

An analysis of “causative” forms in Okinawan: A benefactive view

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Abstract. Okinawan is said to have two causative forms: *-(r)as* and *-(r)ashimi*, with the former primarily expressing forcible causation and the latter, permission causation. However, this is just a tendency, not an absolute rule. This paper adopts Miyara’s (2015a) view that *-(r)ashimi* consists of two morphemes *-(r)as* and *-imi* but proposes that *-imi* functions ambiguously either as a causative morpheme or as a benefactive morpheme. This makes it possible to understand some complex interpretational facts observed in causative constructions in Okinawan. A theoretical analysis of the causative suffixes is also offered in the framework of Distributed Morphology.

Keywords. causative; benefactive; Okinawan; Distributed Morphology

1. Introduction. In the literature on the causative construction in Okinawan—a Ryukyuan language genetically related to Japanese—, two causative suffixes have been identified for syntactic causatives (Toyama 2015, Hanazono 2020),¹ as exemplified in (1) from Toyama (2015:98).²

- (1) a. Warabi-nu sakkwii soota-kutu, kusui num-**as**-u-n.
 child-NOM cough did-because medicine drink-CAUS-PRS-IND
 ‘Because my child was coughing, (I will) make (him/her) take medicine.’
- b. Yattchii-ga saki numibusasoota-kutu, uhwooku num-**ashimi**-i-n.
 older.brother-NOM saké wanted.to.drink-because, a.lot drink-CAUS-PRS-IND
 ‘Because my older brother wanted to drink saké, (I) let (him) drink a lot.’

According to Toyama (2015) and Hanazono (2020), the basic difference between the two causative forms *-(r)as* and *-(r)ashimi* is that the former has a ‘make’ reading (forcible causation), while the latter has a ‘let’ reading (permission causation).³ Thus, it appears that Okinawan distinguishes these two readings morphologically, while Japanese uses the same morpheme *-sase* for both a ‘make’ reading and ‘let’ reading. However, Toyama (2015) also shows that the *-(r)ashimi* causative can have a ‘make’ reading rather than a ‘let’ reading. Therefore, Toyama notes that the association of the ‘let’ reading with *-(r)ashimi* is a tendency, not an absolute property of the form. On the other hand, Miyara (2015a, 2019) argues that the causative form

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¹ Toyama (2015) shows that there is a third type of causative suffix in Okinawan, in which *-(r)as* immediately follows *-(r)ashimi*. I put aside an analysis of this form in the present paper.

² I use the (somewhat simplified) romanization convention to transcribe Okinawan data throughout this paper. Toyama (2015) uses IPA symbols for her transcription.

³ The suffixes that Toyama (2015) actually identifies are *-(a)sun* for forcible causation and *-(a)shimiin* for permission causation. This is because Toyama’s study is carried out in the framework of traditional Japanese linguistics. I take the liberty of showing what I take to be correct morphological segmentations of her Okinawan data. In this respect, I follow a series of Miyara’s (2000, 2015b, among many others) work on Okinawan.

-(r)*ashimi* actually consists of two morphemes: *-ras* and *-imi*.⁴ He claims that *-ras* simply instructs the causee to do something, while *-imi* implies that the caused event actually takes place.

Adopting Miyara's idea that the suffix *-rashimi* is a combination of *-ras* and *-imi*, this paper examines the nature of these morphemes carefully in order to understand why *-rash-imi* tends to express permission causation while *-ras* alone does not, as reported by Toyama (2015). I will propose that *-imi* is ambiguous: it may express causation, or it may express benefactiveness. When *-imi* is used as a benefactive morpheme and the beneficiary is the causee, permission reading arises. When *-imi* is used as a causative morpheme and is attached to another causative morpheme *-ras*, a double causative reading emerges.

The organization of this paper is as follows. In section 2, I briefly discuss Miyara's (2015a, 2019) work showing that there is a discrepancy between his data and the data collected in my fieldwork. Section 3 offers my analysis of the morphemes *-ras* and *-imi* based on my fieldwork as well as Toyama's (2015) work. I propose there that *-imi* can be either causative or benefactive. In section 4, I offer a theoretical analysis of these morphemes in the framework of Distributed Morphology. Section 5 concludes this paper.

