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Author(s): Osumi, Midori

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Information Structure in Tinrin and Neku:  
topicalisation, impersonal constructions, passive\*

Midori Osumi  
Tokyo Woman's Christian University

This paper discusses the information structures of Tinrin and Neku, two Oceanic languages critically endangered, spoken in the southern part of the main island of New Caledonia. Specifically, we shall be looking at topic-shift constructions and the formation of passive structures by the use of impersonal constructions. Another agentless passive construction is also discussed for Tinrin, which exhibits with other constructions a continuum along the active-passive axis.

1. The basic word order and topicalisations

In both languages, the basic word order of a sentence is: V-(O)-S(=A). Their clauses can be: (a) non-verbal: NP-(NP) and (b) verbal: VP-(NP), where (NP) is the subject and it can be omitted. Before the subject, *nrâ* occurs as a subject marker, optionally in (a), and obligatorily in (b) type of clauses in Tinrin, while in Neku, the subject marker *nâ* occurs optionally in both types.

(a) Non-verbal clauses

The predicate NP may be preceded by the TA markers and/or the pre-head modifier as in (2). In (1) and (2) the focus is on the first NP, as they can be answers to the questions such as the following.

[ Who is that one? → That one is X ]

Tinrin

- (1) warrabù<sup>i</sup>-nrî (nrâ) wara mwâ  
uncle-3sg (sm) one M.Dist  
'That one is his uncle.'
- (2) (re) warrabù-nrî (nrâ) wara mwâ  
(ASS) uncle-3sg (sm) one M.Dist  
'That one must be his uncle.'

Neku

- (3) jèvî na lui  
chief sm Louis  
'Louis is a chief.'

However, especially when there is no preceding element before the first NP, and there is a slightly rising intonation at the end of the first NP with a pause, it can be a topic. In (4), *warrabù-nrî* 'his uncle' is a topic.

[ Which one is his uncle? → His uncle (topic) is that one. ]

- (4) warrabù-nrî ↗ wara mwâ ↘  
uncle-3sg one M.Dist  
'His uncle (topic), he is that one.'

In (4) *warrabù-nrî* is in fact the subject NP fronted to the initial position of the sentence,

which acquires the topic function, highlighting what is under discussion, either previously mentioned or assumed in the discourse.

*Warrabù-nrî* (topic) can be omitted as in (5).

[ Which one is his uncle? → That one. ]

- (5) wara mwâ  
 one M.Dist  
 ‘(His uncle is) that one.’

Non-verbal clauses in Neku behave in the same way as those in Tinrin, as illustrated in the followings sentences:

Neku

- (6) 'ò donepê na jan  
 man tribal\_place sm Jan  
 ‘Jan is a Kanak man.’

- (7) jan ↗ 'ò donepê ↘  
 Jan man tribal\_place  
 ‘Jan (topic), he is a Kanak man.’

(b) Verbal clauses

In verbal clauses, the verb is preceded by a proclitic subject pronoun, which agrees in person and number with the nominal subject that optionally follows the predicate. The head of VP may be preceded or followed by a number of tense-aspect markers and verbal modifiers.

Tinrin

- (8) rru= ta pù nrâ truuo  
 3dl= hit flying\_fox sm man.dl  
 ‘Two men hit (killed) flying foxes.’

As with non-verbal clauses, while the normal situation is for the predicate to begin a clause, the first slot of a clause can be filled by the subject NP when topicalised. It can in fact also be filled by an object or oblique argument, or an adverbial phrase. The topic in Tinrin is thus expressed in a topic-shift construction (Givón 1976) and is not marked by any specific topic marker.

When the nominal subject is anteposed, the subject pronoun (in the following example, *rru*) in the predicate is retained (9). The subject marker *nrâ* never occurs before the topicalized nominal subject.

[ What did the two men? → The two men, they hit flying foxes. ]

- (9) truuo rru= ta pù  
 man.dl 3dl= hit flying\_fox  
 Two men, they hit (killed) flying foxes.’

