Fluid transitivity in Chintang

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The Chintang language

- **location:**
  Eastern Nepal
  > Kosi zone (कोशी अञ्चल)
  > Dhankuta district (धनकुटा जिल्ला)
  > Chhintang (छिन्ताङ) and Ahale (आहाले) VDC

- **genealogy:**
  Sino-Tibetan > ... > Kiranti > ... > Chintang

- **speakers:**
  4000 - 5000, majority at least bilingual
  (with Nepali as the second language)

- **endangerment:** still learned by many children but
  restricted to certain contexts
Overview of morphosyntax

Overall **low degree of fusion, syntheticity higher:**

- 3 nominal categories: person/number of possessor, case, number
- 6 verbal categories: person/number S (or A and P with verbs with bipersonal agreement), tense, mood, aspect, polarity; long verb forms through use of ‘vector verbs’ (= dependent verb stems with grammatical function)
- rich deictic system with 3 categories: distance from speaker, location of object incl. altitude, location of reference point
Overview of morphosyntax

Some prominent argument selectors (cf. Witzlack 2010 for the term, Bickel 2008b, Bickel et al. 2010 for content):

- **case marking and agreement** (relevant for this talk)
- agreement patterns of light verbs + infinitive
- reference in argument-nominalising forms (e.g. active and passive participle, infinitive)
- coreferentiality constraints with converbs and subordinating particless
- antecedence and binding with reflexives and reciprocals
- moving referent in vector verbs coding motion
Verb classes

- number of **verb classes** based on case and agreement presently 57 (39 single-membered, so 18 ‘real’ classes).
- about 84% of the registered 647 verbs are covered by **two most frequent classes**:
  - intransitive verbs: only with S-ABS V-S (130 = 20%)
  - potentially transitive verbs: allowing A-ERG P-ABS V-A,P (413 = 64%)
Examples

- Intransitive verb *hap-* ‘cry’:

  (1) *Ama, nunu hap-no.*
  mother baby cry-IND.NPST
  ‘Mum, the baby is crying.’ [CLDLCh3R01S02.293]

- Transitive verb *loĩs-* ‘take out, bring out’:

  (2) *Dhami-ce-ŋa dokh-a*
  shaman-ns-ERG illness-NTVZ
  *u-loĩs-o-ko.*
  3nsS/A-bring.out-3P-IND.NPST
  ‘The shamans remove the illness.’ [Jan-Gen.1142]
Structure of the remainder of this talk

- class of potentially transitive verbs includes many ambitransitives
- in the following we will talk about two large classes of ambitransitives:
  - **S/A ambitransitives**: intransitive or transitive with coreferentiality of S and A
  - **S/P ambitransitives**: intransitive or transitive with coreferentiality of S and P
- we will show that these are not lexical classes (in the sense that their classification follows partially arbitrary criteria) but rather fully transparent semantic classes and reflect productive syntactic alternations
If one looks for typical S/A ambitransitives - verbs where the precise category of P is often irrelevant - one quickly finds them. Here is an example:

(3)  
\[\text{a. } \text{Anci } \text{khoŋ}-\text{ce } o!\]
\[1\text{di } \text{play-d } \text{okay}\]
\[\text{‘Let’s play, okay?’ [CLDLCh3R05S04.041]}\]

\[\text{b. } \text{Lo, } \text{ba-go } \text{khoŋ-c-o.}\]
\[\text{okay PROX-NMLZ play.with-d-3P}\]
\[\text{‘Okay, let’s play with this one.’}\]
\[\text{[CLLDCh3R08S01.0159]}\]
Closer inspection

If one takes a closer look, however, one soon comes across less nice examples:

(4) *Agga, hun-ce gucca u-khonj-ce-ke!*

wow 3-ns marble 3nsS/A-play.with-d-IND.NPST

‘Wow, they’re playing (with) marbles!’

[CLLDCCh1R09S07.0411]

Note that A is still marked as ABS (-Ø) and is the only argument cross-referenced on V. What is different from textbook “ambitransitives” is that P is overt.
Ambitransitivity - or something else?

- What looks like S/A ambi-transitives turns out to be a common phenomenon across Kiranti languages (Bickel et al. 2007) that comes under a variety of names (antipassive, detransitivisation, incorporation, ...). We call it object fading.

