

Syntactic and morphological alternatives to the passive voice

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European languages usually show voice contrasts like *John opened the door* vs. *the door was opened (by John)*. Passive readings may also arise in non-finite contexts like *the door opened by John*, where the past participle construction serves as a relative clause modifying *the door*. It has often been claimed that languages like German and English use the passive freely, while other languages, especially the Romance ones, tend to avoid it (cf. Gauger 1978: 25). Hungarian (Finno-Ugric) has gone even further. Its finite passive has become obsolete (cf. Komlósi 1994: 96, É. Kiss 2002: 226ff., Tankó 2010: 313), although it still has the past participle construction. Furthermore, just as in Germanic and Romance, there are alternative constructions which target subparts of the passive construction (topicalisation of the internal argument, focussing of the external argument, concealing the identity of the external argument). Investigating both spoken and written data from Hungarian, German, French, and Spanish, I will answer the following questions:

1. What are the primary purposes of the genuine passive?
2. What are the alternatives to achieve the same goals?
3. How much do languages rely on syntactic or derivational processes to reproduce passive-like functions?

The answers to these questions will shed light on the properties of the passive and passive-like constructions in the four languages under investigation. It will also offer insights into how syntactic and morphological processes impact the different ways in which events may be represented.

The active-passive alternation typically occurs with transitive predicates. Following Næss (2007), a prototypical transitive predicate has the following properties (see also Hopper and Thompson 1980 and Kittilä 2002):

- at least two participants
- external argument: agent ([+volitional, +instigating, –affected])
- internal argument: patient ([–volitional, –instigating, +affected])
- NOM-ACC case pattern

Prototypical transitive predicates denote a change of state (CoS) and are telic by virtue of having an [+affected] internal argument (*open, clean, break, kill*). Less prototypical transitives are consumption predicates (*eat, drink*: affected external argument) and perception predicates (*see, hear*: unaffected internal argument / nonvolitional external argument), among others, as well as polyvalent predicates which do not assign accusative case. In the active version, the external argument becomes the subject (NOM) and the internal one the direct object (ACC), while in the passive the internal argument surfaces as subject and the external one is coded as oblique-marked XP or as null. If null, the external argument receives an ‘arbitrary’ interpretation (see Alonso-Ovalle 2000 for different sources of arbitrariness). Passivization does not alter the valency of the verb, as can be shown with agent-directed adverbs like *deliberately* (cf. Baker et al. 1989, Doron 2013, Alexiadou 2014, among others). However, the ‘reversed’ assignment of subjecthood changes the information structure of the sentence, as in neutral word order, subjects are easily interpreted as topics and objects as (part of the) focus. Like the active counterpart, the passive construction denotes an ongoing process.

Apart from using topicalizing/focussing strategies or indefinite/plural subjects with active forms, there are further alternatives to the genuine passive. In Hungarian, German, French, and Spanish we find at least some of the following options:

- copula + adjectival/adverbial verb form, cf. DEU *die Tür war geöffnet* ‘the door was open’
- impersonal *se* construction, cf. SPA *se abrió la puerta* ‘(someone) opened the door’
- middle voice, cf. FRA *la porte s’est ouverte* ‘the door opened’
- unaccusative predicate, cf. HUN *az ajtó kinyílott* ‘the door opened’

These constructions typically reduce the valency by eliminating the external argument, and they are

often subject to different restrictions than the genuine passive. For instance, the copula construction usually denotes the resulting state only. It acquires a process reading in Hungarian when constructed with *lesz* ‘become’ instead of *van* ‘be’ (cf. Komlósi 1994: 132f.). Furthermore, it requires a clearly [+affected] internal argument (**János meg volt látva* ‘John was seen’), but is insensitive to the presence or absence of an external argument (*János be van rúgva* ‘John is drunk’). In French, genuine and adjectival passive are formally identical, but aspect distinguishes between the two. While the perfective past *la porte a été ouverte (par Jean)* ‘the door was opened (by John)’ allows the process reading and the overt expression of the external argument, the imperfective *la porte était ouverte* ‘the door was open’ is interpreted as resulting state without implied agent (cf. Jones 1996: 106).

Preliminary results indicate that the main purpose of the genuine passive seems to be the suppression of the external argument, as most passives appear without a *by*-phrase. This goal can also be achieved by using the active construction with a generic subject (*they opened the door*), an adjectival/adverbial copula construction (*the door was open*), a middle construction, or an unaccusative verb (*the door opened*). A closer look at change of state predicates reveals that Hungarian uses far more unaccusative verbs than German and the Romance languages do. In many cases, transitive-unaccusative verb pairs are morphologically distinguishable, cf. *nyit* (Vtr) vs. *nyílik* (Vintr) ‘to open’, *ébreszt* (Vtr) vs. *ébred* (Vintr) ‘to wake up’ or *alakít* (Vtr) vs. *alakul* (Vintr) ‘to form’. French, in contrast, uses mostly transitive verbs in the active and sometimes in the passive voice, where the external argument remains implied.

To sum up, languages use the genuine passive mostly if they want to conceal the identity of the agent of a transitive event, but they need not rely on this device. Alternative syntactic or morphological processes may serve the same goal. German and Romance languages prefer syntactic devices which do not change the predicate’s valency, while Hungarian relies considerably on morphological derivation. It comes as little surprise that the Hungarian genuine passive has become obsolete, as the language features a well-developed system of morphologically distinguishable transitive-unaccusative verb pairs.

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