Passive-like Affected Constructions: Evidence from Khmer (University of Delaware, Lan Kim)

This paper investigates previously overlooked data on Khmer passive-type constructions involving the verb trau ‘hit, strike’. As described in Haiman (2011), trau appears to act both as a main verb (when it takes an NP) (1) and as a passive-like marker (when it takes an agent NP immediately followed by a lexical verb) (2). We argue that a unified analysis of trau is not possible. More specifically, we propose that main verb trau as an adversative marker is a ditransitive unaccusative verb with two internal arguments (experiencer and affecter) (3), whereas passive-like trau is similar to an English tough-predicate (4). Under this proposal, these uses of trau are historically related and share a core meaning of ‘affect’, but synchronically the predicates diverge by selecting different complements.

First, we show that the meaning of main verb trau is restricted to an adversative implication of physical affectedness and imposes selectional restrictions with respect to animacy: the experiencer is prototypically an animate entity but the affecter is a non-volitional entity such as a natural force or an inanimate entity (5). The two NPs selected by trau may also undergo argument inversion without a change in meaning (6). Given these facts, we propose that trau behaves syntactically as a ditransitive unaccusative involving two internal arguments without an explicit agent in its structure and that it has the semantics of AFFECT (3). Assuming that the inversion is triggered by the choice of which argument is raised from a position equidistant to the target, the movement of trau to Voice via v would result in the same distance for both the experiencer and the affecter (i.e. semantically vacuous inversion). Evidence for this comes from the control of PRO in an adjunct clause (7), in which the NP that appears before trau controls PRO, while the post-trau NP remains inside VP.

Unlike main verb trau, passive-like trau conveys a less restricted meaning of affectedness. We argue that passive-like trau (2) involves A’-movement of a null operator to the CP in the embedded clause and that the surface subject is non-thematic and licensed by predication, similar to an English tough construction. We assume that a co-indexation between the surface subject and the null operator is established via strong binding (following Chomsky 1986a). Evidence in support for an A’-dependency analysis comes from a series of diagnostic tests: long-distance passivization, island sensitivity, strong crossover, and resumptive pronouns. Long-distance passivization is possible where trau permits its internal argument to be contained in the infinitival complement clause of control verbs (8), but it also exhibits island effects (9). Strong crossover effects appear when the null operator moves across the coreferential pronoun c-commanding its gap (10). Lastly, a resumptive pronoun coreferential with the surface subject (the experiencer) is always licensed in an A’-position in place of a gap (2) and (8). The behavioral differences between main verb trau and passive-like trau thus follow from a difference in the complement which trau selects, namely NP versus CP. In addition, we provide three sets of facts to support the non-thematic status of the surface subject. Subject-oriented adverbs such as ‘deliberately’ can only be construed as referring to the action of the agent, but not the surface subject (11). Next, passive-like trau is also compatible with inanimate and sentential subjects (12). Finally, if passive-like trau theta-marks its subject, the latter part of (13) which negates the meaning of the prior beating event should not be contradictory to the former part; however, this is contrary to the data. Under our analysis, the surface subject is semantically licensed as the subject of a complex predicate, consisting of trau and its sentential complement. In particular, following Landau’s (2011) notion of (non-)natural predicate, we posit that a CP involving a null operator is not a natural predicate, thereby semantically integrated as a lambda-predicate.

This study reveals an interesting parallelism with Chinese bei passives (Huang 1999, Ting 1998) in displaying A’-dependency properties and also lends empirical support to the so-called Southeast Asian areal phenomenon in which a lexical verb denoting an adversative meaning has been generalized as a passive-like marker via grammaticalization (e.g., Cole et al 2010 on Malay, Prasithrathsint 2006 on Thai, Simpson & Ho 2008 on Vietnamese). In our talk, we focus on similar constructions in Malay, Vietnamese and Thai, and discuss that, as originally suggested in Haspelmath (1990) and more recently in Comrie (2008), a general notion of passive should take into consideration these non-canonical passive constructions.
(1) Samnang trau kroap kamplEng.  (2) Samnang trau Bopha dal (kuot1/*2/*3).
   Samnang trau seed gun  Samnang trau Bopha punch 3Sg
   ‘Samnang was affected by the bullet.’         ‘Samnang was affected by Bopha’s punching him.’
   (‘Samnang was hit by the bullet.’)          (‘Samnang was punched by Bopha.’)

(3) a. [VoiceP  [VP  [VP Samnang trau kroap kamplEng]]]]
   b. [[trau]] = λx.λy.λe. Affect(e) & Experiencer(e,y) & Affecter(e,x)

(4) a.[VoiceP Samnang,  [VP trau  [CP OPi  [TP Bopha dal t]]]]
   b. [[trau]] = λP. λx. λe. Affect (e, P(x))

(5) Samnang trau ball/plieng/*Bopha.
   Samnang trau bal/rain/*Bopha
   ‘Samnang was adversely affected by the ball/rain/*Bopha.’

   Samnang trau seed gun  Seed gun trau Samnang
   ‘Samnang was adversely affected by the bullet.’  ‘Samnang was adversely affected by the bullet.’

(7) a. Tubeicie PRO1/*2 tuoc kodaoi, Samnang1 nowtae trau kroap kamplEng2.
   Although PRO small although Samnang still trau seed gun
   ‘Although being small, Samnang was still affected by the bullet.’
   b. Tubeicie PRO1/*2 tuoc kodaoi, Kroap kamplEng1 nowtae trau Samnang2.
   Although PRO small although seed gun still trau Samnang
   ‘Although being small, Samnang was still affected by the bullet.’

(8) [Neari nEng Samnang], trau poli 2 bagncie aoj Bopha vaj (pukket1/*2/*3).
   Neari and Samnang trau police order for Bopha beat 3Pl
   ‘Neari and Samnang were affected by the police’s ordering Bopha to beat them.’ (Neari and Samnang
   were beaten by Bopha, but it was the police who ordered Bopha to beat them.)

(9) *Samnang1 kEcie buros tael Bopha2 trau poli bagncie aoj t1 vaj (kuot2).
   Samnang is guy that Bopha trau police order for beat 3Sg
   ‘Samnang is the guy that Bopha was affected by the police’s ordering (Samnang) to beat him.’
   (Intended) ‘Samnang is the guy that the police ordered to beat Bopha.’

(10) *Samnang1 trau Bopha borngkuab kuot1 vaj (kuot1).
    Samnang trau Bopha instruct 3Sg beat 3Sg
    (Intended) ‘Samnang was affected by Bopha’s instructing him to beat (Bopha).’

(11) Daoi mienbomnorng Samnang trau Bopha dal.
    By intentional Samnang trau Bopha punch
    ‘Samnang was affected by Bopha’s punching him intentionally.’

(12) Ka bawkbagchawt Samnang robos Neari trau ke krobknea dEng.
    Nom cheat Samnang Poss Neari trau 3Pl everyone find
    ‘Neari’s cheating of Samnang was known by everyone.’

(13) Kon vaj chEngkang, #punte chEngkang ot trau kon vaj.
    Kid beat gangster but gangster Neg trau kid beat
    ‘The kid beat the gangster, but the gangster was not affected by the kid’s beating him.’

Selected References