- Object fading is different from S/A ambi-transitivity in two respects:
  - It allows P to be overt - in fact, faded P are mostly overt.
  - It is possible with all transitive verbs.

- The second characteristic is a decisive argument against considering verbs allowing for object fading a lexical class.
Examples

(5) *Huŋ-go jaile=yan tara khanŋ-no.*
MED-NMLZ always=ADD star watch-IND.NPST
‘He’s always watching the stars.’ [field notes 2010]

(6) *Wa-ce wathī̃ u-thin-no.*
hen-ns egg 3nsS/A-lay-IND.NPST
‘Hens lay eggs.’ [field notes 2010]
Some more properties

- Semantics: object is **unbounded**, i.e. the speaker does not have a definite number (with countables) or a definite amount (with uncountables) in mind (cf. Bickel et al. 2007 on Puma)

- There is a continuum of verbs:
  - verbs prone to object fading, faded O often covert and highly unspecific, e.g. *khoa*- ‘play’, *rett*- ‘laugh’
  - verbs not prone to object fading, faded O typically overt and simply non-cardinal, e.g. *kha*- ‘watch’, *ten*- ‘beat’
Some more properties

- Fading is also possible with **ditransitives**: the faded argument is the one marked by absolutive (T, G, or both T and G, depending on the valency class) - hence general “object fading”:

(7)  

MED-NMLZ J./3sPOR-friend letter send-3P-IND.NPST  
Intended: ‘He sends letters to Joge/his friend.’ (in general) [field notes 2008]
S/P ambitransitivites - a large class

- 20% of all verbs are S/P ambitransitive
- this is about a third of all transitive verbs
- about as many S/P ambitransitivites as intransitives
- Some examples:
  - bhuŋs- ‘heap up’
  - cems- ‘be spent; spend’
  - hot- ‘break down’
  - loko- ‘boil’
  - sand- ‘(start to) play (music)’
  - wa-pokt- ‘get soaked; soak’
Is this productive?

- Given the large number of S/P ambitransitives, how productive is this pattern?
- Common semantics: potential change of state, potentially telic; intransitive variant where A cannot/should not be identified
- Test: can verbs with these semantics swap frames even when A is hardly ever identifiable or nearly always identifiable?
- If yes, speakers can apply the pattern even where they are unlikely to have heard it before → pattern is productive
Examples

Change of state verb with hardly identifiable A: *ghoŋs*- ‘be/grow big’:

(8) a. Saĩli, *kana-phak na ba-tta-kha* *ghoŋ*
third.daughter 1pePOR-pig TOP PROX-EXT-NMLZ grow.big
*haŋ na an...*
COND TOP QTAG

‘Saĩli, suppose our pig grew as big as this...’
[CLLDCh1R06S03.0151]

b. *Ba-go phak them-ma ba-tta*
PROX-NMLZ pig what-ERG PROX-EXT

*ghoŋs-o-ŋs-e?*
let.grow.big-3P-PRF-IND.NPST

‘What has let this pig grow this big?’ [field notes 2010]

→ *ghoŋs*- is S/P ambitransitive, transitive meaning ‘let grow big’
Examples

Change of state verb with hardly identifiable A: *cukt-* ‘be/become short’:

(9) a. Ali *cuk-ŋaʔã.*
    a.bit be.short-1sS/P-IND.NPST
    ‘I am a bit short.’ [CLLDCh4R11S07.2821]

b. *Ba-go a-teiʔ waiʔ-ma-lanṭinŋ*
    PROX-NMLZ 1sPOR-clothes wear-INF-for
    *cukt-u-ku-ŋ.*
    shorten-3P-IND.NPST-1sA
    ‘I shorten these clothes of mine so I can wear them.’ [field notes 2010]

→ *cukt-* is S/P ambitransitive, transitive meaning ‘shorten’
Examples

Change of state verb with nearly always identifiable A, e.g. *yapt-* ‘serve (food)’:

