Antipassives in Yukulta

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Yukulta’s antipassive construction is obligatorily used to code transitive propositions that involve counterfactuals or marked A-O relationships. Its use and the use of active transitive constructions is strictly regulated by these grammatical features, to the extent that the two constructions have a complementary distribution. The particular functions of Yukulta’s antipassive and its highly conditioned usage are atypical for antipassives cross-linguistically.

Keywords: antipassive, Australian languages, inverse, transitivity, voice, Yukulta

1 Introduction

An antipassive construction in Yukulta (Australia: Tangkic, non-Pama-Nyungan) was identified by Keen in her grammar as an important syntactic construction that was used to code certain types of propositions. This paper seeks to build on Keen’s description of the antipassive by examining the various contexts in which it is used, and by isolating the features which control its distribution relative to active transitive constructions. Section 2 will define the antipassive. Section 3 will review two functional typologies of the construction. Sections 4 and 5 will focus on identifying and describing Yukulta’s antipassive. Section 6 will discuss some of the atypical features that antipassives have in this language.

2 Defining Antipassives

The term ‘antipassive’ was coined by Michael Silverstein, and used to refer to an intransitive clause construction that was similar to a passive but occurred in ergative languages:

Ergative systems have an analogous construction, here termed the antipassive, which has all the properties of the passive [...] in antipassive forms the transitive agent is expressed by a surface absolutive (or nominative) case-marking, the verb has a change of voice, with a special mark, the transitive object (normally coded by surface absolutive case) appearing at most facultatively in some oblique, adverbial case-marking (italics original).

(140-2)

1 I would like to thank to Mary Laughren and Rob Pensalfini for their insightful comments on this paper. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers.
Most of the literature on antipassives since Silverstein has followed this pattern of defining the class of antipassives in structural terms (Cooreman 1994: 49; Dixon 1994: 146; Terrill 73). Antipassives can also be defined in terms of their relationship with associated active transitive clauses: “The antipassive is a construction typical for ergative languages and occurs along with ergative constructions as a morphosyntactic alternative for the same transitive proposition” (Cooreman 1994: 50). The following sentence pair from Dyirbal is a typical example: a proposition involving two participants is encoded by an active transitive construction with normal ergative case marking (henceforth ‘active’) in 1) and encoded by an antipassive construction in 2):

1) Balan dyugumbil banggul yaranggu bura-n
CL(ABS) woman(ABS U) CL(ERG) man(ERG ACT) see-TNS
Man saw woman. (Dixon 1972 qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 335)

2) Bayi yara bagun dyugumbilgu bural-nga-nyu
CL(ABS) man(ABS ACT) CL(DAT) woman(DAT U) see-ANTIPASS-TNS
Man saw woman. (Dixon 1972 qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 336)

3 Classifying Antipassives

While antipassives are usually defined on structural grounds, they are often divided into subclasses according to their various functions. This section will give an overview of two antipassive typologies which use this approach, namely those by Foley and Van Valin and by Cooreman (1994).

Foley and Van Valin’s typology distinguishes two main types of antipassives: foregrounding and backgrounding. Foregrounding antipassives are found in many ergative languages\(^3\) that have a syntactic pivot system (‘pragmatic pivot’ in Foley and Van Valin’s terminology) which requires the absolutive NP to be the “controller and target of zero anaphora” in complex sentences (335). In other words, both the NP that co-references a zero NP and the zero NP itself must be assigned absolutive case. Obviously, there are propositions which would involve mismatches of case, for example, if an intransitive subject (marked ABS) in a governing clause co-referenced a transitive subject (marked ERG) in a subordinate clause. In this case, using an antipassive in the subordinate clause allows the

\(^2\) 1-1\(^{st}\) person; 2-2\(^{nd}\) person; 3-3\(^{rd}\) person; ABS-absolute case; ACT-actor; AP/ANTIPASS-antipassive; AUX-auxiliary complex; DAT-dative case; DES-desiderative; DU-dual; ERG-ergative case; EXC-exclusive; IMP-imperative; INC-inclusive; IND-indicative mood; INT-intransitive; INST-instrumental case; INTERR-interrogative; IR-irrealis mood; NEG-negative; NOM-nominative case; NP-noun phrase; NPRES-non-present tense; PL-plural; PRES-present tense; R-realis mood; SG-singular; TNS-tense; TR-transitive; U-undergoer; VINTR-intransitive verb; VTR-transitive verb. = indicates a clitic boundary.

