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Author(s): Scott DeLancey

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Agentivity and Causation: Data from Newari

Scott DeLancey
University of Oregon

This paper represents part of an investigation into the nature of agentivity and its status as a universal syntactic and semantic category (see also DeLancey 1982a, b, to appear a,b). Evidence has been accumulating for some time now that the term agent, as generally used in linguistics, applies to a multifactoral concept, and that in the real world which language must report on the various factors can occur independently (see e.g. Cruse 1973, Lakoff 1977, Hopper and Thompson 1980). I will be reporting here on three morphosyntactic constructions in Newari¹, a Tibeto-Burman language of Nepal, each of which describes some sort of causal relationship between an entity and an event. Our interest is in identifying the distinctions among causal events which are sufficiently salient to merit differential morphosyntactic coding. The results of investigations such as this will be the material from which we will eventually construct a general cross-linguistic classification of types of causation and their relationship to the category of agentivity.

The most obvious construction of the sort described above is the simple transitive clause. Newari is an unusually consistent ergative language;² transitive subjects are marked with a postposition which occurs as -ṣ following a stem-final consonant, and -nṣ (in normal speech usually reduced to nasalization on the preceding vowel) after final vowels. Nearly all verbs are lexically transitive or intransitive, though I have found one labile verb (toja-e-gu 'break (tr. or intr.)'). Nearly any simple transitive clause can be contrasted with a corresponding clause with an intransitive verb and the 'agent' marked by both ergative case and a following -yana, as

- 1) harsa-nṣ wo misa-yato siat-ṣ
H. -ERG the woman-DAT kill-PERF
'Harsha killed the woman.'
- 2) harsa-nṣ-yana wo misa sit-ṣ³
die-PERF
'Because of Harsha the woman died.'

The glosses, which are my informant's, suggest the nature of the semantic distinction coded here, but before we attempt to explicate it we will need to examine some contextual data. My informant suggested as contexts for

(2) situations in which the woman is clearly dangerously ill and Harsha delays calling a doctor until too late, or in which the woman had had a weak heart and Harsha brought her news which affected her sufficiently so as to precipitate a fatal heart attack. These have in common an intermediate event in the chain of causation leading from some act of Harsha's to the death of the woman, and this I will suggest is the central meaning of the -yana construction. (1) is impossible in either of these contexts, which suggests that part of what is involved in agentivity is directness of causation (cf. Givón 1975). Inevitably, however, the matter is more complicated. (1) is a possible description of an event in which a physical assault by Harsha precipitates a fatal heart attack in the victim. We still have a case of mediated causation, but we have added an element of intention on Harsha's part. That this qualifies the event for coding in a transitive clause is consistent with the widely-noted relationship between intention and agentivity. (This recalls the legal principle described by Fillmore (1977) according to which one who intends to commit murder and accidentally kills the wrong victim is nonetheless guilty of murder. Note that Harsha need no have intended to kill the woman in order for the event to be describable by (1) -- it is enough that he intentionally inflicted harm which eventuated in her death).

To complicate matters further, we can show that intention is not a necessary prerequisite for (1). Consider the class of events in which Harsha is driving a car which strikes the woman and kills her. If the accident is entirely the woman's fault, then neither (1) nor (2) is appropriate. If the accident required negligence on the part of both Harsha and the victim, (2) but not (1) is possible. However, if the accident is clearly Harsha's responsibility -- suppose that he was drunk and driving fast and erratically down a crowded street -- then (1) is a more appropriate description. The distinction here is between shared and sole responsibility -- Harsha is more of an agent if he alone caused the event, even if he had no intention of doing so.

The above data constitute evidence for the prototype approach to transitivity and agentivity suggested by Lakoff (1977) and implied in Hopper and Thompson 1980. The prototypical transitive event has as agent an intentionally acting entity whose act is the sole and immediate cause of the event. Deviations from this prototype with respect to any of these parameters remain legitimate, if less than perfect, transitive clauses up to a certain (obviously not clearly determinate) point. However, too much deviation from the prototype, in the form of intermediate causes, shared responsibility, lack of intention,

or some combination of these, disqualify an event for the transitive category, and require a different coding.

