

# Transitive structures with generic/indefinite O-arguments in English: An emergent antipassive construction?

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# 1. Introduction

- Transitive structures with generic/indefinite O-arguments in Present-day English:
  - 1) Iyad Allawi is strong and tough with a hard edge. He'll make **things** better. (USnews) [plural count O]
  - 2) The fact that he cut such a handsome figure tended to make **folks** forget that he didn't know it all. He looked and acted like a man destined for great things, and most people tend to be swayed by a man's opinion of himself. (USbooks) [plural count O]
  - 3) "I love demolishing **stuff**," said Matthew Markham, an 11-year-old attendee who had just taken apart a cell phone and was struggling to piece it back together. (USmag) [uncount O]
- To what extent do these show reduced transitivity and backgrounded discourse status in the sense of Hopper & Thompson (1980)?

# 1. Introduction

- Hopper & Thompson (1980: 252): transitivity as a scalar notion; global property of the entire clause

		High Transitivity	Low Transitivity
A	Participants	Two or more participants	One participant
B	Kinesis	Action	Non-action
C	Aspect	Telic (completed)	Atelic (in progress)
D	Punctuality	Punctual	Non-punctual
E	Volitionality	Volitional	Non-volitional
F	Affirmation	Affirmative	Negative
G	Mode	Realis	Irrealis
H	Agency	Agent high in potency	Agent low in potency
I	Affectedness of the object	Object totally affected	Object not affected
J	Individuation of the object	Object highly individuated	Object non-individuated

- Focus on one parameter: Individuation of O → What happens in transitive structures with low-individuation objects?

# 1. Introduction

Main findings: Transitive structures with generic/indefinite O-arguments in PDE

- do not clearly show reduced transitivity across other parameters
- but they tend to occur in backgrounded discourse and show 'demotion' of O  
→ functionally (not formally) antipassive constructions
  - 1) Iyad Allawi is strong and tough with a hard edge. He'll make **things** better. (USnews) [plural count O]
  - 2) "I love demolishing **stuff**," said Matthew Markham, an 11-year-old attendee who had just taken apart a cell phone and was struggling to piece it back together. (USmag) [uncount O]
- form fruitful ground for idioms and partially filled constructions (strong V-O bond), e.g. periphrastic causative cxns with folks, cf. (3)
  - 3) The fact that he cut such a handsome figure tended to make **folks** forget that he didn't know it all. He looked and acted like a man destined for great things, and most people tend to be swayed by a man's opinion of himself. (USbooks) [plural count O]

# Outline for today

1. Introduction
2. Data and methods
3. Antipassive construction?
  - 3.1 Functional approach to antipassives
  - 3.2 Transitivity parameters
  - 3.3 Discourse status
4. Emergence of idioms and partially filled constructions
5. Conclusions

## 2. Data and methods

- Queries run on **WordBanks Online** subcorpora (57 million word corpus of Present-day English)
- US English subcorpora, containing spoken and written data
- Queries targeted **any verb form** followed by *folks/things/stuff/shit(s)*, allowing for up to two intervening words between V and O
- After basic sorting, random samples of **250 relevant hits** were analysed per object NP for a number of analytical parameters, including:
  - Degree of transitivity, subsuming H&T 1980 parameters
  - Discourse status
  - Decategorialization reflexes of object NP

# 3. Antipassive construction?

## 3.1 Functional approach to antipassives

**Traditionally**, antipassive constructions are defined as a valency-decreasing device (Dixon 1994: 13):

- mirror image of passive constructions, typically found in ergative languages
- showing 4 properties:
  - 1) Applies to an underlying transitive clause and forms an intransitive one
  - 2) Underlying Agent becomes S of the intransitive
  - 3) Underlying Object is demoted → goes into peripheral function, being marked by a non-core case, preposition, etc
  - 4) Presence of overt formal marking on the verb

Examples from Dyirbal (Pama-Nyungan):

(a) transitive (Dixon 1994: 10, ex. 8)

*yabu*            *ɲuma-ɲgu*    *bura-n*  
mother + ABS   father-ERG   see-NONFUT  
father(A) saw mother(O)

(b) intransitive; antipassive (Dixon 1994: 10, ex. 12)

*ɲuma*            *bural-ɲa-n<sup>y</sup>u*            *yabu-gu*  
father + ABS   see-ANTIPASS-NONFUT   mother-DAT  
father(S) saw mother

# 3. Antipassive construction?

## 3.1 Functional approach to antipassives

From a **functional** perspective, antipassive constructions (Herslund 1997):

- not restricted to ergative languages
- Agent perspective and enhanced intentional value
- demotion of O/Patient: **Patient** is unimportant (not fully integrated in the event) because it is **non-specific** or **unidentifiable**, or it is obvious

Examples from French (Herslund 1997: 80, ex. 9): note difference in perfective auxiliary

(a) transitive

*Le ministre **a** **tu** ce problème.*

‘The minister kept secret this problem.’

