

Aspectual classes and non-agentive morphosyntax in Lowland Chontal

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1. Introduction

Lowland Chontal is a Mexican indigenous language spoken in the southern part of the state of Oaxaca.¹ The data here are from my fieldwork in San Pedro Huamelula, Oaxaca, and the 1962 grammatical description by Waterhouse.

This paper has three goals: 1) to characterize the morphosyntactic system as agentive; 2) to characterize the language-specific linguistic category of agency as reflecting the volition or intention of the participant; and 3) to characterize the situations that can or must involve a non-agentive participant.

In Chontal, the single argument of an intransitive predicate is expressed sometimes as an independent pronoun and sometimes as a pronominal affix to the verb. Separate classes of intransitive verbs were identified by Waterhouse (1962) and Turner and Turner (1971) in descriptions of both Chontal dialects, but the system was not characterized as active or agentive. Based on these analyses, Smith Stark and Tapia García (1986) identified the system as active-static. In the terminology adopted here, the system is agentive because it is the perceived agency of the argument, and not the lexical aspect of the verb root as state vs. event, that determines the pattern of person marking (Mithun 1991).

In Lowland Chontal, the agentive/non-agentive distinction is found in the encoding of the arguments, as shown in Figure 1.

¹ There are two major dialects of Chontal of Oaxaca – Highland Chontal, of the mountain area, and Lowland Chontal, on the Pacific coast. According to the 1990 census, there are about 15,000 ethnic Chontales; 3,500 of these reported themselves speakers of the highland dialect, and another 1,000 as speakers of the lowland dialect. However, the speakers tell me there are about 250 truly fluent speakers of Lowland Chontal, all elders. I am grateful to Alberto Espinoza López, Adelaida Espinoza Raymundo, Eulalia Espinoza Raymundo, Romanita García, Petrona García Sosa, Selso Leyba Sosa, Aurelio López Abad, Pámfila López Molina, Paulino López Sosa, Severo López (†), Arturo Pétriz Muñoz, Columba Ramírez, Alberto Rey García, María de Victoria Sosa, Guillermina Trinidad, Inéz Zavaleta Robles, Anatolia, Tomás, and the bilingual education teachers at Alma Chontal elementary school.

	AGT		PAT	
	SG	PL	SG	PL
1 st	<i>iya'</i>	<i>iyank'</i>	<i>jl-</i>	<i>-onga'</i>
2 nd	<i>ima'</i>	<i>imank'</i>	<i>-o'</i>	<i>-olwa'</i>
3 rd	0	0	0	<i>-ola'</i>

Figure 1: Person marking in Lowland Chontal

Agentive arguments occur as independent pronouns for first and second persons; third persons are ellipted or expressed with nominals. Non-agentive arguments occur as pronominal affixes for all but third-person singular, where the agentive /non-agentive contrast is neutralized. The system groups arguments roughly into macroroles of Actor and Undergoer (Foley & Van Valin 1984).

Agentive Actors: In one set of person markers, Actors are expressed with pronouns, from the AGT columns of Figure 1, and the aspect morphology indexes the number of the Actor as singular or plural.

Agentive Actor (transitive predicate).²

- (1) *pijl-pa iya' lantranay'*
kill-PFV.SG 1S.AGT chickens
'I killed the chickens.'
- (2) *pijl-pa' iyank' lantranay'*
kill-PFV.PL 1P.AGT chickens
'We killed the chickens.'

Agentive Actor (intransitive predicate).

- (3) *may-pa iya' may-pa' iyank'*
go -PFV.SG 1S.AGT go -PFV.PL 1P.AGT
'I went.' 'We went.'
- (4) *may-pa 0 may-pa' 0*
go -PFV.SG 3S go -PFV.PL 3P
'S/he went.' 'They went.'

Transitive Undergoers: Some but not all transitive Undergoers are marked on the verb in what might be a primary object type of system. Agreement marking seems to depend on factors of animacy and topicality of the Undergoer arguments. Example (1) is repeated here to demonstrate the contrast.

² Only data pertinent to the discussion are fully glossed. Spanish borrowings are glossed inside parentheses. Abbreviations used in this paper are: 1S-3P person markers; AGT agentive; AND andative; APPL? applicative; DEM demonstrative; DUR durative; IMPF imperfective; PAT non-agentive; PFT perfect; PFV perfective; PL plural; SG singular; STAT stative; TERM terminative; and at morpheme boundary, hyphen = derivation or inflection; equal sign = clitic; plus sign = infix.

