Tiwa *khúp*: A degree modifier in the verb phrase

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ABSTRACT

We examine the intensifier *khúp* in Tiwa (Tibeto-Burman; India), arguing that despite its broader distribution, it is a true modifier of degrees with the same semantics as English *very*. We attribute its broader distribution and apparent flexibility in readings to its syntax: while *very* is an adjectival modifier, *khúp* modifies verb phrases, allowing it to combine with a broader range of (often derived) predicates of degrees.

1 Introduction

Intensifiers within and across languages are not a unified class, neither semantically nor syntactically. While many intensifiers, for instance, operate directly on degrees, others do not (McNabb 2012, Beltrama & Bochnak 2015). For example, while English *very* is restricted to modifying gradable predicates like *tall* (Kennedy & McNally, 2005), *really* can also modify non-gradable predicates like *dead*. This contrast is shown in (1).

(1) a. Premica is {**very**, **really**} tall.
b. The lizard is {**#very**, **really**} dead.

Intensifiers also have different syntactic distributions (Bolinger 1972, McNabb 2012). For example, while *very* is largely restricted to modifying adjectives and adverbs, *really* has a much broader distribution. For example, *really* can modify verbs, while *very* can't, as shown in (2).

(2) This {***very**, **really**} interests me.

This level of variation raises a variety of questions that warrant detailed cross-linguistic study. What are the semantic strategies for intensifying predicates? How do these semantic strategies correlate (if at all) with their syntactic distribution?

In this paper, we add to the growing literature on intensification across languages by examining the intensifier *khúp* in Tiwa, a Tibeto-Burman language of Assam, India. At a first glance, it is immediately apparent that *khúp* differs significantly from English *very* in its distribution and the range of interpretations it receives. Specifically, while *khúp* can and does modify gradable stative predicates, as shown in (3) with the gradable stative verb *chu* 'tall', it also modifies eventive predicates, as shown in (4) with the verb *misâ* 'dance'.[1]

[1]Tiwa examples are given in the orthography used in Joseph's (2014) dictionary. Abbreviations are: ACC 'accusative', ALL 'allative', DAT 'dative', EX 'existential', FOC 'focus', GEN 'genitive', IPFV 'imperfective', NEG 'negation', NEUT 'neutral aspect', NMLZ 'nominalizer', PART 'discourse particle', PFV 'perfective', SG 'singular'.

(3) Rupson **khúp** chu-w.
Rupson KHUP tall-NEUT
'Rupson is very tall.'

(4) Maria **khúp** misâ-ga.
Maria KHUP dance-PFV
'Maria danced a lot.'

We argue that despite these apparent differences, *khúp* has exactly the same semantics as English *very*: it operates directly on degrees, and thus can only combine with gradable predicates. We argue that *khúp*'s broader distribution, rather than reflecting a semantic difference, can be explained entirely in syntactic terms. Specifically, while *very* largely modifies adjectives and adverbs, *khúp* is a VP modifier, allowing it to combine with a much wider range of (often derived) predicates of degrees. The Tiwa data thus show that *very*-like intensifiers that narrowly operate on degrees can appear in the VP, rather than being restricted to adjectival modifiers. We suggest that Tiwa's tendency to lexicalize gradable stative predicates as verbs, rather than adjectives, is the likely source of this syntactic variation in degree-modifiers.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. In section 2, we provide some background on Tiwa, the data, and the distribution and interpretation of *khúp*. In section 3, we provide evidence that despite its relatively broad distribution, *khúp* can only modify predicates of degrees. We present our analysis in section 4, adopting Kennedy & McNally's (2005) analysis of *very* as a degree modifier, and showing how it captures the interpretation of *khúp* with the broader range of predicates it appears with. We also provide evidence for *khúp*'s syntactic position with the VP. We briefly conclude in section 5.

2 Background on Tiwa and *khúp*

Tiwa is a Tibeto-Burman language of the Boro-Garo subgroup (Post & Burling 2017), spoken by over 30,000 people primarily in West Karbi Anglong district, Assam, India.[2] The data presented here come from the first author's original fieldwork with four speakers of Tiwa in Umswai, Assam, between 2015 and 2023. The data come primarily from elicitation, with key semantic data gathered using the methodology of semantic fieldwork laid out by Matthewson (2004).

