CHAPTER 7

Constructions with Predicates Involving More than Three Arguments

The possibility of predicates having more than three arguments is a little-studied issue; only a few authors discuss this type of construction. Margetts and Austin (2007), for example, state that the number of participants of ditransitive predicates can be surpassed if such predicates allow causativization or applicativization, in which case verbs with four arguments can be derived. In line with this, Kittilä (2007), in his typological study on tritransitive constructions, contends that in some languages the addition of a causer or beneficiary to ditransitive events yields sentences with four explicit arguments—what he calls semantically tritransitive constructions. The existence of languages that allow this type of sentence has recently attracted the attention of typologists, since no language has verbs that inherently entail more than three arguments.

According to Song’s (1996:173–180) study of causative constructions, the maximum number of core NPs allowed by a language in ordinary sentences (without valence-increasing affixes) must be preserved when non-derived ditransitive verbs undergo causativization; a fact the author terms “NP density control”. Thus, in languages such as Songhai (Song 1996:174) the result of causativizing three-argument predicates is an ambiguous construction with a direct object and an indirect object, in which either the causee argument or the original indirect object is not encoded in the syntax; this suggests that the language maintains NP density control. Along the same lines, Dixon (2000), Comrie (1985), Kulikov (1993), Alsina (1993:628), and Kittilä (2007) have pointed out that in languages with argument augmentation mechanisms operating on ditransitive verbs, it is common for an otherwise core argument to be suppressed or to be encoded by other means, for example, as an oblique. Gerdts (2004) argues that the number of argumental positions a language permits does not block the derivation of predicates entailing an argument increase, provided that the total output of the valence process involved adjusts to the mapping principles of the language. This can be achieved via detransitivizing processes (for example, the antipassive), so that a new argument may be mapped following the rules of the language. According to Song (1996:179) detransitivizing operations are a way of maintaining NP density control.

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1 According to Gerdts’ analysis, intermediate valence values are not monitored. Therefore, derived predicates must not be ruled out when the output of a morphological chain
Comrie (1976:293) and Creissels (2004) differ from Song in stating that the maximum number of core arguments permitted across languages is four. Indeed, syntactically tritransitive sentences have been registered in several languages, although in most cases there is little information regarding their properties and morphosyntactic restrictions. Creissels (2004) asserts that the possibility of adding participants to syntactically ditransitive verbs seems to be subject to arbitrary restrictions, which vary from language to language. While the author notes that in Tswana non-derived ditransitive verbs can undergo applicativization but not causativization, in Yaqui the opposite is true (Guerrero and Van Valin 2004). Other languages in which syntactically tri-transitive sentences resulting from applicativization have been registered are Kinyarwanda (Dryer 1983:137, Baker 1988a:382, 384, Kimenyi 1980:31), Olutec (Zavala 2000:715), and Sierra Popoluca (Marlett 1986:375). Tritransitive sentences derived from the causativization of ditransitive verbs have also been recorded in Swahili (Comrie 1976:293) and Tagalog (Comrie 1975:13). Similarly, triple object constructions involving the applicativization of causativized monotransitive verbs have been identified in Swahili (Baker 1988a:394, Alsina 1993:623), Tswana (Creissels 2004), Yaqui (Guerrero and Van Valin 2004), and Shipibo-Konibo (Valenzuela 2002:440). Finally, in Tswana (Creissels 2004) and Totonac (Beck 2006), this type of construction is found with monotransitive verbs having undergone double applicativization. The scarcity of information on such construction types can be attributed to the small number of languages exhibiting tritransitive sentences and, more importantly perhaps, to the fact that in the languages in which they are permitted, they are not common in spontaneous speech nor in texts and in many cases can only be obtained through elicitation (cf. Margetts and Austin 2007, Kittilä 2007).

Porhépecha, as will be examined here, offers various options regarding constructions with more than three arguments resulting from valence-increasing morphology. Due to the fact that the language possesses valence-reducing mechanisms, predicates involving more than three arguments but which do not generate tritransitive sentences can be expected. Indeed, as can be seen in the following examples, the addition of an argument in object function when the base predicate has undergone argument suppression is common in Porhépecha.

(whatever the number of morphological operations involved) exhibits a syntactic total valence no greater than that allowed by the language.