

Agent-defocusing constructions in Mocoví: Beyond the passive

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1. Introduction

- Many studies on agent-defocusing have addressed the semantic and structural correlations among (promotional and non-promotional) passive, impersonal actives and (action) nominalizations. The correlation between passives and impersonals is a typical phenomenon of European languages (e.g. O'Connor & Maling, 2014; Sansò, 2006). The correlation between passives and nominalizations is well represented by north American languages and beyond (e.g. Malchukov & Siewierska, 2011; Sansò, 2016).
- This paper contributes to the typology of agent defocusing constructions (cf. Myhill, 1997) by exploring two agent defocusing constructions in Mocoví, a Guaycuruan language spoken in the southern Gran Chaco area in Argentina. My data specifically come from Colonia Aborigen Mocoví, a linguistic variety spoken in central Chaco province.
- The two agent-defocusing constructions I discuss here are: (i) a *qa*-marked verbal construction and (ii) object/result nominalization clauses. The verbal construction bears properties of the so-called promotional and non-promotional passives as well as impersonal active constructions (cf. Carrió, 2015; Carrió & Salanova, 2013; Grondona, 1998; Gualdieri, 1998).

(1) ... **qa-i**-ogoren na n-ya:le-qa-pi ...
 AGT.DEF-3-love DET IND.POSS.I-descendent-PL-COLL
 '... children are loved ...'
 '... (they/someone) loved children ...' (NJ01_text_barrio Cacica Dominga)

- The object/result nominalization resembles a non-verbal clause (a.k.a. copulative clause) in which the nominalized predicate behaves like the 'passive participle' in languages with periphrastic passives.

(2) so nogotole-k **n-keʔma-agat-ek**
 DET child-M IND.POSS.I-wound-CAUS-NMLZ.OBJ.M.SG
 'The child was wounded.'

- The main constraint that differentiates both constructions is given by the reference temporal that each of them supports.

2. Mocoví Typological profile

- Head-marking language at the nominal and verbal phrases.
 - A nominal phrase is defined by the presence of a determiner (e.g. *ka*, *so*, *na*, *ñi*, *dʒi*) followed by a noun. Nouns inflect for number (3) and can also inflect for gender.
- (3)
- a. *so pyoG napyo?*
DET dog dirty
'the dog is dirty'
 - b. *so pyoG-r napyo?*
DET dog-PL dirty
'the dogs are dirty'
- 3rd person possessed nouns may have a definite or indefinite possessor encoding.
- (4) Definite vs. non-definite possessor expression
- a. **l-wor**
3POSS.I-family
'his/her family'
 - b. **n-wor**
IND.POSS.I-family
'someone's family' / 'relative'
 - c. **l-ya:le-Ø**
3POSS.I-descendent-F
'his/her daughter'
 - d. **n-ya:le-Ø**
IND.POSS.I-descendent-F
'someone's daughter'
- Person-based split alignment at the verb indexing property, i.e. nominative-accusative for Speech Act Participants and tripartite for Non-Speech Act participants (Juárez, 2013).
 - Three sets of bound person forms (Set I, Set II and Set II); different bound person forms for the 3rd person subject.
 - There are two prefixes that exclusively occur with intransitive predicates, *t-* and *r-*, as shown in (5).
- (5) Intransitive predicates
- a. **t-ya-we**
3INTR.II-go-DIR:out
'He/She goes to (there).'
 - b. **r-alola**
3INTR-get/be.sick
'He/She is sick.'
- Another 3rd person bound form is *i-*. This prefix occurs with a small number of intransitive predicates, as (6) below, but it has a much stronger correlation with transitive predicates. Juárez (2013) noticed that *i-* occurs with the largest number of transitive predicates in the language, as in (7), and is required by predicates that undergo a transitivization process (see section 3.1 below).

(6) Intransitive
i-lew
3-die
'He/She died.'

(7) Transitives
a. i-tfaG
3-cut
'He/She cut it/him/her.'

b. i-lawat
3-kill
'He/She killed it/him/her.'

- Tense is not morphologically marked; only aspect is overtly expressed. Temporal reference can be given by adverbial modifiers as *kavit* 'yesterday', *mante?e* 'tomorrow', *ma?le?* 'later,' *nagi* 'now', *nakita* 'just' (see section 4.2 below).

