

When intransitives behave like passive: De-causativization in Japanese

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Cross-linguistically, verbs like ‘break’, ‘burn’, ‘melt’, and ‘open’ typically participate in inchoative/causative alternation, but verbs like ‘dance’ and ‘work’ do not. One salient semantic property of the former ‘inchoative/causative verb’ pairs is that an agentive meaning is not encoded in the intransitive verbs.

- (1) a. John broke the vase.
b. The vase broke.

Due to the difference in the meanings of the pairs of verbs, it is often assumed that two distinct semantic representations, i.e. decomposed Logical Structures in RRG, are related to yield the transitivity alternation (see e.g. Van Valin 1993).

- (2) [**do'** (x, ϕ)] CAUSE [BECOME **broken'** (y)] \leftrightarrow [BECOME **broken'** (y)]

Since the LS on the left contains two variables, which are realized as marcorole arguments, it represents the meaning of a transitive clause like (1a). The LS on the right does not have part of LS representing an activity, so that the LS is related to an intransitive clause like (1b).

Nevertheless, it is observed (e.g. Haspelmath 1993) that in certain languages, intransitive (inchoative) verbs sometimes include an agentive meaning, while English lacks this option entirely. Japanese has such intransitive verbs, as in (3).

- (3) a. Kodomo-ga nantoka (*karera-ni) tasukat-ta.
child-TOP somehow them-by be.rescued-PST
‘The child was somehow rescued (by them).’
b. Kodomo-ga nantoka (karera-ni) tasuke-rare-ta.
child-TOP somehow them-by rescue-PASS-PST
‘The child was somehow rescued (by them).’

In Japanese, intransitive verbs are related to transitive verbs via morphological affixation of an intransitivizing or a transitivizing suffix. The intransitive *tasukar-u* in (3a) differs morphologically from the passive verb *tasuke-rare-ru* in (3b), derived by combining the transitive *tasukeru* with the passive *rare*. The described event in (3a) (in the intended sense) cannot be realized unless some agentive action is involved (and thus the meaning of the intransitive clause in (3a) can only be expressed by a passive clause in English). Despite the verb’s carrying an agentive meaning, the agent, which is implied by the meaning of the verb, can never be realized.

On the other hand, there is also a class of intransitive verbs that allow an agent to be manifested with morphologically oblique marking, as in (4a).

- (4) a. Gootoo-ga (keikan-ni) tukamat-ta.
burglar-NOM police-by be.caught-PAST
‘The burglar was caught (by the police).’

The fact suggests that in (7a), the *ni*-marked argument should be a realization of the variable *z* in **be-at'** (*z*_i, *y*), which indicates that (7a) is an intransitive clause (and not a passive), and carries the meaning of 'the event of the bear's getting caught takes place at some location, which could be identified as the agent.

I also present other empirical data showing that the relevant *ni*-marked argument is a location rather than a genuine agent. The core claim in this paper is that since Japanese has a semantic means of equating the location with the agent, the intransitive clause (4a), which expresses approximately the same argument realization pattern as the passive clause (4b), allows an 'apparent' agent to be expressed overtly.

References

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