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Indeterminate valency and verbal ambivalence in Chitimacha

Abstract

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Though valency has long been of interest to linguists, there are relatively few surveys of valency classes from a crosslinguistic perspective (Dixon & Aikhenvald 2000a; Kulikov, Malchukov & de Swart 2006; Malchukov & Comrie 2015; Tsunoda & Kageyama 2006). A minority but persistent perspective that appears in valency research, however, is the suggestion that valency classes may not be a concept equally applicable to all languages. This skepticism takes different forms for different researchers and languages. In some languages, valency classes claimed to be epiphenomenal, or the indirect result of other mechanisms in the grammar. For example, Martin (2000) argues that valency classes in Creek (Muskogean) are merely a side effect of changes in event perspective. Likewise for Mohawk (Iroquoian), Mithun (2006:214) shows that “voice alternations are not exploited for purely syntactic purposes. They can serve important semantic, lexical, and discourse functions, however.”

The present paper offers another potential difficulty in the crosslinguistic application of valency: How does one determine valency classes in a language where there is no consistent means of deciding the number of arguments that a given verb has? While many have noted the difficulty in determining whether a given participant is an argument or adjunct in various languages, the problem presented here is more foundational, i.e., whether a given participant can be said to be present in the clause at all. I argue that Chitimacha, a language isolate of Louisiana, presents precisely this challenge for the study of valency classes. Since nearly all definitions of transitivity and valency rely crucially on knowing the number of arguments in a clause (Dixon & Aikhenvald 2000b:4; Haspelmath 2015:136; Næss 2007:6), the case of Chitimacha suggests that a more robust definition of valency than these is needed.

Using data from an archival corpus collected by Morris Swadesh in the 1930s, I show that each of the potential morphological valency-adjusting devices in Chitimacha are in fact not valency-adjusting per se, but rather alter the lexical semantics of the verb in ways that license and abet – but do not require – changes in valency. This is exemplified in (1) and (2) below.

(1) Kamčín ʔap šam-k’ust-i-nki t’emi-naka. Weyt **ni** k’uš-**mi**-:t’i-nakun.
deer come go.out-sudden-3sg-TEMP kill-1pl thus **thing** eat-**PLACT**-IRR-1pl
‘As the deer came out, we killed them. Thus we shall eat them.’

(2) Hi kima-ki k’an **ni** k’uš-**m**-puy-na.
DIST believe-1sg NEG **thing** eat-**PLACT**-IPFV-3pl
‘I do not believe they ate (in that other land).’

In (1), the preverb *ni* ‘thing’, as well as the pluractional suffix *-ma* (realized here as *-mi*), both reference *kamčín* ‘deer’ from the previous clause – hence the transitive interpretation. But even though example (2) contains the same verb *k’uš-* ‘eat’ and the same transitivity-adjusting devices *ni* and *-ma*, does not receive a transitive interpretation, because there is no prior discourse referent which could serve as an object. Instead in (2) the pluractional *-ma* indexes a plural subject, while the preverb *ni* indicates that some generic, unspecified thing is being eaten. Morphology and discourse thus work in tandem to elucidate which referents are implied in the clause.

The implication of the data presented in this paper is that, while these morphemes do not directly function to index or indicate agreement with a participant, they do often semantically imply its presence. Should then these implied participants count as arguments? Ultimately I conclude that this question cannot be answered for Chitimacha due to the ambiguous nature of its transitivity-adjusting devices, and

moreover that it does not need to be, because a combination of the transitivity-adjusting devices and discourse tracking are sufficient to make clear the nature of the event and participants in the clause. The data and definitional challenges presented here will hopefully lead to a more typologically robust definition of valency, or, if it is determined that valency is not a relevant notion for all languages, a better understanding of what motivates valency classes in the languages that have them, and what the alternatives are for the languages that do not.

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