A sentence can have both topicalized and postposed subject:

- (10) truuo rru= ta pù nrâ nrorry  
 man.dl 3dl= hit flying\_fox sm 3dl  
 ‘Two men, they hit (killed) flying foxes.’

Thus, Subject Fronting has the structure :

$s V (O) sm S \rightarrow [S] s V (O)$

When an object NP is fronted, there are two cases: the case (A) is found when the object is animate, while in the case (B) the object is inanimate.

(A) a pronominal anaphor to the topic occurs after the verb:

$s V O sm S \rightarrow O s V o sm S$

(B) no pronominal copy is left behind:

$s V O sm S \rightarrow O s V sm S$

Note that in normal verb initial word order, no object marker or object pronoun occurs before the nominal object.

Case A: with an animate object

- (11) [sonya] nrâ= ta **nrî** nrâ nrâ Toni  
 Sonya 3sg= hit 3sg.O PST sm Tony  
 ‘Sonya, Tony hit her.’ (He hit Sonya.)
- (12) [nro] nrâ= sùveharru **rò**  
 lsg 3sg= like lsg.O  
 ‘Me, he likes me.’

The pronominal anaphor after the verb signals that the clause-initial animate NP is an object and not a subject, though this does not completely prevent the ambiguity of an object-fronted sentence. If the subject NP, *Tony*, is not explicit in (11), the sentence can also be interpreted as ‘Sonya, she (=Sonya) hit him/her.’

In sentence (12) the fronted object is not in the object form *rò*, but in the free form *nro*. This demonstrates that the fronted element is not syntactically tied to the rest of the clause, but is the free-floating topic of the discourse.

Neku clauses behave similarly to Tinrin:

Neku

- (13) taaki gò= dei è (<gò= dei taaki ‘I hit the dog.’)  
 dog 1sg= hit 3sg  
 ‘The dog, I hit it.’

It is also possible for a sentence to have both a fronted subject and a fronted object. The word order among them is normally:

$O S s V o$

Tinrin

- (14) [nro] [traiki] nrâ= eghe rò  
 lsg dog 3sg= bite lsg  
 ‘Me, the dog (it) bit me.’

Case B: with an inanimate object

When the fronted object NP is inanimate, there is no pronominal anaphor after the verb.

- (15) [peci ha] kea nrorri ei rò  
 paper this 2sg.PERF give DAT lsg

‘This paper, you have given it to me.’

There is a group of verbs which do not conform to the principles of using the animacy of fronted objects to determine whether a pronominal anaphor should occur after the verb. This group comprises those verbs which can occur in passive constructions with *nrî*. For these verbs, the pronominal anaphor of an anteposed object is always omitted, whether the object is animate or inanimate. These verbs are discussed in detail in the next section.

An object of a preposition can also be fronted to the left of the predicate. It is normally fronted together with the preposition, but there are rare cases in which the NP is fronted by itself, leaving the preposition behind. It is never deleted.

- (16) [dri-wa-ù ha] ri= vajù ghegi  
leaf-DET-tree PROX lpl.inc= die because of  
‘The leaf of this tree is poisonous.’ (lit. The leaf of this tree, we die because of it.)

When the prepositional object is animate, it leaves a pronominal copy behind, as with fronted objects in the previous section.

- (17) [toni] ke= hwarri nrî ei nrî  
Tony 2sg= sell 3sg DAT 3sg  
‘Tony, you sold it to him.’ (Tony = him)

The possessor NP of either a subject or an object NP can be fronted, leaving behind the cross-referenced possessor pronoun.

- (18) [hùwù-nrâ-rò] nrâ= sòwò nrâ nrime-nrî  
child-LINK-1sg 3sg= swollen sm face-3sg  
‘My son, his face is swollen.’

The following sentence with verb *fwi* ‘exist, make, do’ with the possessor NP fronted is a typical Tinrin possessive structure (cf. ‘topic shift construction’ by Stassen 2009).

- (19) [sonya] nrâ= fwi nrâ rroto nrâ nrî  
Sonya 3sg= exist sm car POSS 3sg  
‘Sonya has a car.’ (lit. Sonya, her car exists.)

