On noncausal-causal alternations in Tima (Niger-Congo)

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This talk is concerned with transitivity alternations in Tima, a Niger-Congo language spoken in Sudan. I examine pairs of verbs which share the same base, but alter with regard to their transitivity status. For instance, 'gather' in 'gather the people' is used in a causal/transitive context, whereas in 'the people gathered', it is used in a noncausal/intransitive context. While these kinds of verbs are often ambivalent in English, the noncausal-causal opposition is almost always achieved through derivational marking in Tima. Specifically, causative marking, middle voice and antipassive marking play a role in this context. Middle voice as well as antipassive marking are mainly used to detransitivise a causal verb. Causative marking has a dual role: For certain intransitive verbs, it increases the valency, for certain transitive verb's it decreases the valency.