

Voice and number agreement in Kiribati transitive verbs

Isabelle Byrne

International Christian University

Abstract

This paper focuses on syntactic structure in Kiribati, more specifically the functions of the active and passive voice within transitive verbs. This paper also focuses on the verb and object agreement and how different suffixes determine how many objects a Kiribati verb can take. In the Kiribati language, there remain two forms for the active voice, in which the verbs will take suffixes *-a* and *-i* when determining whether or not the verb is able to take singular or a number of objects. There is one form for the passive, in which verbs will take suffix *-ki* for both singular or a number of objects. This paper attempts to explore the exceptions to these rules, and consider the role of certain verbs, which cannot agree with either the suffixes or the objects. This paper reveals that there are exceptions to the rules, and there are many ways of forming an active or passive sentence in Kiribati.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on syntactic structure in Kiribati, more specifically the functions of the active and passive voice within transitive verbs. It also focuses on the verb and object agreement and how different suffixes determine how many objects a Kiribati verb can take. This paper attempts to explore the exceptions to these rules, and consider the role of certain verbs, which cannot agree with either the suffixes or the objects.

(1) Verbal suffixes of Kiribati

	Active TR	Passive
SG	-a	-ki
PL	-i	-ki

Example (1) shows how suffix *-a* is added to the end of the verb in the active voice resulting in the verb only being permitted to take one singular object. Alternatively, adding suffix *-i* in the active voice results in the verb being permitted to take a couple of objects. In regards to the passive voice, the verb will take suffix *-ki* for both singular and a number of objects. This study results from the hypothesis that there are many exceptions to these rules, and that it is not always possible to take the required suffixes in both the active and passive voice.

This research was conducted through weekly recording sessions with a native Kiribati speaker, aged 40 and originally from South Tarawa in the Republic of Kiribati. It was also done with equipment Shure SM35-XLR and a head-worn microphone (with RPM626 XLR Preamp).

2. Active

Active transitive determines whether or not a verb in the active voice can take a number of objects or just a singular one by suffix *-a* or *-i*. Both suffixes enable a sentence to reflect an action in the active voice. The verb *tangir-* ‘to like’ in (2) was used when exploring the active voice.

(2) *i tangira* ‘I like/I’m liking/ I’m wanting’

Adding the suffix *-a* to the end of the verb results in the verb only being permitted to take one singular object as in (2a); this suffix specifies that you only ‘like’ *one* thing. The suffix *-a* cannot take more than two objects.

(2) a. *i tangira boki*
 I like book
 ‘I like (this/a) book.’

Example (2b) shows that the verb *tangir* ‘to like’ refers to a number of different things, i.e. the *book* and the *pen* because the verb takes the suffix *-i*.

(2) b. *i tangiri te boki ao te ben*
 I like (the/a) book and (the/a) pen
 ‘I like (the) book and (the) pen.’

When focusing on verb and object agreement in Kiribati language, using the singular article type term ‘te’ can specify one object as in *te ika* ‘(the/a) fish’ in (2c):

(2) c. *i tangira te ika*
 I like (the/a) fish
 ‘I like (the/a) fish.’

Singular article type term ‘te’ can be omitted when the verb takes a plural object¹. Objects abide by this rule, especially when their own suffixes do not change whether they are singular or plural, and they cannot agree with any quantifiers. Example (2d) demonstrates how singular article type term ‘te’ is omitted when the object becomes plural. Example (2d) shows how singular article type term ‘te’ and suffix *-a* are used to specify that the subject *likes* one *chair*. When it becomes plural, suffix *-a* does not change to suffix *-i* and singular article type term ‘te’ is omitted to specify that the subject *likes* more than one chair.

(2) d. **Singular** (part one).
i tangira kain tekateka
 I like (the/a) chair
 ‘I like (the/a) chair.’

(2) e. **Plural** (part two).
i tangira kain tekateka
 I like chairs
 ‘I like chairs.’

