The *-eye/o- Enigma: Causative and Iterative-Intensive Morphology in Indo-European

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An enduring problem of Indo-European linguistics is the true nature of what is commonly known as the causative formation, the *-eye/o- suffix attached to the o-grade of the root. Although its meaning is typically assumed to be causative, there are several descendant languages, including Greek and Tocharian B, in which the construction has an iterative or even intensive meaning. While this fact has been noted by many Indo-Europeanists, the general conclusion seems to be that “the point of tangency between these two clear-cut functions is an enigma” (Sihler 1995: 504). In order to solve this enigma, we must establish first why this relationship exists, and second how it developed. In other words, what is the semantic relationship between causatives, iteratives and intensives, and which meaning, if either, is the original?

There are very few works which attempt to provide an explanation for this phenomenon, notably Adams (1998), and more recently Kölligan (2007). Adams claims that *-eye/o- is one of many PIE iterative-intensive suffixes which developed causative meaning in some cases, while elsewhere retaining their original meaning. He provides data indicating that another suffix, *-ske/o-, was initially iterative-intensive, and later causative (76). Unfortunately, he does not propose a semantic relationship, nor does he provide evidence which would suggest a similar evolution for the case of *-eye/o-. This would lead us to agree with Sihler, who so aptly observes that, “two examples of the same enigma are no more illuminating than one.” Kölligan, however, refuses to settle for the long-accepted mystery. Focusing primarily on Latin data, he hypothesizes that the solution can be found in nothing more than a “very neat distribution depending on the agentivity of the base verb from which they are derived” (63). His claim is that the relationship between causative and iterative/intensive meaning is simply a shared increase in agentivity.

Despite this recent development, the general lack of resolution among Indo-Europeanists led me to examine data from other language families, in hopes of gaining some new insight into this puzzling problem. This broadened scope of exploration provides plentiful examples of languages with causative-intensive relationships from several language families including Muskogean, Semitic, and Cushitic. These examples can be classified into two categories: single-morpheme, as found in Bari, Mwera, and Arabic, and double-causative, as in Choctaw, Amharic, Oromo, and Tuvan. The Indo-European case is that of a single-morpheme causative, which in
general seems to behave differently from the double-causative. Despite the wealth of data, there is still a surprisingly sparse amount of literature attempting to explain it. The relationship is completely absent from major causative typologies such as Jae Jung Song’s *Causatives and Causation: A Universal Typological Perspective* (1996), but receives a brief mention in both R.M.W. Dixon’s ‘A typology of causatives’ (2000) and Bernard Comrie’s contribution to *Language typology and syntactic descriptions* (1985). Dixon does not propose a reason for the connection, but Comrie hypothesizes that it may be related to the “intensity (force) that is often implied in forcing someone to do something (330).” Unfortunately he does not expand on this idea, and it is not until Fenxiang Li’s work in 1991, followed by Li and Lindsay Whaley’s manuscript (1995), that the subject is given a more thorough investigation. Independently from these hypotheses, George Aaron Broadwell (1997) has proposed a formal explanation for the relationship based on his work with Choctaw, Amharic, Oromo, and Tuvan.

Broadwell’s investigation deals with what he calls ‘intensive causation,’ and at first glance appears to be an example of the single-morpheme type causative formation found in Indo-European. However, upon closer examination, I have concluded that it can in fact be treated as double-causative type formation. Double-causatives behave quite differently, and thus Broadwell’s explanation, while interesting, is not particularly relevant to the Indo-European case.

Li and Whaley’s approach, on the contrary, appears to be highly relevant to the Indo-European case, and reaches well-supported conclusions. The authors begin with Li’s earlier theory of a continuum of control and force between causer- and causee-controlled causatives (1991), and then extend this idea to apply to intensives. They go on to provide diachronic data from Arabic that suggests the intensive meaning was indeed the original. In emphasizing the semantic relationship between iterative-intensives and causatives, as well as providing evidence indicating which was the original meaning, Li and Whaley’s theory provides plausible solutions to both the why and the how of iterative/intensive-causative relationships.

In this paper, I attempt to reconcile the conclusions of Li and Whaley with those of Kölligan, evaluating both with regards to the remaining Indo-European data while taking into account the brief observations of Comrie and Adams. By combining these contributions from both within and without of the Indo-European sphere, I propose a long sought-after explanation of the Indo-European Causative-Iterative phenomenon, and hope to spur further exploration of this fascinating case.
REFERENCES


