Diachronic Typology of Passive in the Cariban Family

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This talk arises from collaborative work between four colleagues who have collected text corpora on one or more Cariban languages: Sérgio Meira (Museu Goeldi), Racquel Sapién (a.k.a. Yamada, University of Oklahoma), Natalia Cáceres (University of Oregon), and me. We are preparing four manuscripts for a thematic volume on the diachronic typology of voice. After an introduction on the problems of doing typology in general, and diachronic typology in particular, we will introduce a set of "passive" constructions in the Cariban family and use them as an example of how difficult it may be to arrive at satisfactory definitions, especially as we expand the scope of the data used to define our categories. Despite the relatively rich descriptive literature in the Cariban family (South America), there is no canonical passive construction that is widely attested in the various sister languages and there has been no comparative treatment of voice in the family. In descriptions available thus far, modern Cariban languages utilize four distinct constructions to code a passive function, each of which also codes functions other than passive voice and none of which seems to be doing all of the "passive" work in any given language. These constructions are:

• A DETRANSITIVE derivation (middle-like), reconstructible to Proto-Cariban with this function
• three structurally more canonical passives (patient subjects, optional oblique agent phrases), all young enough to be readily reconstructible to distinct sources that are clearly not voice constructions.

    a causative-reflexive construction
    a deverbal adverb (participle?) as the complement of a copula
    an absolutive nominalization as the head of a nonverbal predicate.

After looking briefly at each of the four Cariban "passive" constructions, we conclude that — despite having the grammar and (at least at first glance) the function of passive voice, none of them is a great example of a canonical passive. This leads us to wonder what the traditional typological definitions of "passive" buy us and, on the side, to wonder how seriously we should take the claims that have been made thus far about the geographical distribution of "passive constructions" in the languages of the world.

Note that none of my collaborators will be present at this talk, so while they should get credit for most of the insights, they might not agree with all the conclusions that I will suggest, and so should not be held responsible for any flaws in theoretical reasoning or other disagreeable things I might say...