

Getting a Detransitivizer from a Ditransitive: From ‘give’ to Antipassive in Maa

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An antipassive is a detransitivized construction with a two-argument base predicate, but in which the patient-like argument is implicit, is incorporated into the verb, or is expressed as an oblique. Semantic correlates of antipassives have been claimed to especially include indefinite, diffuse or incompletely-affected properties of patients; habitual or some other imperfective aspectual meaning; and profiling the action rather than an endpoint of the action. In terms of discourse properties, it has been argued that antipassives may be used when the patient is highly non-topical.

Maa (Nilotic, Nilo-Saharan) has a detransitivized construction marked by the verb suffix *-ishɔ(r)*. This construction corresponds to antipassives as described for many other languages. However, use of the Maa antipassive is arguably triggered more by a choice to profile the AGENT or AGENT+SITUATION, than by properties of the patient or aspect. First, though it is semantically compatible with diffuse and non-referential patients as well as with imperfective situations, these situations do not require the antipassive. Second, a notable use is to profile the ‘ability’ or ‘characteristic activity’ of an AGENT.

Sources previously identified as origins for antipassive constructions include reflexives, reciprocals, benefactives/malefactives, indefinite or generic argument marking, non-telic aspect forms, nominalizations; and the lexical verbs ‘get’ and ‘make’. There are reasons to suspect that the Maa Antipassive suffix developed historically from the ditransitive root *ishɔ(r)* ‘give’, with which it shares identical allomorphic behavior. It might seem unlikely that a ditransitive root would develop into a detransitivizing morpheme. However, corpus investigation shows that lexical *ishɔ(r)* has a range of senses beyond just ‘give’, including ‘invite, permit, allow, be able to’ (and it has developed into a discourse conjunction ‘so then/next’ in some dialects). The sense ‘be able to’ is a possible route for grammaticalization of *-ishɔ(r)* as the Maa antipassive, first from a compound-like structure such as ‘cut-give’, to ‘able to cut’, to ‘cut-ANTIPASSIVE’.