Nominal causal constructions: causal chains and syncretism (a typological study)[1]

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By nominal causal constructions, I refer to constructions in which the caused event is syntactically expressed by a full-fledged clause, whereas the causing event is syntactically represented as a noun phrase, typically in combination with dependent marking (cases or adpositions) or, more rarely, head marking devices. Nominal causal expressions can be headed by verbal nominalizations ('because of the plane's late arrival') and abstract nouns ('because of the distance'), but they can also metonymically refer to an entity involved in the causing event ('because of my sister / car') [Degand 2000].

The goal of this study is to establish typologically valid connections between types of meanings expressed by nominal causal constructions and the polysemy/syncretism patterns associated with the respective coding devices. The data were gathered from available descriptions of areally and genealogically diverse languages (the size of the sample is currently 65 languages). Individual constructions (0-4 per language) were annotated for several parameters including morphosyntactic type, pattern of syncretism and semantic type.

Syncretic nominal causal markers are cross-linguistically more common than dedicated nominal causal markers (see [Palancar 2001] for a discussion of some patterns of syncretism from a cognitive point of view). Typically, they emerge based on more concrete meanings via grammaticalization [Heine & Kuteva 2002]. I propose to group specific functions that can be syncretic with nominal causes into four classes: i) "Source" (motion from, 'after', etc.), ii) "Identity" (markers of spatial or temporal proximity, including locative, instrumental, comitative and possessive markers); iii) "Goal" (directional, dative, benefactive, purposive markers, etc.) and iv) the residual "Other" class.

Semantic classification was often problematic because of the scarcity of available data. This classification was based on the relative position of the caused and causing events on the time axis, semantic type of the main predicate and the presence/absence of a sentient or agentive participant (these parameters were inspired by Talmy's and Croft's approaches to causation). As a result, available uses were grouped into four broad classes: i) Prior non-volitional cause ('he was late because of his sister/car'); ii) Simultaneous non-volitional cause ('I am shedding tears because of the smoke'); iii) cause of Reaction, including emotions ('he was punished for his sin'); iv) Motivation ('they fought over / because of the meat').

It seems that all possible types of combinations of semantics types and syncretism patterns can be attested. However, these combinations are not distributed randomly. In particular, causes from the "Simultaneous" domain strongly favor markers of the "Identity" type. Reactions and Motivations favor markers of the "Goal" type. Interestingly, prior non-volitional causes seem to be rare in some macro-areas (e.g. New Guinea and Oceania). They favor dedicated markers and tolerate borrowed markers more easily than other types of nominal causes. These findings might reflect more abstract (and secondary?) status of those causal constructions that do not involve a sentient / human being as a mediator, despite their strong presence in the Western scholarly tradition, including linguistic accounts. A more general conclusion is that conceptualization of causal chains and the transfer from a causing event to a participant of that event is not universal.

References

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