\(^3\) Foley and Van Valin also discuss morphologically accusative languages that have an ergative pivot system, however I have confined this description to morphologically ergative languages.
subordinate subject to be assigned absolutive case instead of ergative, thus matching it with the case of the controlling NP. Note that in these circumstances, the use of the antipassive is obligatory.

For languages with this type of pivot system, the unmarked choice for pivot status in transitive propositions is the undergoer (in absolutive case), while the actor (in ergative case) is the marked choice that triggers the use of an antipassive. Foley and Van Valin give an example from Dyirbal which is reproduced in 3) and 4):

3) Bayi yara bani-nyu __ bagun dyugumbilgu
   CL(ABS) man(ABS ACT) come-TNS CL(DAT) woman(DAT U)
   bural-nga-nyu
   see-ANTIPASS-TNS
   Man came and saw woman. (Dixon 1972 qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 336)

4) *Bayi yara bani-nyu balan dyugumbil __
   CL(ABS) man(ABS ACT) come-TNS CL(ABS) woman(ABS U)
   bura-n
   see- TNS
   Man came and saw woman. (Dixon 1972 qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 335)

In the antipassive subordinate clause in 3) the actor (“man”) occurs in absolutive, not ergative, case. It can thus co-reference the subject of the governing intransitive clause which is also marked absolutive. Example 4) shows that the normal ergative construction may not be used in the subordinate clause, because this would mean the controlling absolutive NP would be co-referencing an ergative target. The basic function of the foregrounding antipassive is thus to allow alternative choices for pivot status (Foley and Van Valin 337).

Backgrounding antipassives on the other hand serve to “demote the undergoer [of a transitive proposition] to peripheral status” (Foley and Van Valin 338). Though a language may possess both types of antipassive, backgrounding antipassives are the only type that occur in ergative languages without syntactic pivots, in which “pivot selection is determined strictly on semantic lines” (Foley and Van Valin 341). The demotion of the undergoer may be achieved in a number of ways (in each of the following sentence pairs, the first example represents an active clause with ergative case marking while the second example represents an antipassive clause with only one absolutive core argument). Firstly, the undergoer may “suppressed entirely and removed from the clause” (Foley and Van Valin 338) as in Yidiny:
Secondly, the undergoer may be incorporated into the verb, as in Tongan:

7) Na’ē tō a e talo ē he tangata
PAST plant ABS(U) ART taro ERG(ACT) ART man
The man planted the taro. (Green qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 341)

8) Nale tō talo ā he tangata
PAST plant taro(U) ABS(ACT) ART man
The man was taro-planting. (Green qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 342)

Thirdly, the undergoer may be present in the clause, but “demoted from the core and marked as oblique” (342), as in the Kabardian examples below. Foley and Van Valin refer to this type as ‘semantic antipassives’ which generally serve to express “the incompleteness of an action as it affects the object” (343).

9) hē-m qʷipš fire-r jedzaq’ē
dog- ERG(ACT) bone-ABS(U) bite
The dog bites the bone (through to the marrow). (Catford qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 343)

10) hē-r qʷips fire-m je[w]dzaq’ē
dog- ABS(ACT) bone-ERG [ANTIPASS]-bite
The dog is gnawing the bone. (Catford qtd. in Foley and Van Valin 343)

Cooreman’s (1994) antipassive typology also makes a distinction between antipassives that are triggered for semantic or pragmatic reasons and those that are triggered for structural reasons. These classes divide along roughly the same line as in Foley and Van Valin’s analysis. Cooreman provides a similar description of the main function of structural (=foregrounding) antipassives as feeding an S/O pivot (1994: 72). She also observes that “obligatory structural antipassives” are
commonly used when forming a relative clause on A\textsuperscript{4} and notes that Dyirbal only allows syntactically absolutive arguments to be relativised on (1994: 74)\textsuperscript{5}.

