

Transitivity and Information Flow

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Prototypical transitivity distinctions encode the number of major participants in an event or state: one in intransitives, two in transitives, etc. But languages differ in the kinds of referents speakers may or must code as core arguments. What is expressed in a transitive clause in one language may be encoded as intransitive in another. Languages of the Philippines are fascinating arenas for the study of transitivity, partly because of their extensive overt marking of grammatical relations, partly because of the myriad factors speakers take into account as they shape their messages. Here syntactic, discourse, semantic, and pragmatic factors underlying the coding of core arguments are examined in unscripted speech in Hiligaynon. Ergative, absolutive, and oblique arguments are distinguished in pronoun shape, determiners, and verbal morphology. Usually these three systems work in concert, but sometimes they contrast. The coding of referents as core arguments depends on such factors as their status as count or mass, as concrete or abstract, their identifiability to the audience, and, significantly, their importance in the unfolding message. In some situations, argument structure choices are crystallized in the grammar, while in others, speakers select among alternatives according to their communicative goals at the moment.