The category of causative verbs in Tibeto-Burman languages and the Iconicity Principle

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The category of causative is widely attested in Tibeto-Burman languages, both in modern idioms and classical or extinct languages. Its ways and means of manifestation are quite heterogeneous, including agglutinating affixes, auxiliaries, and derivation by Ablaut, where segmental 'mutations' and tone alternations can be found.

The meaning of causatives is usually thought of as a variety of the cause-and-effect semantics. Actually, this is not the case, since a cause is identifiable, if (if and only if) an effect, necessarily brought about by this cause, is invariably produced, while the causative semantics does not really presuppose a necessary effect as its integral component. E.g. from Bu. Maung Hla go e(se d_ '(He) causes Maung Hla to sleep' it cannot be inferred if Maung Hla really sleeps or not. It could be argued that the causative semantics belongs to the set of semantic primitives, which cannot be reduced to any other 'simpler' meanings and are, accordingly, indefinable.

A very interesting issue is the type of relationship between form and meaning in causative verbs. The Iconicity Principle predicts that the causative verbs will display "additional" morphemes and/or marked phonological features (if formed by Ablaut) as compared to their simplex counterparts. The data drawn from a number of Tibeto-Burman languages shows that the (morpho)phonological alternations underlying the causative verb derivation are not strictly uniform. Both unmarked and marked phonological values may be associated with this type of derivation, cf., on the one hand, Bu. mjing 'be high' > hmjing 'make high, elevate', where preaspirated sonorant is marked as opposed to its non-aspirated, plain nasal counterpart, naturally unmarked, and, on the other hand, Lhasa Tibetan (a14 'sleep' > (a55 'cause to sleep'; in the latter case, the causative counterpart of the simplex verb is derived by a tone change which arguably brings about a less marked tone (it stands to reason to consider level tones unmarked as opposed to marked contour tones).

The number of such diverse examples is quite great, which makes it doubtful whether the Iconicity Principle, at least if applied to the category of causative in Tibeto-Burman languages, is as valid an explanatory tool as it is believed to be by many.