Kain is used in reference to *tekateka*, ‘chair’ in English, in both singular and plural active. Through examples (2d) and (2e), an object cannot always be identified as singular or plural by simply using suffixes *-a* or *-i*.

¹ Nouns will generally lengthen the vowel to indicate that it is in a plural form.

3. Passive

Both singular and plural forms of the passive voice require the suffix *-ki*. As the object now receives the action of the verb, the third person singular subject is realized with ‘e’ in reference to the object. The following examples were used when exploring the passive:

- (3) a. *e kanaki* ‘3rd sg.- object+ being eaten’
 b. *e koreaki* ‘3rd sg.-object+ being written’

- (3) a. *e kanaki te Ika*
 3rd sg. eaten (the) fish
 ‘The fish is being eaten.’

Here, suffix *-ki* is used in the singular passive voice. Example (3a) shows how subject ‘i’ is omitted and replaced by subject ‘e’, referring to 3rd person singular. The passive voice still follows a similar pattern to the active voice as specifying a singular object is also done through the singular article type term ‘te’. The quantifiers *taian* ‘(plural article)’ or *irouia* ‘many’, are also used to mean that there are a number of objects and the subject marker is ‘a’:

- (3) b. *a koreaki reeta irouia aomata*
 3rd pl. writing letter many people
 ‘The letters are being written by many people.’

Example (3b) shows that if subject ‘a’ is used with *irouia*, ‘many’, after the verb, the sentence has plural subjects as well as plural objects. If the sentence previously consisted of singular article type term ‘te’, indicating that it was singular passive, then it must be omitted and then replaced with *irouia* or *taian*, as well as substitute subject ‘e’ for subject ‘a’.

4. Verbs with different final vowel

In section 3, verbal ending in Kiribati follows a pattern in which *-a* takes a singular object and *-i* takes a plural object. In the Kiribati language, verbs can also end with other types of vowels: *-e* or *-u*. This section discusses these exceptional patterns by closely examining other types of verbs.

4.1 Active

The following examples were used when exploring other verbs in the active voice:

- (4) a. *i matakū* ‘I’m watching’
 b. *i taetae* ‘I’m talking’
 c. *i anene-i* ‘I’m singing’
 d. *i kana (sg object) / kang (pl object)* ‘I’m eating’

Verbs ending with suffix *-u* cannot simply change to suffix *-i* in the active voice when taking a number of objects. Example (4a) shows how verb *matakū*, ‘watch’ in English, cannot take suffix *-i* in the active voice:

- (4) a (part one). **i matakū TVs*
 I watch TVs
 ‘I watch TVs.’

Verbs like *mataku* can only take a number of objects in the active voice if it has quantifiers, such as *taian*, and uses a different verb. Quantifier *taian* denotes that verb to have a number of objects. The example below shows the plural active voice with the verb *mataku*:

- (4) a (part two). *I mataki taian TV*
 I watch (the) many TV
 ‘I watch many TVS.’

Other exceptions to basic grammar rules in the active voice include suffix *-e* not having to change to suffix *-i* when taking a number of objects:

- (4) b. *i taetae ma Mere ao Tiabo*
 I talk (with) Mere and Tiabo
 ‘I’m talking (with) Mere and Tiabo.’

The structure does not change despite there being no change in the suffix; a number of objects can agree with the verb even without the suffix *-i*. Some verbs will add suffix *-i* to the end of the verb after *-e* but this does not apply to all. Some verbs with suffix *-e* will add an *-i* rather than change to suffix *-i* to be plural active.

- (4) c. *i anene-i taian kuna*
 I sing many song
 ‘I’m singing many songs.’

There exist some verbs that cannot take quantifiers and have different suffixes when structuring a plural active voice sentence. Verbs, such as *kana*, omit singular article like term ‘te’ and change from suffix *-a* to suffix *-g* in order to make the objects plural in the active voice. Adding quantifier *taian* would not be grammatically correct. Suffix *-i* is not required for the plural active voice here. The examples in (4d) show a transition from singular active, where suffix *-a* is still used, to plural active, where suffix *-g* is used instead of suffix *-i*:

- (4) d. **Active** (part one).
i kana te ika
 I eat (the) fish
 ‘I’m eating (the) fish.’

