Notes on Malagasy causatives

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Introduction

There are two known scope puzzles in Malagasy amp-causatives (Andrianierenana 1996:68f and Randriamasimanana 1986). In this squib, I sketch how these puzzles fall out from structure building merge, and compositional interpretation.

The first puzzle concerns certain right adjoined adverbs, which can be interpreted below or above the causative:

(1) n.amp.i.homehy ary indroa aho

PST.CAUS.AT laugh ACC.3 twice NOM.1

'I made [him laugh twice].'

CAUSE > twice

'I twice [made him laugh].'

CAUSE < twice

A proper understanding of the structure of amp causatives yields a straightforward, and unsurprising account for this ambiguity in light of von Stechow (1996).

The second puzzle concerns the possible scopes of negation tsy in amp causatives. Though tsy must precede the amp causative, it appears to be able to scope not just above the causative, but also, and this is the puzzle, below the causative:

(2) a. tsy m.amp.a.tory ahi io fanafody io

NEG PRES.CAUS.AT sleep ACC.1 DEM medicine DEM

'This medicine doesn’t make me sleep.'

b. tsy m.amp.a.tory ahy ny kafe

NEG PRES.CAUS.AT sleep ACC.1 D. coffee

'Coffee makes me not sleep.'

It is widely assumed that scope is determined by merge (i.e. c-command). Since tsy precedes the amp causative, merges with tensed marked forms, hence c-commands the causative, the causative should always be interpreted in the scope of negation, period. How then can this apparent low scope interpretation arise from structure building and interpretation?

1 Amp causatives and the first puzzle

A first step towards understanding these puzzles, consists of unpacking the structure of amp causatives (Keenan and Polinsky 1998). The analysis will share most features with...

Malagasy amp causatives are built on a tenseless active (AT) voiced form:

(3) n.amp.[i.homehy] PST.CAUS.[AT.laugh] ACC.3 NOM.1

'I made him laugh.'

(4) n.amp.[a.tory] PST.ACT.CAUS.[AT.sleep] ACC.1 DEM medicine DEM

'This medicine made me sleep.'

While amp is typically glossed as CAUS, this gloss does not represent a linguistic analysis. Amp is clearly not monomorphemic, in fact, it is not even a constituent. It hides further substructure, consisting (minimally) of a complex agent nominalization preceded by an AT voice prefix.

A productive agent nominalizer /p/ (orthographic mp-) combines with a tenseless active-voiced verb to form an agent nominalization. /p/ itself consists of two parts: the f-nominalizer and, a floating /m/ that leaves its mark in the change of [f] to [p].

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Malagasy word</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mi-ahely</td>
<td>laugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m-nilomehy</td>
<td>laugh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m-a-tory</td>
<td>sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m-i-jery</td>
<td>look at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m-ira miasa</td>
<td>be together work</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These agent nominalizations are best translated as relative clauses. They contain a surprisingly large verbal syntactic structure (surprising here from the perspective of English -er nominals), with accusative pronouns and DPs, adverbial modifiers, and even "object shift", a process which results in a definite direct object following an adverb (Ntelitheos 2006:49f).

Importantly, however, they exclude the tense (or participial markers) — m- for present, n- for past, h- for future — as well as any elements that merge with these tense forms, in particular the negation tsy. This rules out any analysis for the low scope interpretation of tsy as merging with or within the agent nominalization causative, with some mysterious kind of raising to a position preceding the causative (i.e. tsy would be interpreted low, but pronounced high).

The agent nominalization, basically a subject relative clause, is an open predicate that in turn merges with a subject. This yields the inner segment of the causative structure for (3), labeled here as a VP (with simplified structure), rather than a nominal small clause:

(5) n. an. [vp [m. [i.homehy] ary ]] acc.3 nom.1

PST AT [vp [m. [AT.laugh] ACC.3] nom.1]

≈ I made [him become someone who laughs].

'I made [him laugh].'

