

Modal vs. Non-modal ‘Un-agentive’ constructions in Laz

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Typological and theoretical background. The understood agent in Involuntary Agent Constructions (IAC), semantically, appears to lack control over the event, and morpho-syntactically, bears non-canonical marking, which may also be indexed on the verb somehow (Kittilä 2005). Importantly, IAC exhibits polysemy cross-linguistically. Kittilä notes that IAC may, in some languages, also describe situations where an agent acts intentionally yet has ‘a lower degree of control’, citing situations where the agent ‘finally or unexpectedly manages to do something’.

Broadly speaking, two theoretical perspectives on the syntax and semantics of IAC have emerged:

(i) Schäfer (2009) proposes an analysis for IAC (in e.g. German, Greek, Agul) where the event is an anticausative change-of-state event and there is an applicative projection on top of it, introducing a **possessor** rather than a unintentional causer. Schäfer argues that the vague semantics of possession will accommodate both ‘unintentionally do X’ and ‘manage-to do X’ readings.

(ii) Davis et al. (2009) propose that the construction that got cited as an example of IAC in St’át’imcets feature a **circumstantial modal** which has the ability reading when its force is existential and the compulsion reading when its force is universal.

Then, the obvious question: *do we need both of these non-modal and modal analyses?*

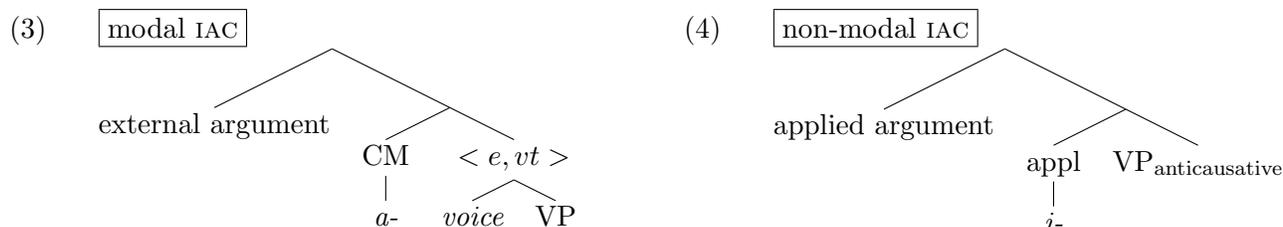
This paper argues that two distinct IAC-like constructions co-exist in Laz, suggesting both lines of analyses are independently needed.

Data. Laz¹ (endangered, South Caucasian, spoken in Turkey) has two IAC-like constructions, which I will call modal IAC and non-modal IAC, respectively (on the former, see Öztürk (2013), Demirok (2018)). The apparent morphosyntactic contrast is located in the pre-root prefix. I argue that *a-* in (1), a modal IAC, expones a circumstantial modal whereas *i-* in (2), a non-modal IAC, expones an applicative head.

(1) Ma mak’vande-s para me- m- a- ç -u
 1SG.DAT beggar-to money.NOM PV- 1SG- CM- give -PST
 ‘I couldn’t but give money to the beggar.’ ⇐ modal IAC

(2) Ma mtsxuli me- m- i- l -u
 1SG.DAT pear.NOM PV- 1SG- APPL- GO -PST
 ‘I (accidentally) dropped the pear.’ ⇐ non-modal IAC

In particular, I propose that modal IAC and non-modal IAC have the following structures in Laz. The former features a circumstantial modal that combines with an unsaturated voiceP, whereas the latter features an applicative head that combines with an unaccusative change-of-state event.



There are a number of distributional observations that justify this asymmetry in the event composition — setting aside modality for now. Three of them: (i) modal IAC can embed unergatives (which feature *voice*) (ii) modal IAC cannot embed unaccusative events (which do not contain *voice*) (iii) the regular causativizer is required for modal IAC to embed a lexically unaccusative verb.