2. Miyara's (2015a, 2019) analysis. As mentioned above, Miyara (2015a, 2019) takes the "causative" form *-rashimi* to be a combination of two morphemes *-ras* and *-imi*. His proposal that *-ras* simply instructs the causee to do something is based on sentences like (2), where the morpheme *-ras* (glossed as RAS for the moment) is used in the initial clause.

- (2) Nabii-ya Taruu-nkai yaa ka-**ra**-cha-shiga, Taruu-ya yaa ka-ran-ta-n.
-TOP -DAT house rent-RAS-PST-though -TOP house rent-NEG-PST-IND
'Although Nabii tried to make Taruu rent a house, Taruu did not rent it.'
(Miyara 2015a:23-4)

According to Miyara, the subordinate clause of (2) is interpreted in such a way that the subject (Nabii) only tried to cause an event of Taruu's renting a house; whether or not the event actually took place is not conveyed by this clause. Thus, sentence (2) as a whole is not contradictory. This is why Miyara proposes that *-ras* is not a causative morpheme; it conveys the meaning of instructing someone to do something. In contrast to (2), example (3) is a contradictory statement, according to Miyara.

- (3) Anmaa-ga Nabii-nkai shishi koo-**rash-imi**-ta-shiga, koo-ran-ta-n.
-NOM -DAT meat buy-RAS-CAUS-PST-though buy-NEG-PST-IND
'Although mother made Nabii buy meat, (she) did not buy.'
(Miyara 2019:179)

Hence, for Miyara, *-imi* is the causative morpheme in Okinawan.

Contrary to Miyara's observation, my own fieldwork with a native speaker of Shuri Okinawan revealed that there is no distinction between *-ras* and *-rashimi* in terms of whether the caused event actually takes place or not. Thus, according to my consultant, sentence (2) is just as contradictory as sentence (3). This judgment seems to be in accord with Toyama's work (2015), where no distinctions are reported between the suffixes *-ras* and *-rashimi* in terms of the occurrence of the event described. Thus, clearly, an analysis of the morphemes *-ras* and *-imi* that is different from Miyara's is called for. I take it for granted that *-ras* in (2) is an ordinary

⁴ The morpheme *-ras* has several allomorphs such as [-as], [ra], and [rash]. For the rest of this paper, I use the underlying form *-ras* to refer to this morpheme.

causative morpheme, given that (2) is a contradictory statement for my consultant. The remaining question, then, is: What is *-imi*? The next section is an attempt to answer this question.

3. What is *-imi*?

3.1. *-IMI* AS CAUSATIVE. First, consider the verb *sun* ‘do’ in (4a) and its causative form in (4b).

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|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------|
| (4) a. s-u-n | b. sh- imi -i-n | c. *s- as -u-n |
| do-PRS-IND | do-CAUS-PRS-IND | |
| ‘do’ | ‘make/let do’ | |

Crucially, the causative morpheme *-ras* does not appear in (4b); instead *-imi* appears here. Substituting *-ras* for *-imi* in (4b) results in non-existent form (4c). Thus, it must be the case that *-imi* in (4b) is a causative morpheme. More generally, we can say that the morpheme *-imi* appears in the causative forms of the verbs that end in the sound /s/; (4b) is just one example of such a verb. Another example is given in (5), where the verb root *noos* ends in /s/.

- | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| (5) a. noos-u-n | b. noosh- imi -i-n | c. *noos-as-u-n |
| fix-PRS-IND | fix-CAUS-PRS-IND | |
| ‘fix/repair’ | ‘{make/let} {fix/repair}’ | |

The other causative morpheme *-ras* appears elsewhere, i.e., after verbs that do not end in /s/. In fact, this distributional difference between the two causative morphemes was known since the very first comprehensive Okinawan dictionary published in 1963,⁵ although the relevant suffixes were identified as *-shimiyun* (corresponding to *-imi* in our analysis) and *-shun* (corresponding to *-ras*) in the dictionary.⁶ We may conclude, then, that *-imi* is a causative morpheme when it is attached to a verb root as in (4b) and (5b).

Another kind of evidence that supports the idea that *-imi* is causative comes from comparison of sentences like (6a) and (6b).

