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(Citation)

Proceedings of the International Argument Alternation Workshop:77-87

(Issue Date)

2026-01-20

(Resource Type)

conference paper

(Version)

Version of Record

(JaLCD0I)

<https://doi.org/10.24546/0100499710>

(URL)

<https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14094/0100499710>



Dative anticausatives in Slavic*

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1. Introduction

Slavic languages distinguish between agents with full control over the event in which they are causally involved (nominative agents) and agents that lack full control over the event and are therefore lower in agency in comparison (dative agents). This distinction, which occurs across Slavic languages, is illustrated in (1) and (2) below for Polish (West Slavic), and (3) and (4) for Serbian (South Slavic) (as cited in Rivero 2003 and Rivero and Arregui 2012).¹

- (1) *Jan czyta książkę.*
John.NOM read.PRES.1SG book.ACC
'John is reading a book.'
- (2) *Jankowi czytało się tę książkę z przyjemnością.*
John.DAT read.NEUT REFL this book.ACC with pleasure
'(Somehow) John read this book with pleasure.'
- (3) *Marko čita knjigu.*
Mark.NOM read.PRES.1SG book.ACC
'Mark is reading a book.'
- (4) *Marku se čita knjiga.*
Mark.DAT REFL read.PRES.3SG book.NOM
'Mark feels like reading a book.'

Nominative agents in (1) and (3) above are conceptualized as fully responsible for the event actualization and its outcome. That the event happens is entirely the result of the agent's intention and, everything else being equal, the success of the event depends entirely on the agent's ability to produce the intended outcome. In contrast, dative agents in (2) and (4) are conceptualized as lacking full responsibility for the actualization and the outcome of the event in which they are causally involved. Sentences in (2) and (4) therefore both express eventualities which are beyond control of the dative agent and differ primarily in that in Polish (2), the event of the book reading is successfully actualized due to some unexpressed facilitating factors (note the word "somehow" in the English translation), whereas the corresponding example in Serbian (4) merely states a potential for the event actualization due to some unexpressed factors triggering agent's

* This paper was presented at *The International Argument Alternation Workshop* held on July 16 and July 17, 2025, hosted by the Graduate School of Humanities, Kobe University. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the conference organizers and the members of the audience for their insightful comments on my presentation of this study. Any remaining shortcomings are, of course, the author's alone.

¹ If not otherwise marked, Serbian examples are provided by the author.

disposition to do the reading (to be discussed in greater detail in section 3.1.). The dative agent in (4) is therefore best understood as a *potential agent* of an unactualized event (rather than the experiencer, as it is commonly claimed in the literature), while the dative agent in (2) is a *de facto* agent of the actualized event of reading. Crucially, however, neither one of them has a full control over the event actualization and its outcome, which puts them in sharp contrast with the nominative agents in (1) and (3).

A further distinction between these two types of agents is that the nominative agents in (1) and (3) occur with active verb morphology, while the dative agents in (2) and (4) occur with the reflexive marker which is functionally anticausative (see section 4.5. for more details). At first glance this might seem typologically odd considering that the verbs in (2) and (4) are agentive, rather than causative. However, as we will see shortly, lexical semantics of the base verb plays the key role in the proposal put forward in this paper. In the subsequent sections, sentences illustrated in (2) and (4) will be analyzed within the larger context of anticausative verbs, particularly dative anticausatives (cf. *the oblique causer construction*, Schäfer 2008), and will be claimed to arise as the extension of use of the anticausative verb morphology to agentive verb bases. Examples below illustrate anticausatives and dative anticausatives with causative verb bases in Polish, (5) and (6), and Serbian, (7) and (8) (as cited in Rivero 2003 for Polish).

(5) *Złamały się okulary.*
 PERF.broken.FEM.PL REFL glasses.NOM.FEM.PL
 ‘The glasses broke.’

(6) *Jankowi złamały się okulary.*
 John.DAT PERF.broken.FEM.PL REFL glasses.NOM.FEM.PL
 ‘John accidentally broke the glasses.’

(7) *Slomile su se naočare.*
 PERF.broken.FEM.PL AUX.PL REFL glasses.NOM.FEM.PL
 ‘The glasses broke.’