For reasons of space, here I only provide comparisons with baseline structures below.

¹Laz data drawn from author’s own current and previous fieldwork notes.

- (5) baseline → modal IAC
- a. Himu-**k** mtsxuli tsad-u
3SG-ERG pear look-PST
'She looked at the pear.'
- b. Himu-s mtsxuli **a**-tsad-u
3SG-DAT pear CM-look-PST
'She couldn't *not* look at the pear.'
- (6) baseline → non-modal IAC
- a. Ditsxiri do-kort-u
blood PV-clot_{intr}-PST
'The blood clotted.'
- b. Ditsxiri do-m-**i**-kort-u
blood PV-1SG-APPL-clot_{intr}-PST
'I (accidentally) let the blood clot.'

Why need both modal and non-modal?

First, Modal IAC in Laz *requires* an (unsaturated) voiceP, which entails that the DAT NP it features is semantically the external argument (under a (trivial) semantic composition reminiscent of the PASS head in Bruening 2012). A supporting point for this is that instruments are licensed as the DAT argument in modal IAC - shown in (7). This is not possible in non-modal IAC. [not shown here]

- (7) a. Xami-k xe-šk'imi k'vat-u
knife-ERG hand-my cut_{trns}-PST
'The knife cut my hand'
- b. Xami-s xe-šk'imi **a**-k'vat-u
knife-DAT hand-my CM-cut_{trns}-PST
'The knife couldn't *not* cut my hand'

While it is not surprising for a root-modal to be agentive (Mandelkern et al. 2017), this is highly surprising if we wanted to subsume modal IAC under the well-studied form of IAC which *requires* an anticausative event, as Fauconnier (2011) and Schäfer (2009) both stress.

Second, modal IAC exhibits polysemy, as Kittilä argues IAC in general does. Yet, on a closer look, the polysemy in modal IAC is fully within the confines of a circumstantial modal, allowing readings where an event is allowed or forced to unfold by its circumstances. Nothing beyond that.

Notably, modal IAC in Laz is force-variable, as shown in (8b), like its counterpart in St'át'imcets. In addition, there is evidence that CM is apparently an existential modal, as its behavior under negation suggests. Note that (8c) is not ambiguous.

[Though, it is not clear if its universal construal is to be derived via strengthening, or is only available due to entailment (see Deal (2011) for Nez Perce).]

- (8) a. Bere-**k** opša šk'om-u
child-ERG a lot eat-PST
'The child ate a lot.'
- b. Bere-s opša **a**-šk'om-u
child-DAT a lot CM-eat-PST
i. 'The child was able to eat a lot.'
ii. 'The child couldn't *not* eat a lot.'
- c. Bere-s opša var **a**-šk'om-u
child-DAT a lot NEG CM-eat-PST
✓'The child wasn't able to eat a lot.'
✗'It isn't the case that
the child couldn't *not* eat a lot.'

Third, there is evidence that the syntax of the VP domain isn't the only point of difference between non-modal IAC and modal IAC. If this were the case, we would expect them to have identical construals in all environments where they are talking about the same event. Here is how I test this: Laz has distinct roots for 'break', one lexically transitive, one lexically unaccusative. As expected, they go with modal IAC (9a) and non-modal IAC (9b), respectively. Yet, they don't converge on the same meaning, it seems. Under negation, (9a) only gives us a construal that we expect from a possibility modal, which (9b) lacks.

- (9) a. Ham kva va m-**a**-t'ax-u
this stone NEG 1-CM-break_{trns}-PST
'I wasn't able to break this stone.'
- b. Ham kva va m-**i**-t'rox-u
this stone NEG 1-APPL-break_{intr}-PST
≈ 'I didn't break this stone.'

Selected References:

- Davis, H, L. Matthewson, & H. Rullmann. 2009. Out of control marking as circumstantial modality in St'át'imcets. In *Cross-linguistic Semantics of Tense, Aspect and Modality*.
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