

## SS. Passive Constructions

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### 1. Defining the values

Map SS depicts the geographical distribution of passive constructions. Only two values are represented:

@	1. There is a passive construction	163
@	2. There is no passive construction	211
	total	374

A construction has been classified as **passive** if displays the following five properties:

- (i) it contrasts with another construction, the **active**;
- (ii) the subject of the active corresponds to a non-obligatory oblique phrase or is not overtly expressed;
- (iii) the subject of the passive, if there is one, corresponds to the direct object of the active;
- (iv) the construction is pragmatically restricted relative to the active;
- (v) the construction displays some special morphological marking of the verb.

A prototypical example of the passive, defined as above, is given in (1 b) from Swahili.

(1) Swahili (Ashton 1947: 224)

a. *Hamisi a-li-pik-a chakula*

Hamisi 3SG-PST-cook-INDIC food

‘Hamisi cooked the/some food.’

b. *chakula ki-li-pik-w-a (na Hamisi)*

food 3SG-PST-cook-PASS-INDIC by Hamisi

‘The food was cooked (by Hamisi).’

33 (1b) is an example of a **synthetic** passive where the lexical verb  
 34 exhibits some form of marking, here the suffix *-a*, absent from  
 35 the active. Synthetic passives contrast with **periphrastic** or  
 36 **analytical** passives in which the special verbal morphology  
 37 involves the use of a participial form of the lexical verb and an  
 38 additional auxiliary verb, as in the English translation of (1b) and  
 39 also in the Polish (2b).

40

41 (2) Polish

- 42 a. *intensywne deszcze zniszczyły żniwa*  
 43 intensive rain destroyed harvest  
 44 'Intensive rain destroyed the harvest.'
- 45 b. *żniwa zostały zniszczone (przez*  
 46 harvest remained destroyed by  
 47 *intensywne deszcze)*  
 48 intensive rain  
 49 'The harvest was destroyed by intensive rain.'

50

51 In Swahili, Polish and English the subject of the active may be  
 52 expressed in the form of an oblique constituent or remain  
 53 unexpressed. In many languages only the latter is possible; the  
 54 subject of the active cannot be overtly present in the passive.

55 The three examples of passive clauses given so far are  
 56 **personal passives**, i.e. passives with an overt lexical subject.  
 57 Personal passives are typically seen as involving a process of  
 58 agent demotion (from subject to oblique role or total  
 59 suppression) and a process of patient promotion (from direct  
 60 object to subject). There are also passive clauses which involve  
 61 only agent demotion. These are called **impersonal passives**. An  
 62 example of an impersonal passive is given in (3b) from Kannada  
 63 (Dravidian; southern India).

64

65 (3) Kannada (Sridhar 1990: 215)

- 66 a. *ya:ro: i: nirNayav-annu khaNDisidaru*  
 67 someone this resolution-ACC denounce.PST.3PL.HUM

- 68 'Someone denounced this resolution.'
- 69 b. *i: nirNayav-annu khaNDisala:yitu*
- 70 this resolution-ACC reprove.INF.BECOME.3N
- 71 'This resolution was reprovèd.'

72

73 We see that the accusatively case marked direct object  
 74 *nirNayavannu* of the active (3a) retains its accusative case  
 75 marking in the passive (3b). Moreover the passive auxiliary –  
 76 *a:gu* 'become' is always in the third person singular neutral and  
 77 thus shows no agreement with *nirNayavannu*. The direct object  
 78 is thus not promoted to subject. This becomes even clearer  
 79 when we compare the impersonal passive in (3b) with the  
 80 Kannada personal passive in (4b), in which the direct object of  
 81 the active appears in the nominative case and controls  
 82 agreement with the passive auxiliary.

83

84 (4) Kannada (Sridhar 1990: 214)

- 85 a. *hudugaru ba:vuT-annu ha:risidaru*
- 86 boys flag-ACC fly.PST.3PL.HUM
- 87 'The boys flew the flag.'
- 88 b. *huDugar-inda ba:vuTa ha:risalpaTTitu*
- 89 boys-INSTR flag.NOM fly.INF.PASS.PST.3SG.N
- 90 'The flag was flown by the boys.'

