

The causal-noncausal alternation in African languages

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This workshop aims to bring together a collection of papers on the causal-noncausal alternation from a wide range of African languages. The valency alternation, illustrated with an example from Wan in (1), has received little systematic and comparative attention in languages from across the African continent.

(1) Wan (Mande)

a. **causal**

è p̄ d̄ n̄n̄

3SG thing one lose:PST

‘He lost something.’

b. **noncausal**

è n̄n̄ k̄l̄ ḡ

3SG lose:PST forest in

‘He got lost in the forest.’

(Nikitina 2014 [2018])

‘Causal’ and ‘noncausal’ are semantic notions that refer to related events differentiated by the number and type of participant roles; a causal event involves an external and internal participant role while a noncausal event only includes an internal participant role. For the verb pair *lose/get lost* in (1) both the causal and the noncausal events involve a theme-like participant, whereas only the causal event includes an agent-like event-external participant.

The valency alternation lies at the interface between semantics, morphology and syntax, and has been the focus of different theoretical approaches (e.g., Härtl 2003, Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 2004, Koontz-Garboden 2005, Schäfer 2009, Haspelmath et al. 2014, Haspelmath 2016, Schäfer and Vivanco 2016). Typological-comparative studies such as Haspelmath (1993: 90-92) and Nichols et al. (2004: 158-160) have identified various types of formal relationships between causal and noncausal verbs in the languages of the world:

- Causative strategy: the verb denoting the causal event is formally derived from the verb denoting the noncausal event.
- Anticausative strategy: the verb denoting the noncausal event is formally derived from the verb denoting the causal event.
- Equipollent strategy: both verbs are formally derived from a shared root.
- Labile strategy: the same verb is used to denote the causal and noncausal event.
- Conjugation class change strategy: both verbs are underived but take a different conjugation class.
- Auxiliary change strategy: phrasal predicates using different auxiliaries or light verbs within the same verb root or heavy verb.
- Adjectival strategy: the causal event is denoted by a verb and the noncausal event is denoted by an adjective.

- Ablaut strategy: Difference of vowel or consonant grade in root or stem, but no difference in formal morphological composition.
- Suppletion strategy: The causal and noncausal events are denoted by two lexically different verbs which are not related by any direct morphological process.

In a sample of 30 languages from sub-Saharan Africa, Creissels (2018) compares the morphological alternations for 13 causal-noncausal pairs restricted to inanimate undergoers. He observes that most languages have one “relatively prominent strategy”. Interestingly, 10 out of the 30 sub-Saharan languages have labiality as the most prominent formal relationship between causal-noncausal verb pairs with inanimate undergoers. This is in stark contrast with Haspelmath’s (1993) mainly Eurasian sample, where English is the only language that has a high prominence of labiality for causal-noncausal verb pairs. This begs further investigation: Is the labile strategy determined by areal typology, or because of the semantic restrictions of Creissels’ verb list, i.e. inanimate undergoers only? Creissels (2018: 6) also observes that the anticausative strategy is particularly prominent in languages with a high degree of morphological complexity, whereas languages which lack anticausative derivation are morphologically simple. There are three exceptions, namely Fula, Herero and Hausa, all of which are morphologically complex but demonstrate a high proportion of equipollent pairs instead of anticausatives. Again, the tendency needs to be corroborated with more data from a more diverse range of African languages. Finally, it stands out from Creissels (2018) that causativization is not a highly prominent strategy in any of the sample’s languages. As pointed out by Creissels (2018: 7), this could be related to the fact that causativization is not as productive with events involving inanimate undergoers but instead is more productive with other types of causal-noncausal pairs. This hypothesis should be further investigated by looking at those causal-noncausal verb pairs with *animate* undergoers in African languages.

Although labiality together with anticausativity form the main strategies encountered in Creissels’ language sample, his study also illustrates that variation abounds in African languages. With the exception of Creissels (2018), data on the causal-noncausal alternation in African languages is extremely fragmented. In order to identify finer-grained typologies and detailed comparative studies, we need more parallel data from a wide range of different languages.

