

Prominence levels and the symmetrical voice-to-transitivity shift

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Many researchers posit an association between the symmetrical voice systems found in the western area of the Austronesian language family and semantic or discourse transitivity, such that semantically highly transitive situations tend to be expressed by the undergoer voice (Riesberg et al. 2021 and references therein). However, the nature of this association remains poorly understood.

This paper will explore this issue from the perspective of different systems being sensitive to prominence at different levels of structure. In the Oceanic branch of Austronesian, the original symmetrical voice system has mostly been reanalysed into a system marking alternations in transitivity, with the original undergoer voice (UV) being reanalysed as the default transitive construction, and the actor voice (AV) as intransitive. This reanalysis involves a process of relinking, since the patient subject of the original UV becomes the object of the reanalysed transitive construction.

To understand how such a reanalysis might have taken place, I examine the Reefs-Santa Cruz group of Oceanic languages. One of these languages, Äiwoo (Reefs), is highly unusual for an Oceanic language in having retained a symmetrical voice system (Næss 2015, 2021); while the languages of Santa Cruz show systems of clausal organisation more like the canonical Oceanic pattern (Vaa 2013, Alfarano 2021). In the available Äiwoo data, the UV is vastly more frequent than the AV, suggesting that it may be on its way to being reanalysed as the default transitive construction. What, then, is the function of the AV? I examine usage patterns of the AV in Äiwoo and show that it occurs in a range of circumstances, which could be grouped under the heading of actor prominence according to Latrouite's (2011) analysis. The actor can be prominent at different levels, such as the discourse-structural, information-structural, or event-structural level; in Äiwoo, however, the majority of examples are found in contexts with indefinite or generic undergoer arguments, i.e. where the actor is more prominent than the undergoer at what Latrouite calls the referential level.

This increased weight of referential prominence, relative to other types of prominence, has potential consequences for the overall properties of the system. Referential prominence involves an inherent actor bias, as actors are more often referential, animate and human than are undergoers, and so increased importance of referential prominence in the system of voice choice may lead to an increased association between the actor role and subject function, giving rise to the relinking that has taken place in other Oceanic languages, including Äiwoo's closest relatives. But referential prominence is also a key property of transitivity as it is understood in the typological literature: a prototypical transitive clause does not simply involve reference to two participants, but two participants which are **thematically and referentially distinct** (e.g. Kemmer 1993, Næss 2007). That is, referential prominence may be a more central property in a system based on transitivity alternations than in one based on symmetrical voice alternations, where the presence of two referentially prominent arguments is not a prerequisite for encoding in a formally transitive clause. This might also point towards the aforementioned association between undergoer voice and transitivity, given that a definite and thus referentially prominent undergoer tends to trigger undergoer voice in symmetrical voice languages.

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