Much more space in Cooreman’s (1994) typology is devoted to a detailed description of the functions of semantic/pragmatic antipassives. She states the general function of this type as follows: “The antipassive which is used for semantic/pragmatic reasons is best described as indicating a certain degree of difficulty with which as effect stemming from an activity by A on an identifiable O can be recognised” (1994: 51). Cooreman justifies her analysis of the semantic/pragmatic motivation for this class of antipassives by arguing that “if the same semantic proposition can be coded or expressed by different linguistic constructions...these differences in syntactic coding are to a large extent driven by semantic and/or pragmatic factors” (1994: 51).\textsuperscript{6}

Three such factors are identified as the most widely attested triggers for antipassive usage. The first is when O is low in identifiability. This depends of various characteristics such number and the degree of definiteness and referentiality. Thus an indefinite, non-referential, non-singular O is located at the lowest end of a scale of identifiability. Cross-linguistic variation is found regarding “the point at which languages may or must use an antipassive” in these circumstances (Cooreman 1994: 52). In the following example from Chamorro, the antipassive is obligatory when O is indefinite or generic:

11) \textit{Ha-konne’ i peskadot i guihan}  
\textit{ERG.3SG-catch the fisherman the fish}

The fisherman caught the fish. (Cooreman 1988 qtd. in Cooreman 1994: 54)

12) \textit{Mangonne’ (guihan) i peskadot}  
\textit{AP.catch (fish) the fisherman}

The fisherman caught a fish/fish (something). (Cooreman 1988 qtd. in Cooreman 1994: 54)

\textsuperscript{4} A and O are used throughout this paper to refer to the two participants in a basic two-participant clause. They are not used to make claims about transitivity or grammatical function (cf. Cooreman 1994: 82).

\textsuperscript{5} Cooreman provides an interesting discussion of the significant difference in function of structural vs. semantic/pragmatic antipassives, and hypothesises that structural antipassives arose due to a process of ‘co-opting’, whereby some languages using existing semantic/pragmatic antipassives to fulfil the additional functions of disambiguation and filling a structural gap (1994: 75). This question is outside the scope of this paper, but see also Terrill.

\textsuperscript{6} Cooreman (1994) goes on to describe some semantic/pragmatic antipassives that are obligatory when certain semantic conditions hold and that therefore in some cases only the antipassive can express a particular proposition. Her understanding of what constitutes ‘the same semantic proposition’ is presumably wide enough to accommodate this fact.
The second triggering factor is aspect: an antipassive is likely to be used when an event is incomplete or non-punctual, or when an activity has no perceptible onset or conclusion (57). In West Greenlandic Eskimo, the antipassive carries a meaning of repeated or habitual action, example 13), which the normal transitive construction does not imply, example 14).

13) \textit{Inun-nik tuqut-si-vuq}
\begin{itemize}
  \item people-INST kill-AP-VINTR.IND./3SG ABS
\end{itemize}
He killed people. (Fortescue qtd. in Cooreman 1994: 57)

14) \textit{Inuit tuqup-pai}
\begin{itemize}
  \item people.ABS kill-VTR.IND.3 SG.ERG.3 PL
\end{itemize}
He killed the people. (Fortescue qtd. in Cooreman 1994: 57)

Antipassives can also be correlated with a low degree of affectedness of O (similarly noted by Foley and Van Valin 343). In Chamorro, an antipassive may be used if the semantics of a verb do not imply an enduring effect on O:

15) \textit{Un-patek i ga 'lago}
\begin{itemize}
  \item ERG.2SG-kick the dog
\end{itemize}
You kicked the dog. (Cooreman 1988 qtd. in Cooreman 1994: 59)

16) \textit{Mamatek hao gi ga 'lago}
\begin{itemize}
  \item AP-kick 2SG.ABS LOC dog
\end{itemize}
You kicked at the dog. (Cooreman 1988 qtd. in Cooreman 1994: 59)

Interestingly, the antipassive in these circumstances is optional in Chamorro, while it is obligatory with indefinite Os as discussed above.

