**Split intransitives, experiencer objects and ‘transimpersonal’ constructions:
(re-)establishing the connection**

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In his review of Uhlenbeck, Sapir (1917) suggested that ‘inactive’ (object inflecting) intransitive verbs in Amerindian languages should be better analysed as transitives: “Thus, forms like ‘I sleep’ or ‘I think’ could be understood as meaning properly ‘it sleeps me’, ‘It seems to me’” (Sapir 1917: 85). In the recent typological literature this insight of Sapir has not been pursued (cf., e.g., Merlan 1985: 327 for a critical assessment), which may be due to an increased awareness of heterogeneity of split intransitive languages. Yet, the semantic similarity between experiencer object constructions and constructions with patientive subject (So) cannot be overlooked. The connection between these two constructions becomes more evident if one takes into account that, on the one hand, object inflecting verbs usually constitute a minor pattern in split intransitive languages, which predominantly have an ‘accusative base’ (Nichols 1992: 103), and, on the other hand, an object experiencer more often than not reveals (some) subject properties and therefore can be alternatively analysed as a non-canonical subject (cf. Aikhenvald, Dixon and Onishi 2001).

In this paper I shall provide further evidence for this connection focusing on the cases when the distinction between experiencer-object construction and a construction with patientive subject is not clear-cut. One instructive case is provided by Koasati (see Kimball 1991), which like other Muskogean languages has been regarded as split intransitive on the basis of its agreement system (cf. Mithun 1999: 237-8). However, Kimball (1991: 251) is reluctant to call Koasati split-intransitive, in particular, because morphologically So verbs look like plain transitives. To account for this similarity Kimball suggests that So intransitives originated from reanalysis of transitive forms with a 3rd p. subject. Earlier a similar analysis has been put forward by Haas for Tunica, where “involuntary action verbs developed from transimpersonals” (Haas 1941: 59). As shown in the paper, a similar account can be suggested for many other split-intransitive Amerindian languages, as long as they use the same agreement for O and So and have a zero agreement marker for the 3rd p. A.

While Amerindian languages show evidence that So verbs developed from ‘transimpersonals’, Papuan languages reveal a gradual reanalysis of experiencer object verbs into transimpersonals and further into So verbs. As is well known (see, e.g. Foley 1986: 123-127) many Papuan languages show a predilection for the experiencer object constructions with the stimulus encoded as subject. While in some languages like Usan the only peculiarity of this construction as compared to a typical transitive clause is that experiencer is invariably found in the clause-initial topic position (Reesink 1987: 139), Amele shows further evidence for reanalysis. According to Roberts (1987: 316), some nouns referring to stimulus do not occur outside this construction, and thus cannot count as subjects. Moreover, the experiencer, while still cross-referenced by the object agreement, shows otherwise properties of the syntactic subject (Roberts 2001: 241). Here then we witness an impersonal construction in the process of being reinterpreted as a patient-subject construction.

Thus, there is considerable evidence that impersonal constructions with object experiencers constitute an important source for the rise of split intransitive languages. The motivation for reanalysis is functional: as in other similar cases (cf., e.g., development of experiencer subject verbs from experiencer object verbs in Germanic, as in the case of English

like) it is conditioned by the tendency to ‘upgrade’ the discourse-functionally most prominent (animate/definite etc) argument to the subject position.

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