A sentence can have both a possessor NP and the subject fronted. It is also possible to have the possessor of an object NP, the object NP, and the subject NP all fronted, as illustrated in the following. When there are more than two topics, the topicalized subject is always nearest to the subject pronoun, that is, the rightmost.

- (20) [aunê-nrû] [òò-juo nrâ nrî] [ubo] nrâ= wirù nrâ  
mother-2sg place-sit POSS 3sg Ubo 3sg= break PST  
‘Your mother, her chair, Ubo, he broke it.’

Adverbs and verbal modifiers, usually spatial or temporal, can also be fronted to the left of the predicate as illustrated by the following sentence. *Tau nrâ* is normally placed after the verb or at the end of the sentence.

- (21) [tau nrâ] nrâ= re fi pwere gi nrû -dròwe  
often PST 3sg= HAB go to at field-mangrove  
‘Before, he used to go to the mangrove bush.’

Sentences can also have topics that are not fronted from within, but related only thematically.

(22) [hari] saa nrî nrî fi pwere erre mêrrê rri truu  
 1pl.inc one 3sg.FUT EVENT go to village pl 3pl stay  
 ‘Speaking of us, one will go to the village, the others stay.’

Table 1: Topicalized Elements and their Anaphoric References

Topicalised Elements	Anaphoric References
S, DO animate	pronoun
DO inanimate	zero
OBL animate	pronoun (when separated from the preposition)
OBL inanimate	zero (when separated from the preposition)
OBL	zero (moved together with the preposition)
POSS	pronoun
AD/MOD	zero

Whether the topicalised element leaves the pronominal anaphor or not is summarized in Table 1. Pronominal anaphora seems to be a device to remove ambiguity from sentences, especially when the NP is human or animate and its function in a sentence is important. Subjects and animate objects are always cross-referenced by a pronoun. The possessor always has a pronominal copy, as it is either human or animate, or something personified to possess a thing. Other elements normally do not leave any mark (except an animate object of a preposition, when it is separated from the preposition). Prepositional objects are generally moved together with their preposition, so that there is no possibility of ambiguity on that score. Adverbs and modifiers cannot be misinterpreted as subject or object of a sentence.

## 2. Passive constructions

Passive is a structure in which the deep object NP of a transitive clause is promoted to the surface subject. The agent of a transitive clause is either deleted or demoted to an oblique function, and the verb in the passive structure often bears some morphological marking of the passive. Passivization generally applies to agentive transitives, and derives intransitives, so that the passive structure implies the existence of an agent, even if it is not explicit. Therefore, the difference between passives and intransitives lies in the fact that in passives there is a deep agent, whether specified or not, whereas in intransitives, such an agent is not implied at all. The primary function of passivisation is that of ‘agent defocusing’ (Shibatani 1985:830). He claims that passives generally do not express agents overtly. Numerous languages prohibit or generally avoid expressing an agent in a passive construction, and even in those languages which permit overt expression of an agent, agentless passives are far more numerous in actual data. Passives are used when the singling out of an agent is either impossible or unimportant. Shibatani uses ‘agent defocusing’ as a cover term for phenomena such as the absence of mention of an agent, the mention of an agent in a non-prominent syntactic slot, the blurring of the identity of an agent by using a plural form, and indirect reference to an agent by using an oblique case.

Tinrin and Neku have constructions with agents defocused or totally suppressed, which are:

### Tinrin

- ◆ Impersonal constructions using *hêrrê*
- ◆ *nrî* constructions

Neku

- ♦ Impersonal constructions using *a 'ê*

Apart from that these constructions have a passive meaning in the sense that the agent is defocused or deleted in some way, they have certain similarities to the constructions used for object topicalization which will be clarified hereafter.

## 2.1. Impersonal constructions

We will look at Tinrin and Neku constructions using impersonal pronouns, respectively *hêrrê* and *a 'ê*.