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|--|-------------|----------|----------------------------|
| (6) a. Taroo-ya | Hanako-nkai | kusui | num- a -cha-n. |
| -TOP | -DAT | medicine | drink-CAUS-PST-IND |
| ‘Taroo made Hanako take medicine.’ | | | |
| b. Taroo-ya | Hanako-nkai | kusui | num- ash-imi -ta-n. |
| -TOP | -DAT | medicine | drink-CAUS-CAUS-PST-IND |
| ‘Taroo (asked someone and) made Hanako take medicine.’ | | | |

In (6a), the causative morpheme *-ras* (realized as [a]) is used while in (6b), both *-ras* (realized as [ash]) and *-imi* are used. On one reading of (6b), it is someone other than Taroo who made Hanako take medicine; Taroo asked this person to make Hanako take medicine. This reading is absent in (6a), in which Taroo is understood to be the person who directly made Hanako take medicine. The difference in interpretation between (6a) and (6b) follows if *-imi* and *-ras* in (6b) are both causatives, making (6b) a double causative construction.

⁵ The title of the dictionary is *Okinawago Jiten* ‘Okinawan Dictionary’ and was edited by *Kokuritsu Kokugo Kenkyuusho* ‘National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics’.

⁶ This is due to the unique way of segmenting suffixes in the traditional Japanese linguistics, coupled with some minor sound changes that these suffixes underwent.

3.2. *-IMI* AS BENEFACTIVE. In the previous subsection, it was shown that *-imi* is a causative morpheme in some sentences. This subsection shows that the meaning associated with *-imi* is not always causative. Consider the sentences in (7).

- (7) a. Taroo-ga Hanako naa-nji ashib-**a**-cha-n.
 -NOM yard-in play-CAUS-PST-IND
 ‘Taroo made Hanako play in the yard’
 b. Taroo-ga Hanako naa-nji ashib-**ash-imi**-ta-n.
 -NOM yard-in play-CAUS-BEN-PST-IND
 ‘Taroo let Hanako play in the yard’

(7a) contains *-ras*, and (7b), both *-ras* and *-imi*. According to my consultant, among the contexts in which uttering (7b) would be appropriate is the context in which Hanako asked Taroo if it is all right to play in Taroo’s yard, and Taroo gave Hanako permission to do so. This intuition is in accord with Toyama’s (2015) claim that the *-rash-imi* causative is mainly associated with permission reading. Under the reading of (7b) just mentioned, *-imi* is clearly not a causative morpheme, since causative meaning is expressed by *-ras*. Rather, *-imi* seems to be functioning as a benefactive morpheme indicating that Hanako is the beneficiary of the event caused by Taroo. Note that if Hanako is the beneficiary of the caused event in (7b), it is likely that Hanako wanted the event to take place. I suggest this is why (7b) is associated with permission reading.

Another fact that supports the idea that *-imi* is associated with benefactive meaning is found in Toyama’s (2015:98–99) discussion of how Japanese sentences like (8) can be expressed in Okinawan.

- (8) Taroo-wa Hanako-ni hon-o yom-ase-te age-ta.
 -TOP -DAT book-ACC read-CAUS-TE⁷-give-PST
 ‘Taroo let Hanako read a book (and did her a favor).’

In the Japanese sentence (8), the auxiliary verb *age* ‘give’ adds the meaning that the subject (*Taroo*) did a favor for the indirect object (*Hanako*). According to Toyama, the literal translation of (8) into Okinawan would be (9).

- (9) *Taroo-ya Hanakoo-nkai sumuchi yum-a-chi tura-cha-n.
 -TOP -DAT book read-CAUS-TE give-PST-IND

However, she notes that her consultant reported that sentences like (9) are not used in Shuri Okinawan. To express the meaning of the Japanese sentence (8), it would be better to use the verb form in (10), according to her consultant.

- (10) Taroo-ya Hanakoo-nkai sumuchi yum-**ash-imi**-ta-n.⁸
 -TOP -DAT book read-CAUS-BEN-PST-IND
 ‘Taroo let Hanako read a book.’

The fact that (10) parallels (8) in meaning follows if *-imi* is a benefactive morpheme whose role is similar to the role played by *age* in (8).

