On Non-Agentivity and Causer Suppression in Colloquial Sinhala

Several recent theories of causative/inchoative alternations (e.g. *John broke the vase*/*The vase broke*) have proposed an anticausativization analysis for certain verb classes, wherein inchoatives are derived from their corresponding causatives via some operation that eliminates the causer argument from a verb's argument structure, provided the causer is semantically unspecified for agentivity (Levin & Rappaport Hovav 1995, Chierchia 2004, Koontz-Garboden 2009). In this talk I present joint work with Cala Zubair (UNC-Wilmington) which explores the properties of such an analysis for causative/inchoative alternations in Colloquial Sinhala, which have two typologically unusual properties: (1) they are overtly indicated by a volitive/involitive mood contrast on the verb, where inchoatives are categorically marked for involitive mood, and (2) the subject of the inchoative shows a nominative vs. accusative case alternation reflecting a true inchoative vs. passive-like interpretive contrast, despite being syntactically inchoative in both cases. I outline an analysis of these properties that supports the idea that non-specification of agentivity is key to such alternations, but fleshes out the notion in ways that derives further grammatical consequences, and also points towards a larger typology of semantic types of anticausativization than previously proposed.

The key to explaining the Sinhala mood marking pattern in causative/inchoative alternations is to carefully define causation that is agentive, non-agentive, or unspecified for agentivity, something generally not defined in prior literature. These notions, I suggest, reflect a truth-conditional contrast that crucially also gives rise to a type-theoretic contrast: agentive causation reflects a causing event, while non-agentive causation reflects a causing state (assuming a bieventive theory of causation; Dowty 1979). Causative verbs that undergo causative/inchoative alternations are simply unspecified for the type of their causer, permitting either an event or state causer depending on pragmatic context and/or grammatical context (e.g. purposive modification). Sinhala inchoatives, conversely, reject any grammatical contexts that categorically require agentivity, despite being acceptable in pragmatic contexts in which it obtains.

This follows if the causer suppression process that derives inchoatives from causatives strips the causer argument from the verb's argument structure but preserves it semantically, albeit fixing its semantic type as one truth-conditionally compatible with event or state causation but not resolvable type-theoretically to either, ruling out grammatical devices that require agentivity. Crucially, volitive mood requires agentivity, and thus cannot combine with roots that have undergone causer suppression, leaving only involitive mood for realizing inchoatives. Thus the fact that involitive mood serves as an overt inchoative marker is ultimately epiphenomenonal of how the non-specification for agentivity is encoded in Sinhala, supporting this notion as key to the process that derives anticausativization.

The nominative/accusative case alternation in turn simply reflects two ways a causer can be interpreted once it has been suppressed — via reflexivization (as in Spanish; Koontz-Garboden 2009) or via existential binding. These options lead to different interpretations of inchoatives: with nominative subjects there is no interpretation of an external causer, but with accusatives there is (much like a passive). I suggest that these options instantiate two logical possibilities for dealing with the open variable left by causer suppression — coidentify the causer with another participant on the argument structure of the verb or bind it off — and discuss other possible ways of interpreting a suppressed argument across languages.

In sum, these data support an analysis of causative/inchoative alternations as a type of non-agentive causer elimination, but they also expand the typology of ways a causer can be unspecified for agentivity, how causer elimination can occur, and what overt morphology can indicate such an alternation.

References

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