<Tinrin *hêrrê* constructions>

This construction uses the impersonal pronoun *hêrrê* in its subject pronoun slot and has the object in a fronted position. When the object is animate, a pronominal anaphor occurs after the verb as in the ordinary object fronted structure:

O *hêrrê* = V (o) (*nrâ* A)

*Hêrrê* normally implies 'someone' (like French *on*) when it occurs in ordinary word order (23). The speaker may or may not know the person, but the identity of this person is not relevant.

- (23) *hêrrê*= hôdrô mwâ  
IMPV= burn hut  
'Someone burned the hut.'

If the speaker implies somebody in particular (who burned the hut), or even mentions the name of the agent explicitly, the speaker can no longer use *hêrrê*, but must use a personal pronoun which agrees with the subject in person and number.

- (24) *nrâ*= hôdrô mwâ (*nrâ* toni)  
3sg= burn hut sm Tony  
'He (Tony) burned the hut.'

The impersonal pronoun *hêrrê* cannot occur in a postposed position, as it would not bear any focus. Nor is it possible for the subject pronoun and the postposed subject to differ in person or number. Accordingly, the following two sentences are ungrammatical.

- (25) \**hêrrê*= hôdrô mwâ nrâ hêrrê  
IMPV= burn hut sm IMPV  
(26) \**hêrrê*= hôdrô mwâ nrâ toni/nrî  
IMPV= burn hut sm Tony/3sg

Now, let us look at the following sentence. Its subject pronoun is impersonal and does not agree with the postposed nominal subject. The sentence, however, is acceptable. It has the object-fronted structure, but is different from the ordinary object-fronted structure.

- (27) mwâ hêrrê= hôdrô nrâ toni  
hut IMPV= burn ?sm/by Tony  
'The hut somebody (Tony) burned.'

'Tony' is the agent of the transitive verb *hôdrô* 'to burn'. Yet the subject pronoun of this sentence is the impersonal *hêrrê* and not *nrâ* '3sg'. In this construction, in fact, the postposed

NP can be any person or number, while the subject pronoun is always the impersonal *hêrrê*. In (28) the fronted object (=passive subject) is the second person:

- (28) nrü hêrrê= sùveharru nrü nrâ sonya  
 2sg IMPN= like 2sg ?sm/by Sonya  
 ‘You, somebody (Sonya) likes you.’ (You are liked by Sonya.)

We find the same construction in relative clauses, where the object of the embedded clause has been relativized:

- (29) nrâ= nrê harru nrâ kafe hêrrê= fwi nrâ nrü  
 3sg= taste good sm coffee IMPN= make ?sm/by 2sg  
 ‘The coffee (which was) made by you tastes good.’

This construction can be interpreted as passive: the subject pronoun slot is filled by the impersonal pronoun *hêrrê*. This use of *hêrrê* must be clearly distinguished from the ordinary notion of ‘impersonality’, as the identity of the agent is often clear from the context, or specified by the postposed NP as in (27, 28). Accordingly, *hêrrê* should be interpreted as a device for defocusing the agent and putting the object in the foreground, which is shifted in the first slot. The subject marker *nrâ* must be reanalyzed as an agent marker, since the postposed NP no longer agrees with the subject pronoun in person and number. In other words, the active subject is apparently being demoted to an oblique position. Thus, the translation of (27) is ‘the hut was burned by Tony.’

<Neku *a* 'ê constructions>

Neku has a peculiar construction using *a*, an attribute marker, and 'ê, an impersonal pronoun, which are inserted between the object in a fronted position and the verb as shown in the following:

O a 'ê = V (o) (na A)

This construction is similar to that of *hêrrê* construction in Tinrin except that it should be preceded by *a*, giving a passive reading to the sentence, which is illustrated by the following sentence.

- (30) korrie a 'ê= ëri giè na toni  
 necklace AT IMPN= buy for\_3sg by Tony  
 ‘The necklace was bought for her by Tony.’

Before examining this construction further, I will briefly describe how this marker *a* is used in clauses. This particle introduces a participial relative clause (31, 32), which applies only to subjects. *A* is also used as a nominaliser to indicate a habitual practitioner or a person with a specific nature or qualification, or something of a particular nature (33).