- d. **Plural** (part two).
i kang ika
 I eat fish(es)
 ‘I’m eating fish.’

The verb *nakonako* ‘to walk’ that ends with the vowel *-o* remains as it is when it takes the preposition *nakon* ‘to’ and a singular object. The example in (5) further shows that suffix *-a* is not always required for singular objects. This verb in particular requires preposition *nakon*, ‘to’ in English, and singular article type term ‘te’ in order to complete the action of *nakonako*.

- (5) *i nakonako nakon te sitoa*
 I walk to (the) store
 ‘I’m walking to (the) store.’

If the suffix *-a* were to be attached to the verb in the form *nakonakoa*, the resulting word would give the sentence a completely different meaning, and would be translated to *gossip* in English. In the Kiribati language, all grammar tools must be applied otherwise the sentence cannot be translated at all; without preposition *nakon* and singular article type term ‘te’, the sentence will not be understood at all.

4.2 Passive

The following examples were used when exploring other verbs in the passive voice:

- (6) a. *i taku* ‘I’m saying’
 b. *i taetae* ‘I’m saying’
 c. *e oroaki* ‘He’s cutting’

The fate of suffix *-u* depends on the verb in the passive voice; some verbs cannot possibly change to suffix *-ki* from *-u*. Suffix *-ki* is needed on most occasions in order to make a passive voice sentence, and sometimes a verb must change completely in order to take this suffix. The examples in (6a) show a transition from an active to a passive voice sentence:

- (6) a. **Active** (part one)
 i taku nakoi Mere
 I say to Mere
 ‘I’m saying (something) to Mere.’
- a. **Active** (part two)
 e taku nakoi Mere
 he say to Mere
 ‘He’s saying (something) to Mere.’
- a. **Passive** (part three)
 e kataetae-ki Mere
 3rd sg. say-pass Mere
 ‘Something is being said to Mere.’

In the Kiribati language, the verb has to change completely as merely substituting subject ‘i’ for ‘e’ only changes the sentence’s meaning from *I’m saying something to someone* to *he is saying something to someone*, which is still an example of an active voice sentence. The verb must be changed from *taku* to *kataetae* and have the suffix *-ki* in order to become passive and must also lose preposition ‘to’. The verb therefore, can only exist in the passive voice with the suffix *-ki* at the end.

Whilst the majority of verbs ending with the suffix *-e* can make a successful transition to the suffix *-ki* in the passive voice, there remain certain verbs with the suffix *-e* which must also use different verbs in order to become passive. The examples in (6b) show a transition from the active to the passive voice for verb *taetae*:

- (6) b. **Active** (part one).
 i taetae ma Mere
 I talk/say to Mere
 ‘I’m talking to Mere.’
- b. **Passive** (part two).
 e kataetaeaki Mere
 3rd sg. talk/say Mere
 ‘Mere is being spoken to.’

The transition from the active to the passive voice reveals how the verb *kataetae* is used instead of the verb *taetae* and loses the preposition ‘to’. Verb *taetae*² cannot use suffix *-ki* in the passive voice; to write the sentence as **e taetaeki Mere* would not be grammatically correct in Kiribati. A reviewer noted that the verb *kataetae* contains the verb *taetae*, and suggested that the passive form for *taetae* has an exceptional

² This falls under example (6c).

circumfix *ka-...-ki*. This is a possible analysis, but confirming this line of thinking needs to be deferred until future research.

Certain verbs ending with suffix *-o*, such as *oro*, will not take suffix *-ki* in the passive voice. Passive voice can include using suffix *-aki*. Whilst *oro* will take suffix *-a* in the active voice, it must take suffix *-aki* in the passive voice³:

- (6) c. *e oroaki te ben*
 3rd sg. cut (the) copra
 ‘The copra is being cut.’