91

92 It is also important to note that in the Kannada impersonal  
 93 passive, unlike in the personal, it is not possible to express an  
 94 overt agent. This, however, is not an integral feature of the  
 95 impersonal passive. For instance, in Lithuanian, which also has  
 96 both a personal and an impersonal passive, an overt agent can  
 97 be expressed in both constructions. An example of the  
 98 impersonal passive with an overt agent is given in (5b).

99

100 (5) Lithuanian (Ambrasas et al. 1997: 282)

- 101 a. *vaikaĩ miegójo sodè*
- 102 children.NOM slept.3PL garden.LOC

- 103 'The children slept in the garden.'
- 104 b. *vaikũ* *bùvo* *miēgama* *sodè*
- 105 children.GEN be sleep.PRES.PART.N garden.LOC
- 106 'The children slept in the garden. (Lit. By the
- 107 children was being slept in the garden.)'

108

109 In both Kannada and Lithuanian the impersonal passive co-

110 exists with the personal. This is also the case, in Dutch, German,

111 Hindi, Icelandic, Spanish and Turkish. But there are languages

112 which have only an impersonal passive such as Kolami

113 (Dravidian; Andhra Pradesh/India), Ute (Numic, Uto-Aztec;

114 Colorado) *Tukang Besi* (Western Malayo-Polynesian;

115 Sulawesi/Indonesia) and Zuni (isolate; New Mexico). Languages

116 with only impersonal passives have been classified as exhibiting

117 a passive on a par with languages with personal passives.

118 In languages which have no passive constructions, agent

119 demotion or suppression can be achieved by other means. Some

120 languages simply allow the subject to be omitted. As shown in

121 (6b), Awtuw (Sepik; Papua New Guinea) is such a language.

122

123 (6) Awtuw (Feldman 1986: 95)

124 a. *rey* **•ye** *rokra-kay*

125 3SG.M food cook-PERF

126 'He has cooked food.'

127 b. **•ye** *rokra-kay*

128 food cook-PERF

129 'Someone has cooked food.'

130

131 In other languages what in English would be expressed by an

132 agentless passive is rendered by the use of an explicit

133 impersonal or indefinite subject such as the German *man* or

134 French *on*, or simply the word for 'persons' or 'people' as in, for

135 instance, Gude (Chadic, Afro-Asiatic; Nigeria, Cameroon).

136

137 (7) Gude (Hoskison 1983: 107)

138 *k• d• •nji t• ci*  
 139 COMP beat.up people DEF he  
 140 'He was beaten up.'

141

142 Yet other languages achieve the same end by using the third  
 143 person singular or plural form of the verb. The latter is  
 144 illustrated in (8) from Paamese (Oceanic; Vanuatu) in which the  
 145 impersonal interpretation is confined to clauses lacking a  
 146 corresponding third person plural independent pronoun.

147

148 (8) Paamese (Crowley 1982: 189)  
 149 (*\*kaile*) *a-munumunu Vauleli*  
 150 (*\*they*) 3PL.REAL-drink Vauleli  
 151 'There is drinking going on at Vauleli.'

152

153 There are several constructions which manifest some, though  
 154 not all, of the five properties listed earlier as definitive of passive  
 155 constructions, and which therefore have not been here classified  
 156 as passive. First, there are **anticausative** (or *middle*, or  
 157 *mediopassive*) constructions such as the one in (10b) from  
 158 Gumawana (Western Oceanic; Papua New Guinea).

159

160 (9) Gumawana (Olson 1992: 349)  
 161 a. *boile iyana ka-kone-di*  
 162 yesterday fish 1PL.EXCL-trap.TR-3PL  
 163 'Yesterday we trapped many fish.'  
 164 b. *lyana bogina si-kona*  
 165 fish PERF 3PL-trap  
 166 'The fish are already trapped.'

167

168 Anticausative constructions resemble agentless passives in  
 169 having a subject which is semantically a patient rather than an  
 170 agent. However, in the anti-causative, unlike in the passive,  
 171 there is no covert agent. The situation or event is depicted as  
 172 being brought about spontaneously without the involvement of

173 an agent. That this is indeed so is evinced by the fact that it is  
 174 not possible to add to an anticausative construction an agentive  
 175 manner adverb such as *deliberately* or *on purpose*. Compare the  
 176 passive (10a) with the anticausative (10b).