(8) *Marku su se slomile naočare.*
 Mark.DAT AUX.PL REFL PERF.broken.FEM.PL glasses.NOM.FEM.PL
 ‘John accidentally broke the glasses.’

Note that both dative anticausatives with causative verb bases illustrated above, and dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases illustrated in (2) and (4), crucially express the same basic meaning that the noted eventuality is beyond control of the dative participant (e.g., Rivero and Arregui 2012 and the references therein; Ilic 2013, 2014). In section 4., I will argue that this basic meaning of dative anticausatives arises from the anticausative morphology, while their specific interpretations arise due to the interaction between anticausative morphology and the lexical semantics of the base verb – causative and agentive, respectively. The relevant distinction between causative and agentive verbs is readily captured in terms of the distinction between externally and internally caused eventualities (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995), while the motivation for the interpretational differences is explained in terms of infelicitous category interactions (Malchukov 2011) and the idea that conflicts between lexical and grammatical features on the verb lead to either blocking or reinterpretation (Malchukov 2019). This has already

been demonstrated for South Slavic (Ilic 2013, 2014), where it was shown that incompatibility between anticausative morphology and lexical semantics of the agentive verb bases in Serbian dative anticausatives cancels the event actualization and gives rise to a modal dispositional meaning (see section 3.1.).

In the remainder of this paper I show that in West Slavic and Russian, the same incompatibility with agentive verb bases preserves event actualization and gives rise to a modal facilitative (abilitative) meaning with an additional evaluative component in the affirmative sentences (section 3.2.). Incompatibility between anticausative morphology and agentive verb bases therefore produces different outcomes across Slavic languages, leading to cancellation of the event actualization only in South Slavic, while reinterpretation occurs in all of them.

2. Dative anticausatives with causative verb bases

Anticausative constructions involving a dative (or genitive) marked participant with an obligatorily human referent commonly occur in many Indo-European languages. These constructions, which I refer to as “dative anticausatives” (cf. Ilic 2013, 2014), have been discussed in the literature under various labels, such as the ‘oblique causer construction’ (Schäfer 2008), ‘dative unaccusatives’ (Kallulli 2006), and the ‘dative anticausative construction’ (Rivero 2003, 2004, 2012), among others. Below are some examples of dative anticausatives as they occur in Spanish (9) and Greek (10) (as cited in Rivero 2004).²

- (9) *A Ana se le rompieron las gafas.*
 to Ann REFL she.DAT broke.3.PL the glasses.NOM.FEM.SG
 a) ‘Ann’s glasses broke.’
 b) ‘Ann was affected by the glasses breaking.’
 c) ‘Ann broke the glasses involuntarily.’
- (10) *Tu Ben tu kaike i supa*
 the.GEN Ben he.GEN burnt.NACT the soup.NOM
 d) ‘Ben’s soup burned.’
 e) ‘Ben was affected by the soup burning.’
 f) ‘Ben involuntarily caused the soup to burn.’

Note that dative anticausatives in both Spanish and Greek are ambiguous between three different readings on which the dative participant is interpreted as a) the possessor of the theme undergoing the change, b) the entity being affected by this change, and c) the involuntary causer who causes the change accidentally (i.e., unintentionally). This is true for Slavic dative anticausatives as well, illustrated below with an example from Serbian (11).

- (11) *Marku se prosula kafa.*
 Mark.DAT REFL PERF.spill.FEM.SG coffee.NOM.FEM.SG
 a) ‘Mark’s coffee spilled.’
 b) ‘Mark is affected by the coffee spilling.’
 c) ‘Mark accidentally spilled the coffee.’

² Greek anticausatives are marked with the non-active morphology (10).

However, as demonstrated in (12) below, the possessor reading is easily canceled in the presence of another possessor and therefore seems to arise inferentially, possibly piggybacking on the affected (benefactive/malefactive) reading which seems to be more basic. A similar observation was also made in Rivero (2003) for Polish (13).

(12) *Marku se prosula Marijina kafa.*
 Mark.DAT REFL PERF.spill.FEM.SG Mary's coffee.NOM.FEM.SG
 *‘Mark’s coffee spilled.’

(13) *Jankowi zlamaly sie okulary Marysi.*
 John.DAT PERF.broken.FEM.PL REFL glasses.NOM.FEM.PL Mary.GEN
 *‘John’s glasses broke.’

