

From reflexivity to antipassive: what do Australian and Slavonic languages have in common?

The antipassive phenomenon, which raised considerable interest in the syntactic description of ergative languages (Comrie 1978, Dixon 1994, among others), is often defined as a derived detransitivized construction with a two-place predicate in which the patient-like argument is either suppressed (left implicit) or realized as an oblique complement (Polinsky 2005). It is traditionally claimed to correlate with ergativity. To derive the antipassive construction, the overwhelming majority of ergative languages, e.g. the Australian ones, use an antipassive marker diachronically associated with the reflexive/middle function. Slavonic languages, in particular Polish, show that such correlation also exists in accusative languages and is by no means coincidental.

This paper argues in favour of the recognition of antipassive constructions in accusative languages with a double objective. It aims, first, at comparing the functional properties of reflexives and antipassives to show that their shared morphology is historically grounded, and, second, at suggesting that the antipassive constructions developed diachronically from the reflexive ones through the extension of already existing reflexive functions.

The present study is based on data taken from a corpus of utterances systematically elicited from native speakers, and expanded by the examples from the literature. The clauses (1) - (3) illustrate respectively the reflexive and antipassive constructions in Polish:

1st Stage: reflexive construction

- (1) *Dziewczynka myje się.*
girl.NOM.SG wash.PRS.3SG REFL
'The girl is washing herself.'

2nd Stage: reflexive/antipassive construction

- (2) *Proszę pani, a on się drapie.*
Excuse me Madam but 3SG.NOM REFL/AP scratch.PRS.3SG
'Madam, he is scratching himself.' (reference to a child sick with smallpox)
'Madam, he is scratching [other children].'

3rd Stage: antipassive construction

- (3) *Nie pchaj się Pan!*
NEG push.IMP.2SG AP sir
'Sir, do not push [others].'

The analysis shows that both Slavonic and Australian languages provide positive evidence wherein the development of an antipassive function from the reflexive morphology was pragmatically motivated. It also shows that this evolution is a three step process (cf. Terill 1997 for Australian languages). Thus, the example (1) illustrates a preliminary stage of the evolution in which the construction with a special morphology on the verb performs the reflexive function. The latter triggered by a different discourse environment breeds an ambiguous interpretation, the reflexive one and the antipassive, as in (2), and consequently develops into the antipassive function, as in (3).

It will also be shown that the morphological relation between reflexive and antipassive construction observed in Slavonic and Australian languages is indeed a cross-linguistic phenomenon (Heath 1976, Foley and Van Valin 1984).

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Abbreviations:

AP: antipassive	NEG: negation	PRS: present	SG: singular
IMP: imperative	NOM: nominative	REFL: reflexive	