

Causativization as a de-transitivizing device

Causativization is usually understood as a morphologically signalled process which adds an Agent to the valency of verbs (see e.g. Comrie 1975: 2). Moreover, causativization also functions as a transitivizing device. This is not especially surprising given the fact that the introduction of an agent results in a complete transitivization of (unaccusative) intransitive clauses. As suggested in the title, this paper is not concerned with these (canonical) functions of causativization, but rather the opposite. In other words, the paper examines the use of causative morphemes as a de-transitivizing device. A couple of examples of the phenomenon are given in (1) and (2) (see the data page). (1a) denotes a typical transitive event, in which a purposefully acting agent acts on a patient that is fully affected by the event in question. In (1b), in turn, the same action is seen as less purposefully initiated, which is expressed by attaching a causative morpheme to the verb. In Kambera, habitual and reciprocal events are expressed by causativized clauses, as shown in (2).

My paper examines the de-transitivizing functions expressed by causative morphemes from a broad cross-linguistic perspective. In addition to the formal illustration of these cases, the paper also discusses their motivation. The differences in the nature of causativization of intransitive and transitive clauses is very important in this regard. As was noted above, causativization transitivizes (unaccusative) intransitive clauses completely. This follows, because the denoted underlying event lacks all features of agency, which are then introduced via causativization. On the other hand, all the agentive features (and thus all relevant features of transitivity) are present in canonical transitive clauses. This renders transitivization impossible. Rather, causativization of canonical transitive clauses results in a division of agentive properties; the introduced agent initiates the event, while the underlying agent is responsible for performing the denoted action. This deprives the underlying agent of complete volitionality and renders it less of an agent. This feature associated with the causativization of transitive events aids us in explaining the seemingly bizarre use of causative morphemes for de-transitivization. If we omit the introduced agent from a causativized clause we are left with an instigator with a reduced degree of agency. This easily explains the use of causative morphemes as a de-agentivizing device which seems to be the most frequent de-transitivizing function expressed by causative morphemes. On the other hand, the use of causative morphemes in cases such as (2b) and (2c) can be explained by referring to the overall decreased degree of transitivity associated with causativized transitive events. In a similar vein, the use of causative morphemes as transitivizers can be explained by referring to the general transitivizing nature of these elements in the case of causativized intransitive clauses.

Data and references

Finnish

- (1a) henkilö tappo-i kissa-n-sa
person.NOM kill-3SG.PAST cat-ACC-3POSS
'A person killed his/her cat (on purpose)'
- (1b) henkilö tapa-tt-i kissa-n-sa
person.NOM kill-CAUS-3SG.PAST cat-ACC-3POSS
'A person had his/her cat killed/killed the cat accidentally'

Kambera (Klamer 1998: 180, 186f)

- (2a) tila-nanya na njara
kick-3SG.CONT ART horse
'The horse is kicking (now)'
- (2b) rimang, na-pa-tila na njara
look out 3SG.NOM-CAUS-kick ART horse
'Be careful, the horse kicks' (i.e. it is her character)
- (2c) da-pa-tila
3PL.NOM-CAUS-kick
'They kick (each other)'

References:

- Comrie, Bernard. 1975. Causatives and universal grammar. *Transactions of the Philological Society*: 1–32.
- Klamer, Miriam. 1998. *Kambera*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.