As introduced above, Tiwa has an intensifier *khúp* that in many cases gets translated by speakers as English 'very', with a typical degree-modifier reading. Indeed, *khúp* freely combines with gradable stative predicates like *chu* 'tall' (shown in (3) above), *kró* 'good', *chál* 'far' and *hóma* 'hungry', as shown in (5)-(7) below. Note that syntactically, these predicates are all verbs, rather than adjectives; Tiwa has very few true adjectives (Dawson, 2020). We will return to this point in section 4 below.

[2]The 2011 census lists 33,900 Tiwa speakers.

(5) Taglí mai **khúp** krói-do.
this.year paddy KHUP good-IPFV
'The paddy this year is very good.'

(6) Pe tes **khúp** chál-do.
3SG country KHUP far-IPFV
'That country is very far.'

(7) Ang **khúp** mai hóma-ga.
1SG KHUP rice hungry-PFV
'I am very hungry.'

However, unlike *very*, *khúp* has a much broader distribution. Most strikingly, it can appear with non-stative predicates like *misâ* 'dance', as shown in (4) above, and *krá* 'cry', as shown in (8).

(8) Pe korkhyá **khúp** krái-do.
3SG child KHUP cry-IPFV
'That child is crying so much.' [OM 2022.2.12]

Eventive predicates modified by *khúp* can receive a couple of different readings. Specifically, they can receive a reading in which there is a single event that can be measured in some way as exceeding a contextually determined standard, or one on which there are, contextually speaking, many events. For example, in (8), *khúp*, in combination with the imperfective marker *-do*, yields a reading on which there is a single ongoing event of crying that is particularly intense in the context. In contrast, in (9), the predicate is marked with 'neutral aspect' which, when combined with non-stative predicates, allows for habitual readings (Dawson, 2020). This sentence allows for a reading which conveys that the child cries frequently: it is the number of crying events that is noteworthy in the context, not their intensity.

(9) Pe korkhyá **khúp** krá-w.
3SG child KHUP cry-NEUT
'That child cries so much.'

A variety of examples with *khúp* modifying non-stative predicates are given in (10)-(14) below, illustrating the wide range of predicates that it can combine with.

(10) Ang **khúp** pe khûri-go phí-ga.
1SG KHUP that cup-ACC break-PFV
'I broke that cup so many times.'

(11) Ang **khúp** torgâ aw-ga.
1SG KHUP door open-PFV
'I opened the door so many times.'

(12) Ang **khúp** kó-ga.
1SG KHUP fall-PFV
'I fell down so many times.'

(13) Saldi **khúp** plaw-ga.
Saldi KHUP forget-PFV
'Saldi has forgotten so much.'

(14) Ang kashóng **khúp** pre-ga.
1SG dress KHUP buy-PFV
'I bought a lot of dresses.'

At first glance, these data suggest that *khúp* is not limited to operating on degrees. The readings in (4) and (9)-(14) in particular suggest that *khúp* can target events and entities, as well as degrees. Indeed, it's known that languages can use different semantic means to intensify predicates, which can lead to a wider range of uses. While intensifiers like *very* operates directly on degrees, intensifiers like Hebrew *mamaš*, English *really*, Washo *šemu*, and Italian *-issimo* likely operate on contexts (McNabb 2012, Beltrama & Bochnak 2015). This different core semantics leads to a wider distribution for these intensifiers than degree-operators like *very*. The data presented in this section suggest that such an analysis might be appropriate for *khúp* as well. We argue in the next section, however, that despite its wider distribution, *khúp* does directly operate on degrees, and further that it can and should be analyzed as having the same semantics as *very*.

3 *khúp* is a degree modifier

In section 2, we showed that *khúp* appears with a wider range of predicates than *very* does. Specifically, in addition to appearing with gradable stative predicates, it also appears with a wide variety of non-stative predicates. However, *khúp* is not as unrestricted in its distribution as other intensifiers like English *really* and Hebrew *mamaš*. Most notably, unlike those other intensifiers, *khúp* cannot be used to emphasize the truth of a proposition. This can be seen clearly in the dialog in (15). Here, speaker (a) asserts that Samsing went home, but speaker (b) disagrees and asserts the opposite. While an intensifier like *really* can be used in contexts such as these to emphasize the truth of speaker (a)'s original assertion, *khúp* is judged infelicitous.