There are two structural differences between the simple transitive and the -yana constructions -- the transitivity of the verb, and the presence of extra morphological material, which we have so far treated as a postpositional NP marker. Since the presence of this extra material correlates with the presence of extra 'distance' between cause and effect, we have here a degree of iconicity of meaning-form mapping of the sort discussed in e.g. Givón 1979. In this context we can adduce further information about the nature of -yana which will constitute an interesting study in grammaticalization. -yana is transparently (to the informant as well as the investigator) a participial form of the verb yat- 'do'. The -yana sentences can thus be analyzed as structurally isomorphic with the very common participial embedding construction exemplified in (3):⁴

- 3) bēduk-ya goli la-na wo misa sit-ɔ
 gun-GEN bullet get-PART the woman die-PERF
 'Having gotten (hit by) a bullet from the
 gun, the woman died.'

This construction is frequently used when a causal relationship is being attributed to the two clauses, as in (3), but the existence of such a relationship is a matter of pragmatic inference and not a part of the essential meaning of the participial chain. All that is asserted is temporal succession,⁵ as can be seen from an example like (4):

- 4) misa la na-ya won-ɔ
 woman meat eat-PART go-PERF
 'The woman, having eaten the meat, left.'

where there is no asserted or implied causal relation between the two clauses.

This suggests an analysis of a sentence like (2) as meaning something like 'The man having done something, the woman died'. (Note that we now have at least a historical explanation for the ergative case marking on -yana-marked NPs). This would provide a neat account of the 'mediated causation' sense of this construction, which could now be seen as even more clearly isomorphic with the structure. We could then describe a semantic continuum coded by sentences like (5-7):

- 5) kica-nō wo misa-yato siat-ɔ
 dog-ERG the woman-DAT kill-PERF
 'The dog killed the woman.'

- 6) kica-nō-yana wo misa sit-o
 dog-ERG-YANA the woman die-PERF
 'Because of the dog the woman died.'
- 7) kica-nō ja-na wo misa sit-o
 bite-PART
 'The dog having bitten her, the woman died.'

(5) makes no mention of any intermediate proposition, treating the overall sequence of events which begins with the dog's biting and ends with the woman's death as a single unitary event. (7) traces the sequence of events in some detail, explicitly mentioning the bite ---- die sequence. (6) is intermediate between the two, in that it makes explicit reference to an intermediate event, but doesn't overburden the discourse by describing it. The biting, which is definitely backgrounded in (7), is suppressed even more. Thus the sentence focusses on the woman's death and the dog's responsibility for it, minimizing the salience of the intermediate stage without completely ignoring it.

There are, however, reasons to believe that this account is too simple and straightforward to correspond to the actual facts of the grammar. To begin with, the -yana clauses which we have looked at so far would in fact be ungrammatical if they were interpreted as containing ya-na 'having done.' yat- is a transitive verb, and must have either an explicit or an anaphorically recoverable object. We can have a main clause with finite yat- and no explicit object, as in (8):

- 8) misa-nō yat-o 'The woman did it.'
 woman-ERG do-PERF

But this is grammatical only as an answer to a question like 'Who finally fixed it?' We can also have true participial constructions with yat-, as in (9):

- 9) wo misa jya ya-na chē-ē won-o
 the woman work do-PART house-to go-PERF
 'The woman, having done the work, went home.'

However, in the -yana sentences of the type we have been examining, there is no explicit or recoverable object for -ya-na if we choose to interpret it as yat-. Thus, if we choose this analysis of -yana, we will need to mention in the grammar that in this use it has idiosyncratic syntactic behavior -- i.e. we will have to note that -yana in this construction has been at least partly grammaticalized.

More significant and interesting evidence for the same conclusion is to be found in the semantics of -yana. Note that while the participial analysis neatly predicts the 'mediated causation' sense of the construction, which is its sense in most of the sentence-context pairs spontaneously supplied by my informant, it does

directly predict its appropriateness for the other contexts in which we have seen that it can be used. In fact, we can find examples of -yana where there is no plausible interpretation which accords with the literal sense of 'do', such as (10):

- 10) dhewa-nõ-yana wo misa sit-õ
 money
 'Because of money the woman died.'

The appropriate context for this sentence is one in which the woman was killed in a quarrel over money. Now, in this case the -yana still has a version of the mediated causation sense -- the money is the ultimate cause of death, but the effect is brought about by an action performed by someone else. However, we cannot give -yana here the literal sense of 'do', for the money in fact does nothing.

Thus we find that, while the origin of the -yana construction remains synchronically transparent, it has acquired both syntactic and semantic idiosyncrasies which require special description -- i. e. it is no longer describable as a straightforward case of the participial construction. (It is worth noting that my informant, an intelligent and linguistically sophisticated individual who early in our work developed a keen interest in and talent for explicating Newari syntactic structure for me, prefers to translate -yana as 'because of', while with ordinary examples of the participial construction he much prefers English translations with participial subordinate clauses.) Thus we have here an example of the diachronic process of grammaticalization in its early stages. A construction which originally (presumably) made explicit (but **not** specific) reference to an intermediate event in a causal chain is being bleached of concrete reference and becoming an abstract marker of reduced transitivity.