- (31) gò= 'a i pârrâ ne'ê [a wèja]  
 1sg= laugh at several thing AT good  
 ‘I laughed at several things that are beautiful.’
- (32) è= tò ui ra 'ò [a tònèmè nju]  
 3sg= stay exist one man AT think 1sgO  
 ‘There is a man who thinks of me.’
- (33) u= pwa wai ro a - mëë  
 3dl= arrive already L NMZ- dry  
 ‘They two already arrived at somewhere dry (=land)’

*A* is not used when a non-subject NP is relativised. When the object NP is relativised, the relative clause just follows the head noun without any specific relative marker. When the relativised object is animate, it leaves the pronominal anaphor in the relative clause as in (34), while the inanimate object does not leave the anaphor as in (35).

- (34) è= tò      ui    ra    'ò    [gò= tònèmè    è]  
 3sg= stay exist one man 1sg= think 3sgO  
 'There is a man who I think of.'
- (35) è= tònèmè    ne'ê    [è= jè      jaa]  
 3sg= think thing 3sg= FUT say  
 'He thinks of what he will speak.'

As we see in (31), (32), (33), *a* always precedes a VP, whether it introduces a participial relative clause or functions as a nominaliser to derive a noun. However, when we look at the sentence (30), we notice that the way *a* is used does not conform to this principle. Let us examine the sentences (36) and (37). While (36) is an ordinary transitive sentence with a direct and indirect objects, (37) has the object (*korrie* 'necklace') shifted to the sentence initial position, and *a* 'è in the slot of the subject pronoun, substituted instead of è '3<sup>rd</sup> person singular'. This construction is similar to the Tinrin *hêrrê* construction in that it employs the impersonal pronoun 'ê, defocusing the agent and putting the object in the foreground. A specific agent of the transitive verb can occur as in (38) and (39), marked by *na*, whose function as a subject marker is reanalyzed as an agent marker, exactly like in Tinrin counterparts.

- (36) è= ëri      gi      mari    korrie  
 3sg= buy for Marie necklace  
 'He bought a necklace for Marie.'
- (37) korrie    a    'ê= ëri      gi      mari  
 necklace AT IMPN= buy for Marie  
 'The necklace (which) somebody bought for Marie.'  
 (=The necklace was bought for Marie.)
- (38) korrie    a    'ê= ëri      gi      mari    na    toni  
 necklace AT IMPN= buy for Marie by Tony  
 'The necklace (which) somebody bought for Marie by Tony.'  
 (= The necklace was bought for Marie by Tony).'

This construction can occur in a relative clause as in (39). The head noun 'ò being animate leaves a pronominal anaphor in the embedded clause as is the case with the ordinary object fronted structure.

- (39) è= tò      ui    ra    'ò    a    'ê= tònèmè    è    na    mari  
 3sg= stay exist one man AT IMPN= think 3sg by Marie  
 'There is a man (who) somebody thinks of him by Marie.'  
 (=There is a man who is thought by Marie.)'

## 2.2. Tinrin *nrî* constructions

There is another type of construction in Tinrin which I take to be passive. It also has a structure similar to that of object topicalization. Furthermore, what I consider to be the passive marker has the same form as the pronominal anaphor of the fronted object, and may be mistaken for it. I will show, however, that this construction is distinct from the object fronted structure and that it expresses another type of passive.

First of all, the marker *nrî* always occurs in this construction, even with inanimate objects

(where it normally does not). Secondly, this construction never allows an explicit agent, although the existence of one is always implied. Thirdly, the object NP (of the active clause) can be postposed, with the subject marker *nra* preceding it, this indicating that the object NP is promoted to the surface subject in these constructions.

The following formulae illustrate this construction:

S s V-*nrî* (S is O of the active clause)

or,

s V-*nrî* (sm S) (S is postposed)

Unlike the Tinrin *hêrrê* construction, only a limited number of verbs (some are listed below) can occur in this type of construction. Furthermore, the subject is restricted to the third person, generally inanimate. In the following examples, the verb *nyobò* ‘to open’ is employed in different constructions. (40a) is a normal active sentence.