2.1. Transitivity changes and morphological correspondences

- Typical morphological changes associated with transitivity alternations in the 3rd person: the intransitive subject bound pronoun *r-* changes to *i-* when predicates are transitivized via causativization, as shown in (8).

(8) a. Intransitive
so i-aqaya r-alola
DET 1POSS.I-brother 3INTR-get/be.sick
'My brother is sick.'

b. Causative
so wagayaq i-alola-agat-it so yale
DET water 3-get/be.sick-CAUS-CAUSEE DET man
'The water made the man sick.'

- The reverse change is also possible, i.e., transitive predicates having the subject bound pronoun *i-* goes to *r-* when predicates are intransitivized via antipassivization (9).

(9) a. Transitive
so pyoG i-ta-tak so yale
DET dog 3-sniff-PROG DET man
'The dog is sniffing the man.'

b. Antipassive
so pyoG r-ta-acan
DET dog 3INTR-sniff-ANTIP
'The dog sniffs.'
(adapted from Juárez & Álvarez González, 2017:240)

3. Agent defocusing constructions

- Since Shibatani's (1985) seminal work on passives and related constructions, *agent defocusing* has been argued to be the main functional motivation for passives and functionally passive-like constructions, e.g., reflexives, anticausatives, reciprocal, spontaneous, potential, honorific and plural constructions (e.g. Beavers & Zubair, 2013; Myhill, 1997).
- **DEFINITION:** Agent defocusing has been taken as a prototype-based cover term that allows to capture “phenomena like absence of mention of an agent, mention of an agent in a non-prominent syntactic slot, blurring of the identity of an agent by the use of plural forms” (Shibatani, 1985:832).
- Structurally speaking, impersonal actives, passives and (action) nominalizations differ in form but overlap in function (i.e. family resemblance): they are means to defocus the agent-like argument.

3.1. Type I: *qa-*

General pattern:

- ✓ Predicate transitivity constraint: only transitive predicates.
- ✓ 3rd person subjects.
- ✓ Diverse morphosyntactic strategies: compare (10)-(14).

- (10) a. so nanayk **i**-alawat so yale
 DET snake 3-kill DET man
 ‘The snake killed the man.’
- b. so yale **qa-i**-alawat **ke**-so nanayk
 DET man AGT.DEF-3-kil OBL-DET snake
 ‘The man was killed by the snake.’
 ‘The man died because of the snake.’

- (11) * so yale **qa-r**-alawat **ke**-so nanayk¹
 DET man AGT.DEF-3INTR-kill OBL-DET snake
 ‘The man was killed by the snake.’
 ‘The man died because of the snake.’

- The *ke-* oblique marking of the agent-like nominal phrase, however, is an optional mechanism to diminish the agent presence, as shown in (12).

- (12) a. so pyoG **i**-alawat a-so keʔla-y-ole-Ø²
 DET dog 3-kill F-DET ear-ATTR-NMN.CLASS-F
 ‘The dog killed the hare.’

¹ This predicate does change the subject bound person form when it is intransitivized via *-agan* antipassive marking, e.g. *r-alawat-agan 3INTR-kill-ANTIP* ‘He/She kills’.

² The noun ‘hare’ derives from ‘ear’ in Mocoví.

- b. so keʔla-y-ole-Ø **qa-i**-alawat so pyoG-ole-k
 DET ear-ATTR-NMN.CLASS-F AGT.DEF-3-kill DET dog-NMN.CLASS-M
 ‘The hare was killed (by) the dog.’
 ‘The hare, the dog killed it.’

- Another strategy to defocus the agent-like argument is the syntactic suppression of its nominal phrase, as in (13). The construction looks like a non-promotional passive or impersonal active (cf. the non-promotional passive in Ute (Givón, 1988:149) or the impersonal in Irish or Russian (McCloskey, 2007; Noonan, 1994; Siewierska, 2008)).

- (13) a. so yale **yim** i-ogoren
 DET man 1SG 3-love
 ‘The man loves/likes/takes care of me.’

- b. **ayim** **qa-i**-ogoren
 1SG AGT.DEF-3-love
 ‘(They) love/like/take care of me.’

- The agent-like defocusing is also achieved by blurring its mention with a plural nominal phrase when the predicate is *qa*-marked.