Moreover, dative anticausatives always indicate accidental outcomes which occur due to some uncontrollable factors, rather than by the design of an intentional human causer. Dative anticausatives are therefore incompatible with adverbs indicating intentionality, as demonstrated in (14) below, thereby contrasting with active construction with the nominative causer in (15), which is compatible with both intentional and accidental reading.

(14) *Marku se prosula kafa*
 Mark.DAT REFL PERF.spill.FEM.SG coffee.NOM.FEM.SG
 (**namerno/slučajno*)
 (*intentionally/unintentionally)
 ‘Mark accidentally spilled the coffee (*intentionally/unintentionally).’

(15) *Marko je prosuo kafu*
 Mark.NOM AUX PERF.spill.FEM.SG coffee.ACC.FEM.SG
 (*namerno/slučajno*)
 (intentionally/unintentionally)
 a) ‘Mark poured out the coffee (intentionally).’
 b) ‘Mark accidentally spilled the coffee (unintentionally).’

This uncontrollable nature of dative anticausatives is the essential part of their meaning, and they can therefore only occur with verbs which can be conceptualized as occurring spontaneously. Dative anticausatives are consequently restricted in their use to causative (alternating) verbs which involve the result component in their lexical semantics and do not require to be instigated by an agent.

3. Dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases

Considering how common dative anticausatives are in Indo-European languages, it is rather surprising that Slavic languages seem to be among the only ones which allow dative anticausatives to occur with both causative and agentive verb bases. To the best of my knowledge, outside of the Slavic group of languages only Albanian (Kallulli 2006), and

more marginally Baltic languages (Geniušiene 1987), allow this option.³

Examples below contrast dative anticausatives with a causative (16) and agentive (17) verb base in Serbian. Note that the verb in (16) occurs with the perfective prefix indicating result, while in (17) this prefix is absent, and the verb therefore has an imperfective aspectual value (Ilic, 2013).

- (16) *Marku se prosula kafa.*
Mark.DAT REFL PERF.spill.FEM.SG coffee.NOM.FEM.SG
a) 'Mark's coffee spilled.'
b) 'Mark is affected by the coffee spilling.'
c) 'Mark accidentally spilled the coffee.'

- (17) *Marku se pila kafa.*
Mark.DAT REFL drank.FEM.SG coffee.NOM.FEM.SG
'Mark was craving coffee.'

Although at first glance it might seem that the difference in meaning between (16) and (17) is due to the differences in aspect, this is not the case. As indicated in (18) below, the possessor/affected/involuntary causer readings arise even when the verb undergoes secondary imperfectivization, thereby receiving an overall imperfective aspectual value. Note, however, that the imperfectivization here contributes a durative meaning, but the verb is still resultative due to the presence of the perfective prefix. In contrast, the dispositional meaning cannot arise when the verb bears the perfective prefix and is therefore resultative, as demonstrated in (19).

- (18) *Marku se prosipa kafa.*
Mark.DAT REFL PERF.spill.IMPERF.PRES.3.SG coffee.NOM.SG
a) 'Mark's coffee is spilling.'
b) 'Mark is being affected by the coffee spilling.'
c) 'Mark is accidentally spilling the coffee.'

- (19) *Marku se pojeo keks.*
Mark.DAT REFL PERF.ate.MASC.SG cookies.NOM.MASC.SG
*'Mark craved the cookies.'

We therefore conclude that it is not the aspect *per se* that drives the interpretational differences between dative anticausatives with causative (18) and agentive (19) verb bases, but rather lexical semantics of the base verb.⁴

This is further supported below, where the same sentences are repeated, only this time the attempted interpretations are reversed, thereby testing whether the dispositional

³ Dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases have been discussed in the literature under various labels, such as the “dispositional reflexive construction” (Franks 1995), “modal deagentive reflexives” (Nedjalkov 1980, Geniušiene 1987), “involuntary states” (Rivero and Arregui 2012), the “feel-like construction” (Marušič and Žaucer 2006), “reflexive-with-dative construction” (Ivanova 2014), and “dative unaccusatives” (Kallulli 2006), among others.

⁴ Perfectivization in Slavic languages is a derivational process.

meaning can arise with the causative verb base (20), and whether the possessive/affected/involuntary causer interpretations can arise with the agentive verb base (21).

