

Why a language may lack P demotion: Deagentivization in Zenzontepec Chatino

Eric W. Campbell
University of California, Santa Barbara

Keywords: Valency, voice, syntax, agentivity, Chatino

Zenzontepec Chatino (Zapotecan, Mexico) displays multiple semi-productive causative alternations, but quite limited applicative, anticausative and other alternations (Campbell 2015). Derivations are (i) coded on the verb by prefixes and/or tonal alternations, (ii) highly lexeme-specific, and (iii) often semantically idiosyncratic. The language lacks productive voice alternations and is notable for its almost complete lack of coded detransitivizing strategies that demote core arguments.

This paper explores the following questions from a typological context. Why might a language display little or no P-demotion? And, what communicative and diachronic factors might shape language this way?

Taking the first question, we find that many canonically (di)transitive verbs are lexicalized intransitively, requiring causativization to express agents (e.g., BREAK, PUT, SHOW). The example in (1) shows the simplex intransitive verb ‘get cut’ (1a) and its derived causative (1b).

- (1) a. ki-xūʔú tsaxī=ri yuu.nkutī hiʔj̃=na nʔāʔā
POT-get_cut a_little=only body GEN=1PL 2.see
‘Our body gets cut just a little bit, you see.’
- b. lee k-u-xūʔú naa hiʔj̃
like_so POT-CAUS-get_cut 1INCL OBJ(.3)
‘We cut it like so...’

Although CUT semantically implies an agent and instrument, these cannot be encoded as core arguments of the basic verb. Thus, part of the response to the first question is that there simply are not many transitive verbs that would have a P to demote, nor is there any alternation for demoting the P of derived causatives.

While Zapotecan languages are known to display mostly unproductive transitivizing strategies (Kittilä 2015), the reasons for this remain unexplored. In language use, there is a preference for using intransitive verbs, even when there is a given or topical agent. Speakers often simply omit the implicated agent or encode it as the possessor of the S or oblique of an intransitive verb. In (2), the authorities who control the jail are clearly the ones putting people into it.

(2) ná ki-saʔa yaweʔ yaweʔ ntoo tī tsaka tsaka
 NEG POT-be_attached curse curse face TPLZ one one

nu chu nu nte-yuʔu niʔi kīkʷá tī hiʔĩ kʷaʔa
 SBD hum SBD PROG-get_put_inside house metal TPLZ GEN 2PL

‘May a curse not be put upon each one of those that are being put inside **your** jail.’

Avoidance of expressing salient agents is widespread in a corpus of 21 hours of naturalistic usage, and I propose that culturally-grounded discourse patterns like this have led to the language(s) becoming remarkably transitivity or agentivizing (Uchihara and Gutiérrez 2021) in their structure.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported in part by grants from ELDP (IGS 0080) and the UCSB Academic Senate.

References

- Campbell, Eric. W. (2015), Valency classes in Zenzontepec Chatino, in A. Malchukov, and B. Comrie (eds.), (2009), *Valency Classes in the World's Languages Vol 2: Case studies from Austronesia, the Pacific, the Americas, and theoretical outlook*, Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 1371–1406.
- Kittilä, Seppo (2015), Valence change: General and Zapotec perspectives, in N. Operstein, and A. H. Sonnenschein (eds.), (2015), *Valence change in Zapotec: Synchrony, diachrony, typology*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 345–380.
- Uchihara, Hiroto and Ambrocio Gutiérrez (2021), Teotitlán Zapotec: An ‘activizing’ language. *Linguistic Typology* 25(2), 257–301. <https://doi.org/10.1515/lingty-2020-2058>