(15) a. Samsing nó-jîng lí-ga.
Samsing house-ALL go-PFV
'Samsing went home.'

b. Cha, lí-wa-n' cha.
NEG.EX go-NMLZ-GEN NEG.EX
'No, he hasn't gone.'

a. # **Khúp** lí-ga.
KHUP go-IPFV
Intended: 'He *really* did go.'

Similarly, speakers also judge *khúp* infelicitous when it is combined with a predicate like *thi* 'die', at least in an out of the blue context. Instead, the only reading that sentences like (16) can receive is the impossible one on which the subject died many times, in line with the multiple-event readings described in section 2.

(16) # Rupson **khúp** thi-ga.
Rupson KHUP die-PFV
Intended: 'Rupson really did die.'
Only reading: 'Rupson died many times.'

Note in contrast that if the subject is not singular,[3] *khúp* freely combines with *thi* 'die', as it easily allows a reading on which the number of creatures that died exceeds contextual standards, as shown in (17).

(17) Khúgri-râw **khúp** thi-ga.
dog-PL KHUP die-PFV
'So many dogs died.'

We've seen that *khúp* has a broader distribution than *very*, but a narrower distribution than non-degree-based intensifiers like *really.* Taken together, what all the predicates that *khúp* can modify have in common is that they are gradable: all the predicates that *khúp* can modify can also appear in comparatives, which is a standard diagnostic for gradability (Kennedy & McNally, 2005; Beltrama & Bochnak, 2015). This includes lexically gradable stative predicates (i.e., those that are inherently type $\langle d, et \rangle$), like *chu* 'tall', but also includes eventive predicates and stative predicates that are (presumably) not lexically gradable. For example, the non-stative verb *lí* 'go' can both appear in comparative constructions, as shown in (18), as well as be modified by *khúp*, as shown in (19). The comparative compares the number of times that the subject went to Guwahati; the effect of *khúp* is to signal that the subject went to Guwahati many times.

(18) Ang Guwahati-jíng konông-a khúli **parâ** lí-ga.
1SG Guwahati-ALL other-DAT than more go-PFV
'I went to Guwahati more than the others.'

(19) Ang Guwahati-jíng **khúp** lí-ga.
1SG Guwahati-ALL KHUP go-PFV
'I went to Guwahati so many times.'

[3]That is, the subject is either explicitly marked plural, or a bare non-human noun (which are number neutral in Tiwa; Dawson & Gibson to appear).

Similarly, the possessive construction, which is presumably not lexically gradable in the way a predicate like *chu* 'tall' is, can appear in both comparatives, as in (20), and modified by *khúp*, as in (21). In the comparative, the quantity of possessed objects are being compared. With *khúp*, this quantity is being signaled as high, in the context.

(20) Context: The consultant is asked who has more eggs, Lastoi or Saldi?

Lastoi-ne **parâ** tudí tong-o.
Lastoi-GEN more egg exist-NEUT
'Lastoi has more eggs.'

(21) Rupson-e **khúp** tudí tong-o.
Rupson-GEN KHUP egg exist-NEUT
'Rupson has a lot of eggs.'

Comparatives like those in (18) and (20) involve quantification over degrees. Given *khúp*'s semantics as an intensifier, its inability to get veridicality readings like the ones attempted in (15) and (16) above, and the fact that it patterns with comparatives in what predicates it modifies, we assume that *khúp* operates directly on degrees.

Before turning to the details of our analysis, it's worth noting that while *khúp* is a degree modifier, and can combine with any predicate that can appear in a comparative, *khúp* itself does not have comparative semantics. This is evident from the infelicity of sentences with *khúp* in scenarios like the one in (22). In this context, Rupson is objectively taller than the people he is around, but only by one centimeter. This small difference in height is not enough to license *khúp*, as shown in (22a), but it is enough to license a comparative, as shown in (22b).[4]

(22) Context: Rupson is 135cm, and he's in a group with other people between 130 and 134cm.

a. # Rupson **khúp** chu-w.
Rupson KHUP tall-NEUT
'Rupson is very tall.'

b. ✓ Rupson **parâ** chu-w.
Rupson more tall-NEUT
'Rupson is taller.'

Rather than expressing comparison between the degree to which the predicate holds true and some contextually determined standard, *khúp* instead requires that the predicate hold to a much higher degree than that standard, just like English *very*.