- (14) a. **so** **yale** yim **n-oʔtʃi-aʔa**
 DET man 1SG 3.I-be.afraid-TRNS
 ‘The man fears me.’

- b. * so yale **yim** **qa-n-oʔtʃi-aʔa**
 DET man 1SG AGT.DEF-3.I-be.afraid-TRNS
 ‘The man fears me.’

- c. **dʒi** **qom** yim **qa-n-oʔtʃi-aʔa**
 DET people 1SG AGT.DEF-3.I-be.afraid-TRNS
 ‘The people fear me.’

3.2. Type II: Object nominalizations

- Mocoví object nominalizations (Comrie & Thompson, 2007) show morphosyntactic changes like the *qa*- construction and give rise to a passive-type reading as well.
- They further contribute to the view on nominalizations as mechanisms to manipulate the information structure, backgrounding event participants (Bello, 2016; Givón, 1995; Hopper & Thompson, 1980).

General pattern:

- ✓ Predicate transitivity constraint: only transitive predicates.
- ✓ Subject person constraint: the passive-type reading is only given by 3rd person subjects.
- ✓ Syntactically similar to clauses with non-verbal predicates (e.g. S/he is tall)
- ✓ Two morphologically distinct sub-types:

3.2.1. Type II (i)

- Paradigm

(15) **POSSESSOR.MARKING-transitive.root-*a***
POSSESSOR.MARKING-transitive.root-*ek*
POSSESSOR.MARKING-transitive.root-*qa*

- The transitive subject is encoded as the possessor of the nominalized predicate and the object is encoded by gender and number. Thus, *-a* indicates that the referent is feminine, singular; *-ek* denotes a singular masculine referent, and *-qa* refers to plural participants.

(16) a. so pyoG i-alawat a-so keʔla-y-ole-Ø
 DET dog 3-kill F-DET ear-ATTR-NMN.CLASS-F
 ‘The dog killed the hare.’

b. so keʔla-y-ole-Ø n-alawat-a (so pyoG-ole-k)
 DET ear-ATTR-N.CLASS-F IND.POSS.I-kill-OBJ.NMLZ.F.SG DET dog-NMN.CLASS-M
 ‘The hare was killed (by the dog).’
 (Lit. ‘The hare (fem), someone’s killed, (the dog).’)

c. so pyoG-oki? n-alawat-ek (so nanayk)
 DET dog-DIM.M IND.POSS.I-kill-OBJ.NMLZ.M.SG DET snake
 ‘The little dog was killed (by the snake).’
 (Lit. ‘The little dog (masc), someone’s killed, (the snake).’)

d. so keʔla-y-ole-h n-alawat-qa (so pyoG-ole-k)
 DET ear-ATTR-NMN.CLASS-PL IND.POSS.I-kill-OBJ.NMLZ.PL DET dog-NMN.CLASS-M
 ‘The hares were killed (by the dog).’
 (Lit. ‘The hares, someone’s killed, (the dog).’)

3.2.2. Type II (ii)

- Paradigm

(17) **POSSESSOR.MARKING-transitive.root-*se-Ø***
POSSESSOR.MARKING-transitive.root-*se-k*
POSSESSOR.MARKING-transitive.root-*se-r*

- The sub-type II (ii) uses the nominalizer *-se* which precedes the gender and number marking of the transitive object.³ The feminine is expressed by *-Ø*, the masculine form is *-k* and the plural form is *-r*, as shown in (18).

³ The nominalizer *-se* also derives nouns from nouns, providing the meaning of ‘a type of noun that is for the base noun’ or ‘a type of noun that belong to the class of the base noun’ (e.g. *lap* ‘mouth’ < *lap-se* ‘chinstrap’ < *lap-se-r* ‘chinstraps’; see also Gualdieri 1998:167).

- (18) a. so yale **ayim** i-tʃag
 DET man 1SG 3-cut
 'The man cut me.'
 'The man operated on me (masc).'
- b. a-so ʔa:lo-**oʔi** n-tʃag-se-**Ø**
 F-DET woman-DIM.F IND.POSS.I-cut-NMN.CLF-F
 'The little girl cuts (herself).'
- c. naʎa:qa **ayim** n-tʃag-se-**k**
 today 1SG IND.POSS,I-cut-NMN.CLF-M
 'I (masc) was operated on today.'
 'I was cut today'
- d. a-so ʔa:lo-**l** n-tʃag-se-**r** a-so r-ataren-atagan
 F-DET woman-PL IND.POSS.I-cut-NMN.CLF-PL F-DET 3INTR-cure-ANTIP
 'Women were operated on (by) the doctor (fem).'