⁷ The morpheme *-te* is a connective that connects two verbs. I use TE as its gloss here. The same gloss is used for the corresponding Okinawan morpheme *-chi* in (9).

⁸ The proper name *Hanakoo* (10) has a long vowel at the end, unlike (7). According to my consultant, either *Hanako* or *Hanakoo* is acceptable in (10), as well as in (7).

Our discussion so far suggests that *-imi* in (7b) and (10) is a benefactive morpheme. In these examples, the beneficiary is the causee, but the causer can also be the beneficiary, as can be illustrated by (11).

- (11) *Tanmee-ya ayaa-ni joo aki-rash-imi-ta-n.*
 grandfather-TOP mother-DAT gate open-CAUS-BEN-PST-IND
 ‘My grandfather made my mother open the gate.’ (Toyama 2015:101)

Toyama notes that (11) has a reading in which the subject (*tanmee*) is interpreted as the beneficiary of the caused event (= mother’s opening the gate). Thus, when the benefactive morpheme *-imi* is present in the sentence, the beneficiary may be either the causer as in (11) or the causee as in (7b) and (10).

3.3. *-IMI IS AMBIGUOUS*. In subsection 3.1, I showed that *-imi* is causative if it is attached to a verb root. I also showed that *-imi* attached to *-ras* can also be causative, forming the double causative construction. In subsection 3.2, I showed some sentences in which *-imi* is attached to *-ras* and *-imi* functions as a benefactive morpheme. A natural conclusion we can draw, then, is that the morpheme *-imi* is ambiguous: it can be causative or benefactive. This conclusion is supported by the fact that example (7b) above has another reading in which *-imi* is taken to be a causative morpheme.⁹ Consider (12).

- (12) *Taroo-ga Jiroo-nkai ichi Hanako naa-nji ashib-ash-imi-ta-n.*
 -NOM -DAT said.and yard-in play-CAUS-CAUS-PST-IND
 ‘(lit.) Telling Jiroo, Taroo made Hanako play in the yard.’

In contrast to (7b), (12) is a double causative construction: It is Jiroo who made Hanako play in the yard, but it is Taroo who told Jiroo to do so (Cf. (6b)). Although (7b) and (12) contain the same predicate, *-imi* is interpreted as benefactive in (7b), whereas it is interpreted as causative in (12). The causative interpretation of *-imi* in (12) is forced by the presence of the adjunct *Jiroo-nkai ichi* ‘telling Jiroo’.

4. A theoretical explanation. To recapitulate, I have argued that there are two causative morphemes in Okinawan: *-ras* and *-imi*. I have also argued that *-imi* can also function as a benefactive morpheme, and either the causer or the causee can be the beneficiary. In this section, I will consider how these facts are captured structurally in the framework of Distributed Morphology. Following Aoyagi (2021), I assume (13).

- (13) a. Causative constructions may contain three functional heads that introduce external arguments (EA): Cause, Voice, and High-Applicative (hereafter, Appl).
 b. These heads may bundle together, forming complex heads with combined features (Cf. Pykkänen 2008).
 c. Conventional θ -roles are specified by features such as [+c] (= cause change), [+m] (= mental state), and [+a] (= actor) (Cf. Reinhart 2016).
 d. The functional head Cause assigns [+c] feature to the EA in its Spec. Similarly, Voice assigns [+a] to its EA, and Appl(licative) assigns [+m] to its EA.

For Okinawan morphemes *-ras* and *-imi*, I propose the following.