Active:

(40a) *nrâ= nyobò mwâ nrâ afiraa-nrî*  
 3sg= open house sm wife-3sg  
 ‘His wife opened the house.’

(40b) is obtained by fronting the object *mwâ* ‘house’, while (40c) is unacceptable because the fronted inanimate object should not leave a pronominal copy behind.

Object topicalised:

(40b) *mwâ nrâ= nyobò nrâ afiraa-nrî*  
 house 3sg= open sm wife-3sg  
 ‘The house, his wife opened.’

(40c) \**mwâ nrâ= nyobò nrî nrâ afiraa-nrî*  
 house 3sg= open 3sg sm wife-3sg  
 ‘The house, his wife opened.’

However, consider the following sentence:

(41) *mwâ nrâ= nyobò-nrî*  
 house 3sg= open-PASS  
 ‘The house is open/opened.’

Although it appears similar to (40c) except for the postposed NP *afiraa-nrî*, it is grammatically acceptable. This construction needs to be distinguished clearly from the structure with a fronted object. Furthermore, the following sentences (42) is also acceptable, with *mwâ* as a postposed NP, which is no longer the object, but is the (promoted) subject of the sentence. (43) is in the past tense.

(42) *nrâ= nyobò-nrî nrâ mwâ*  
 3sg= open- PASS sm house  
 ‘The house is open/opened.’

(43) *nrâ= nyobò-nrî nrâ nrâ mwâ*  
 3sg= open- PASS PST sm house  
 ‘The house was open/opened.’

Example (44) shows that this construction does not permit co-occurrence of the active agent *afiraa-nrî* ‘his wife’.

- (44) \*nrâ= nyobò-nrî nrâ mwâ nrâ afiraa-nrî  
 3sg= open- PASS sm house by wife-3sg  
 ‘The house was open/opened by his wife.’

The speaker can also add a specific time reference, in which case the change of state takes place at a specific time, as in the following sentence. This time reference can indicate either the habitual present (the shop is habitually closed at noon), or an event (somebody closed the shop) which took place at noon.

- (45) nrâ= tôbwerrî-nrî nrâ magasâ rugi midi  
 3sg= close- PASS sm shop (Fr) at noon  
 ‘The shop is/was closed at noon.’

The passive subjects which occur with *nri* verbs are basically inanimate, but there are some exceptional verbs that take both animate and inanimate subject. They are *tewùrrù-nrî* ‘be tied up by a cord’, *nrowùrrù-nrî* ‘be pressed under’, and *soforro-nrî* ‘be bound by a cord’. When an animate object occurs with these verbs, it does not leave a pronominal anaphor in object fronted topic constructions. Thus, (46) is object-topic construction, while (47) is passive.

- (46) nranri nrâ= tewùrrù nrâ toni  
 goat 3sg= tie\_up sm Tony  
 ‘The goat, Tony tied up.’  
 (47) nrâ= tewùrrù-nrî nrâ nranri  
 3sg= tie\_up- PASS sm goat  
 ‘The goat is tied up.’

Do they indeed express passiveness, or do they reflect other concepts such as spontaneity and reflexivity? In fact, with some verbs the spontaneous or reflexive reading is possible or even more appropriate, depending upon the context. In most cases, it is difficult to differentiate them clearly from a passive meaning when they are out of context. For example, the following sentence indicates that the hut is leaning, and this situation may have been caused by some outer force (by people or an accident, for example), or it may have been spontaneous.

- (48) nrâ= serri-nrî nrâ mwâ  
 3sg= lean- PASS sm hut  
 ‘The hut is leaned/leaning.’

Some verbs which may be found in these constructions are listed below. *Tewùrrù-nrî*, *soforro-nrî*, *sevirro-nrî* can occur with a reflexive meaning as well, while *takîrrî-nrî*, *waghidhi-nrî*, *tusama-nrî*, *nyobò-nrî*, *tiô-nrî*, *tôbwerrî-nrî*, *sevirro-nrî* can occur with a spontaneous meaning as well as a passive meaning.

