

Transitivity alternations in North Sámi

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Introduction In this talk, I define “transitivity alternations” as pairs of semantically closely related verbs, one of which is intransitive and takes an undergoer (theme or patient) argument, while the other is transitive and takes an agent argument as subject and the undergoer argument as object (cf. e.g. Haspelmath 1987, Schäfer 2009). Verb pairs with these properties have been much debated in the linguistic literature, and a central question is how the two verbs in a pair are related derivationally: is one verb derived from the other, so the latter is structurally contained in the former, or are the two verbs derived from the same base?

In English, the two verbs in a transitivity alternation pair are often morphologically identical, that is, it involves a labile verb in the terminology of Haspelmath (1987). English is however exceptional in having many labile verbs (cf. Haspelmath 1993). In other languages, the two verbs in a transitivity alternation pair are often distinguished morphologically. In North Sámi, the language that I will focus on, there are no labile verbs at all. All transitivity alternations are reflected in the verb forms, although it is not done in the same way for all verb pairs. In some pairs the transitive verb is morphologically more marked than the intransitive verb, while in other pairs it appears to be the other way round. There are also pairs where both verbs are marked to the same degree but with different suffixes, in addition to pairs where the two verbs are built on different roots.

A closer investigation of North Sámi leads to rejection of the view that all alternating verbs are basically causative, as claimed e.g. by Levin & Rappaport Hovav (1995), and also of the analysis proposed by Alexiadou et al. (2006), according to which the two verbs in a transitivity alternation pair are never derivationally related. I am not claiming, though, that the patterns found in North Sámi necessarily are universal. My ambition is more limited – I want to show that certain claims to universality do not hold.

Causatives Some causatives in North Sámi are arguably formed by merging a root with a causative verbaliser, which then replaces the verbaliser found in the corresponding unaccusative verb. In (1), we note that the adjectives and the inchoative verbs have different theme vowels, which suggests that the theme vowels represent a and v heads. More specifically, the *-u-* seen in the inchoative verbs represents an inchoative v_{BECOME} verbaliser (while *-t* is the infinitival marker). In the causative verbs, the suffixed *-d-* represents the causative verbaliser, while the vowel preceding the *-d-* is an epenthetic vowel.

(1)	ADJ (SG NOM)	INCHOATIVE VERB	CAUSATIVE VERB
a.	<i>hálbi</i> ‘cheap’	<i>hálbut</i> ‘get cheap(er)’	<i>hálbbedit</i> ‘reduce the price (of)’
b.	<i>stuoris</i> ‘big’	<i>stuurrut</i> ‘become big(ger)’	<i>stuoridit</i> ‘enlarge’

However, from some roots another causative verb can be formed, one that morphologically and semantically (the causer is less directly involved with the causee) appears to contain the inchoative verb, as shown in (2):

(2)	INCHOATIVE VERB	CAUSATIVE VERB
a.	<i>hálbut</i> ‘get cheap(er)’	<i>hálbudit</i> ‘cause to become cheaper’
b.	<i>stuurrut</i> ‘become big(ger)’	<i>stuurrudit</i> ‘cause to become big(ger)’

If we add to this the observation that North Sámi also can form causatives from structures that contain an agent argument and consequently also a Voice head, we can conclude that North Sámi has all the three causative types identified by Pylkkänen (2002): the phase-selecting causative, the verb-selecting causative and the root-selecting causative.

Anticausatives In other transitivity alternation pairs in North Sámi, the intransitive verb appears to be more marked than the transitive verb. Some examples are shown in (3):

(3)	INTRANSITIVE VERB	TRANSITIVE VERB
a.	<i>cuovkanit</i> ‘break, become broken’	<i>cuovkut</i> ‘break’
b.	<i>luovvanit</i> ‘loosen, get loose’	<i>luvvet</i> ‘loosen, undo’
c.	<i>rahpasit</i> ‘open’	<i>rahpat</i> ‘open’
d.	<i>čiktásit</i> ‘happen to be mended’	<i>čiktit</i> ‘mend (of fishing net)’

Concerning the intransitive verbs marked with *-n-*, I follow Vinka (2002) and conclude that this marker is just an allomorph of the inchoative verbaliser (many of these verbs are clearly related to adjectives). The *-s-*marked intransitive verbs are however different. Although traditionally taken to be passives, they differ from ordinary passives in their inability to license purpose clauses. With Vinka I take the licensing of purpose clauses to indicate the presence of a Voice head. The *-s-*marked verbs involve no Voice head. Their semantics suggests that they are what Pylkkänen (2002) calls unaccusative causatives, having Caus but lacking Voice, and consequently no external argument, so that the cause is not specified. The *-s-* is thus the phonological realisation of a Caus head that is not immediately embedded under a Voice head, while with the Voice head added, the Caus head gets a vocalic realisation in combination with the roots in (3), as seen in the transitive verbs. Thus, the transitive verbs are only apparently less marked than the intransitive verbs.

Equipollent alternations Since unaccusative verbs as well as causative verbs can involve a consonantal suffix, it is not very surprising that there are transitivity pairs where both members have a consonantal suffix, as in (4) (*-it* is infinitive). This is just a matter of allomorphy.

(4)	INTRANSITIVE VERB	TRANSITIVE VERB
a.	<i>allánit</i> ‘get higher, rise’	<i>alidit</i> ‘make higher, promote’
b.	<i>hedjonit</i> ‘get weaker, get worse’	<i>heajudit</i> ‘make worse’
c.	<i>heavvanit</i> ‘drown’	<i>heavahit</i> ‘drown’
d.	<i>jorggihit</i> ‘turn’	<i>jorgalit</i> ‘turn’

Conclusions Despite the morphological variation, all the intransitive verbs that take part in transitivity alternation in North Sámi have the same underlying structure: they are made up of a root plus an intransitive verbaliser. Verbs built on roots that imply external causation or an unspecified cause, in the classification of Alexiadou et al. (2006), have causative counterparts, and so have some verbs built on roots that typically imply internal causation but also allow external causation, such as ‘grow’ and ‘wilt’. Some of these causatives embed an unaccusative verb, while others are built directly from the root. Many agentive transitive verbs have unaccusative causative alternants. Despite appearances, there are no real anticausatives, which means that anticausative cannot be a universal category.

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