (transitive)/be begun’, enden ‘finish/be over’, aufhören ‘stop (transitive)/be stopped’ and so on.
Although all these verbs are semantically labile (they designate a situation P and its causation), not all of them are syntactically labile: the first three verbs can be either transitive or intransitive, but the last (*aufhören*) does not usually govern a direct object:

(1) Sie *fingen die Demonstration an* ‘They begin the demonstration’ (direct object), but
(2) *Ich hörte mit der Arbeit auf* ‘I finished the work’ (prepositional object).

It is important to note that lability of prefixal phase verbs does not imply that the original simplex verb is also labile: the verb *anfangen* ‘begin (transitive)/be begun’ is derived from the verb *fangen* ‘catch’, which can only be used transitively.

In German not all phase verbs are labile: for instance, the verb *beenden* ‘to end’ is transitive. But in Bulgarian there is a rule that all phase verbs must be labile: for example, *započvam* ‘begin (transitive)/begin (intransitive)’, *proběžavam* ‘continue (transitive)/be continued’, *svorša* ‘finish/be over’. As in German, if a derived phase verb is labile, the initial simplex verb need not itself be labile: the verb *vorša* ‘do’ can be used only transitively.

Phase verbs do not form a homogenous group; inchoative verbs are labile more often than verbs designating other phases of the situation (its end or middle phase). For example, in German the verb *beenden* ‘finish’ has the prefix *be-* which derives almost exclusively transitively; this mode of derivation (with *be-*) is not typical for inchoative verbs. In Arabic many phase verbs are semantically labile (they can denote either a situation P or its causation): *tawaggafa* ‘be stopped/stop’, *’istamarra* ‘continue (intransitive)/continue (transitive)’, *bada’a* ‘be begun/begin (transitive)’, *ibtada’a* ‘be begun/begin (transitive)’. But only the inchoative verbs *bada’a* and *ibtada’a* can be used as syntactically bivalent transitive verbs:

1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(3a)</th>
<th><em>ibtada’a</em></th>
<th>al-‘a:m-u</th>
<th>al-dir:siyy-u</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>be_begun.3SGM</td>
<td>DEF-year-NOM</td>
<td>DEF-academic-NOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘The academic year began’</td>
<td>(monovalent);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(3b)</th>
<th><em>na-btadi’u</em></th>
<th>dira:sa-t-a</th>
<th>al-luyat-i</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1PL-begin</td>
<td>studying-ACC</td>
<td>DEF-language-GEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘We are beginning studying the Arabic language’</td>
<td>(bivalent transitive);</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| (4a) | fi: | al-‘a:at-i | al-ta:si’at-i |
|------|----------|-------------|
| in | DET-hour-GEN | DET-ninth-GEN |
| *bada’a-t* | al-Harb-u |
| ‘At 9 o’clock the war began’ | (monovalent). |

| (4b) | *bada’a* - | al-‘umma:l-u | al-mašru:‘a |
|------|------------|--------------|
| begin.3SGM | DEF-worker.PL-NOM | DEF-project-ACC |
| ‘The workers began the project (working on the project)’ | (bivalent transitive). |

Rather, most phase verbs govern a prepositional object:

| (5a) | *’intaha:* | al-‘i:d-u | fi | al-layl-i |
|------|-------------|-----------|---|
| *be_finished.3SGM* | DEF-holiday-NOM | in | DEF-night-GEN |
| ‘The holiday was finished at night’ | (monovalent); |

| (5b) | wa ba’da | an | *intaha:* | min | tana:wul-i | al-faTu:rl-i |
|------|---------|---|-------|-----|-------------|
| and after that | be_finished.3SGM | from | taking-GEN | DEF-breakfast-GEN |
| nahaDa | stand_up.3SGM |
| ‘After he finished (from) eating breakfast, he stood up’ | (bivalent intransitive). |

1 Abbreviations. NOM – Nominative, ACC – Accusative, GEN – Genitive, SG – Singular, PL – Plural, 1, 2, 3 – 1st, 2nd, 3rd person, DEF – Definite.
This variant is also possible for inchoative verbs:

(6) na-bda’u bi aHba:r-i al-yawm-i
1PL-begin with news-GEN DEF-day-GEN
‘We begin with today’s news.’