- (20) *Marku se prosipa kafa.*
 Mark.DAT REFL PERF.spill.IMPERF.PRES.3.SG coffee.NOM.SG
 #‘Mark feels like pouring out the coffee.’
- (21) *Marku se pojео keks.*
 Mark.DAT REFL PERF.ate.MASC.SG cookies.NOM.MASC.SG
 a) ??‘Mark’s cookies were eating themselves up.’
 b) ??‘Mark was affected by the cookies eating themselves up.’
 c) *‘Mark accidentally ate the cookies.’

As demonstrated above, the dispositional meaning can arise with the causative verb base (although this is pragmatically odd), but only if the event is conceptualized as agentive (20), as indicated by the English translation (*pour out* vs. *spill*). In contrast, the possessive/affected/involuntary causer interpretations cannot arise with the agentive verb base regardless of the perfective prefix introducing the resultative component (21). We therefore conclude that the lexical semantics of the verb base plays the crucial role in interpretation of dative anticausatives in Serbian (this is true for other Slavic languages as well).

3.1. Dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases in South Slavic

Dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases in South Slavic give rise to a wide range of semantically related interpretations, such as needs, desires, and dispositions of the dative agent towards the event, depending on the specific verb used. They speak of “the agent’s predisposition to perform the action”, of uncontrollable “urges ...and impulses of the dative [referent], not actions in the ‘real world’... They report “dispositions that need not materialize” (Rivero and Arregui, 2012) and are uncontrollable and “inexplicable” in their nature (Ivanova, 2014). These are needs, desires, and dispositions of potential agents, towards potential (non-actualized) events, arising due to some internal factors which are beyond control of the agent. This is illustrated in (22) for Slovenian (Rivero 2003), and (23) and (24) for Bulgarian (Ivanova 2014).

- (22) *Janezu se spi.*
 Janez.DAT REFL sleep.PRES.3SG
 ‘Janez is sleepy/Janez needs to sleep.’
- (23) *Puši mi se.*
 smoke.PRES.3SG I.DAT REFL
 ‘I feel like smoking.’
- (24) *Ne mi se smee.*
 NEG I.DAT REFL laugh.PRES.3SG
 ‘I don’t feel like laughing.’

The above sentences are all *irrealis* in the sense that they do not entail actualization of the event. If actualization is cancelled, no contradiction arises, as demonstrated in (25)

for Serbian. This is true in other South Slavic languages as well (Rivero 2004). In this respect, dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases in South Slavic differ from their counterparts in West Slavic and Russian, where actualization cannot be cancelled without contradiction (Rivero 2003).

- (25) *Marku se pila kafa, ali je nije pio.*
 Mark.DAT REFL drank.FEM coffee.NOM.FEM, but it.ACC.FEM NEG.AUX
 drink
 ‘Mark was in the mood for coffee, but he didn’t drink any.’

3.2. Dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases in West Slavic and Russian

Examples provided below illustrate dative anticausatives with causative (26) and agentive (27) verb bases in Czech (as cited in Geniušienė 1987 and Rivero 2004, respectively).

- (26) *Zlomil se mi nehet.*
 PERF.broken.MASC.SG REFL I.DAT nail.NOM.MASC.SG
 a) ‘My nail got broken on me.’
 b) ‘I broke my nail by accident.’

- (27) *Ta kniha se Janovi četla dobře.*
 that book.NOM.FEM REFL John.DAT read.PST.FEM well
 ‘John read this book with ease.’
 ‘Somehow it was easy for John to read this book.’
 ‘Reading this book came easily to John.’

Dative anticausatives in West Slavic (Polish, Czech, Slovak) and Russian represent subjective evaluations of actualized events. As noted in Rivero and Arregui (2012), “the agent perceives his own action as proceeding well (or not well) for reasons independent of him” (Wierzbicka 1988), “the goal is achieved through luck and external conditions” (Dąbrowska 1997), and the success is commonly attributed to “the environment in which the action takes place” (Wierzbicka 1988). Examples (28) from Czech (Franks 1995) and (29) from Russian (Ivanova 2014) illustrate this point. In (28), the agent’s performance of the action is facilitated by some favorable conditions which exist at the certain location referred to as “there”, in (29), the quality of the agent’s sleeping is diminished with the window closed, and in (30), the agent’s ability to write well is affected by the properties of the article that he is writing (the abilitative meaning arises prominently under the negation). Finally, because these sentences are subjective evaluations, they occur with adverbial modifiers that qualify the event as proceeding excellently (28), or with difficulties (29), which in (30) is indicated by the negation – all as perceived by the speaker (the last example is from Polish, as cited in Franks 1995).

