

## ANTIPASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN TIGEMAXO (BOZO)

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**Abstract:** The present paper investigates the grammar of the 2<sup>nd</sup> argument, the patient-like object, in Tigemaxo, focusing on first-hand data to describe three different antipassive constructions common in this language. The main questions treated are: What are the ways the 2<sup>nd</sup> argument is expressed, focusing on the structural possibilities to demote or suppress it? Then, looking at alternative morphosyntactic alternations, what motivates the choice of one of these structures over the other? It will be shown that 2<sup>nd</sup> argument demotion or suppression is common in Tigemaxo, and that one of the AP constructions is motivated by a stylistic effect.

**Key words:** Mande, anticausative, antipassive, passive, noun incorporation, unexpressed objects, oblique objects, labile verbs

### 1. Introduction

Not much is published about ANTIPASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS (AP) in Mande languages of West Africa.<sup>1</sup>

Tigemaxo<sup>2</sup>, one of four Bozo languages spoken in central Mali, belongs to the Western Mande family. Some typological traits relevant for this study are the S-INFL-O-V-X syntax, a reflexive-based anticausative and passive<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Creissels (2012; Ms) and Janic (2016: §3.2) are notable exceptions.

<sup>2</sup> All data (texts, elicited clauses) are from the author's field research in 1992/93, 1997–2004.

<sup>3</sup> Anticausative: *a tɔmɔ gu ĩ fiiji* {3SG head ANTIC disperse} 'His/her head burst.' Passive: *saa gu ĩ golo (Muusa faa)* {sheep DEF PASS M. PP} 'The sheep was sheared (by Muusa).' See Blecke (1996: 268–269).

an impersonal passive<sup>4</sup>, productive noun incorporation (§2), perfective & imperfective verb stems for many verbs.

In addition to this, there are two kinds of valency marking on verbs: a productive causative suffix *-ni* (ex. footnote 4; ex. 20), as well as detransitive marking for many verbs.<sup>5</sup> The latter merits a summary here, because its understanding is crucial for the present study. Starting with the formal side, coalescence of a detransitivising suffix *-i* with the verb-final vowel led to syntactically intransitive stems. The basic-derived relation underlying the two stems is noteworthy. In the detransitivised stems, vowel height is retained and [back] becomes [front]. Now in CVCV verbs, final back vowels are much rarer than the abundant final front vowels. However, in the latter, coalescence caused by the suffix *-i* does not show on the surface, as for instance in ex. (7) and (8) below. In addition, the formal TR distinction still in use in Tigemaxo (dialect of Dia) is eroding elsewhere. Despite this growing formal indistinction, the directionality of the derivation is still argued for here by analogy. But at some point, the erosion may well lead to an alternative analysis of the structures concerned, namely as labile verbs.<sup>6</sup>

The functional side of the detransitivisation suffix *-i* and the verb stems derived from it, treated in Blecke (1996) as intransitive tout court, was analyzed by Creissels (2012: §5), who compared it with a corresponding *-i* suffix in Soninke and gave it a more specific label than INTR, namely AP. I agree with this more functionally grounded analysis for Tigemaxo, as the present paper will show that wherever syntactic detransitivisation is expressed in verb forms, the functional context of it is AP.

I will follow the broad definition of antipassive given by Polinsky (2013: 108): “An antipassive construction is a derived detransitivized construction with a two-place predicate, related to a corresponding

<sup>4</sup> *ye lokoli jε-ni* {3P school let-CAUS} ‘School is over.’

<sup>5</sup> See Blecke (1996: 61–77) for the formal side of this with lists of examples.

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for indicating the labile verb view of this complex.

transitive construction whose predicate is the same lexical item. In the basic transitive construction, the patient-like argument is realized as a direct object; in the antipassive construction, that argument is either suppressed (left implicit) or realized as an oblique complement”.

There are three different kinds of antipassive constructions in Tigemaxo, all involving one or several of the following traits: AP verb marking, morphological properties of the patient-like object and its changing syntactic position. In each case, the resulting effect is a demotion or suppression of the object, i.e. AP. The following constructions will be described, all based on the transitive clause structure given above: noun incorporation (S INFL OV), unexpressed object (S INFL [Ø] V), and oblique object (S INFL [Ø] V O<sub>obl</sub>). In the remainder of the paper, each of these alternations will be treated in turn.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Incorporated object antipassive

Noun incorporation in Tigemaxo<sup>8</sup> occurs firstly as a word formation process, which is more or less semantically transparent: *laa-paxã* (mouth-fill) ‘complete’, *naa-se* (eye-say) ‘explain’, *numãã-sa* (memory-spend the night) ‘forget’. In addition to such compounds, where the incorporated noun is always a body part, there is a productive syntactic transitive / incorporated object alternation:

- (1) *a*            *gaana*    *ɲɔɔ*        *mana*        *fuono*    *i*<sup>9</sup>  
       3SG        PFV        fish        search.TR    market    PP  
       ‘S/he looked for fish in the market.’