Although we might consider that in such cases the valency increase is marked with a preposition like min ‘from’ or bi, fi: ‘in’, this is not proved by the Arabic data: the prepositions min, fi: cannot typically mark causativity or valency derivations in other cases. I will consider that verbs like intaha: can change their valency with no special additional marker, just like phase verbs in other languages. However, the lability of this verb is weaker than the lability of verbs like bada’a and ibtada’a, so it cannot become transitive.

Almost the same situation can be seen in Turkish. Prototypically Turkic verbs are not labile, but the Turkish verb baslamak can mean either ‘begin something’ or ‘be begun’. However, in the first meaning it is not transitive, but governs an indirect (dative) object.

2. VERBS WITH A PROTOTYPICALLY PATIENTIVE ARGUMENT. It is well-known that prototypical causative markers can apply to monovalent verbs that have a patientive argument, but often fail to apply to transitive verbs or agentive intransitive verbs like ‘go’ [see Nedjalkov, Silnitsky 1969].

In languages where most verbs are labile, lability arguably can play the role of a causative marker. Therefore, prototypically patientive monovalent verbs, which typically combine with causative markers, are labile and can be used in transitive or intransitive constructions. For example, in English verbs with patientive arguments often are labile (like break), while many verbs of other types are not (cf. go, which cannot mean ‘make somebody go’). In Adyghe the class of labile verbs includes most verbs of destruction, which always have a patientive argument.

3. Verbs with semantically close meanings. In languages where the class of labile verbs is not very large, lability can appear when two meanings — a situation with one argument and with two arguments — have some common semantic component.

For instance, transitive verbs in pairs like ‘go’/‘lead’, ‘run’/‘drive, make run’ involve sociative causation [Shibatani & Pardeshi 2001]: the subject does P and by this makes the object do P, e.g. lead X = ‘go with X and make X go’. The transitive and intransitive meanings thus have the common component ‘the subject goes’. In Classical Greek many such verbs are labile, cf. baino ‘go/lead’, ago ‘lead/leave, go out’. Another example of this type is the Russian verb gnat’ ‘drive, make run’, which means ‘go’ in colloquial Russian.

Another type of verb which becomes labile in many languages are verbs derived from nouns. In this case the transitive and intransitive uses also have a common semantic component, namely, the original noun as semantic argument: cf. Russian kapat’ ‘fall in drops/spill in drops’, Arabic naqqaTa (ditto), where the common component is ‘form drops’:

Russian

(7a) s --- kryshi kapay-et vod-a
from --- roof drop-3SG water-NOM
‘Water drips (falls in drops) from the roof’;

(7b) mne --- kazhdyj den’ kapay-ut lekarstvo
to_me--- every day drop-3PL medicine
‘They give me the medicine (in drops) every day.’

4. LABILITY OF DERIVED VERBS. The Arabic data show that derived verbs, formed by the markers of valency derivations, easily become labile. For example, lability is very typical for verbs of the “third pattern” (1a:2a3a) with the meaning of reciprocity or symmetrical action: cf. qa:raba ‘come nearer/draw nearer’, ma:tala ‘compare/be alike’, sa:wa: ‘level/become equal’ and so on.
This tendency can be explained by the fact that the main semantic component which is added to the meaning of verbs by this derivation is that of symmetrical action; causativity is less important and less intrinsic, so it can vary from one use to another, leading to lability of such verbs.

**Types of semantic correlation between the two meanings of labile verbs**

All the aforementioned verbs are examples of cases where the verb can mean either the **situation P** or **causation of the situation P**. This type of semantic correlation between the two meanings of labile verbs is the most widespread, but there are other types as well. The types of lability are:

1. **Causative lability.**
   The same verb means both ‘P’ and ‘cause P’. One must be clear, however, about which type of causation is meant. For example, in Classical Greek ‘P’ and ‘associative causation of P’ often are designated by the same labile verb, while in Arabic symmetrical action and its causation tend to be expressed by the same verb.