Cooreman also notes that a marginal functional correlate of the semantic/pragmatic antipassive occurs in Yukulta with counterfactuals. These propositions refer to “events which are not likely to occur in the real world of experience” (1994: 62). None of the other languages in her genetically diverse sample of 19 languages was seen to have this function. Further discussion on this point is reserved for Section 5.

4 Identifying Yukulta’s Antipassive

Two-participant clauses in Yukulta can be coded by active or antipassive constructions, depending on the grammatical context. These constructions are formally distinguishable by the auxiliary verb selection and by the case frames of bound pronouns and NPs. The auxiliary verb has distinct
transitive and intransitive forms for each combination of tense and mood as indicated in Figure 1. Antipassives take the intransitive forms, while actives take the transitive forms. The auxiliary verb hosts proclitic bound pronouns, which together form an auxiliary complex. This always occurs in second position following any phrase (the auxiliary complex is underlined throughout examples for clarity).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Transitive</th>
<th>Intransitive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present Realis</td>
<td>-rri</td>
<td>-a-ti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Irrealis</td>
<td>no form</td>
<td>-a-yi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Present Realis</td>
<td>-nt-a</td>
<td>-(y)ingk-a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Present Irrealis</td>
<td>-nt-i</td>
<td>-(y)ingk-i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3SG Present</td>
<td>no form</td>
<td>-ngka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Auxiliary Verb Forms

The case frames of each construction for bound pronouns and free NPs are given in Figure 2 and Figure 3 below. Note that Yukulta has a split case marking system whereby NPs show ergative/absolutive case marking while bound pronouns have distinct forms for all core functions. 3SG bound pronouns are null.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Antipassive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>ERG NOM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>ACC DAT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Bound Pronoun Case Paradigm

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Antipassive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>ERG ABS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>ABS DAT (or ERG/LOC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Noun Phrase Case Paradigm

The following sentence examples illustrate these formal differences. The clause in 17) can be identified as active as it has a transitive auxiliary, and NPs that are A(ERG) and O(ABS). The clause in 18) can be identified as antipassive as it has an intransitive auxiliary, and NPs that are A(ABS) and O(DAT). The type of construction of the next two examples can be identified primarily by the case frames of the bound pronouns: A(ERG) and O(ACC) in the active clause in 19), and A(NOM) and O(DAT) in the antipassive clause in 20).

17) \(rtangka-ya=ka-rri\ ngawu pala-tha\)

\[\text{man-ERG=TR-PRES(R) dog(ABS) hit-IND}\]

The man is hitting the dog. [ACTIVE] (Keen 206)

7 Note that no realis/irrealis distinction is made for transitive present form –rri or the 3SG intransitive present form –ngka; these both have a default realis reading.
8 The names given in Figure 2 and Figure 3 refer primarily to distinct forms and do not necessarily encode grammatical function.
The man isn’t hitting the dog. [AP] (Keen 206)

I will hit you (plural). [ACTIVE] (Keen 201)

Those men will hit you three. [AP] (Keen 215)

5 Functions of the Antipassive

The use of antipassive and active clauses in simple sentences is highly constrained. From the data, it appears that the antipassive is required to code propositions that are counterfactual or that involve marked A-O relationships. Following to Cooreman’s (1994) terminology, the coding of these two types of propositions indicates the function of Yukulta’s antipassive.

5.1 Coding Counterfactuals

The first function of the antipassive is to code counterfactuals. A number of grammatical contexts count as counterfactual in Yukulta, and these will be detailed below. It is appears that only the antipassive may be used in these contexts, and not the active. The first grammatical feature that counts as counterfactual is the present irrealis auxiliary verb a-yi. If this verb from is used, the clause always occurs as an antipassive:

Those three will give it to me. [present irrealis] [AP] (Keen 215)

Those men will hit you three. [present irrealis] [AP] (Keen 215)
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23)  *walirra*=:th=a-yi  *kapa-tha-rri  ngu-mpan-inytya  miyarl-inytya*
    NEG=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-IR  find-IND-IR  2SG-GEN-DAT  spear-DAT  
    I won’t find your spear. [present irrealis] [AP]  (Keen 235)

For the remaining three tense and mood combinations, transitive clauses generally occur, unless the antipassive is required due to presence of a marked A-O relationship. This can be observed in examples 24) to 26):