Transitive Undergoer, unmarked and marked.

- (1') *pijl-pa iya' lantranay'*
kill-PFV.SG 1S.AGT chickens
'I killed the chickens.'
- (5) *muk'i-p -ola' sa =iya' la'way'*
teach-PFV-3P.PAT DEM=1S.AGT children
'I taught the children.'
- (6) *j1 -muk'i-pa lay-biida latyaygi*
1S.PAT-teach-PFV.SG my -grandmother language
'My grandmother taught me the language.'

In (1'), the Undergoer is not marked on the verb, while in (5-6), affected Undergoers are indexed with pronominal affixes from the PAT columns of Figure 1. Affixes from the same paradigm are used to index the single arguments of intransitive predications in (7) and (8).

Intransitive Undergoer.

- | | | |
|-----|--|--|
| (7) | <i>j1 -toj -pa</i>
1S.PAT-grow-PFV.SG
'I grew (up).' | <i>toj -p -onga'</i>
grow-PFV-1P.PAT
'We grew (up).' |
| (8) | <i>tyoj-pa 0</i>
grow-PFV.SG 3S
'S/he grew (up).' | <i>tyoj-p -ola' la'way'</i>
grow-PFV-3P.PAT children
'The children grew (up).' |

The pattern of first and third person marking in (7) and (8) contrasts with the use of independent pronouns in (3) and (4).

The second goal of this paper is to characterize the linguistic category of agency in Chontal as reflecting the volition or intention of the participant. Agency can be inherent in the lexical semantics, as with *ma-* 'die' or *toj-* 'grow', or it can be attributed or perceived, as with *xux-* 'be late' or *jak-* 'disappear'.

The third goal is to characterize the situations that can or must involve a non-agentive participant. These are intransitive predications of a change of state evaluated as outside the volition or intention of the participant. I call these events *transformations*, a term which describes situations of resulting state, prefatory phase, and involuntary response, as well as the moment of change itself.

The organizing principle of the discussion is the aspectual class of each predication, here analyzed as composed of two types of aspect: *situation type* and *viewpoint* (Smith 1997). Situation type aspect is a covert category identified by the verb plus its arguments, similar to Aristotelian classes and verb classes described in Vendler 1967, Chafe 1970, and Dowty 1979, among others. Event structures are classified as achievements, states, activities, semelfactives, and accomplishments. In this paper, only intransitive situation types are discussed; these are defined below, following Smith 1997.

achievements	dynamic, telic, instantaneous
states	static, durative
activities	dynamic, durative, atelic
semelfactives	dynamic, atelic, instantaneous

Viewpoint aspect is an overt category typically evidenced in aspectual inflection. Viewpoint encompasses Aktionsarten and other grammatical categories and depicts the grammaticized perspective from which the speaker expresses the situation as bounded and complete, ongoing, or viewed from one of its endpoints.

2. Agentive/non-agentive marking by aspectual class.

The rest of the paper contrasts expressions with agentive and non-agentive morphosyntax within interacting categories of viewpoint and situation type.

2.1. Achievements.

Achievements are the typical locus of transformation. They are dynamic, telic, and instantaneous. While there is an element of duration implied by many predicates of achievement, in which an activity leads up to the moment of change of state, the endpoint as salient event is the defining feature of this category.

2.1.1. Achievements with agentive inflection.

Intransitive expressions of achievement with agentive inflection are difficult to find in my corpus. Perhaps the only clear example involves a stem derived with an andative suffix and inflected for perfective aspect. Example (9) shows the verb *kway-*, a stative root meaning 'be somewhere, having arrived', collected in a narrative about life on the ranch.

- (9) *kway -x -pa'* *sa lajl-ale'*
 arrive-AND-PFV.PL DEM our -neighbors
 'our neighbors would stop by'

The andative suffix means "go and do" the main verbal concept; in Chontal, the affix is used to "go and do" in both space and time.