- (28) *Sestře se tam pracuje výborně.*
 sister.DAT REFL there work.PRS.3.SG excellently
 ‘(My) sister is working excellently there.’

(29) *Mne pri zakrytoj fortočke ploxu spit-sja.*
 I.DAT with closed window badly sleep-REFL
 ‘My sleeping goes badly with the window closed.’

(30) *Ten artykuł nie pisze mi się dobrze.*
 this.NOM article.NOM NEG write.PRS.3.SG he.DAT REFL well
 ‘I just can’t write this article well.’

Overall, due to their facilitative meaning in West Slavic, and dispositional meaning in South Slavic, dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases are essentially both modal and differ most notably in their event actualization status, as well as in the presence of the evaluative component in West Slavic and Russian.

4. Towards a unifying account of Slavic dative anticausatives

It is commonly accepted in the literature that dative anticausatives in Slavic all crucially express the same basic meaning of lack of control on the part of the dative participant (e.g., Rivero 2003, 2004, Rivero and Arregui 2012, Ilic 2013, 2014). In this section, I will argue that this meaning arises from the anticausative morphology, while the specific interpretations arise compositionally, as a result of the interaction between anticausative morphology and the lexical semantics of the base verb. The distinction between causative (alternating) and agentive verbs is explained in terms of the distinction between externally and internally caused eventualities (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995).

4.1. Externally and internally caused eventualities

In order to explain which causative change-of-state verbs undergo the causative-anticausative alternation, Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) introduced a distinction between externally and internally caused eventualities. Externally caused eventualities inherently involve an external cause which brings about the change and is therefore perceived as responsible for that change (e.g., *John/the hammer/the storm broke the window*). In contrast, internally caused eventualities are brought about by some inherent properties of the entity undergoing the change (cf. “a change by inner predisposition”; Bentley 2024), and the responsibility for the change is therefore attributed to these properties (e.g. *The flower wilted*) (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995: 90-91).

Verbs such as *break* and *close* describe eventualities that can easily be conceptualized as internally caused, i.e. without the help of an agent, and can therefore appear as either causative or anticausative, e.g. *John broke the window/The window broke (by itself)*. Internally caused eventualities, on the other hand, arise from the inherent properties of the entity undergoing the change (“inner predispositions”) and therefore cannot be conceptualized as externally controlled, which is why they also lack causative counterparts.

4.2. Internal causation subsumes agency

According to Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995), agentive verbs are also internally caused by some inherent properties which are responsible for bringing about the eventuality. “For agentive verbs, such as *play* and *speak*, this property is the will or volition of the agent who performs the activity” (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995: 91). In contrast to verbs such as *break* and *open*, agentive verbs therefore cannot be externally controlled, as they occur due to the inherent properties of the agent – e.g. *Mark is playing*,

because he feels like playing (i.e. he wants to play), and *Mark is sleeping, because he is sleepy* (i.e. he needs to sleep). Agentive verbs can therefore only be controlled internally, i.e. by the agent who performs the activity (Smith 1970). I will use the term “agent’s inner dispositions” to refer to these inherent properties of the agents that prompt them to perform different activities (in parallel to the “inner predispositions” of the theme, Bentley 2024).

4.3. Agency presupposes agent’s inner dispositions

The inherent properties of the agent, such as agent’s needs, desires, and dispositions, represent conditions for the event actualization and are associated with the semantic notion of agent as non-cancellable presuppositions. Consider (31), with an active verb expressing that the nominative agent is involved in an ongoing event of sleeping. When the agent’s disposition towards sleeping is negated in (32), a contradiction arises, as it is illogical to claim that *Mark* would be sleeping without him feeling sleepy. This indicates that, in order to be true, the active sentence in (32) presupposes *Mark’s* disposition towards sleeping. In addition, as demonstrated in (33), the agent’s disposition towards sleeping is preserved under the negation, further confirming its status of a semantic presupposition. This is replicated in (34) and (35) for Serbian. Crucially, part of the sentence expressing *Mark’s* disposition towards sleeping, which is presupposed in (34) and (35), looks exactly like the dative anticausative with the agentive verb *sleep* in (36).