24)  *wurlan-ta=nga=rri  karna-tya*
    food-ABS=1SG.ERG=PRES(R)  cook-IND  
    I'm cooking tucker. [present realis] [ACTIVE]  (Keen 221)

25)  *rtirr-lya=ka-nt-a  paa-tya  marnrtuwarra*
    snake-ERG=TR-NPRES-R  bite-IND  boy(ABS)
    The snake bit the boy [non-present realis] [ACTIVE]  (Keen 205)

26)  *walirra=nga=nt-i  kapa  ngu-mpan-ta  miyarl-rta*
    NEG=1SG.ERG=NPRES-IR  find  2SG-GEN-ABS  spear-ABS
    I didn't find your spear. [non-present irrealis] [ACTIVE]  (Keen 235)

The second context that counts as counterfactual is negating an event that is marked as present realis by the auxiliary verb. Antipassives will also occur in these contexts, as can be see in 27) and 28):

27)  *walirra*=k=a-ti  *rtiya-tya-rri  wurlan-inytya*
    NEG=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-R  eat-IND-IR  food-DAT
    I’m not eating any tucker. [present realis] [AP]  (Keen 230)

28)  *walirra*=k=a-ti  *kurri-tya-rri  ngu-mpan-inytya*
    NEG=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-R  see-IND-IR  2SG-GEN-DAT  
    miyarl-inytya
    spear-DAT
    I can't see your spear. [present realis] [AP]  (Keen 235)

Certain uses of the desiderative morpheme also counts as a third counterfactual context. Examples 29) and 30) seem to have a lowered expectation of realisation due to outside factors (Keen 239), while the use of the antipassive construction in the second clause in 31) “implies gentle coaxing rather than a strong order” (Keen 239). These examples of lowered expectancy can be contrasted with desiderative clauses that have a higher degree of expectancy. These are not counted as counterfactual, and are thus coded by the active construction, as in 32).
29) *kawa-* = *k=α-τι* *mukurrarra-nta*
   cook-DES=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-R wallaby-DAT
   I’d like to cook a wallaby in a ground oven (said wistfully by an old lady). [present realis] [AP] (Keen 239)

30) *warraka-* = *k=α-τι* *wurlan-ntyra*
   go-IND-PL(IMP) cook-DES=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-R food-DAT
   Go away, I want to cook some tucker [and I haven’t a hope of doing it if you don’t stop annoying me.] [present realis] [AP] (Keen 239)

31) *rarrtyirlu-ka=rna* *warrla-ra* *rtaman-ntyra=pa* *pua-τa*
   widen-IMP=3SG.DAT mouth-ABS tooth-DAT=2 DAT pull-DES
   Open your mouth for him, he want to pull your tooth out. [AP] (Keen 239)

32) *mirliya-* = *yi=ka-rri* *rtan-τa* *pirrka*
   cut-DES=2SG.ERG=TR-PRES(R) this-ABS string(ABS)
   It’s a good idea to cut this string (Lit. You expect to cut this string). [ACTIVE] (Keen 238)

5.2 Coding Marked A-O Relationships

Antipassives are also required to encode marked A-O relationships between clause participants. A marked relationship occurs when O is higher than A on the Yukulta’s pronominal hierarchy given in 33):

33) 1NSG > 1SG/2 > 3

The following examples illustrate various interactions of clause participants and the effect this has on clause construction. The clause participants are indicated in square brackets in sentences 34) to 39) in the format [A acting upon O]. Minimal pairs are provided where possible to show that the A-O relationship is the triggering factor for the antipassive construction in these clauses.