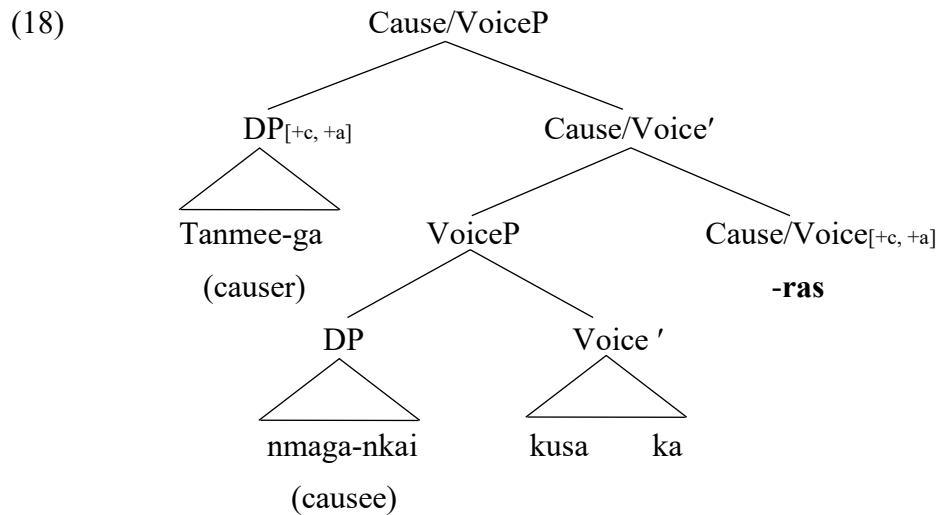
- (14) a. *-ras* is a Cause head.

⁹ I thank Ken Hiraiwa for asking me whether sentence (7b) also has a double causative reading. As expected, it does, as shown in (12).

- b. *-imi* is an Appl head (more specifically, a benefactive applicative head)
- (15) a. *-ras* selects for a VoiceP.
 b. *-imi* selects for a CauseP.
- (16) a. *-ras* may appear in a complex head formed by bundling Cause and Voice.
 b. *-imi* may appear in a complex head formed by bundling Cause, Appl, and Voice.

Given (14)–(16), example (17) with the causative morpheme *-ras* would have the partial structure in (18).

- (17) Tanmee-ga nmaga-nkai kusa ka-ra-cha-n.
 grandfather-NOM grandchild-DAT grass mow-CAUS-PAST-IND
 ‘Grandfather made his grandchild mow the grass.’



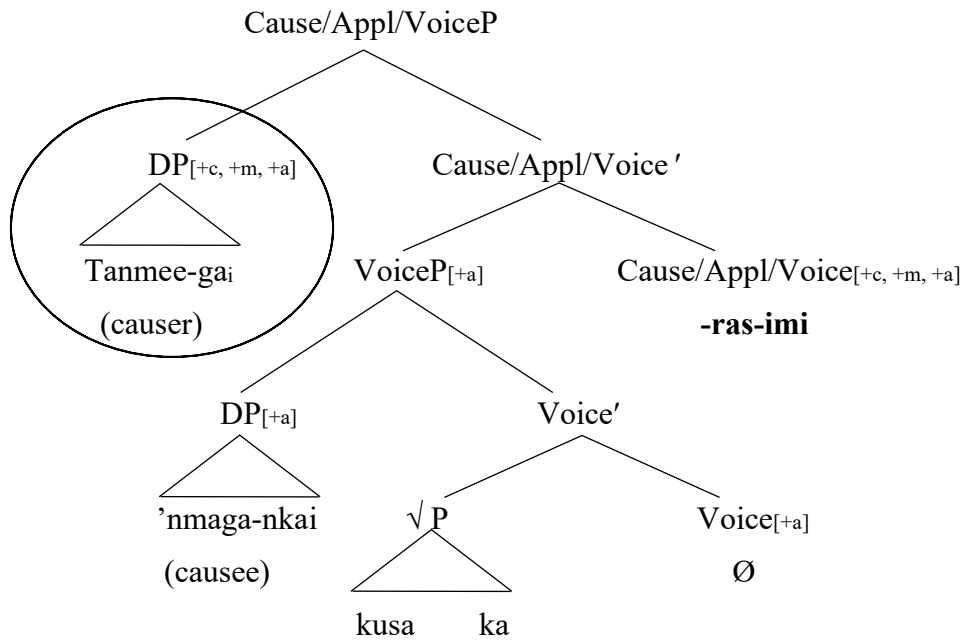
In (18), the subject *tanmee* ‘grandfather’ is assigned [+c] and [+a] θ -roles, and is interpreted as the causer and actor.

Example (19) below with the benefactive applicative morpheme *-imi* is ambiguous in terms of who the beneficiary is. If the causer is the beneficiary, the sentence would have the structure in (20); if the causee is the beneficiary, then it would have the structure in (21). In (19)–(21), I gloss *-imi* as APPL, with the understanding that benefactive is a kind of applicative.