(b) intransitive; antipassive reflexive

*Le ministre **s’est** **tu** **sur** ce problème.*

‘The minister REFL was silent PREP this problem’



### 3. Antipassive construction?

#### 3.2 Transitivity parameters

- Computation of transitivity index per hit, based on values for Hopper & Thompson's (1980: 252) transitivity parameters
- distinction between:
  - bare NPs (lacking determiners, premodifiers, postmodifiers)  
For example: A child is born to parents who are of average intelligence. One parent is quick to feel **things** - to be angry, to be irritated [...] (USbooks)
  - non-bare NPs  
"For the moment, our focus is on all of the police and response personnel necessary not being diverted from a visitor and really focusing on the recovery itself," Kerry said. "Teresa and I are really thinking about **those folks** and our prayers and our thoughts are with them in the next hours," he said. (USnews)

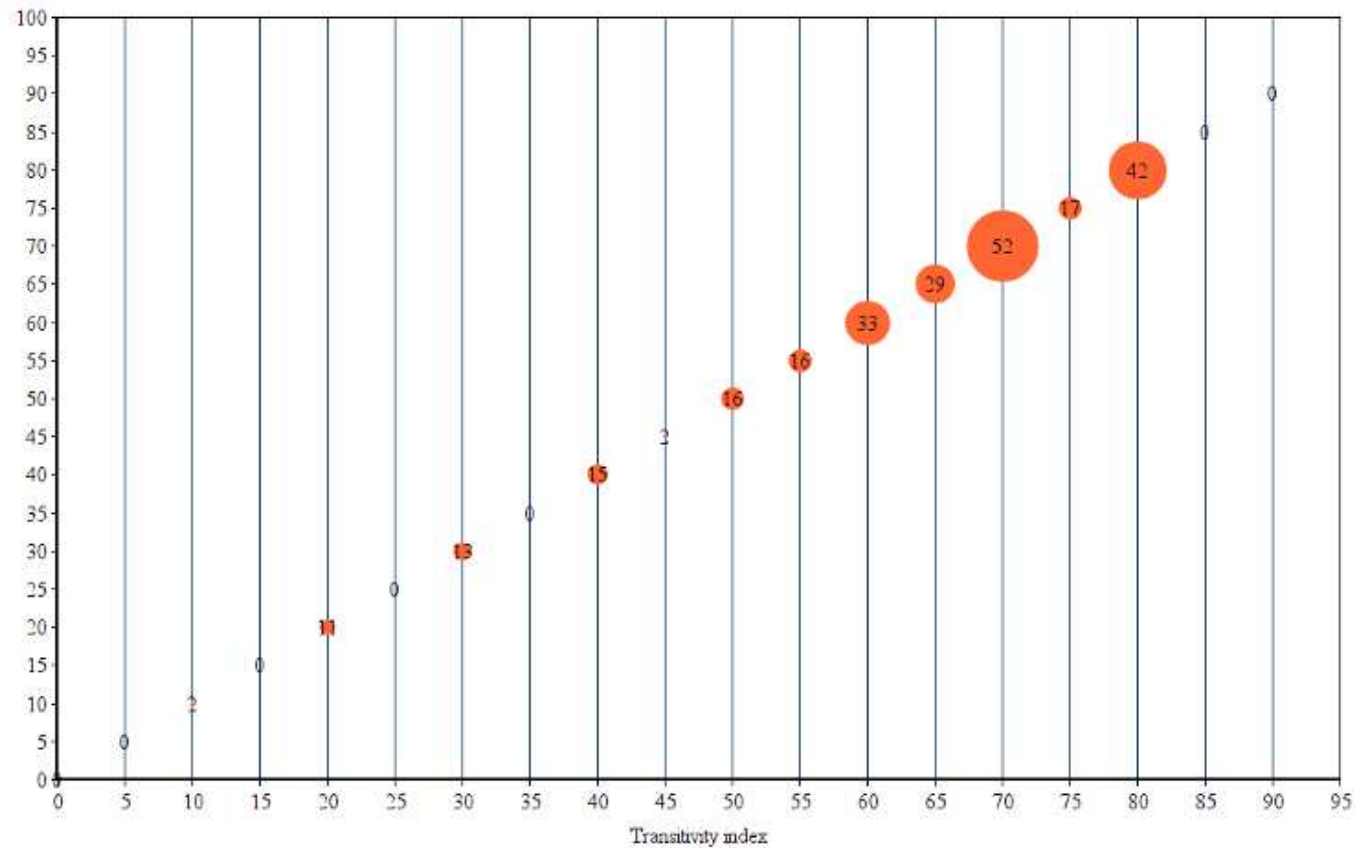
BARE NPs	<i>Folks</i> [n=98]	<i>Things</i> [n=96]	<i>Stuff</i> [n=68]	<i>Shit(s)</i> [n=66]
<b>Kinesis</b>	9.39 – 920	9.68 – 920	9.26 – 630	5.38 – 350
Aspect	7.91 – 775	7.44 – 735	7.57 – 515	6.46 – 420
Punctuality	7.55 – 740	3.05 – 290	6.32 – 430	2.92 – 190
Volitionality	7.96 – 780	9.26 – 880	8.97 – 610	4.77 – 310
<b>Affirmation</b>	9.69 – 950	9.47 – 900	8.97 – 610	4 – 260
Mode	6.33 – 620	4.21 – 400	6.62 – 450	2.31 – 150
Agency	6.43 – 630	7.15 – 680	9.26 – 630	2.92 – 190
Affectedness of O	9.29 – 910	7.68 – 730	7.5 – 510	3.85 – 250
Individuation of O	0.20 – 20	0.10 – 10	0	0
<b>Mean Index (0-90)</b>	<b>64.74</b>	<b>56.10</b>	<b>64.49</b>	<b>57.47</b>
Standard Deviation	9.50	10.85	8.75	12.62