34) *kungul-τa=θ=υi=ngk-a* *paa-τya*
   mosquito-ABS=1SG.DAT=N PRES(INT)-R bite-IND
   A mosquito bit me. [3→1] [AP] (Keen 234)

35) *kungul-i=ka-nτ-a* *paa-τya*
   mosquito-ERG=TR-N PRES-R bite-IND
   A mosquito bit him [3→3] [ACTIVE] (Keen 234)

9 The pronominal feature hierarchy in Yukulta was identified by McConvell.
36) \textit{kuya=thu=yingk-a} \textit{pala-tha}  
\text{INTERR=1SG.DAT=N PRES(INT)-R hit-IND} 
Did he hit me? [3→1] [AP] (Keen 217)

37) \textit{kuya=nk=i=ka-nt-a} \textit{pala-tha}  
\text{INTERR=1SG.ACC=2SG.ERG=TR-N PRES-R hit-IND} 
Did you hit me? [2→1] [ACTIVE] (Keen 217)

38) \textit{rtathin-ta=rr-awa=rr=ingk-a} \textit{kurit-tya} \textit{ki-l-wan-tyi}  
\text{that-ABS=NSG-DAT-NSG(NOM)-N PRES(INT)-R look-IND 2-PL-GEN-ERG/LOC} 
Those fellows are looking at you lot. [3→2] [AP] (Keen 236)

39) \textit{ki-l-ta=wu-l=ka-rrri} \textit{kurrikurri} \textit{rtathin-ta} \textit{tyarti}  
\text{2-PL-ABS=2ERG-PL=TR-PRES(R) see that-ABS lot(ABS)} 
You lot are staring at them. [2→3] [ACTIVE] (Keen 236)

5.3 Interaction of Constraints

It appears that if either of the two triggering factors discussed above are present in the clause, an antipassive must be used. Thus 40) is antipassive because it is present irrealis (=counterfactual), even though it has an unmarked A-O relationship. Similarly, 41) is antipassive because it features a marked A-O relationship, even though it is not classed as counterfactual. Clauses are only active if neither of the triggering factors are present, as can be observed in 42).

40) \textit{walirra=th=a-yi} \textit{kapa-tha-rrri} \textit{ngu-mpan-inytya}  
\text{NEG=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-IR find-IND-IR 2SG-GEN-DAT} 
\text{miyarl-inytya spear-DAT} 
I won’t find your spear. [present irrealis] [1→3] [AP] (Keen 235)

41) \textit{kuya=thu=yingk-a} \textit{pala-tha}  
\text{INTERR=1SG.DAT=N PRES(INT)-R hit-IND} 
Did he hit me? [non-present realis] [3→1] [AP] (Keen 217)

42) \textit{nga-ta=nga=npu=nga-nti} \textit{kurri-tya}  
\text{1SG-ABS=1SG.ERG=2PL.ACC=TR(1SG)-N PRES-IR see-IND} 
I’ll see you (plural). [non-present irrealis] [1→2] [ACTIVE] (Keen 222)

The interaction of these two functions results in a strict complementary distribution pattern for actives and antipassives. Thus active clauses akin to 44) and 46) are unattested in Keen’s data.
From these observations, it seems that each transitive-like proposition involving two participants may only be coded by one construction, to the exclusion of the other.

43)  \textit{kungul-ta=thu=vingk-a} \quad \textit{paa-tya} \\
\text{mosquito-ABS=1SG.DAT=NPRS(INT)-R} \quad \text{bite-IND} \\
A mosquito bit me. [AP] (Keen 234)

44)  \textit{*kunguli=nk=ka-nt-a} \quad \textit{paa-tya} \\
\text{mosquito(ERG)=1SG.ACC-TR-NPRES-R} \quad \text{bite-IND} \\
A mosquito bit me. [ACTIVE]

45)  \textit{walirra=th=a-yi} \quad \textit{kapa-tha-rri} \quad \textit{ngu-mpan-inytya} \\
\text{NEG=1SG.NOM=PRES(INT)-IR} \quad \text{find-IND-IR} \quad \text{2SG-GEN-DAT} \\
\text{miyarl-inytya} \\
\text{spear-DAT} \\
I won’t find your spear. [present irrealis] [AP] (Keen 235)

46)  \textit{*walirra=nga=??} \quad \textit{kapa-tha-rri} \quad \textit{ngu-mpan-ta} \\
\text{NEG=1SG.ERG=PRES(INT)-IR} \quad \text{find-IND-IR} \quad \text{2SG-GEN-ABS} \\
\text{miyarl-rlta (149)} \\
\text{spear-ABS} \\
I won’t find your spear. [present irrealis] [ACTIVE]

6 Discussion

It is evident from the above description that Yukulta possesses a backgrounding or semantic/pragmatic antipassive because the morpho-syntactic construction to be used is determined by the type of semantic proposition that will be encoded. Further, the restriction on clause types operates in simple, not complex, sentences, and therefore cannot be serving a structural or foregrounding function. Although it is clear enough that Yukulta’s antipassive falls within this class, it is atypical for three reasons.