What category exactly merges with this VP constituent? The structure contains an, which behaves like an AT voice as it combines with tense/aspect. However since AT voice markers combine with lexical predicates without exception, it is surprising that this construction contains no such expressed predicate. We expect some predicate in the agent nominalization. 1

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1Or perhaps the AT voice marker -a, if the appearance of the nasal is due to a floating nasal in the agent nominalization.
(6) a. [n.an. v [m.p.i.homhey] azy] also
b. [PST at. v [m.p.i.homhey] who [AT voiceP laughs]] ACC.3 NOM.1
Since this structure also contains an additional argument (either a cause, or an agent), the subject in the VP carries accusative case, and the construction receives a causative interpretation, the most parsimonious analysis is one in which equals a causative verb v, albeit silent, and is analyzed as the AT voice marker typical of transitive verbs, which tense combines with.

This structure allows an immediate understanding of the scopal ambiguities in (7): it is a trivial case of structural ambiguity. If a modifier like adverb twice is attached to the lower VP, it yields the reading where twice modifies just the lower VP. If it is attached to the causative VP, it yields an interpretation where twice modifies the causative:

(7) n.an.m.p.i.homhey azy indroa also
PST.AT.mp.laugh ACC.3 twice NOM.1
'I made him laugh twice.'

Thus, from a structural and interpretative point of view, everything points towards the presence of a silent verb that contributes the causative meaning, as well as a cause or an agent. It merges with a VP small clause complement, determines accusative case on the subject of the small clause complement, and combines with the AT voice an, which is probably the most expected form for a transitive causative predicate.

2 Negation and amp causatives: the second puzzle

What exactly is the semantic contribution of the silent causative verb? Since languages in general have various causative verbs (make, let, get, have ...), is there any reason to assume the silent predicate must be equivalent to the meaning of a particular causative, corresponding to say make? Could the meaning be vaguer, or could there be more than one silent transitive verb able to fill the v slot in this environment?

Relevant here is that there is a context in which amp must occur, which lacks a causative interpretation altogether. This is the case for the reciprocal suffix which has to combine with amp for verbs that are built on AT forms starting with -i, as in the example below. As Keenan and Polinsky (1998) comment: "The occurrence of amp has no causative interpretation, it is purely epenthetic."

(9) m-if-an.m-p. -jery Rabe sy Rasoo
m-if-an.m-p. AT-look.at Rabe and Rasoo
'Rabe and Rasoo are looking at each other.'
Under the view presented here, a purely epenthetic story is unlikely: if the structure contains the AT voice suffix, it must also contain a v that it combines with, which in turn combines with an agent nominalization. We expect some semantic contribution of v. It could be some other type of transitive v — perhaps an agent introducing a verb akin to do — which induces some kind of control in these particular complex reciprocal amp structures. The question what the semantic contribution would be exactly depends on the precise analysis of this construction, but what is clear is that a causative meaning can be absent. That a causative meaning can be absent in such contexts, provides a way to analyze the surprising negative scope examples, with negation apparently taking scope below the causative. Rather than assuming that the causative is always a make causative, the silent causative could be compatible with a let causative meaning. Since not let is logically equivalent to make not, this would allow maintaining the most general and strongest theory of scope. Try always takes scope over the causative: there simply is no other option given the syntactic structure. Low scope of negation must therefore be result in some other way. I suggest it arises from negation combining with a causative verb with a let-like meaning. More abstractly, it must arise from the semantic interaction of the structural components in the structure, which must include silent elements.

This solution is in fact foreshadowed in Abinal and Malzac’s remarkable (1888) dictionary: “[…] Cet adverbe de négation placé devant certains verbes prend le sens de suppression, d’ enlèvement […]” Abinal and Malzac (1987), which they illustrate with try nampandry aby ny aterina-halime ‘La maladie m’a empêché de dormir hier soir’, ‘Sickness prevented me from sleeping last night’.

This raises questions for future research: are these readings freely available? If not, why not? How widespread is the let interpretation, i.e. what independent interpretative evidence can be found for let interpretations beyond the negative amp causatives with apparent low scope? And if such readings turn out to be available only in restricted contexts, why would this be the case? What exactly is the semantic difference between make and let? How are these verbs built up? Does (silent) modality (possibility versus necessity) have any role to play in these interpretations? Does quantification (perhaps existential versus universal)? More broadly, what are the properties of modality and quantification in Malagasy and how do they interact with negation?

I hope we will have many opportunities to continue further issues of these questions in the future!

References


Travis, Lisa deMena. 2010. Inner aspect: the articulation of VP. Dordrecht: Springer.


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