2. **Reflexive lability.**
   The reflexive and reciprocal types of lability were first examined in [Liutikova 2002]. The reflexive type (the same verb expresses the meanings ‘X P Y’, where X is the subject and Y is the object, and ‘X P X’, where X is both subject and object) is found in English (*The mother washes the baby/John washes *washes his face*) and Estonian (*pesema ‘wash something/wash oneself’*). It is highly interesting that in some languages the reflexive type of lability is the main type. In Alutor, an ergative language closely related to Chukchi, most labile verbs are of this type: cf. *ilγъtav- ‘wash something/wash oneself’, tivla- ‘beat with a stick (a carpet)/beat oneself with a stick’, psetbwa- ‘take somebody’s shoes off/take one’s shoes off’ etc. Since both the causative and reflexive types of lability can combine with verbs that have animate arguments (although the causative type prefers an inanimate causee), sometimes it can be difficult to distinguish these types; indeed, some examples do not seem to belong clearly to either type, as e.g. with Russian *povernut ‘turn something/turn (to the right)’:

   Russian:
   
   (8a) on poverynul ruchk-u dver-i
       he turn-PAST.SG.M handle-ACC door-GEN
   ‘He turned the door-handle’;
   (8b) my poverynul-i napravo
       we turn-PAST-PL right
   ‘We turned right’.

   Here the intransitive verb does not have a reflexive meaning; but its subject is agentive and acts consciously, which is not typical for intransitive subjects in the causative type of lability.

3. **Reciprocal lability.**
   The same verb means ‘X P Y’ and ‘X and Y P each other’. This type of lability is not widespread in the languages of the world. We can see it in English (*meet: I met her/We meet in the street ‘meet each other’*) and Arabic (*tala:qa ‘X meets with Y’/X and Y meet’):

   Arabic:
   
   (9a) ta-tala:qa al-juhu:d-u al-Huku:miyyat-u wa
       3FSG-meet DEF-efforts-NOM DEF-governmental-NOM and
       al-ahliyyat-u DEF-people’s-NOM
   ‘The efforts of the Government and the people are converging’ (lit. ‘meet’).
   (9b) ya-tala:qa-hu fi: yawm-i al-sabt-i
       3MSG-meet-3SGM in day-GEN DEF-saturday-GEN
‘He will meet her (with her) in Saturday.’

This type of lability usually occurs when the action expressed by the verb is semantically reciprocal in both meanings: if $X$ meets $Y$, then also $Y$ meets $X$.

4. **Passive (conversive) lability.**

Passive lability is the case when the same verb can designate the same situation $P$ using different participants as subjects: cf. Bulgarian *xaresam* ‘A likes B/B attracts A’ and Arabic *tahaddada* ‘threaten/be under a threat’:

(10a) al-dawlat-u al-‘arabiyy-at-u ta-tahaddadu-hu
    DEF-state-NOM DEF-Arabic-F-NOM 3FSG-threaten-3SGM
    ‘The Arabic state threatens him.’

(10b) al-tama:suk-u al-waTan-iyy-u ya-tahaddadu min ru:H-i -- al-‘in’iza:l-i
    DEF-solidarity-NOM DEF-motherland-REL-NOM 3MSG-threaten from spirit-GEN DEF-isolation-GEN
    ‘The solidarity of our motherland is under the threat of isolationism.’

Verbs like these are close to prototypical conversive verbs, like *buy/sell*. The difference is that the arguments of verbs like *tahaddada* are not so similar as the two agents of verbs like *buy*: the argument which is under threat is less agentive than the other, which threatens. In addition, we can use the criterion of transitivity: the verbs *tahaddada* and *xaresam* are transitive in the “agentive” meaning and intransitive in the “patienteive” one, so we may consider these verbs labile. This type of lability is found only rarely and does not occur when one of the participants is a prototypical agent and the other is a prototypical patient (there are no verbs which can mean either ‘A kills B’ or ‘B is killed by A’), so we can suppose that it lies between prototypical passive and prototypical conversive.

**REFERENCES**