[4]Note that 'crisp judgment' data like these provide clear evidence that comparative constructions in Tiwa do involve quantification over degrees (unlike some other languages; Beck et al. 2009). See Dawson 2020 and Dawson 2021 for discussion and analysis of comparatives in Tiwa.

4 Analysis

In the previous section, we established that *khúp* shows one of the key restrictions that *very* does; namely, it can only combine with gradable predicates. In section 2, however, we saw that *khúp* has a wider distribution than *very*, in that it can appear with a wide range of non-stative predicates. In this section, we develop an analysis that explains *khúp*'s distribution, arguing that semantically, it conveys that a gradable predicate holds to a degree significantly higher than the contextual standard, just like *very,* but that it differs in its syntax. Specifically, we argue that while *very* is largely restricted to modifying adjectives and adverbs, *khúp* modifies VPs, allowing it to appear with a much wider range of gradable predicates than *very*.

4.1 Basic semantic analysis

Given that *khúp* is an intensifier that (i) can only combine with gradable predicates, and (ii) requires that the predicate hold to a degree significantly higher than the contextual standard, we assume that *khúp* has the same semantics as a modifier of predicates of degrees like *very*. Specifically, we adopt for *khúp* Kennedy & McNally's (2005) analysis of *very* in proposing that *khúp* combines with a type $\langle d, et \rangle$ gradable predicate and yields a predicate which holds to a degree significantly above a contextually determined standard. A formal definition for *khúp* is given in (23), following Beltrama & Bochnak (2015).

(23) $[\![\text{khúp}]\!]^c = \lambda G_{\langle d,et \rangle}.\lambda x.\exists d[G(x, d) \wedge d >! \text{standard}(G, c)]$

This analysis straightforwardly results in the desired reading for gradable stative predicates, like *chu* 'tall', as shown in (24), which provides the truth conditions of (3), repeated here from the introduction. Sentence (3) holds true if there is some degree to which Rupson is tall that greatly exceeds what counts as tall in the context.

(3) Rupson **khúp** chu-w.
Rupson KHUP tall-NEUT
'Rupson is very tall.'

(24) $[\![(3)]\!]^c = \exists d[\text{tall}(\text{Rupson}, d) \wedge d >! \text{standard}(\text{tall}, c)]$

A key supporting piece of evidence for this approach comes from *khúp*'s behavior with maximum-standard predicates. As Kennedy & McNally (2005) note, *very* sounds degraded when it combines with a maximum-standard predicate. This follows from the analysis above: maximum-standard predicates are true only if they hold to the maximum degree on their scale; it's therefore odd to modify these predicates to say they hold to some significantly higher degree than that. Just like *very, khúp* is judged somewhat degraded when it combines with maximum-standard predicates. Example (25) shows that *khúp* is judged felicitous with the minimum-standard predicate *ler* 'wet'. In contrast, the examples in (26) show that *khúp* is judged degraded with the maximum-standard predicates *rán* 'dry' and

porê 'full'.[5]

(25) Pe ré **khúp** ler.
that cloth KHUP wet
'That cloth is very wet.' [minimum-standard]

(26) a. ?? Pe ré **khúp** rán-ga.
that cloth KHUP dry-PFV
?? 'That cloth is very dry.' [maximum-standard]

b. ?? Hêbe khûri **khúp** porê-ga.
this cup KHUP full-PFV
?? 'This cup is very full.' [maximum-standard]

Speakers instead have offered alternative ways to emphasize how completely the predicate holds true, like the sentences in (27), which use focus marking and a discourse particle.

(27) a. Pe ré rán-ga**-lô-bó**.
that cloth dry-PFV-FOC-PART
'That cloth is completely dry.'

b. Hêbe khûri porê-ga**-lo-bó**.
this cup full-PFV-FOC-PART
'This cup is completely full.'

Note that data like these also provide evidence against an analysis of *khúp* as an intensifier that operates on contexts (cf. McNabb 2012, Beltrama & Bochnak 2015): such intensifiers, including *really,* readily combine with maximum-standard predicates.

