

IT'S ALL ABOUT ME: THE CENTRALITY OF THE ACTOR IN CANONICAL 'TRANSITIVE' CODING IN WHITE HMONG

CARDINAL Transitivity (in the sense of Hopper & Thompson 1980) tends to be closely associated with canonical 'transitive' coding. Thus, in many languages, two-participant clauses with a large number of semantic features associated with high Transitivity – features related to the “effectiveness or intensity with which the action is transferred from one participant to another” (*ibid* p. 252) – are more likely to be coded morphosyntactically as 'transitive' than those with fewer such semantic features. These clauses with fewer features of high semantic Transitivity may exhibit morphosyntactic coding that is closer, in some ways, to that of 'intransitive' clauses.

This extremely common correlation between CARDINAL Transitivity and canonical 'transitive' coding does not hold in White Hmong. In this language, the crucial factor in the use of canonical 'transitive' coding for situations involving two participants is not the degree of semantic Transitivity of the clause, but rather the extent to which the Actor can be thought of as central to the situation described.

An interesting example of this phenomenon relates to a very small number of the verbs in Hmong that exhibit limited S=0 ambitransitivity. Examples include *kub* 'be hot / heat, burn (something)', *ntub* 'be wet / wet (something)', *no* 'be cold / chill (something)'. The syntactically 'transitive' usage of these verbs seems only to occur with Actors that can, themselves, exhibit the property described. For example, the Actors *hluav-taws* 'fire' and *lub hnub* 'the sun' are typical A arguments with the verb *kub* 'burn' (e.g. 'the fire burned the house'), and the Actors *dej* 'water' and *nag* 'rain', with the verb *ntuj* 'wet' ('the rain wet the clothes'). Human Actors, on the other hand, which can cause such changes but are not centrally involved in them, do not occur with these verbs in simple, AVO clauses. Furthermore, when a verb describes a change of state for which an Actor could not, itself, exhibit the property described (e.g. *yaj* 'melt', *siav* 'ripen'), the 'transitive' pattern does not occur at all. In these cases an analytic causative construction is used instead: *X ua Y yaj* 'X made Y melt' (e.g. 'the sun made the ice-cream melt'), *X ua Y siav* 'X made Y ripen' (e.g. 'the sun made the fruit ripen').

This paper will present a range of examples illustrating the importance of this key semantic factor in the use of canonical 'transitive' coding in Hmong. It will show how deviation from the centrality of the Actor results in deviation from the simple, AVO structure and in the use, instead, of a range of multi-verb constructions, including serial verb constructions and complement constructions.

REFERENCE

Hopper, Paul & Sandra A. Thompson. 1980. Transitivity in grammar and discourse. *Language* 56: 251–299.