NON-BARE NPs	<i>Folks</i> [n=152]	<i>Things</i> [n=154]	<i>Stuff</i> [n=182]	<i>Shit(s)</i> [n=184]
<b>Kinesis</b>	8.88 – 1350	8.82 – 1350	7.64 – 1390	8.63 – 1580
Aspect	8.65 – 1315	7.84 – 1200	7.14 – 1300	8.20 – 1500
Punctuality	5.92 – 900	3.07 – 470	5.33 – 970	7.12 – 1090
Volitionality	7.70 – 1170	7.90 – 1210	7.42 – 1350	8.69 – 1590
<b>Affirmation</b>	9.61 – 1460	9.28 – 1420	9.12 – 1660	6.56 – 1200
Mode	6.45 – 980	5.29 – 810	6.65 – 1210	3.22 – 590
Agency	6.94 – 1055	7.94 – 1215	8.96 – 1630	1.20 – 220
Affectedness of O	7.83 – 1190	6.11 – 935	7.5 – 1365	9.01 – 1380
Individuation of O	0.86 – 130	0.20 – 30	0	0
<b>Mean Index</b>	<b>62.83</b>	<b>57.76</b>	<b>59.75</b>	<b>36.74</b>
Standard Deviation	11.24	9.77	14.33	20.06
<b>MEAN Index BARE NPs</b>	<b>64.74</b>	<b>56.10</b>	<b>64.49</b>	<b>57.47</b>

### 3. Antipassive construction?

#### 3.2 Transitivity parameters

- Clustering of Transitivity Indexes : e.g. *stuff*



### 3. Antipassive construction?

#### 3.2 Transitivity parameters

- Apart from *shit(s)*, only a slight difference between bare and non-bare NPs
- In general, data show rather high degree of transitivity, including high degree of agency  
(cf. functional approach to antipassives)
- **animacy** variable (animate *folks* versus inanimate *things, stuff* and *shit(s)*), as well as a **register** variable (neutral *things* versus informal to slang *folks, stuff, and shit(s)*) do not bear on the tendencies observed

### 3. Antipassive construction?

#### 3.3 Discourse status

- structures studied prefer backgrounded discourse status
- animacy of O or register variation do not seem to bear on discourse status preference

[TOTAL=250 hits per sample]	Foregrounding		Backgrounding	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Folks</i>	85	34.00	165	66.00
<i>Things</i>	81	32.40	169	67.60
<i>Stuff</i>	93	37.20	157	62.80
<i>Shit(s)</i>	75	30.00	175	70.00

### 3. Antipassive construction?

#### 3.4 Interim conclusions

- NPs studied merely function as filler elements, used to satisfy the argument-structure requirements imposed by the verb
- As they realize non-individuated O-arguments in backgrounded stretches of discourse, we propose that the structures can be analysed as emergent (Hopper 1991) antipassive constructions
- These won't necessarily develop into canonical antipassive constructions over time. Most probably they will never shed overt expression of the (original) O-argument.

## 4. Emergence of idioms and partially filled cxns

- Colloquial collocations

- *Shit* as a negative polarity item → emphatic negation

(1) *But he doesn't know it yet? – He don't know *shit*, but he is learning.* (USbooks)  
(‘not anything at all’)

- Partially-filled constructions (cf. Goldberg 1995)

- *Folks*: indirect causation construction (MAKE + *folks* + INF)

(2) *The smartest thing Satan ever done was making *folks* believe he ain't real.* (USbooks)

(3) The fact that he cut such a handsome figure tended to make *folks* forget that he didn't know it all. (USbooks)

- *Things*: resultative construction (MAKE + *things* + ADJ.COMP)

(4) He'll make *things* better. (USnews)

(5) I thank you for your intervention, sir, but I fear you have made *things* worse. (USbooks)



## 5. Conclusions

- Transitive structures with generic/indefinite O-arguments in Present-day English show a high degree of transitivity in terms of Hopper & Thompson (1980)
- This begs the question whether individuation of O is a reliable indicator of conceptual transitivity (participant-related rather than event-related)
- Our findings are concurrent with Næss's (2004, 2007) view on prototypical transitivity, in which affectedness of O is a crucial parameter (event-related), while degree of individuation of O (animacy and definiteness) is shown to be merely epiphenomenal across languages
- A strong connection between V and O gives rise to idioms and partially filled constructions

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