4.2 Non-stative predicates

Predicates like *chu* 'tall' are inherently gradable: they are type $\langle d,et\rangle$ and have lexically-determined scales. Not every predicate is lexically gradable, however, including the eventive predicates that we saw *khúp* combines with in section 2. While predicates like *misâ* 'dance' and *lí* 'go' are not lexically $\langle d,et\rangle$, they can appear in comparative constructions, which require a type $\langle d,et\rangle$ predicate (Cresswell 1977, von Stechow 1984, among many others). That such predicates can appear in comparatives suggests that there is some silent degree operator present in comparative constructions that derives a type $\langle d,et\rangle$ predicate from what was otherwise not a predicate of degrees. We assume that this same silent degree operator that is present in comparative constructions is available for predicates that combine with *khúp,* which likewise combines with a $\langle d,et\rangle$ predicate.

We leave the compositional details of this silent degree operator to future work, as they are relevant for degree-constructions more broadly in Tiwa. For our purposes, it is enough

[5] As in English, Tiwa speakers give variable judgments on these, rather than judging them completely infelicitous. We assume there's a pragmatic halo effect, where what counts as dry and full is variable according to context (Kennedy & McNally 2005).

to note that whatever derives a $\langle d, et \rangle$ predicate from a non-gradable predicate in comparatives and other degree constructions can serve the same purpose for *khúp*. Whatever the compositional details, the resulting semantics for non-stative predicates in comparative constructions and with *khúp* are comparable, as shown in (28) and (29).

(18) Ang Guwahati-jíng konông-a khúli **parâ** lí-ga.
1SG Guwahati-ALL other-DAT than more go-PFV
'I went to Guwahati more than the others.'

(28) $[\![(18)]\!]^c$ = ∃d[go(I, G., d-times) & ¬go(others, G., d-times)]

(19) Ang Guwahati-jíng **khúp** lí-ga.
1SG Guwahati-ALL KHUP go-PFV
'I went to Guwahati so many times.'

(29) $[\![(19)]\!]^c$ = ∃d[go(I, G., d-times) & d >! standard(go(G.), c)]

In both cases, the number of times that the subject went to Guwahati serves as the gradable component that the comparative and *khúp* can target.[6]

4.3 Differing distributions

We have argued above that *khúp* and *very* have the same core semantics. We have also seen, however, that *khúp* has a much broader distribution than *very.* Specifically, while *khúp* can combine with any gradable predicate – including those that are lexically gradable, and those that are derived – *very* cannot. Instead, *very* can (for the most part) only occur with lexically gradable predicates like *tall.* Rather than attributing this difference in distribution to semantics, we propose instead that it is syntactic: while *very* modifies adjectives (and adverbs), as represented in (30), *khúp* modifies verb phrases, as represented in (31).

(30) Rupson [$_{VP}$ is [$_{AP}$ **very** tall.]]

(31) Rupson [$_{VP}$ **khúp** chu-w.]
Rupson KHUP tall-NEUT

This syntactic difference explains the differing distributions of *very* and *khúp*, and in particular explains why *khúp* has a much broader distribution than *very:* a much wider range of predicates can appear in verb phrases than in adjective phrases, and they allow for whatever operator is responsible for deriving gradable predicates from non-gradable ones.

The most obvious piece of evidence that *khúp* is not an adjectival modifier is that the vast majority of predicates that it combines with do not contain an adjective; instead, they are verbal. This includes most gradable stative predicates, like *chu* 'tall' and *phung* 'fat', which inflect for tense and aspect, and do not appear with the copular verb (Dawson, 2020). For example, we saw that *chu* 'tall' is inflected with neutral aspect in (3). Example (32) shows *phung* 'fat' inflected with perfective aspect, yielding an inchoative reading.

[6]Given the available readings, this analysis would ideally be implemented in an event semantic framework, but we leave that to future work.

(32) Sonasing **khúp** phung-ga.
Sonasing KHUP fat-PFV
'Sonasing has become very fat.'

Most gradable stative predicates in Tiwa are syntactically verbs, but there are a small number of true adjectives which cannot inflect for tense and aspect, and which occur with the copular verb when in predicative position (Dawson, 2020). True gradable adjectives in Tiwa, like *kumún* 'well', can be modified by *khúp*, as shown in (33).

(33) Ang **khúp** kumún hóng-do.
1SG KHUP well COP-IPFV
'I am very well.'

