Denominal affixes as sources of antipassive markers in Japhug Rgyalrong[☆]

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Abstract

In this paper, we review the documented diachronic pathways leading to antipassive markers in the world's languages and show that Japhug Rgyalrong, a polysynthetic language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family, attests a previously unreported source of antipassives.

In Japhug, the two antipassive constructions (human and non-human antipassive) are built from the base verb through a two-step process: first nominalization into an action nominal, and second denominal verbalizing derivation of the action noun into an intransitive verb. Nominalization neutralizes the verb's transitivity, and a new transitivity value is allocated by the denominal prefix.

A similar pathway is proposed for other derivations, in particular the applicative.

1. Introduction

The diachronic origin of antipassive markers, unlike that of passive markers and constructions (for instance Haspelmath, 1990), has only attracted a limited amount of scholarship.[1] This lack of research is due in part to the fact that antipassive constructions are less common than passive ones cross-linguistically, but also that many constructions that could have been described as antipassives are usually described with a different terminology, especially in languages whose flagging is aligned accusatively.

Antipassives are overtly marked intransitivizing constructions that demote the patient of transitive verbs, whereby the agent of the original verb (A) becomes the only argument (S) of the verb in the antipassive construction; the demoted O either receives oblique case or is deleted from the construction. This definition allows for constructions variously labelled as 'depatientive', 'detransitive', 'deaccusative' or 'deobjective' in accusative languages[2] to be designated as antipassive,

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[1] To my knowledge, Say (2008:99–375) is the only reference discussing this topic in a typological perspective.

[2] See Janic (2013) for a review of the terminology used to refer to antipassive constructions in accusative languages. Some authors restrict the definition of antipassive constructions to ergative languages (for instance Dixon, 1994; Cooreman, 1994).

Table 1
Attested sources of antipassive markers.

Origin	Example	Reference
reflexive	Slavic, Romance,	Nedjalkov (2007), Say (2008:378–517)
	West Mande,	Creissels (2012)
	Pama-Nyungan	Terrill (1997)
Benefactive/malefactive	Eskaleut	Jacobson (1984:453), Mithun (2000:97–8)
Reciprocal/coparticipation	Tswana	Creissels and Nouguier-Voisin (2008)
Indefinite, generic argument	Nahuatl	Langacker (1977:46)
TAM Non-telic	Godoberi	Tatevosov (2004)
verb MAKE	West Mande, Eskaleut	Creissels (2012)
GET	Eskaleut	Fortescue (1996)

following authors such as Heath (1976), Polinsky (2011) and Creissels (2012), but excludes agent-preserving lability and incorporation.

Previous work has pointed out five cross-linguistic origins for antipassive markers, presented in Table 1[3]:

The first three origins can involve the intermediate stage of a middle construction. Nominal origins (such as BODY) are well-attested for reflexive, reciprocal and middle markers (Heine and Kuteva, 2002:58), but no such case has been reported for antipassive constructions.

The last pathway, namely derivation from antipassive periphrases with the verb 'make' or 'get', has only been described for two groups of languages: Eskaleut and Mande.

In West Greenlandic, we find three antipassive ('half-transitive') suffixes: -(s)i-, -nnig- and -ller-.[4] According to Fortescue (1996), all three suffixes originate from the combination of nominalizing or participial suffixes with a postbase (bound stem):

- -(s)i- results from the fusion of the passive participle *-ðaR with the postbase *-li 'to make, to become' (Fortescue et al., 2010:438, 447). The change of proto-Eskimo *ð– to Greenlandic s– is regular.
- -nnig- comes from the fusion of the nominalizer *–nəR with the verb *–nəɣ 'to get' (Fortescue et al., 2010:457, 459).
- -ller- originates from a nominalizer (which could be either the nominalizer *-ɬəʁ- or the passive participle *-kaʁ-) combined with the postbase *-ləɣ 'to provide with' (Fortescue et al., 2010:451, 442, 459)

In West Mande, Creissels (2012) similarly argues that the antipassive suffixes –ndì in Soninke originate from a verb root that can be reconstructed as *tin 'to do', and that the antipassive construction in question comes from a periphrase comparable to French acheter ('to buy', transitive) ⇒ faire des achats ('to do shopping', with the verb faire 'to do').

In this paper, we present a related, but slightly different, pathway of grammaticalization of the antipassive in Japhug, a polysynthetic Sino-Tibetan language spoken in Sichuan, China. Like the Greenlandic case, it involves two steps: nominalization of a transitive verb and then denominal derivation back into a verb. An important difference of the Japhug case from both Eskaleut and West Mande is that denominal derivational prefixes cannot be etymologically derived from a verb.[5]

This paper is divided into four sections. First, we present background information on Japhug in general, in particular on nominalization and transitivity. Second, we offer an account of the antipassive construction in Japhug and discuss all the derivational prefixes homophonous with the antipassive prefixes. Third, we provide arguments showing that one of the two antipassive prefixes originates from a denominal construction. Fourth, we show that a similar scenario can be proposed to explain the origin of the applicative marker.

2. Background information

Japhug Rgyalrong is a polysynthetic language belonging to the Sino-Tibetan family, spoken by fewer than 10000 speakers in Mbarkhams county, Rngaba district, Western Sichuan, China.

The closest relatives of Japhug are the other Rgyalrong languages: Situ, Tshobdun, and Showu. The distribution of the four Rgyalrong languages is indicated in Fig. 1; the black dot represents the Japhug speaking area.

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[3] A detailed account of the Nahuatl antipassive is provided in Section 4.3.
[4] Mithun (2000:97–8) mentions antipassives deriving from benefactive markers in Yup'ik, but these are not related to the Greenlandic suffixes.
[5] This issue will be discussed in more detail in Section 4.