<sup>7</sup> Polinsky (2017), as well as Kulikov (2011) include all such types in the AP.

<sup>8</sup> See Blecke (1996: 88–92), focusing on the word formation side of noun incorporation. For incorporation in other Mande languages see Creissels & Dramé (2018) on Soninke, Khachatryan (2017) on Mano.

<sup>9</sup> Transcription is phonological, with some special conventions: j=[j], r=[r], long vowel by doubling. The two-tone system of Tigemaxo remains left out here, since it has no bearing on the subject.

- (2) *a gaana ɲɔɔ-mɛnɛ*  
 3SG PFV fish-search.AP  
 ‘S/he looked for fish (wherever).’
- (3) *a ga ɲɔɔ-mɛnɛ Saamaakɔɔ*  
 3SG IPFV fish-search.AP S.  
 ‘S/he fishes in the Saamakoro pond.’ (habitual)

The transitive alternation in (1) has a transitive verb stem, the incorporation *ɲɔɔmɛnɛ* being possible, but less common here. Note that while examples (1) and (2) both refer to an accomplished situation, only the former has a local adjunct, adding to its concrete referential status. This difference makes the noun incorporation less common in (1) and the expression of choice in (2) for keeping it more vague. Furthermore, while in both (2) and (3) the object is incorporated and thus non-referential, only ex. (3) is imperfective with a habitual interpretation. This is obviously compatible with a local adjunct. Some more examples of this alternation:

- (4) *ye kɔɔ gu tarãã ⇒ ye kɔɔ-terẽ*  
 3PL dowry DEF share.TR 3PL dowry-share.AP  
 ‘They split the dowry.’ ⇒ ‘They split dowry.’
- (5) *ye so sua mana ⇒*  
 3PL go.PFV firewood search.TR  
*ye ga sio sua-mɛnɛ*  
 3PL IPFV go.IPFV firewood-search.AP  
 ‘They went looking for firewood.’ ⇒ ‘They are used to looking for firewood.’

The difference in meaning between the transitive and the AP alternations may be perceived as minimal in a context like (4), but at least the incorporated object becomes less individuated by losing its definiteness. Note that the AP alternation is typically used with unbounded aspect markers (5), e.g. for habitual situations, but not limited to them. The demotion effect alone warrants the inclusion of

this construction in the AP.<sup>10</sup> In addition, it goes along with the transitivity change of the verb stem.

Besides, incorporation with valency lowering via object demotion also happens in the context of action nominalization in Tigemaxo, see Blecke (2009: 359–360) for details.

### 3. Unexpressed object antipassive

The patient-like argument may remain entirely unexpressed where it is not relevant for communication, as in generic statements of the following kind:

- (6) *tinĩbuo n bo namãĩ* ⇒ *tinĩbuo ga buo namãĩ*  
 ant 1SG bite.PFV very ant IPFV bite.IPFV very  
 ‘An ant bit me hard.’ ⇒ ‘Ants bite hard.’ (generic)

Unexpressed object APs could be seen as involving a verb which is labile with respect to syntactic transitivity (Kulikov 2011: 381). However, in the cases discussed here the affected object remains unexpressed *because* it is conceptually present and understood. It comes close to what Levin (1993: 39) calls “characteristic property of agent alternation” for English, i.e. ‘ants characteristically bite (unexpressed patient)’. Below are some more examples of the unexpressed object AP. The verbs in (7) and (8) show no overt transitivity distinction, thus remaining formally unchanged without object.<sup>11</sup>

- (7) *ye ga (wari) bããĩ*  
 3PL IPFV money ruin  
 ‘They waste (money).’ ⇒ ‘They are (money) wasters.’

<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Polinsky (2017: 311) concludes about defining criteria: “The demotion or removal of the object argument, however, is definitional of the antipassive...”

<sup>11</sup> This is close to Levin’s (1993: 33) “unexpressed object alternation” for English.

- (8) *a ga (tɔɔŋɔ gu) belēēbelēē*  
 3SG IPFV hut DEF go\_around  
 ‘S/he goes around the hut.’ ⇒ ‘S/he takes detours.’
- (9) *a ga liwuru xarāā ⇒ a ga liwuru-xerēē*  
 3SG IPFV book read 3SG IPFV book-read.AP  
 ‘S/he reads a book.’ ⇒ ‘S/he commonly reads books.’ (habitual)
- (10) *a ga muɔ jiga ⇒ a ga jige*  
 3SG IPFV people curse.TR 3SG IPFV curse.AP  
 ‘S/he curses (people).’