<Tied, bound, untied>

*tewùrrù-nrî* ‘be tied up’ *teforro-nrî* ‘be wound by cord’  
*soforro-nrî* ‘be bound by cord, be wound up’, etc.

<Pressed, deformed, wrinkled, broken>

*ubwerrî-nrî* ‘be squeezed by hand’ *nrowùrrù-nrî* ‘be pressed under’  
*drôwùrrù-nrî* ‘be pushed and pressed’ *takîrrî-nrî* ‘wrinkle/be wrinkled’  
*waghorro-nrî* ‘be pressed and crushed’ *waghidhi-nrî* ‘be crumpled’, etc.

< Posture or position changed >

*tusama-nrî* ‘be piled’                      *nyobò-nrî* ‘be opened’  
*tôbwerrî-nrî* ‘be closed’                    *sevirro- nrî* ‘be turned, change’  
*pagô-nrî* ‘be pushed forward’    *tiô-nrî* ‘be spilt’, etc.

The semantic properties as summarized in the above three headings and the recurring morphemes noticeable in their listing bring some unity to this group of verbs which can occur in *nrî* constructions.

Morphemes which recur include (a) classificatory prefixes, (b) bound (resultative) verbs, and (c) some free verbs:

(a) *te-* ‘by cord’, *wa-* ‘by force’, *u-* ‘by hand’, *ki-* ‘by key’, *ta-* ‘pushing’, *tô-* ‘by pointed object’, *wi-* ‘by a club’, *sa-* ‘by a cutting instrument’, *hò-* ‘by holding’, *nro-* ‘landsliding’, *drô-* ‘pushing’, *pa-* ‘by pointed object’, and *rrò-* ‘pressing down’, etc.

(b) *-wùrrù* ‘pressed’, *-forro* ‘bound’, *-gidhi* ‘wrinkled’, *-ria* ‘cut in two’, *-rau* ‘dug up’, *-bwerrî* ‘closed in’, *-sârrî* ‘untied’, *-ghorro* ‘crushed’, *-ghai* ‘mixed’, and *-ru* ‘cut across in two’, etc.

(c) *tiô* ‘to spill’, *nyobò* ‘to open’, *tu(o)* ‘to put’ and *gô* ‘to move’, *sevirro* ‘to turn’, *serri* ‘to lean’, *sùrrù* ‘to swing’, and *perrii* ‘to roll’

These are the only verbs in this group which are morphologically simple. They involve changes in the posture or position of objects, not drastic changes in their form.

Classificatory prefixes function as a kind of causative, and the verbal stems seen in the above list express a resultative state. For example, in *waghorro*, the classificatory prefix *wa-* suggests that somebody applies a force to or drops an object, which leads to the state of the object being broken into pieces. The resultative state is expressed by the bound verb *-ghorro* ‘be crushed’, *waghorro* is a transitive verb, as are the rest of the verbs listed that can take *-nrî*. Most of them semantically contain the cause or instrument, and the result, as does *waghorro*. These are some additional morphological and semantic characteristics of the group of verbs that may be found in *nrî* constructions. Further investigation may well find more verbs with these characteristics that belong to this group.

To summarize, *nrî* constructions indicate the passive state of an object, with the attention drawn to the result of an action. This does not mean, however, that these verbs occur only in the past tense in *nrî* constructions. They may be in any tense. They can also indicate habitual present or a passive action at a specific point of time.

### 2.3. Tinrin *hêrrê* ~ *nrî* constructions

There is an additional construction in Tinrin which employs both *hêrrê* and *nrî*. If the verb can occur in *nrî* constructions, it can occur in this construction as well. An explicit agent (a postposed nominal) would never occur as in *nrî* constructions. They are distinguished from *nrî* constructions in that they have an impersonal pronoun as subject pronoun, and in that a passive subject cannot occur as a postposed NP. This is illustrated by (49).

- (49) *peci hêrrê= takîrrî-nrî*  
 paper IMPN= wrinkle- PASS  
 ‘The paper is wrinkled.’