(10)  

  a. *Ba-tta kok u-bhada-be?-ŋa*  
      PROX-EXT rice 3sPOR-pot-LOC-ABL  
      *yapt-o-loi̯s-e.*  
      serve-3P-bring.out-IND.PST  
      ‘She dealt out a piece of rice as big as this.’ [phengniba.tale117]

  b. *Kok yapt-e?*  
     rice be.served-IND.PST  
     ‘Is the rice served?’ [field notes 2010]

→ *yapt-* is S/P ambitransitive, intransitive meaning ‘be served’
Examples

Change of state verb with nearly always identifiable A: *lett*- ‘plant’:

(11) a. Aseĩ *kancha-ŋa* *lett-o-ŋs-o-kha*.
    last.time youngest.son-ERG plant-3P-PRF-3P-BGR
    ‘Last time our youngest had planted it.’ [CLDLCh2R02S02.658]

b. *Makkai-ce u-lett-a-ŋs-e*.
    maize-ns 3nsS/A-plant-PST-PRF-IND.PST
    ‘The maize plants have been planted.’ [field notes 2010]

→ *lett*- is S/P ambitransitive, intransitive meaning ‘be planted’
- S/P ambitransitivity is not lexical, but **semantically fully transparent**:
  - All S/P ambitransitives have the semantics lined out above
  - All verbs with this semantics lined out above are S/P ambitransitive
- Some rare exceptions where frame swapping is impossible:
  - lexical alternative exists, e.g. *chukt*- ‘land’ (itr.) cannot be transitivised because there is *thand*- ‘bring down’
  - ambiguity of S, e.g. *cett*- ‘feed’ (frame A-ERG T-ABS G-ABS V-A,G) cannot be detransitivised because S could be both T or G
- Just like S/A ambitransitives, S/P ambitransitives are not a lexical class. Rather, switching between $S_i$-ABS V-S and A-ERG $P_i$-ABS V-A,P is a semantically transparent syntactic phenomenon, which may be called **agent fading**.
Transitivity is syntactical

- Transitivity in Chintang is more often than not in the syntax, not in the lexicon.

- What might be called transitive verbs are those verbs that can have bipersonal inflection - there are none which must have it.

- Borders blurred between (typologically) typical intransitive verbs “without” O and verbs with faded O.
Valency is gradable by counting how often a potentially transitive verb is used intransitively/transitively (cf. figure next slide).

Intuitively some variants are more “basic” than others, especially the transitive variants in most instances of object fading - but is there an objective criterion justifying this intuition?
Valency is gradable

- **hand-** 'talk; talk about'
  - 99%
  - 1%

- **ot-** 'break'
  - 70%
  - 29%
  - 1%

- **hekt-** 'be cut; cut'
  - 70%
  - 29%
  - 1%

- **napa-** 'shake'
  - 63%
  - 33%
  - 4%

- **thun-** 'drink'
  - 78%
  - 22%

- **las-** 'return'
  - 51%
  - 15%
  - 34%
Summary: Valency classes

- Chintang has **two major valency classes**, making up 84% of verbs:
  - strictly intransitive verbs (20%)
  - potentially transitive verbs (64%)

- Potentially transitive verbs have **gradual subclasses** depending on the proportions of each of the three possible frames.

- The rest are many classes with few members each, i.e. more like irregulars than like true classes. (Compare this to languages with conjugation classes vs. languages with irregulars.)

- Languages differ in the extent to which valency classes play a role.
Summary: Detransitivisation

- Both S/A and S/P ambitransitivity are **semantically transparent** syntactic phenomena in Chintang. One does not need lexical classes to explain them.

- This means that the category “ambittransitivity” is not suitable for Chintang since it is associated with lexical classes. Better: “**object fading**” and “**agent fading**”

- Keep in mind that despite the commonalities there are also important differences (optionally overt object with object fading, conditions on verbal semantics with agent fading).

- But at any rate, both are subtypes of detransitivisation processes, not lexical classification.


### Abbreviations

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<th>Number</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>NTVZ</td>
<td>nativizer (attached to loan words)</td>
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Abbreviations

**O** object (here: P+T+G)  
**P** patient  
**POR** possessor  
**PRF** perfect  
**PROX** proximal  
**PST** past  
**QTAG** question tag  
**s** singular  
**S** subjective  
**SAP** speech act participant  
**T** theme of ditransitive verb  
**TOP** topic  
**V** verb