I should reiterate here that, even if we were to analyze -yana as a monomorphemic postposition synchronically unrelated to the verb yat-, there is still some degree of iconicity in the mapping between meaning and form, in that deviation from the prototypical transitive schema is reflected in deviation from normal transitive syntax. There is, however, no need to make so drastic a decision; there can be no doubt that speakers of language are capable of recognizing both the similarities and differences between -yana and ya-na.

In this connection it is worth a detour to consider another construction based on the verb yat-. Newari, like many languages, has a contrast between a morphological and a periphrastic causative construction, the latter constructed with the verb yat-.⁶ This can be seen in examples like (11-12):

- 11) wo misa-nõ mēca-yatõ chahi-kal-õ
 the woman-ERG child-DAT walk-CAUS-PERF
 'The woman walked the child.'

- 12) wo misa-nō mēca-yatō chahi yat-ō
 walk do-PERF
 'The woman made the child walk.'

The semantic difference, which is imperfectly captured by my English glosses, is again direct versus mediated causation. In (12) the woman orders the child to walk and he does so. Notice that the child retains some control; the woman's act, a command, must induce in him a disposition to walk, which in turn is the cause of his doing so. (11), in contrast, describes unmediated causation; the woman is dragging the child down the street, or perhaps manipulating his legs for him. This is, of course, a special case of the same distinction which we have already attributed to the alternation between -yana-marked and ordinary transitive agents. I do not see any point in trying to link these two constructions (i.e. the yat-causative and the -yana 'agent') syntactically (though it would not take too much ingenuity) but we may remark, first that the semantic values of the two causative constructions are predictable according to the same line of argument which I have suggested in connection with the iconicity of the -yana construction (this is the typical semantic contrast associated with this morphosyntactic contrast; cf. Givón 1979), and further that the existence of this alternation of causative constructions and the nature of the semantic contrast coded by it no doubt reinforce the semantic value of -yana. (Arguments of this type have been convincingly developed within Langacker's Space Grammar framework; see e.g. Tuggy 1982). Indeed, it may be that the existence of the yat-causative helps to keep alive in the grammar the association between -yana and yat-, and thus retards the process of grammaticalization.

There is another construction which we need to consider here, one which poses somewhat stickier problems than does -yana. To set the stage let us note that in Newari, as in many other languages of the area, ergative and instrumental case are marked identically:

- 13) misa-nō bōduk-ō kica siat-ō
 woman-ERG gun-INSTR dog kill-PERF
 'The woman killed the dog with a gun.'

They may be distinguished by eligibility for transitive subject, which is restricted to ergative NPs:

- 14) *bōduk-ō kica siat-ō
 gun-INSTR dog kill-PERF

(Note that (14) is grammatical if interpreted as having an anaphoric zero agent, '(S/he) killed the dog with a gun'. It would also, of course, be grammatical in a fantasy about a magical gun possessed of volition). Instruments are also ineligible for the -yana construction:

- 15) *bõduk-õ-yana kica sit-õ
 gun dog die-PERF

(But cf. ex. (10); with a human patient (15) would be acceptable in the sense of 'killed over a gun'). This restriction is consistent with the mediated causation interpretation of -yana, since a true instrument is by definition the most immediate cause of the effect on the patient; what qualifies it as an instrument is that it is not also the ultimate cause.

There is a class of sentences in Newari in which this ergative/instrumental case form occurs with an intransitive verb:

- 16) bikh-õ wo misa sit-õ 7
 poison-ERG woman die-PERF
 'The woman died from poison.'

All of the examples which I have found of this can also be put into ordinary transitive form with no apparent change of meaning:⁹

- 17) bikh-õ wo misa-yato siat-õ
 poison-ERG woman-DAT kill-PERF
 'Poison killed the woman.'

(It is clearly relevant, though somewhat difficult to interpret, that in many cases my informant describes a sentence like (17) as somehow 'personifying' the poison, though not so much so as to make the sentence inappropriate for ordinary discourse). Most of them can also be recast as -yana sentences, again without apparent semantic effect:

- 18) bikh-õ-yana wo misa sit-õ
 die
 'Because of poison the woman died.'

