

Towards a typology of P-demotion constructions in Oceanic languages

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Oceanic languages, which belong to the Austronesian family, are known to display a wide range of constructions involving P demotion, a “particular type of operation performed on verbal valency”, where “the P argument, which is coded like a patient of a core transitive verb, loses the properties of a core argument” (Janic 2020: 56). In this preliminary study, we focus on the formal and functional properties of P-demotion constructions in Oceanic languages, including the following three syntactic configurations: (1) P-demotion constructions with incorporated objects, (2) P-demotion constructions with objects downgraded to oblique, and (3) P-demotion constructions with omitted objects.

So far, several works have dealt with the morphosyntax and semantics of P-demotion phenomena in Oceanic, both from a comparative perspective and with focus on specific individual languages (*inter alia*, Sugita 1973, Miner 1982, Mithun 1984, Massam 2001, Margetts 2008, Moyse-Faurie 2021). However, a comprehensive typology that offers a unified account of the P-demotion phenomena found in Oceanic languages is still lacking. The complexity and heterogeneity of P-demotion constructions, particularly those of Type 1 involving object incorporation, may explain this gap. Different languages exhibit various formal properties of object incorporation. In some, the object is phonologically incorporated in the verb, while in others, it is more morpho-syntactically independent, with the possibility of taking a set of modifiers or being dislocated. Different labels have been used in the literature to refer to these constructions, including “incorporation”, “pseudo-incorporation”, “noun stripping”, “semitransitive verbs”, and “discord constructions”. In this study, to compare the widest range of constructions, we define “object incorporation” as a process in which the object forms a certain bond with the verb, whether phonological, morphological, or syntactic, making the overall construction less transitive. In P-demotion constructions of Type 2 and Type 3, the object either receives an oblique encoding and no longer functions as a core argument or is omitted.

This paper presents a preliminary typology of P-demotion constructions of Type 1, 2, and 3 in a balanced sample of 30 Oceanic languages from all first-order subgroups of the family. We illustrate their formal properties based on parameters such as the type of P demotion process, verbal marking strategies, degree of object dependence, object-marking patterns, and alignment type. Semantically, the focus is primarily on the object’s properties, such as referentiality and (in)definiteness. We also observe that the distribution of the described P-demotion types in the literature is uneven throughout the Oceanic language family.

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