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Transitive Anticausatives

A Case Study in Japanese

Keywords: transitive anticausative; reflexively marked anticausative; internal causation

Anticausative events are generally expressed by intransitive verbs in English (e.g., *the vase broke*) but they can also be described by reflexive expressions in many other languages such as German (e.g., Haspelmath 1987; Schäfer 2008; Alexiadou/Anagnostopoulou/Schäfer 2015).

Relatedly, Schäfer (2022) observes that languages such as German and French possess what he calls *transitive anticausatives* (e.g., *the clouds changed their shape*), which are semantically anticausative but syntactically transitive because they take a possessor subject DP and a possessed object DP. The example in (1) is a transitive anticausative sentence in French.

- (1) *[Les nuages] ont change /ont modifié [leur forme].*
the clouds have changed /have modified their shape

‘The clouds have changed/modified their shape.’ (Schäfer 2022, p.86)

Schäfer (2022) claims that transitive anticausatives can be regarded as anticausatives based on the observations that they cannot be passivized, they can co-occur with causer phrases, and they cannot be paraphrased using a periphrastic causative verb (e.g., *the clouds changed their shape* ≠ *the clouds caused their shape to change*). He proposes that the subject DP of transitive anticausatives receives no external theta role and is selected for by expletive Voice, which selects for a DP in its specifier position but does not provide a theta role for the DP (Schäfer 2008; Alexiadou/Anagnostopoulou/Schäfer 2015). This analysis can be represented by the following structure.

- (2) [_{expletive-VoiceP} *the clouds* expletive-Voice [_{VP} *change* [_{DP} *their shape*]]]

Japanese also possesses transitive anticausatives, as in (3).

- (3) *Kumo-ga katachi-o kae-ta.*
cloud-NOM shape-ACC change-PAST

‘The clouds changed their shape.’

This paper aims to investigate the syntactic and semantic characteristics of transitive anticausatives in Japanese. I propose that Japanese transitive anticausatives are reflexive expressions denoting *internal causation* (Lakoff 1996) with an inanimate subject being interpreted as an animate thing metaphorically. Internal causation is an application of force by a person’s consciousness on its body (e.g., *I lifted my arm*). I argue that Japanese transitive anticausatives such as (3) share the same syntactic structure with reflexive expressions denoting internal causation such as (4).

- (4) *Saiboo-ga katachi-o kae-ta.*
 cell-NOM shape-ACC change-PAST

‘The cell changed its shape.’

Although the subject referents in the transitive anticausative in (3) and the reflexive expression denoting internal causation in (4) are different in animacy, I argue that both are associated with thematic Voice, from which the subjects receive an external theta role, as in (5).

- (5) [_{thematic-VoiceP} *kumo/saiboo* thematic-Voice [_{VP} *kae-* [_{DP} *katachi*]]]

The analysis that the external argument of Japanese transitive anticausatives is introduced by thematic Voice is in conformity with their unavailability of passivization and the selectional restriction on causer phrases.

Schäfer (2022) argues that transitive anticausatives cannot be passivized because the external argument has no external theta role to be absorbed. Japanese transitive anticausatives also resist passivization, as in (6).

- (6) # *Katachi-ga {kumo-niyotte /saiboo-niyotte} kae-rare-ta.*
 shape-NOM {cloud-by /cell-by} change-PASS-PAST

‘(Literal) The shape was changed by {the clouds/the cell}.’

The anomaly of sentence (6), however, cannot be attributed to the absence of an external theta role of the external argument. Sentence (4), whose subject receives an external theta role (i.e., an Agent or Actor role), cannot be passivized, too. This fact suggests that the reflexive relation between the subject and object prevents passivization in (6).

In general, causer phrases are compatible with anticausatives.

- (7) {^{??} *Kyoufuu-de /Kyoufuu-no eikyou-de} kumo-ga katachi-o kae-ta.*
 {strong.wind-by /strong.wind-GEN influence-by} cloud-NOM shape-ACC change-PAST

‘The clouds changed their shape due to strong winds.’

Kyoufuu-de ‘by strong winds’ implies a direct causation whereas *kyoufuu-no eikyou-de* ‘by the influence of strong winds’ evokes a subsidiary causation which indirectly brings about the event denoted by the verb. This semantic difference is concerned with the (un)acceptability of the transitive anticausative sentence in (7), in which the indirect causer phrase *Kyoufuu-no eikyou-de* is preferred to the direct causer phrase *kyoufuu-de*. This fact suggests that, in (7), the subject DP *kumo* ‘cloud’ retains an external theta role, which contradicts the direct causation expressed by the direct causer phrase *kyoufuu-de*; the indirect causer phrase *kyoufuu-no eikyou-de* is compatible because it indicates a subsidiary condition that enables the subject DP with an external theta role to bring about the event denoted by the verb phrase.

To conclude, this paper investigated transitive anticausatives in Japanese, arguing that the external argument is introduced by thematic Voice and that they can be regarded as reflexive expressions denoting internal causation.

References

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