2.1.2. Achievements with non-agentive inflection.

The majority of my examples of non-agentive inflection, collected in recorded natural discourse and in elicitation, are examples of the achievement situation type. These predicate changes of state, especially in the physical body or in nature. All predicates of transformation in nature collected so far inflect non-agentively.

The following examples show the non-agentive counterpart to (9); all are stative predicates with andative derivation and perfective aspectual viewpoint.

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- (10) **xo -gix-p -ola'**
be.tired-AND-PFV-3P.PAT
'they got tired'
- (11) **xux -kix-p -ola' la'way**
be.delayed-AND-PFV-3P.PAT children
'the children got delayed'
- (12) **pagay -x -p -ola' lipa'**
be.in.blossom-AND-PFV-3P.PAT flowers
'the flowers blossomed'

An achievement expressed from an imperfective viewpoint describes the phase leading up to the change of state, as in (13) and (14).

- (13) **ma -'m -ola'**
die-IMPV-3P.PAT
'they will die, they might die'
- (14) **paf' -'m -ola' pijlki laybaaka**
give.birth-IMPF-3P.PAT all my.cows
'all my cows are going to give birth'

In (13) and (14), the outcome is still unknown. In (15-17), perfective viewpoint describes the moment of change or the resulting state.

- (15) **paf' -p -ola' lakajl'no'**
give.birth-PFV-3P.PAT women
'the women gave birth'
- (16) **jak' -p -ola' la'way'**
disappear-PFV-3P.PAT children
'the children disappeared'
- (17) **ma -na -p -ola'**
die-TERM-PFV-3P.PAT
'they died, they have just died; they are dead'

The expression in (17) can be interpreted as achievement or resulting state.

First-person agentivity, a phenomenon attested in many languages of the world, demonstrates 'attributed agency' in Chontal. The roots *so-* 'be tired' and *jak'-* 'disappear' were presented in (10) and (16), respectively, with non-agentive inflection. The predications in (18) and (19) follow the agentive pattern of person marking, suggesting that a speaker can know his or her own volition or intention.

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- (18) *joypa so -gix-pa iya'*
 now be.tired-AND-PFV.SG 1S.AGT
 'I am getting tired'
- (19) *jak' -pa iya'*
 disappear-PFV.SG 1S.AGT
 'I disappeared'

The minimal pair of (20-21) suggests that a speaker can signal his or her opinion or evaluation of the participant's intention.

- (20) *xux -kix-p -o'*
 be.delayed-AND-PFV-2S.PAT
 'you took a long time'
- (21) *xux -kix-pa ima'*
 be.delayed-AND-PFV.SG 2S.AGT
 'you took a long time'

The non-agentive inflection in (20) implies the participant couldn't help the tardiness, while the agentive inflection in (21) indicates the speaker thinks the person had some control over the situation.

2.1.3. Interaction of situation type, viewpoint, and agency.

A comparison of expressions of 'endure, survive' demonstrates combinatorial possibilities of situation type, viewpoint, and agentive/non-agentive inflection. With human participants, morphosyntactic distinction indicates volition or control, but with plants, there is no distinction. Expressions with *maygo-* are variously translated as 'get well, suffer, endure, survive'. For ease of comparison, I gloss each example in (22-24) as 'survive'.

- (22) *injko maygo -'m -onga' jo ma -'m -onga'*
 who.knows survive-IMPF-2P.PAT or die-IMPF-2P.PAT
 'who knows if we will get well or we'll die'
- (23) *tonjsal'e iyank' maygo -pa'*
 this.is.what 1P.AGT survive-PFV.PL
 'this is what we endured, went through'
- (24) *maa xnek -p -ola' layñegay'*
 NEG survive-PFV-3P.PAT cornfields
 'the cornfields didn't survive'

In the prefatory state (22), the outcome of suffering is not yet known. The predication is imperfective and non-agentive to reflect the ongoing nature of the situation and the lack of volition on the part of the participant. In (23), the

achievement event is inflected as perfective and agentive: the critical moment of survival has passed, the event is bounded and complete, and the participant is expressed as agentive or in control. And finally, in (24), the parallel achievement event in nature requires a separate lexical item and is inflected as non-agentive even when the outcome is known.

2.2. States.

States are static and durative; endpoints are not part of the viewpoint. This characterization is adapted to describe expressions of state with non-agentive inflection as the resulting states of transformation.