5. Discussion

The general rule of following the required suffixes in the active and passive voice, whilst very predominant when focusing on transitive verbs, does have exceptions when using certain verbs.

Quantifiers can determine a verb taking a number of objects or just a singular one, such as verbs with original suffix ending *-u*, which cannot take required suffix *-i* in the active voice. Singular article type term ‘te’ can determine a verb taking a singular object in both the active and passive voice. The structure of the sentence in both the active and passive voice therefore, is not fully reliant on what suffixes are used.

Suffixes do not necessarily have to change in to become active as seen in example (4b) *I taetae ma Mere ao Tiabo*, for suffix *-e* does not have to take suffix *-i* in order to take a number of objects. The examples in (4c) obtain the pattern of omitting singular article type term ‘te’ to show that it is an active plural voice sentence and does not have to take suffix *-i* as is required by other verbs. Adding suffix *-i* prevents the verb from becoming active, and, therefore, the rule of such a required suffix cannot be applied to all verbs. As shown through example (5) *i nakonako nakon te stitooa*, adding suffix *-a* is not always required for a sentence to become singular active; to add suffix *-a* would result in the sentence having a completely different meaning. Overall, the structure of the sentence in the active voice therefore, is not fully reliant on using suffixes *-a* or *-i*, for they can actually prevent the sentence from being in the active voice.

Suffixes *-u* and *-e* also face issues in the passive voice with some verbs not having the capability of change to suffix *-ki*. The examples in (6a) and (6b) reveal that different verbs have to be used in order to form certain sentences in the active or passive voice. The rule regarding suffix *-ki* the passive voice is more predominant than the rule regarding suffixes *-a* and *-i* in the active voice; there is more restriction in taking suffix *-ki*, rather than another suffix unless there are exceptions to that verb. However, suffix *-aki* can be added to the verb in the passive voice if it does become an exception to the rule; verbs with suffix *-o*, shown in examples like (6c) *e oroaki te ben*, must take suffix *-aki* otherwise it cannot become passive.

6. Conclusion

The paper focused on the functions of the active and passive voice within transitive verbs. It paid close attention to verb and object agreement and how different suffixes determine how many objects a Kiribati verb can take. The initial data, as explained by Cowell in his analysis of transitive verbs (1951:7), saw the importance of verbs acquiring suffixes *-a* and *-i* in the active voice, and suffix *-ki* in the passive voice, when forming a sentence. With this data, we were able to explore certain aspects further and consider the exceptions to these rules.

(7)

	Active TR	Passive
SG	-a	-ki
PL	-i	-ki

³ During sessions with the Kiribati consultant, only the passive form of *oro* ‘to cut’ was elicited. A reviewer asked whether *-a* after *oro* is a singular object suffix. While this remains as a possibility, the confirmation will be deferred for future research.

There are very specific requirements when there are exceptions to the rules.

The active voice has various exceptions to the rules of suffixes *-a* and *-i*, for certain quantifiers cannot be used for some verbs. Certain suffixes struggle to enable the verb to take a number of objects or just a singular one in the active voice. Further investigation into whether there are more verbs that can make a smoother transition into the active voice would be very interesting.

The passive voice does not merely rely on suffix *-ki* in order to make a sentence passive; suffix *-aki* can also be used. Different verbs tend to be used when verbs with suffixes *-e* and *-u* want to exist in the passive voice. Further investigation into whether or not you could have a verb in the passive voice without suffixes *-ki* or *-aki* would be very beneficial.

References

- Cowell, Reid (1951) *The Structure of Gilbertese*. Tarawa, Gilbert Islands: Rongorongo Press.
Ministry of Education of Kiribati (n.d.) *Te Kuramwa ibukin taetaen Kiribati*. Tarawa: Curriculum Development Resource Unit.
Oliva (1971) *Gilbertese-English dictionary*. Tarawa: Sacred Heart Mission [Translation of the Gilbertese-French dictionary compiled by E.Sabatier].