# The Unitariness of Participant and Event in the Bella Coola (Nuxalk) Middle Voice

One of the most puzzling of the verbal affixes in the Salishan language Bella Coola is the suffix *-m*. Because of the many and varied uses of this morpheme, it has been claimed that *-m* represents two (Davis & Saunders 1980) or even three (Nater 1984) separate morphemes, based in part on the varied effects it has on the transitivity of its base, in some cases rendering a transitive verb intransitive and in others apparently transitivizing intransitive (even nominal) stems. More recent work (Davis & Saunders 1989), however, has argued for *-m* as a single morpheme with a unified meaning that cuts across issues of syntactic transitivity. Close examination of the data in the light of Kemmer's (1993) study of the middle voice reveals that, in by far the majority of cases, the uses of *-m* conform to the meanings of the middle-marker found in a variety of the world's languages. In fact, all of the productive uses of *-m* in Bella Coola conform to Kemmer's characterization of the middle as marking "relatively low elaboration of events"—in particular, two subtypes of low-elaboration which I will refer to as *partial identification of participants* and *partial identification of events*, the latter giving rise to the some of the more cross-linguistically unusual transitivizing uses of the middle-marker.

In the majority of instances, the use of the Bella Coola *-m* conforms to the cross-linguistically typical uses of the middle marker enumerated by Kemmer (1993). It appears in clauses referring to body actions, grooming, speech acts, cognition, emotive events, and activities, and also forms a variety of mediopassive-like clauses and verbs describing meteorological or spontaneous events. In the bulk of these cases, the *m*-marked clause is syntactically intransitive, the result of the lowering of semantic transitivity (Hopper & Thompson 1980) concomitant with the middle's function of reducing the distinctiveness of one or both of the event participants as highly individuable entities. What seems to be at stake in the Bella Coola intransitive middles is the partial identification of the initiator and the endpoint of the event, wherein the speaker construes the event as the initiator acting on some one of its subparts (*e.g.* acting on its body) or some part of the initiator acting on the initiator as a whole, as in *xm*+(*s*) 'it is broken' *xm*+*m*+(*s*) 'it broke, it is breaking', wherein (*à la* van Oosten 1977) a particular property of the single event participant (its frailness) bears responsibility for the event itself.

Significantly, in a portion of the Bella Coola clauses which appear to have been transitivized by the presence of the middle, the principle of partial identification of event-participants is still at work. Consider (1):

(1) ʔiċama+m+is+kʷ+ċ̓ iɬʔayɬ ta+nanmkʷ+tx̌
blanket+MD+3SG:3SG she D+animal+D
'she had put on the hide of an animal'

(Davis & Saunders 1980: 137, line 90)

Here, the initiator (the woman) is partially identified with the endpoint of the event (her body, which is covered by the hide); the clause's syntactic transitivity is not due to the presence of *-m* so much as to the presence of the second, fully individuated event-participant—the animal who is worn like a blanket. Davis & Saunders (1989) offer further evidence that *-m* is not in and of itself a transitivizer in that verbs like *tay* 'pound' appear with *-m* in both transitive and intransitive clauses.

(2) (a) tay+is snac ti+pucq̓+tx
pound+3SG:3SG Snac D+hellebore+D
'Snac pounded the hellebore'

(b) tay+m+is ti+pucq̓+tx
pound+MD+3SG:3SG D+hellebore+D
'he went to pound the hellebore'

(c) tay+m+Ø
pound+MD+3SG
'he went routinely to pound'

(d) *tay+Ø
pound+3SG

(Davis & Saunders 1989: 120 – 121)

The sentence in (2a) is an ordinary transitive clause, marked by the transitive agreement paradigm, as is the *m*-form in (b). The sentence in (c), on the other hand, shows intransitive subject agreement and in this sentence the meaning of *-m* is clearly an instance of the type of activity reading which is common for middle forms. According to Davis & Saunders (1989), the semantic distinction between (a) and (b) is a translocative one which serves to defocus the endpoint/direct object (in their terms, the EXPERIENCER) and lessen its affectedness; Davis & Saunders go on to note that sentences (b) and (c) also seem to have a lessened sense of performance and immediacy, which may indicate that we are not dealing here so much with a literal translocative meaning as an activity reading, a "going-pounding". If this is indeed the case, then the function of *-m* in (b) is also clearly related to the detransitivizing use of the morpheme, the crucial difference between (b) and (c) being the presence in the clause of a completely individuated second participant—an important semantic feature of transitivity, according to Hopper & Thompson (1980)—rather than the presence or absence of a particular *-m* (although the presence of *-m* is not completely irrelevant to transitivity, as shown by the ungrammaticality of (d)).

A more unusual type of transitivization associated with *-m* is found in applicative-like constructions such as (3):

(3) puƛ̓+m+is ti+ʔimlk+tx ti+nusʔuułx̌+tx
come+MD+3SG:3SG D+man+D D+thief+D
'the man attacked the thief'
(lit. 'the man came at the thief')

(Davis & Saunders 1989: 124)

The verb root in this sentence is the intransitive *puƛ̓* 'come'. Here, the addition of the middle-marker allows it to take transitive object-subject agreement and a direct object. The applicative-like function of the *-m* suffix in "promoting" a semantic goal to the status of direct object is reminiscent of Tuggy's (1988) analysis of Nahuatl applicatives as expressing an event with two components or sub-events. One of these sub-events is the action of the initiator, fully specified by the lexical meaning of the verb, while the second, the effect on the goal, is unspecified or left to context. Thus, what seems to be at stake in sentences like (3) is not the partial identification of participants, but the conception of an *m*-transitivized clause as a middle form expressing a com-

plex event made up of two related but separable sub-events. These are partially identified with one another but not fully distinguished by the speaker—thereby conforming to the definition of the middle voice as marking “relatively low elaboration of events”. This analysis thus accounts for virtually every use of the Bella Coola *-m*, and identifies it and its unique properties as instances of a common and well-attested semantic category whose characteristics and behaviour we are just beginning to understand.

## References


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