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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High Transitivity</th>
<th>Low Transitivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>Two or more participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Kinesis</td>
<td>Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>Telic (completed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>Punctual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Volitionality</td>
<td>Volitional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Affirmation</td>
<td>Affirmative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G</td>
<td>Mode</td>
<td>Realis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Agency</td>
<td>Agent high in potency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Affectedness of the object</td>
<td>Object totally affected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>Individuation of the object</td>
<td>Object highly individuated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- 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)

\[ yabu \quad \etauma-\etagu \quad \text{bura-n} \]

\[ \text{mother + ABS father-ERG see-NONFUT} \]

father(A) saw mother(O)

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

\[ \etauma \quad \text{bural-\eta-\etayu} \quad \text{yabu-gu} \]

\[ \text{father + ABS see-ANTIPASS-NONFUT mother-DAT} \]

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
   \[
   \text{\textit{Le ministre a tu ce problème}.} \\
   \text{‘The minister kept secret this problem.’}
   \]

(b) intransitive; antipassive reflexive
   \[
   \text{\textit{Le ministre s’est tu sur ce problème}.} \\
   \text{‘The minister REFL was silent PREP this problem’}
   \]
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)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BARE NPs</th>
<th>Folks [n=98]</th>
<th>Things [n=96]</th>
<th>Stuff [n=68]</th>
<th>Shit(s) [n=66]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aspect</td>
<td>7.91 – 775</td>
<td>7.44 – 735</td>
<td>7.57 – 515</td>
<td>6.46 – 420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuality</td>
<td>7.55 – 740</td>
<td>3.05 – 290</td>
<td>6.32 – 430</td>
<td>2.92 – 190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuation of O</td>
<td>0.20 – 20</td>
<td>0.10 – 10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean Index (0-90)</strong></td>
<td><strong>64.74</strong></td>
<td><strong>56.10</strong></td>
<td><strong>64.49</strong></td>
<td><strong>57.47</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>10.85</td>
<td>8.75</td>
<td>12.62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## NON-BARE NPs

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


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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[TOTAL=250 hits per sample]</th>
<th>Foregrounding</th>
<th>Backgrounding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folks</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>34.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>32.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuff</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>37.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shit(s)</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>30.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.
References