(31) *Mark is sleeping.*

(32) ??*Mark is sleeping (but he is not sleepy).*

(33) *Mark is not sleeping (but he is sleepy).*

(34) ??*Marko spava (ali mu se ne spava).*
 Marko.NOM sleep.PRES.3.SG, (but him.DAT REFL NEG sleep.PRES.3.SG)
 ‘Mark is sleeping (but he is not sleepy/he doesn’t need to sleep).’

(35) *Marko ne spava (ali mu se spava).*
 Marko.NOM NEG sleep.PRES.3.SG (but him.DAT REFL sleep.PRES.3.SG)
 ‘Mark is not sleeping (but he is sleepy/he needs to sleep).’

(36) *Marku se spava.*
 Mark.DAT REFL sleep.PRES.3.SG
 ‘Mark is sleepy/Mark needs to sleep.’

In the subsequent section, I will propose that the modal dispositional meaning in dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases in South Slavic arises precisely from these modal presuppositions expressing agents’ dispositions towards performance of the predicated events.

4.4. Agency and control

Agent’s dispositions are closely tied to the notion of agent control. Recall that agentive verbs denote internally caused eventualities which are brought about by the inherent properties of the agent, i.e. the agent’s dispositions, and can therefore only be controlled

internally, by the agent. This is the case with canonical nominative agents. However, when the factors that bring about the event actualization and are responsible for its outcome are agent-external, the event is controlled by those external factors, while the agent has no control over the predicated event. This is the case with dative agents in dative anticausatives in Slavic.

4.5. The proposal

Across Slavic languages, dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases arise through the extension of use of the anticausative verb morphology to the new class of the agentive verb bases. Anticausative morphology reduces agentivity by indicating that the event is not caused and controlled by the inner properties of the agent, but rather by some other factors which are now seen as the ultimate causal factors responsible for the event actualization and its outcome. Causative (alternating) verbs denote externally caused eventualities which involve the result component and are readily conceptualized as occurring spontaneously, rather than through the involvement of an agent – hence elimination of the syntactic external argument. Agentive verbs, on the other hand, denote internally caused eventualities and can therefore only be controlled by the inner properties of the agent, leading to incompatibility with the anticausative morphology (cf. Ilic 2013, 2014).

In South Slavic languages, incompatibility between agentive verbs and anticausative morphology cancels event actualization and the construction is reanalyzed as modal, expressing agent's disposition towards the event. This meaning is contributed by the modal presupposition expressing inner properties of the agent, which was demonstrated to arise in (34) and (35). In West Slavic and Russian, on the other hand, incompatibility between the lexical meaning of the agentive verb and the anticausative morphology does not cancel actualization entailment and instead leads to reinterpretation of agentive (internally caused and controlled) eventualities as eventualities which are ultimately controlled by some external facilitating factors, such as locations, circumstances, or properties of the theme (examples (28), (29), and (30)), as indicated by the anticausative morphology. An additional evaluative component of the meaning referencing quality (or success) of facilitation is grammaticalized. Across Slavic languages, these essentially modal interpretations (in terms of their basic meanings) arise due to the extension of use of the anticausative morphology to a new class of verbs with an incompatible semantics, leading to cancellation of the event actualization (South Slavic) and/or reanalysis.

5. Conclusion

Dative anticausatives in Slavic languages exhibit complex interactional patterns between anticausative morphology and lexical semantics of their verb bases, with their mutual (in)compatibility determining their final interpretation. Causative and modal meanings arise compositionally, as a result of this interaction. The modality of the dative anticausatives with agentive verb bases was claimed to result from the extension of the anticausative verb morphology to agentive verb bases, with their mutual incompatibility triggering semantic reanalysis. Although the observed outcomes of this reanalysis demonstrate a substantial variation, the resulting meanings are essentially both modal, expressing conditions on event actualization as created by some external facilitative factors (West Slavic and Russian) or agent's inner dispositions (South Slavic).

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