### 2.4. Summary

We have seen in this paper different constructions created by the shift of topics, defocusing agents with the use of impersonal constructions, and agentless passives with *nrî* marker, and the combination of both. (1) and (2) below apply to both Tinrin and Neku, but (3) and (4) are

only the cases for Tinrin. In conclusion:

- (1) Topicalisation is marked by the shift of the topic NP to the sentence initial position.
- (2) Impersonal constructions are characterized by:
  - An impersonal pronoun fills the subject pronoun slot, and the agent is either defocused or suppressed.
  - The object is shifted to the front, and takes over the subject role, since an impersonal pronoun cannot bear focus.
  - The active subject may be explicit, which is demoted to an oblique position.
- (3) Constructions with *nrî* are characterized by:
  - The object is shifted to the front taking over the subject role, or after the VP marked with the subject marker.
  - The new subjects are generally restricted to being inanimate.
  - The agent (active subject) is totally suppressed.
  - The types of verbs which can occur here are restricted.
- (4) Constructions with *hêrrê ~ nrî* are characterized by:
  - The object (=new subject) fills the first slot of the clause.
  - Postposed subjects cannot occur.
  - The agent (active subject) is totally suppressed.
  - The types of verbs which can occur here are restricted.

Table 2 shows the Tinrin constructions lined up with the connotations between the active to the passive perspectives.

Table 2 Active-Passive Continuum of Tinrin Constructions

Active	←		→	Passive	
Structure		Object topicalization	<i>hêrrê</i>	<i>hêrrê ~nrî</i>	<i>nrî</i>
Explicit agent		+	(+)	-	-
Impersonal subject		-	+	+	-
Patient subject		-	(+)	(+)	+
<sup>1</sup> <i>nrî</i> verbs		-----	-----	-----	-----→
<sup>2</sup> other verbs		-----	-----→		

<sup>1</sup>*nrî* verbs are those which can occur in *nrî* constructions. They can also occur in *hêrrê* and *hêrrê -nrî* constructions. That is, they go through the whole range of constructions in the table below, and the choice of the construction gives a subtle difference to the degree of passivization and the meaning.

<sup>2</sup>‘Other verbs’ are those which cannot occur in *nrî* constructions. They can only occur in topicalized object structures and *hêrrê* constructions.

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#### Note

<sup>i</sup>The orthographic symbols used in this paper: Vowels: è [ɛ], ò [ɔ], ù [u], ì [y], ë [ə]; nasal vowels: î, û, â, ô, ê (nasalized [ɛ] and [e]), ü (nasalized u). Tinrin *t, d, n* are dentals and *tr, dr, nr, rr* are retroflexes. *ch* [tʃ], *dh* [ð], *gh* [ɣ], *ng* [ŋ], *ny* [ɲ], *s* [ʃ]; *pw* [p<sup>w</sup>], *bw* [b<sup>w</sup>], *hw* [h<sup>w</sup>], *mw* [m<sup>w</sup>]. *b, bw, g, d, dr, dj* are prenasalized. Neku *r* is a trill, *j* is a fricative, *tj* is a palatalized [t], *dj* is a palatalized [d], ' is a glottal stop [ʔ].

Abbreviations used are: A 'agent', AD 'adverb', ASS 'assertive', AT 'attribute', DAT 'dative', DET 'determiner', dl 'dual', DO 'direct object', EVENT 'eventual', Fr 'French', FUT 'future', HAB 'habitual', IMPN 'impersonal pronoun', inc 'inclusive', L 'locative', LINK 'link morpheme', M.Dist 'mid-distant deixis', MOD 'modifier', NMZ 'nominalizer', O 'object', OBL 'oblique', PASS 'passive', PERF 'perfect', pl 'plural', POSS 'possessive', PROX 'proximate deixis', PST 'past', S 'subject', s 'subject pronoun', sg 'singular', sm 'subject marker', V 'verb', 1/ 2/ 3 'first/ second/ third person', - 'morpheme boundary', = 'clitic'.

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