3.2.3. The connection with non-verbal clauses

- Object nominalizations could be re-interpreted as part of the realm of copulative or non-verbal clause types, e.g. my dog is black (see Dryer, 2007).
- Mocoví does not have a copulative verb like *be* in English and nominal and adjective-like non-verbal clauses are formed by juxtaposition of elements: SUBJECT + NON-VERBAL PREDICATE (19).

- (19) a. so nogot-oki? ladok-y-k
 DET child-DIM.M tall-ATTR-M
 'The boy is tall.'
- b. so nogot-oli? ladok-y-**Ø**
 DET child-DIM.F tall-ATTR-FEM
 'The girl is tall.'

- From a cross-linguistic point of view, the creation of passive constructions from copulative clauses is well-known. For example, in a recent cross-linguistic study on agent-defocusing constructions, Sansò (2016:921) mentions that result/object nominalization + copula are a common source of passive constructions, i.e. object/result nominalization + copula > passive.

4. Contexts of use

4.1. Patient related questions

- I have tested the use of both agent-defocusing constructions as answers to what Thompson et al. (2013) have called patient related question (e.g. *What happened to you?*), see (20).
- The patient related question, among other experiments, has been designed to test the preference of *be*-passive or *get*-passive constructions in English, that is, two different structures to express transitive events where the patient is more prominent than the agent.

(20) a. Context:

You were sick and needed a surgery. Finally, **the doctor** operated on **you** today, but I didn't know that. Then, next time I met you at your place, I ask **you**:

b. Question

neʔko: qamir?

QUESTION 2SG

'What happened to you?'

c. Answer

maji **ayim** **qa-i-tʃag**
already 1SG AGT.DEF-3-cut

'(They) already operated on me.'

'I (masc) was already operated on.'

d. Answer

maji **ayim** **n-tʃag-se-k**
already 1SG IND.POSS.I-cut-NMN.CLF-M.SG

'I (masc) was already operated on.'

4.2. Temporal reference

- The key component to differentiate contexts of use is the temporal reference. For example, both agent-defocusing works well with past temporal reference (21).

(21) a. **ka-wit** ayim **qa-i-tʃaq**
DET-afternoon 1SG AGT.DEF-3-cut

'(They) operated on me yesterday.'

'I (masc) was operated on yesterday.'

b. **ka-wit** ayim **n-tʃag-se-k**
DET-afternoon 1SG IND.POSS.I-cut-NMN.CLF-M.SG

'I (masc) was operated on yesterday.'

- However, the *qa*- construction is only accepted when the event is anchored in a context of present temporal reference (22).

- (22) a. **nagi** ayim **qa-i-tʃag-(tak)**
 now 1SG AGT.DEF-3-cut-PROG
 ‘They are operating on me now’
- b. * **nagi** ayim **n-tʃag-se-k**
 now 1SG IND.POSS.I-cut-NNM.CLF-M.SG
 ‘I’m being operated now’
- Also, the object nominalization is ruled out in a context of future temporal reference (23).
- (23) a. **maʔleʔ** ayim **qa-i-tʃag**
 later 1SG AGT.DEF-3-cut
 ‘I will be operated on later.’
 ‘They will operate me later.’
- b. * **maʔleʔ** ayim **n-tʃag-se-k**
 later 1SG IND.POSS.I-cut-NNM.CLF-M.SG
 ‘I will be operated on later.’
 ‘They will operate on me later.’

5. Final remarks

I have analyzed the two agent defocusing constructions in Mocoví.

- Similarities: they are built on transitive predicates and serve to defocus third person subjects.
- Differences: morphosyntactic strategies (verbal vs. nominalization) with different nuances.

Table 1. Summary: agent-defocusing construction contexts of use

Property	qa- marked	object nominalizations
Patient related questions	✓	✓
Past temporal reference		✓
No temporal reference constraint	✓	

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