- (19) Tanmee-ga nmaga-nkai kusa ka-rash-imi-ta-n.
 grandfather-NOM grandchild-DAT grass mow-CAUS-APPL-PST-IND
 ‘Grandfather made his grandchild mow the grass.’

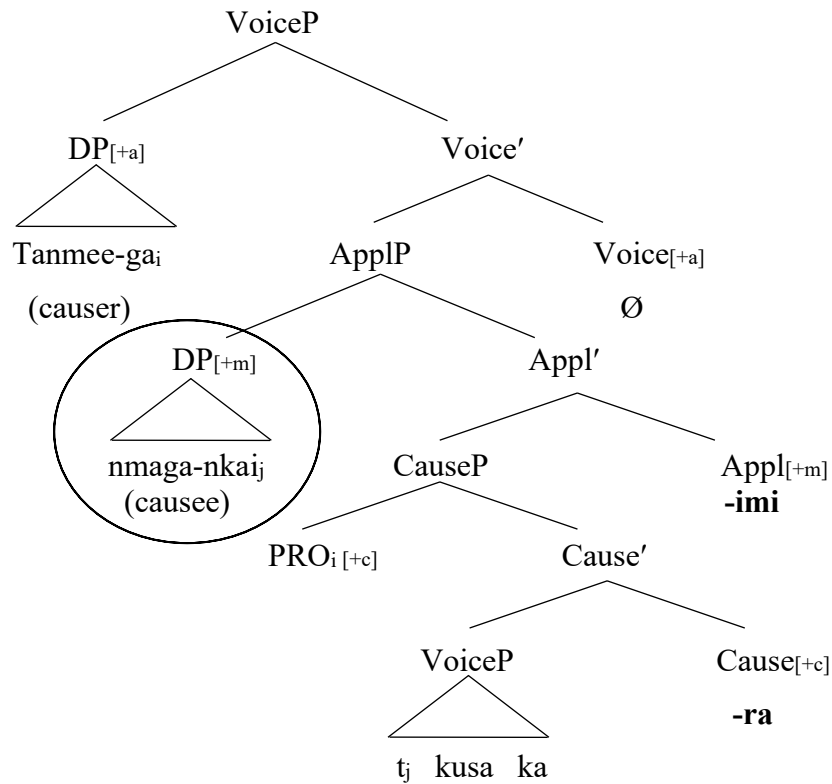
In (20), three heads (Cause, Appl, and Voice) are bundled together. The DP in the Specifier position of the bundled head [Cause/App/Voice] receives a benefactive interpretation, since it is assigned [+m] (= mental state) from Appl. Therefore, the subject DP *tanmee* ‘grandfather’ is interpreted as the beneficiary.

(20)



On the other hand, in (21), all the three heads that comprise a causative sentence appear separately, without being bundled. Here, it is the causee *nmaga* that receives [+m], hence interpreted as the beneficiary.

(21)



In this way, the fact that either the causer or the causee may receive benefactive interpretation is accounted for by the assumption that heads may be bundled together as in (20) or not bundled as in (21).

5. Conclusion. I have analyzed the causative construction in Okinawan in terms of the verbal suffixes that appear in them. I focused on the differences between *-ras* and *-rash-imi* and argued that the morpheme *-imi* that appears in the combined form *-ras-imi* is ambiguous: it may be a causative morpheme or a benefactive morpheme. On the other hand, *-ras* always expresses causative meaning. When *-imi* is used as a benefactive morpheme, it often induces permission reading since the causee can be the beneficiary. The fact that the association of *-rash-imi* with permission reading is just a tendency is explained in our analysis by the possibility of the causer to be the beneficiary. I have also offered a theoretical explanation for the fact that the beneficiary can be either the causer or causee in terms of the possibility of heads (Cause, Appl, Voice) to be bundled in the structure.

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Errata (published: 2025-12-16)

P.6, (14b) should read:

b. *-imi* may be an Appl head (more specifically, a benefactive applicative head) or a Cause head.

P. 6, (15b) should read:

b. *-imi* selects for a CauseP if it is benefactive; it selects for a VoiceP if it is causative.