#### 4. Oblique object antipassives

While the difference in meaning between the transitive and the AP alternations usually remains obvious in the constructions presented in §2 and §3, this is no longer the case with oblique object APs. For these, speakers are unable to identify even a nuance of meaning difference at the clause level.

##### 4.1. N+PP oblique objects

The first case are a restricted number of verbs with obligatory postverbal oblique object. In these cases, the verb requires a certain PP:

- (11) *gūū ga jogi ĩ tuu faa*  
 dog IPFV follow LGP master PP  
 ‘The dog follows his master.’

Furthermore, there are certain verbs with preverbal object and postverbal oblique object use, where each use has its own meaning, like *kuu*<sub>TR</sub> ‘to bear’, *kuu muɔ faa* ‘to fit s.o.’, so such cases are lexicalized. In what follows, however, the two constructions have exactly the same clausal meaning. The only difference is found at the pragmatic level. Those nuances will be dealt with in §5.

- (12) *a ga muo hiina* ⇒ *a ga hiine*  
 3SG IPFV 1PL.INCL forgive.TR 3SG IPFV forgive.AP  
*muo ga*  
 1PL.INCL PP  
 ‘S/he forgives us.’
- (13) *a n s̃* ⇒ *a s̃ n ma*  
 3SG 1SG fight 3SG fight 1SG PP  
 ‘S/he had a fight with me.’<sup>12</sup>
- (14) *a ga ye jaaira* ⇒ *a ga jaaira ye faa*  
 3SG IPFV 3PL tease 3SG IPFV tease 3PL PP  
 ‘S/he teases them.’
- (15) *xɔɔ-ye xāĩ gu sindi* ⇒ *xɔɔ-ye ĩ sindi*  
 house-PL work DEF start house-PL REFL start  
*xāĩ la*  
 work PP  
 ‘The people of the household have started to work.’

Note that the verbs in (13) to (15) have no overt AP form. This does not prevent the construction from being an AP, according to Polinsky’s function-based definition, cited in §1 and footnote 10. As a special case, in (15), the oblique AP alternation contains a reflexive verb, which is a formal expression of a lowering in semantic transitivity.

#### 4.2. *de*+N+*ni* oblique objects

This last AP construction is highly productive in the sense that transitive verbs generally allow for it. At the same time, it seems to be confined to speakers who stem from the one location where Tigemaxo is spoken.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The PFV marker *gaana* being optional, it is often left out, as in this example and in (15) below.

<sup>13</sup> Tigemaxo is the language of the people of Dia, sometimes also called Diañaxo, while Tieyaxo is the term for varieties spoken elsewhere. Dialectal differences remain within the realm of high mutual intelligibility.

A formal peculiarity of this type of oblique object marking is its bracketing by the two semantically empty function words *de* and *ni*. What is their precise categorial status? In the AP context, they serve the standard function of what is done elsewhere by just a postposition (see §4.1), i.e. they link a (demoted) argument to its detransitivized verb. The only other context where the *de+N+ni* phrase appears is as a secondary predication, specifying an attribute of the subject, as in *a ga jade de sabi ni* {3SG IPFV count ? fool ?} ‘S/he is considered a madman.’ or an attribute of the object, as in *Muusa a yaa de fuleya ni* {M. 3SG transform ? fisherman ?} ‘Musa made him a fisherman.’ This may suggest their classification as adpositions. However, apart from the combination of a pre- and a postposition being peculiar, there is no postposition *ni* in Tigemaxo. Instead, there is a frequently used predicate marker in non-verbal predications with a presentative function, as in *n nɔɔ ni* {1SG FOC PRESV} ‘It’s me.’<sup>14</sup> As for *de*, only found in combination with *ni* in the two contexts under discussion here, the only place for prepositions in Tigemaxo is as second part of a serial verb construction, where both parts are very clearly verbs, e.g. *jolo bie* (descend come) ‘go down to’.<sup>15</sup> All this leads me to stay away from an analysis as adposition bracketing. Instead, I tentatively suggest classifying *de* as a conjunction to link the oblique complement to the main predication, and *ni* as a second use derived from the presentative marker mentioned above, giving it the more general label predicate marker (PM). This is meant to account for both constructions with *de+N+ni*.

Let us now turn to some examples for this unusual AP type. In this construction too, the AP verb stem is used, if existing. In (19) and (20) below, the verb does not have an overt AP form (see introduction).

- (16) *a juɔ̃ kũ*           ⇒ *a kumɛ de juɔ̃ ni*  
 3SG fish take.TR       3SG take.AP CNJ fish PM  
 ‘S/he caught some fish.’

<sup>14</sup> This use of *ni* seems quite similar to Bambara *dòn*.

<sup>15</sup> See Blecke (1996: 235–238) for details.



