

Semantic properties of arguments and ordering of derivations (based on Adyghe data)

Adyghe is a polysynthetic language of Circassian (West Caucasian) family. Adyghe verbal form can contain a large number of suffixes and prefixes, marking valency derivations, aspectual and modal meanings (see Rogava, Kerasheva 1966 in detail). Each affix has a fixed position in all verb forms: therefore, the order of derivations is not resolved by means of positions in the word (see Smeets 1984 for details): for example, the meanings ‘I made them go with you’ (causative of comitative) and ‘I (with you) made them go’ (comitative of causative) are expressed by the same form *we-de-z-be-k_wa-be-x* (2SG.IO-COMIT-1SG.AG-CAUS-GO-PAST-PL).

I will analyze one case of resolving such ambiguity, which is the combination of negative, causative and potential markers. This combination can theoretically have a lot of meanings:

- (1) ‘I can make him not to go’ (1) negation, 2) causative, 3) potential)
- (2) ‘I made him not can go’ (1) potential, 2) negation, 3) causative) etc.

However, the real choice in Adyghe is much more restricted by semantic scope of markers (see Rice 2000 on the notion of semantic scope).

First, the scope of negative marker *-(e)p* always includes the scope of the potential one - *š_wə*, but not the opposite case: i.e., example (1) can only mean ‘I couldn’t make him go’, but not ‘I could make him not go’. In fact no independent motivation prohibits this reading. We can propose that negation is a suffix which attaches after the potential marker – therefore, it must have a wider scope, though this tendency does not hold for prefixes (see two readings of *we-de-z-be-k_wa-be-x* above).

A much more interesting case is the scope of the causative marker. Usually this prefix has a more narrow scope than that of the negative and potential markers, see (2). This sentence cannot mean ‘Fatima made Azamat not be able to open the door’ (CAUS>NEG>POT), though the rule “negation above potential” does not prohibit this meaning. We can rather suppose that the potential meaning must be higher than the causative one.

The situation changes when the causer is inanimate (usually a natural force: see Shibatani 1976 about prototypical – agentive and non-prototypical – non-agentive causers): see example (3). The causative marker has the broadest scope in (3). The ordering like in (2) would result in an unnatural meaning ‘The illness couldn’t (did not manage) to make the boy to go to school’ (some elderly speakers regard (3) as absolutely unnatural, because in their idiolects the potential marker always has the broadest scope). In (Shibatani 2002) a lot of non-trivial properties of non-agentive causatives are analyzed.

The Adyghe situation is interesting, because it shows that the ordering of derivations crucially depends on semantic properties of the arguments: the potential marker in (3) has the narrow scope, since the causer is inanimate and the potential meaning can only be applied to the caused situation (‘go’), which has an agentive animate subject; with prototypical agentive causers the potential marker has a broad scope (2). Therefore, the language which does not possess any strict means for resolving the homonymy of different orders of derivations, uses a semantic strategy: semantic properties of arguments unambiguously determine the ordering of derivations.

We can also suppose that the syntactic structures in (2) and (3) are different: in (2) the causing event is the upper one. The potential marker affects the meaning of the upper situation, which is the causing one (‘couldn’t make/cause’). In (3), the caused event is the upper one, whereas the unagentive causation occupies an adjunct-like position. Therefore, the caused event is affected by the potential meaning, which is a broader semantic scope.

Examples

- (1) se a-r z-ke-k_we-š_wə-ke-p
I (s)he-ABS 1SG.AG-CAUS-go-POT-PAST-NEG
'I couldn't make him go'.
- (2) azamat-e fatime pče qə-ʔ_wə-r-jə-ke-xə-š_wə-ke-p
Azamat-ERG Fatima door INV-LOC-3SG-3SG-CAUS-\$open\$-POT-PST-NEG
'Azamat couldn't make Fatima open the door' (NEG > POT > CAUS).
- (3) wəzə-m č'ale školə-m jə-ke-k_we-š_wə-ke-p
illness-ERG boy school-ERG 3SG-CAUS-go-POT-PST-NEG
'The boy did not go to school because of his illness' (CAUS > NEG > POT).

Literature

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