2.2.1. States expressed with various resources (agentive pattern).

States can be expressed as inflected for stative aspect and in relational or attributive constructions. These predications are not semantically agentive, but the presence of pronouns and the indexing number in the aspectual morphology are consonant with patterns of agentive morphosyntax and contrast with non-agentive patterns in 2.2.2. Examples (25-28) present “agentive” states from various aspectual viewpoints.

Stative morphology is used for current, ongoing situations.

- (25) *fa'a pang -uk' iya'*
 here dwell-STAT.SG 1S.AGT
 'I live here'

- (26) *xk'wajing-ojlenna' ma -pij lammixi*
 stick.to -STAT.PL LOC-rock small.shrimp
 'the tiny shrimp are sticking to the rock.'

Perfective viewpoint describes a past ongoing situation. The verb root *pang-* also means 'sit', so (27) also expresses the achievement 'I sat down here.'

- (27) *fa'a pang -pa iya'*
 here dwell-PFV.SG 1S.AGT
 'I lived here'

Perfect viewpoint describes a resulting state achieved volitionally.

- (28) *fa'a kway -tya iya'*
 here arrive-PFT.SG 1S.AGT
 '(when) I arrived here'

2.2.2. States with non-agentive inflection.

The predications in this section are marked non-agentively to signal that they are the resulting states of transformations deemed beyond the control or intention of the participant. Relative tense is determined from context.

- (29) *fa'a jl -pang -tya*
 here 1S.PAT-dwell-PFT.SG
 'I was born here'

Perfect viewpoint (29) describes a resulting state achieved non-volitionally, in contrast to (28). Note that the verb *pang-*, also seen in (25) and (27), translates as 'be born' with perfect inflection.

The examples in (30-32) are counterparts of the derived stems in (10-12).

- (30) *xoj -t -ola' la'way*
 be.tired-PFT-3P.PAT children
 'the children are tired (have become tired)'
- (31) *xux -t -ola' la'way*
 be.delayed-PFT-3P.PAT children
 'the children are late (have been delayed)'
- (32) *pagay -t -ola' lipa'*
 be.in.bloom-PFT-3P.PAT flowers
 'the flowers were in bloom (had blossomed)'

Whether expressed as achievements, with andative derivation and perfective aspect as in (10-12), or as states, underived and with perfect aspect as in (30-32), the situations are evaluated as beyond the volition or intention of the participant. However, examples (18, 20-21) demonstrated the flexibility speakers have in conveying perceived or attributed agency with typically non-agentive predicates.

2.3. Activities.

Activities are situations characterized as dynamic, durative, and atelic; as such, they do not predicate changes of state, and indeed nearly all examples of activities occur in the agentive pattern. Predications with non-agentive inflection involve roots classifiable as states but expressed as ongoing or progressive, in a prefatory phase to a change of state.

2.3.1. Activities with agentive inflection.

Most activities inflect non-agentively, as in (33) and (34).

- (33) *f'aj-kay' lammixtyo' lanek'*
 rise-DUR.PL cats trees
 'cats climb trees'

- (34) **may-**'me' lakujlwe'
 go -IMPF.PL men
 'the men will go'

2.3.2. Activities with non-agentive inflection.

Durative and imperfective viewpoints can be interpreted as prefatory activity.

- (35) **jujl -k -ilya'** lankamisa'
 get.dry-DUR-3P.PAT shirts
 'the shirts are getting dry'
- (36) *faduy iya' layñe'wa'ek', tyoj-m -ola'*
 planting 1S.AGT my.little.trees, grow-IMPF-3P.PAT
 'I'm planting my little trees, they will grow'

In (35-36), the endpoints of dryness and growth have not been achieved. In (37), perfective viewpoint signals interpretation as an activity or a resulting state.

- (37) **tyoj-p -ola'**
 grow-PFV-3P.PAT
 'they grew, they are adults'

The multiple interpretation of (37) corresponds to that of (17).

2.4. Semelfactives.

In Smith's analysis, "semelfactives are single-stage events with no result or outcome" (1997:29). Like achievements, they are dynamic and instantaneous; unlike achievements, they are atelic, as endpoints are irrelevant in a single-stage event. All the predicates examined in this section might arguably be classified as 'involuntary response', yet the patterns of morphosyntax differ.