- (17) *a ga niŋa sie* ⇒ *a ga sei de niŋa ni*  
 3SG IPFV bad say.TR 3SG IPFV say.AP CNJ bad PM  
 ‘S/he says bad things.’ (*niŋa* = adjective as noun)
- (18) *a lɔl mɛ̃* ⇒ *a mɛni de lɔl ni*  
 3SG alcohol drink.TR 3SG drink.AP CNJ alcohol PM  
 ‘S/he drank some alcohol.’
- (19) *a mǎĩ nɔɔ xǎĩ* ⇒ *a xǎĩ de mǎĩ nɔɔ ni*  
 3SG good FOC work 3SG work CNJ good FOC PM  
 ‘S/he did a good job.’ (*mǎĩ* = adjective as noun)
- (20) *a mɔbɛli xeele-ni* ⇒ *a xeele-ni de mɔbɛli ni*  
 3SG car run-CAUS 3SG run-CAUS CNJ car PM  
 ‘S/he drove a car.’

Note that in (20) the verb stem retains its causative suffix *-ni*. This is because *xeele* ‘drive’ is lexicalized from *xeele* ‘run’ with a specific meaning. The following example indicates the equivalence of the two postverbal oblique AP constructions in (21b–c). It is the only case of such alternative oblique AP marking I found:

- (21) a. *a di fɔ̃ mǎĩ miila muɔ gie maasiẽ*  
 3SG NEG thing good think person DEF.PL PP
- b. *a di miila mǎĩ ga muɔ gie maasiẽ*  
 3SG NEG think good PP person DEF.PL PP
- c. *a di miila de mǎĩ ni muɔ gie maasiẽ*  
 3SG NEG think CNJ good PM person DEF.PL PP  
 ‘S/he doesn’t think well of people.’

## 5. Discourse-pragmatic and stylistic considerations

At the level of clause syntax, the common denominator of all AP constructions described here is their function to demote the patient-like object: incorporation, postverbal oblique object, and suppression (unexpressed object) all express this function in their respective way.

Motivation for choosing one of these constructions comes from the pragmatic level of communication needs and styles. And each time the patient-like object is downgraded or left out, there is a natural shift in information prominence towards what remains: the agent-subject and the action expressed by the verbal predicate. Incorporation makes a noun lose its clear referential contour, thus entailing vagueness, see examples (3), (5). Its suppression goes a step further from vague to mute, see examples (7), (10). Direct-to-Oblique demotion of the object is yet different, neither vague nor mute, but semantically equivalent, with a stylistic effect as the sole difference.

The most unusual AP construction is the *de+N+ni* oblique AP: possible with virtually all transitive verbs, but apparently only used by a very restricted group of speakers. In fact, in my corpus of 135 minutes of spoken texts from Bozo people of Dia, it only sporadically occurs in the literary style of griots<sup>16</sup>, i.e. those who are considered the true masters of the language. Children and younger people would hardly use this construction. Speakers from other dialects, e.g. Tiegaxo speakers from neighboring villages, would understand the construction, but not use it themselves. Thus, it is pragmatically marked as a feature of the literary style of the linguistically mature speakers of Tigemaxo.<sup>17</sup>

## 6. Concluding remarks

In syntax and semantics research, it has become apparent over the past decades that AP constructions are by no means confined to ergative languages.<sup>18</sup> The form-based definition was left behind in favour of one based on the core function of object demotion, as argued for by Polinsky (2017: 311). The present study shows that implicit argument

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<sup>16</sup> In the Bozo culture, griots (storytellers) are rare. And it is their texts that most clearly represent an oral literary style. It is there that I found *de+N+ni* oblique AP, rarely in others.

<sup>17</sup> Whether the construction is used by men and women alike, or whether it is considered archaic, I do not know.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Polinsky (2013: §3; 2017: §13.7) and most specifically Janic (2016).

type, incorporation, as well as two oblique complement type APs are indeed all common in Tigemaxo, where one type of AP, the oblique object AP, is an indicator of literary style.

Putting the core function in a broader cultural context, demotion of participants is in line with more general common patterns of politeness in languages of the region. For instance, beyond APs, speaking of oneself by using an impersonal passive or the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural, is preferred over 1<sup>st</sup> person singular in Malian cultures, showing modesty and discreetness as well as collectivist over individualist orientation.

### Abbreviations

|                       |                     |                       |
|-----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| AP – antipassive      | IPFV – imperfective | PRESV – presentative  |
| ANTIC – anticausative | INTR – intransitive | SG – singular         |
| CAUS – causative      | LGP – logophoric    | PL – plural           |
| CNJ – conjunction     | NEG – negative      | PM – predicate marker |
| DEF – definite        | O – object          | PP – postposition     |
| FOC – focus           | REL – relative      | TR – transitive       |
| INFL – inflection     | REFL – reflexive    | V – verb              |
| INCL – inclusive      | PFV – perfective    | X – oblique           |

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