

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

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Zenzontepéc 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-xū?ú tsaxī=ri yuu.nkutī hi?ī=na n̄yā?ā
POT-get_cut a_little=only body GEN=1PL 2.see
'Our body gets cut just a little bit, you see.'

b. lee k-ū-xū?ú naa hi?ī
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	yawe?	yawe?	ntoo	tī	tsaka	tsaka
	NEG	POT-be_attached	curse	curse	face	TPLZ	one	one
	nu	chu	nu	nte-yuʔu	niʔi	kīkʷá	tī	hiʔj
	SBD	hum	SBD	PROG-get_put_inside	house	metal	TPLZ	GEN

‘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 transitivizing or agentivizing (Uchihara and Gutiérrez 2021) in their structure.

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