2.4.1. Semelfactives with agentive inflection.

Predicates of bodily function which inflect agentively include *k'ojsa-* 'cough', *ix-* 'sneeze', *ch'ilyo-* 'defecate', *chalay-* 'urinate', *najwa-* 'vomit', and *stas-* 'pass wind'. The inflection pattern may respond to cultural perceptions of relative control of body function. Alternatively, it may reflect the unergative character of the verbs, each of which predicates a change of state which produces or expels something from the body.

2.4.2. Semelfactives with non-agentive inflection.

Non-agentive semelfactive predications involve involuntary response and motion. *Kwilif-* 'tremble' and *juwix-* 'move in agitation' both denote motion in situ. The first (38) is used to describe someone shivering with cold, trembling in fear, or shaking with the earth during an earthquake. The second (39) was collected in a conversation about pregnant women.

- (38) **kwilif'-p -ola'** *lansanyu'*
 shake -PFV-3P.PAT people
 'the people trembled, shivered'
- (39) **jwix-m -ola'** *lijlku'u*
 jump-IMPF-3P.PAT their.abdomens
 'their abdomens were jumping about'

The verbs *tye-* 'fall down,' *tyamay-* 'fall flat,' and *lan-* 'become stuck' all describe the unexpected and involuntary cessation of motion.

- (40) **tye -p -ola'** *la'way'*
 fall.down-PFV-3P.PAT children
 'the children fell down'
- (41) **tyamay -x -p -ola'** *la'way'*
 fall.flat-AND-PFV-3P.PAT children
 'the children fell flat'

These verbs always occur with non-agentive marking, even in contexts in which the participant has just been warned and arguably might be able to control the event.

2.5. Cognitive and emotional activity.

Predications of cognitive and emotional activity are difficult to classify as situation types. Does "*I think*" depict a state or an activity? With respect to agentive and non-agentive inflection, the domain presents a picture reminiscent of what has been described for changes in the physical body. Some verbs inflect agentively, such as *swelme-* 'think', *fasku-* 'remember', *ja'ko-* 'forget', *smay-* 'dream', *stule-* 'get angry' and *joo-* 'cry, weep', while other situations such as *tos-* 'learn', *tontoj-* 'err', *mes-* 'become wicked', *paychu-* 'fear, be afraid' and *chijko-* 'become calm' (stop crying), are expressed with non-agentive morphology.

While these differences could appeal to a culture-specific understanding of agency (cf. DeLancey 1985), an examination of alternative marking of specific predicates suggests a pattern of using non-agentive morphosyntax to signal the (non-volitional) moment of change as qualitatively distinct from the general state or activity. For example, there are only two occurrences of *tay-* 'comprehend' in the corpus. Both were collected in elicitation, without discourse context to provide a clue to their interpretations. However, it is feasible to suggest that (42) depicts an ongoing state of understanding, while (43) predicates the immediate resulting state of the moment of understanding.

- (42) **tyay -kay'** *la'way'*
 comprehend-DUR.PL children
 'the children understand'

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- (43) **tya+l+ay** **-t -olwa'**
comprehend+PL+ -PFT-2P.PAT
'y'all understand (have understood)'

In similar fashion, the corpus includes only two examples of *soo*- 'laugh'. The first is from a narrative about children in the classroom and predicates an ongoing or habitual activity (44). The second example was collected by Waterhouse, in a narrative about a fiesta dance where everyone enjoyed themselves (45).

- (44) **xyo -day'** *ñi*
laugh-DUR.PL nothing.more
'they just laugh'

- (45) **xyo -go -p -ola'**
laugh-APPL?-PFV-3P.PAT
'they laughed (about it)'

I suggest another translation of (45) could be, "they burst out laughing."

3. Conclusions.

Three main points were argued in this paper. 1) The agent-patient morphosyntactic system of Lowland Chontal is 'agentive' rather than 'active' because it is the perceived agency of the participant, and not the aspectual class of the predication as state vs. event, that determines the pattern of person marking. 2) Non-agentive morphosyntax signals a change of state or transformation evaluated by the speaker as outside the volition or intention of the participant. 3) The term 'transformation' is used as a supertype category that includes predications of resulting state, prefatory phase, and involuntary response, as well as the moment of change itself.

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