There is an apparently systematic set of exceptions to this last statement, however; disease and diseases are eligible for both the ordinary transitive and the ergative intransitive constructions, but not for -yana:

- 19) jor-õ wo misa-yato siat-õ
 fever-ERG woman-DAT kill-PERF
 'Fever killed the woman.'
- 20) jor-õ wo misa sit-õ
 fever-ERG die-PERF
 'The woman died of fever.'
- 21) *jor-õ-yana wo misa sit-õ

As these examples suggest, this construction is limited to inanimate causal entities, which bring about their effect without acting. More typical agents cannot occur in this construction:

- 22) *kica-nō wo misa sit-o
dog

Nor can instruments:

- 23) *bōduk-ō wo misa sit-o
gun

The latter restriction shows that it is not animacy per se which determines eligibility for the ergative intransitive construction, but the distinction between active (prototypically, moving) participants in the event and inactive entities which somehow produce their effect simply by being in the right place at the right time. This is reminiscent of the role of 'money' in ex. (10), but 'money' cannot occur in the ergative intransitive:

- 10) dhewa-nō-yana wo misa sit-o
money the woman die-PERF
'The woman died because of money.'

- 24) *dhewa-nō wo misa sit-o

This suggests that the ergative intransitive construction asserts direct rather than mediated causation. This conclusion may be further indicated by the fact, noted above, that when the -yana construction equivalent to an ergative intransitive sentence is possible, it is difficult (indeed, so far impossible) to find a context in which one but not all of the three alternatives is acceptable. I suspect that this is because the chain of causality connecting something like poison with its effect is completely imperceptible, making it pragmatically impossible to identify it as direct or mediated causation, and thus neutralizing the distinction.⁸

While I have referred to the construction exemplified in (16) and (20) as "ergative intransitive", thus suggesting the identification of the NPs in question as ergative, this analysis is obviously problematic. I have made the identification on the grounds that 'poison' and 'disease' play the same role in the events described by the ergative intransitive sentences, (16) and (20), and the ordinary transitives (17) and (19), and because ordinary instruments cannot occur in the ergative intransitive construction. There is, of course, something odd about identifying an argument in a formally intransitive clause as ergative. It is likely that this too is a false issue, and that we should regard the ergative/instrumental morpheme as three ways polysemous rather than two.⁹

While the morphosyntactic analysis of this construction is difficult, its functional analysis is clear. Those events which are eligible for the ergative intransitive construction deviate

from prototypical transitivity in lacking an an agent which performs a perceptible action. This is a different kind of deviation from the prototype from that typically associated with the -yana construction, but it is in its own way a significant enough deviation to merit distinct morphosyntactic coding.¹⁰ (It follows from this that the fact that the -yana construction can be used in some situations which normally call for the ergative intransitive is further evidence that -yana is generalizing from its original restricted sense into a marker of reduced transitivity of whatever kind.)

Notes

- 1) My informant for Newari is Mr. Harsha Dhaubhadel, who grew up in a small Newari-speaking settlement in a primarily Maithili-speaking area near the Indian border. His speech belongs to the Katmandu dialect group.
- 2) In this informant's speech transitive subject lacks ergative case in some progressive and some first person subject clauses. The conditions which determine case marking in these situations are not yet clear.
- 3) For purposes of clarity I write ergative case everywhere as -nɔ̃, although when followed by -yana it would almost always be realized as nasalization on the stem-final vowel.
- 4) Sentence (3) was volunteered by the informant in the course of the investigation described in the preceding pages. I asked him whether exx. (1) or (2) would be appropriate in describing a situation in which Harsha is firing a gun and the woman walked into his line of fire. Neither (1) nor (2) is possible in that context, which requires fuller explanation. Thus we can see that major deviations from prototype cannot be described by reference to the prototype, but require explicit description.
- 5) There is another participle form, identical to this but with a nasalized final vowel, which indicates that the two clauses take place simultaneously.
- 6) There is at least one additional causative construction which I have yet to investigate.
- 7) As with all of the examples in this paper, the order of the NPs is pragmatically determined and is irrelevant to our present discussion.
- 8) I have a persistent feeling that the fact that diseases occur in the ergative intransitive but not the -yana construction is relevant here, but as yet I cannot say how.
- 9) I use the term 'polysemous', and refer to 'the' ergative/instrumental morpheme, advisedly, for reasons which should be obvious (see DeLancey 1981). Space limitations prevent me from developing the argument here.

- 10) As pointed out to me by F.W. Householder, a similar situation obtains in English, where one ordinarily dies of disease, hunger, etc., rather than being killed by them.
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