The workshop intends to address this research agenda by inviting scholars to present papers on the causal-noncausal valency alternation in African languages, preferably but not necessarily based on Haspelmath’s (1993) 31 verb pairs, given in (2) below.

- (2) 31 causal/noncausal verb pairs in English (Haspelmath 1993: 97)
 WAKE UP (INTR/TR); BREAK (INTR/TR); BURN (INTR/TR); DIE/KILL; OPEN (INTR/TR); CLOSE (INTR/TR); BEGIN (INTR/TR); LEARN/TEACH; GATHER (INTR/TR); SPREAD (INTR/TR); SINK (INTR/TR); CHANGE (INTR/TR); MELT (INTR/TR); BE(COME) DESTROYED/DESTROY; GET LOST/LOSE; DEVELOP (INTR/TR); CONNECT (INTR/TR); BOIL (INTR/TR); ROCK (INTR/TR); GO OUT/PUT OUT; RISE/RAISE; FINISH (INTR/TR); TURN (INTR/TR); ROLL (INTR/TR); FREEZE (INTR/TR); DISSOLVE (INTR/TR); FILL (INTR/TR); IMPROVE (INTR/TR); DRY (INTR/TR); SPLIT (INTR/TR); STOP (INTR/TR)

Notwithstanding possible methodological issues with some verb meanings (e.g. *develop*, *dissolve* or *freeze*), the wordlist forms a good basis for cross-linguistic comparison. This is evinced by the World Atlas of Transitivity Pairs,¹ an online database including data from 80 languages of which only 7 are from Africa, namely Amharic, Herero, Kupsapiny, Matengo, Sidaama, Swahili and Wolaytta.

We are particularly interested in papers that deal with the following topics:

¹ <http://watp.ninjal.ac.jp/en/>

- Language-individual analyses of the formal relationship(s) between causal and noncausal verbs. Are there one or more strategies, and is there a predominant one? How does this relate with the relative degree of morphological complexity of the language? How do the strategies relate to the coding of other valency alternations such as the causative, passive, reflexive, etc.? For example, in Mano (Mande) two different strategies are used for noncausal events, lability or reflexivization (Vydrin and Khachatryan 2015). The labile strategy is also used for passive constructions. These polysemous strategies are illustrated in example (3).

(3) Mano (Mande)

- a. Lability → both noncausal and passive

ē *kpèh̄* *yé*
3SG.PRET stick break
'He broke the stick.'

kpèh̄ *ē* *yé*
stick 3SG.PRET break
'The stick broke.' OR 'The stick was broken.'

- b. Reflexive construction with noncausal meaning

yíí *lē* *ē* (*dìè*) *lièlīē-pèlè*
water 3SG.EXI REFL INT cool_down-INF
'The water is cooling down (by itself, put away from the fire).'

- Wide- or small-scaled comparative studies on the formal relationship(s) between causal and noncausal verbs. Observations from Creissels' (2018) 13-verb study can be tested a) on the basis of Haspelmath's (1993) full verb list including events with animate undergoers and b) in languages not included in Creissels' sub-Saharan sample (see some points of interest in the discussion of Creissels 2018 above).
- Discussion of methodological issues and the lexicalization of the verb meanings in particular languages. For example, Creissels (2018: 10) notes that the meanings GO OUT/PUT OUT (A FIRE) are frequently expressed by the same predicates denoting the meanings DIE/KILL in sub-Saharan languages, e.g. *buu/wii* in Koroboro Senni (Songhay). In Ibibio, there are two different BREAK verbs, i.e. *bòm* and *bín* as illustrated in (4).

(4) Ibibio (Niger-Congo)

a. *èsìò* *á-máá-bòm-mó*
pot 3SG.CL-PST-break-ANTC
'the pot broke.'

b. *úbók* *ómò* *á-máá-bín-ná*
hand his 3SG.CL-PST-break-ANTC
'His hand broke.'

(Anyanwu 2013)

- Detailed studies on the transitivity and syntax of causal/noncausal events. What are the argument structure constructions or (coding) frames of the verbs denoting causal/noncausal events in individual languages, and how might they differ from one another between languages? How is the mapping of semantic roles onto syntactic arguments reconfigured between constructions used for causal versus noncausal events?

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