

Agentivity: The view from semantic typology

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My presentation focuses on recent explorations of crosslinguistic variation in the role that agentivity plays in the grammars of different languages and in the cognition of their speakers. The studies I present form part of the project *Causality Across Languages* (CAL) (NSF BCS-1535846; <https://causalityacrosslanguages.wordpress.com>).

The three studies employ the ‘CAL Clips’, a set of 43 video clips featuring everyday causal interactions. The clips were designed to manipulate a set of semantic variables including causer type (intentional human causer vs. accidental human causer vs. natural force), causee/affectee type (human controlling the resulting event vs. involuntarily responding to a psychological impact vs. involuntarily responding to a physical impact vs. inanimate object), and mediation (the presence/absence of an intermediate event/participant between cause and result). In the first two of the studies, speakers of different languages were asked to rate descriptions of the causal chains featured in the CAL Clips. The descriptions, produced in collaboration with L1 speakers of the sample languages, were systematically varied in terms of morphosyntactic complexity ranging from simplex lexical causative verbs, complex predicates, and morphological causatives to syntactic causative constructions and connective and converb constructions.

The first study, the work of CAL researcher Saima Hafeez, showcases the potential of this study design for exploring a grammatical system in which agentivity plays an unusually prominent role (typologically speaking) in terms of the number of obligatory morphosyntactic distinctions involved. Through case alternations and light verb selection, speakers of Urdu systematically and obligatorily distinguish among volitional instigators, accidental instigators, and ‘induced agents’. The latter carry out controlled acts intentionally, but in response to compelling external causers that are construed as the instigators of the causal chain.

In the second study, we quantitatively modeled responses to the same basic design by 12+ speakers per language of (at the time of writing) Datooga (Nilotic, Tanzania), English, Japanese, Korean, Russian, Sidaama (Cushitic, Ethiopia), Swedish, Yucatec (Mayan, Mexico), and Zauzou (Lolo-Burmese, China). Using random forest models and conditional inference trees, we found variation across the study populations in terms of the most powerful predictors of the participants’ ratings. Thus, looking at ‘compact’ descriptions alone, which represent the causal chain through a simplex or complex lexical causative predicate, speakers of the European languages and Yucatec (and, in first approximation, Korean) rejected such descriptions whenever an intermediate event/participant was involved in the scene. In contrast, Japanese speakers accepted compact descriptions of such scenes, but tended to reject them when the causer was accidental or a natural force. It seems plausible that Japanese speakers prefer to avoid direct causal attribution when referring to non-agentive scenes (cf. Fausey et al. 2010).

The third study explores the impact of intentionality on responsibility assignment. 20 participants per population watched a subset of the CAL Clips that feature chains involving two human actors. Through allocations of 10 tokens, they indicated the extent to which each actor or neither is in their view responsible for the outcome. Consonant with the findings of the second study, Japanese speakers assigned significantly more responsibility to intentional agents than to nonintentional ones. The same holds for Spanish and Yucatec speakers, but not for speakers of Basque, Chuvash (Turkic, Russia), Kupsapiny (Nilotic, Uganda), Mandarin, Sidaama, and Zauzou.

I conclude with ideas for a planned second phase of CAL dedicated to following up on the leads in the exploration of agentivity that have emerged from the first phase.