Firstly, cross-linguistically antipassives and actives tend to code semantic propositions that differ to a certain extent but nevertheless share a similar truth value. Cooreman seems to view this situation as the norm: “The antipassive [...] occurs along with ergative constructions as a morphosyntactic alternative for the same transitive proposition” (1994: 50). The pairs of sentences that were presented in Foley and Van Valin’s and Cooreman’s (1994) typologies as typical examples seem to contrast nuances or finer shades of meaning, such as whether a bone is bitten through or simply gnawed at, or whether a woman is eating something particular or just engaged in the act of
eating. In Yukulta however, the contrast is between an event that is highly unlikely and an event that is true or very likely; or between a clause participant being third person or first person. These are semantic propositions that differ from each other in a significant way, and thus the nature of the alternation between the two constructions is quite distinct in Yukulta.

Secondly, it is unusual that the use or non-use of antipassives is strictly conditioned in all contexts. Most of the languages in Cooreman’s (1994) typology that have semantic/pragmatic antipassives show a tendency towards using this construction when certain conditions exist. Even a language such as Chamorro, which obligatorily uses antipassives with indefinite Os, allows both constructions in cases where O is not significantly affected. Additionally, the fact that antipassives are structurally intransitive means that the absolutive subject becomes the single core argument of the antipassive verb, and the object is freely deleteable in many languages, as in 6) and 12). This means that the backgrounding antipassive can sometimes be used by speakers when they do not know the identity of the object or do not wish to specify it. Foley and Van Valin note that this use parallels the “widespread actorless backgrounding passive construction” which allows for the suppression of the actor (338). In these cases the antipassive becomes a discourse tool that can be employed when needed. This discourse function is clearly not exploited in Yukulta.

Thirdly, the particular functions or triggers of the antipassive in Yukulta are not widely attested. Yukulta was the only language in Cooreman’s typology that had an antipassive functioning to encode counterfactuals, though she does note that Russian has a functionally parallel construction in which O is marked genitive instead of accusative for counterfactuals (and in cases where O is less affected or not individuated) (1994: 65). Despite this apparent rarity, Cooreman claims that this function can nevertheless be subsumed under the general function that she identifies, namely that these antipassives indicate some kind of “difficulty with which an effect stemming from an activity of A on an identifiable O can be recognised” (1994: 70). She argues that in counterfactual antipassives, “any effect on the O from the activity of the A is explicitly denied, hypothesised, or only vaguely desired. Hence no clear effect on an O argument can be identified by the hearer” (1994: 71).

Yukulta’s second antipassive function of encoding marked A-O relationships does not seem to fit under this general function of antipassives. Cooreman notes that the use of the antipassive under these circumstances “is rather unique to Yukulta”, and that it may in fact be a problem for her analysis (1994: 83). In some languages this function is performed by an inverse construction. In their typology of passives, Keenan and Dryer describe an inverse construction in Cree that performs this function:
Keenan and Dryer note that if this inverse is viewed simply as a type of passive (an analysis that has been proposed), then “this means the passive is the sole way to express meanings in which a third person is acting on a non-third person, something that is unlike what we normally find among passives in other languages” (26). One could similarly observe that it is atypical for an antipassive to be the only way to code this type of relationship. Cooreman (1994: 71) tentatively suggests that use of the antipassive to code marked A-O relationships may have arisen due to a cross-over from another functional domain such as the inverse, and that this function may in fact be an accidental correlation with antipassives in Yukulta.

Evidently, while Yukulta’s antipassive is structurally analogous with other constructions in the class of ‘antipassive’ it is functionally atypical on the three accounts discussed above. Typological work on antipassives and other similar phenomena is not extensive enough to draw strong conclusions, but these observations may point to the possibility that antipassives do not in fact form a homogenous class.

Works Cited


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