External causation in anticausativization and lability in Latin: Towards a passive-anticausative continuum

This paper investigates the influence of external causation or its absence on the development of anticausativization and lability in Latin. *Anticausativization* transforms a *causal* event (externally caused: "John opens the door") into a *noncausal* event (occurring spontaneously: "The door opens"). Verbs undergoing anticausativization lack an Agent-oriented meaning component (Haspelmath 1993). This allows semantic flexibility in the subject of the causal alternant, as it bears the generalized role of *Effector*, which can be subdivided into (Van Valin & Wilkins 1996; Næss 2007: 107–110):

i.   *Agent* (+control, -affected): (1)
ii. *Instrument* (-control, +affected): (2)
iii. *Force* (-control, -affected): (3).

(1) *Graeci (…)*   *hordeum*   *siccant.*
     Greek.NOM.M.PL   barley.ACC.N.SG   dry.IND.PRS.3PL.ACT
     "Greeks dry barley." (PLIN. nat. 18, 72)

(2) *Spongeae (…)*   *ulcera (…)*   *inpositae*   *siccant.*
     sponge.NOM.F.PL   ulcer.ACC.N.PL applied.NOM.F.PL   dry.IND.PRS.3PL.ACT
     "Applied sponges dry ulcers." (PLIN. nat. 31, 126)

(3) *Haec (…)*   *sol*   *siccat.*
     DET.ACC.N.PL   sun.NOM.M.SG   dry.IND.PRS.3SG.ACT
     "The sun dries these things." (PLIN. nat. 21, 84)

This paper examines how the role of Force impacts the syntax of *detransitivization* in Latin. Detransitivization with Force, as in (4) and (5), is sometimes labelled as *passive* (causal) (Comrie 1985; Siewierska 1986), and sometimes as *anticausative* (noncausal) (Kulikov 1998; Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019: 43–48). However, the Latin data suggest that neither classification proves satisfactory. This paper argues that the development of anticausativization and the rise of lability in Latin (see Gianollo 2014; Cennamo, Eythórsson & Barðdal 2015; Cennamo 2022; Ongenae 2024), is influenced by the presence of a Force.

Data are extracted from the *Library of Latin Texts*, a corpus of Latin texts ranging from the third century BCE to the sixth century CE (approximately 10,000,000 words). Noncausal examples were annotated for the following variables:

- Construction (the three anticausative strategies):
  i.   mediopassive (in -*r*, syncretic with the passive marker): (4),
  ii. labile (active intransitive): (5),
  iii. reflexive (with *se* REFL): (6),
- Deagentivization: presence of an external Agent,
- Causalness degree: the proportion of causal uses of a verb, calculated as (causal) / (causal + noncausal) (following Haspelmath et al. 2014),
- Presence of a Force, as *vento* (4) or *frigore* (5),
- Century

(4) *Frumenta*   *vento*   *separantur.*
     grain.NOM.N.PL wind.ABL.N.SG   separate.IND.PRS.3PL.MPASS
     "Grain separates through the wind." (COLVM. 2, 20, 5)

(5)   *Flumina (...)   frigore   durant.*
river.NOM.N.PL cold.ABL.N.SG   harden.IND.PRS.3PL.ACT

"Rivers harden through the cold." (AETNA 498)

(6)   *vitium (...)   ruperit   se*
disease.NOM.N.SG   break.IND.FUT.3SG.ACT REFL.ACC

"The disease will have broken." (CHIRON 384)

The data reveal that reflexivity, as in (6), precludes a Force, which confirms that it is mainly reserved for *autocausatives*. Furthermore, Figure 1 shows that, in Late Latin, the labile strategy is preferred for verbs with a low causalness degree and extends to verbs with a higher causalness degree when a Force is absent, while the mediopassive remains frequent when a Force is present. These findings support the reconsideration of the passive-anticausative distinction as a continuum based on form-frequency and the presence of external causation.
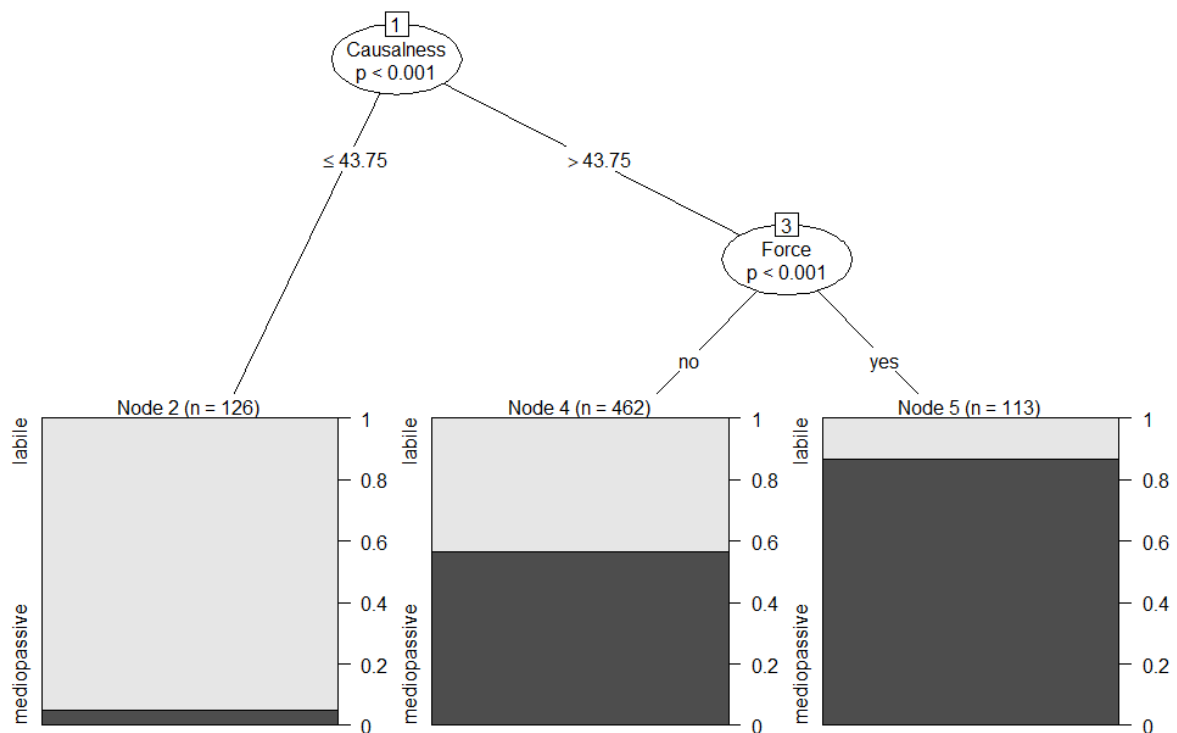

Figure 1: Conditional Inference Tree: Construction ~ Causalness + Force (Construction = mediopassive and labile with +deagentivization in Late Latin)

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