We assume that in these cases, *khúp* is modifying the entire VP which contains the adjectival predicate and the copular verb *hóng* 'be'.[7]

It's clear that *khúp* is not restricted to modifying adjectives. Instead, we've claimed that it modifies the verb phrase. There are two main pieces of evidence that *khúp* is a verb phrase adjunct, rather than merging higher in the structure (e.g., in AspP or TP). The first is that default word order places *khúp* between the subject and any (non-subject) internal arguments of the verb (i.e., on the left edge of the VP). While more marked word order variations are possible, we assume these are derived by scrambling.

The second piece of evidence that *khúp* is located in the VP comes from a split in how *khúp* interacts with internal vs. external arguments. Specifically, only internal arguments can be targeted in deriving a degree predicate that *khúp* modifies, suggesting that *khúp* merges before external arguments. This contrast is clearly seen in the different readings available to unergative and unaccusative predicates modified by *khúp*. As shown in (34), when *khúp* modifies unaccusative predicates like *phi* 'come', there are several distinct readings available. On one reading, *khúp* is interpreted as intensifying the number of coming events that a single dog participates in. On the other reading, which is key for us, it is interpreted as intensifying the number of dogs that participate in the coming event.

(34) Khúgri$_i$ [$_{VP}$ **khúp** t_i phi-do.]
dog KHUP come-IPFV
✓ 'The dog is coming a lot.'
✓ 'Many dogs are coming.' [unaccusative predicate]

In contrast, when *khúp* modifies unergative predicates like *shúng* 'bark', as in (35), it can only receive a reading on which a single dog barks a lot; *khúp* cannot yield a reading that targets the subject.

(35) Khúgri [$_{VP}$ **khúp** shúng-do.]
dog KHUP bark-IPFV

[7]Note that the copular verb can be omitted in Tiwa in present tense. This has happened in example (25) above, whose main predicate is a syntactic adjective *ler* 'dry'. We assume that the copula is syntactically present in these cases, if unpronounced.

✓ 'The dog is barking a lot.'
✗ 'Many dogs are barking.' [unergative predicate]

This contrast between unaccusative and unergative predicates is explained if *khúp* adjoins in the VP, merging before any external arguments, but able to affect the interpretation of internal arguments.

We've argued in this section that the distributional differences between *khúp* and *very* follow from their syntax. While *khúp* is a VP modifier, and thus can occur with a wider array of predicates, *very* modifies adjectives and adverbs. Minimal pairs like those in (36)-(38) suggest that this limitation of *very* is a syntactic restriction, not a semantic one.

(36) a. This [$_{VP}$ is [$_{AP}$ (very) interesting to me.]]
b. This [$_{VP}$ (*very) interests me.]

(37) a. I will [$_{VP}$ get [$_{AP}$ (very) tired.]]
b. I will [$_{VP}$ (*very) tire.]

(38) a. My dog [$_{VP}$ is [$_{AP}$ (very) barky.]][8]
b. My dog [$_{VP}$ (*very) barks.]

While the (a) and (b) sentences in these examples contain the same base predicate and have very nearly the same meaning, *very* can only appear with the predicate in its adjectival form.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, we've argued that despite its apparent flexibility in the types of predicates it appears with, *khúp* operates directly on degrees. Specifically, we have argued that it has the same semantics as a degree-modifier like *very*, but that it differs in its syntactic placement. This analysis captures both *khúp*'s similarities to and differences from *very*: its identical semantics ensures it can only combine with gradable predicates and sounds degraded with maximum-standard predicates, while its differing syntactic position explains why it combines with a far wider array of gradable predicates, including those that are derived.

Overall, the Tiwa data show that degree-modifiers of the *very*-type can appear in verb phrases, suggesting that *very*'s distributional restrictions follow from syntactic constraints rather than semantic ones. That *khúp* has such a different syntax from *very* is not surprising, as the vast majority of lexically gradable stative predicates in Tiwa are syntactically verbs. Together with an independently necessary silent operator that derives degree predicates that can be used in comparatives, *khúp*'s status as a verb phrase modifier accounts for its ability to modify eventive predicates as well as gradable stative predicates.

[8]This is a naturally occuring example, found at https://forums.digitalspy.com/discussion/334362/barking-dog (last accessed on August 18, 2025).

Acknowledgements

Thanks to our Tiwa teachers Bibiana Maslai, Mary Maslai, Olphindro Malang, and the late Juliana Maslai. Thanks also to audiences at Western Washington University and FASAL 15, as well as two anonymous FASAL abstract reviewers, for helpful comments and feedback. Any errors are ours alone.

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