177

- 178 (10) a. *The door was opened deliberately.*  
 179 b. *The door opened (\*deliberately).*

180

181 Second there are constructions called **inverse** (see, e.g.,  
 182 Cooreman 1987, Givón 1994). Inverse constructions are best  
 183 known from the Algonquian languages in which the direct voice  
 184 is used if the agent is more topical or ontologically salient than  
 185 the patient, and the inverse if the patient is more topical or  
 186 ontologically salient than the agent. Traditionally the more  
 187 topical or salient participant is called the *proximate* and the less  
 188 salient or topical one the *obviative*. The direct/inverse  
 189 opposition is illustrated in (11) on the basis of Plains Cree  
 190 (Algonquian; Canada).

191

192 (11) Plains Cree (Wolfart 1973: 25)

- 193 a. *sekih-ew napew antim-wa*  
 194 scare-DIR man.PROX dog-OBV  
 195 'The man scares the dog.'  
 196 b. *skih-ik napew-a antim*  
 197 scare-INV man-OBV dog.PROX  
 198 'The man scares the dog.'

199

200 The inverse is similar to the passive in functional-pragmatic  
 201 terms (Givón 1994). In both constructions the patient is more  
 202 topical than the agent. However, whereas in the passive the  
 203 agent is extremely non-topical or in fact simply suppressed, in  
 204 the inverse the agent retains considerable topicality.  
 205 Accordingly, the two constructions differ with respect to the  
 206 properties of the agent. The agent in the passive, if expressed,  
 207 is a syntactic adjunct. In the inverse, on the other hand, it is a

208 syntactic argument. This is evinced by the obligatoriness of the  
 209 agent in the inverse as opposed to the passive and by the ability  
 210 of the agent of the inverse, for example, to determine verbal  
 211 agreement or participate in various syntactic processes. The  
 212 properties of the agent have therefore been used here as the  
 213 basis for distinguishing the passive from the inverse.

214 Given the above, I have also not treated as passive the so-  
 215 called non-actor focus constructions in the Philippine languages  
 216 illustrated in (12b) from Cebuano (Western Malayo-Polynesian;  
 217 Philippines).

218

219 (12) Cebuano (Valkama 2000: 13–14)

220 a. *mo-palit ang tawo ug libro*

221 ACTOR.FOCUS-buy TOP man a book

222 ‘The man will buy a book.’

223 b. *palit-on sa tawo ang libro*

224 buy-GOAL.FOCUS the man TOP book

225 ‘The man will buy the book.’

226

227 There has been a longstanding controversy on whether or not  
 228 the Philippine focus system should be considered to be a voice  
 229 opposition and if so of what type, active/passive, ergative  
 230 /antipassive or even direct/inverse (see e.g. Siewierska 1984:  
 231 79–86 and the references cited there). The issue is a complex  
 232 one and cannot be done justice to here. My main arguments  
 233 against a passive analysis of non-actor focus clauses are: they  
 234 exhibit a very high text frequency; the agent is typically overt  
 235 and manifests some properties associated with syntactic  
 236 arguments as opposed to adjuncts; they are semantically highly  
 237 transitive in the sense of Hopper and Thompson (1980); and the  
 238 verb does not exhibit special marking, as it is also marked in the  
 239 actor focus construction. In sum, the non-actor focus clauses do  
 240 not appear to be pragmatically restricted vis-à-vis their actor-  
 241 focus counterparts.

242

243 **2. Geographical distribution**

244

245 Passive constructions occur in 44 per cent of the languages in  
 246 the sample. They are most common among the languages in  
 247 Eurasia and Africa. They are also regularly found in the  
 248 Americas, particularly North America. They are somewhat less  
 249 frequent in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. In Australia they are  
 250 attested only in a couple of Tangkic languages spoken in the  
 251 Gulf of Carpentaria and a few Ngayarda languages in south-  
 252 western Western Australia. In New Guinea they seem not to  
 253 occur at all.

254 In Eurasia passives are frequent everywhere apart from  
 255 the Caucasus and the Tibetan languages of India and Nepal. In  
 256 Africa passives are highly common among the Nilo-Saharan  
 257 languages, and only slightly less so among the Afro-Asiatic. Of  
 258 the Niger-Congo languages in the sample only about half  
 259 display passive constructions. Passives are less frequent  
 260 particularly around the coast of West Africa. In North America  
 261 passives are found mainly in the western part of the continent.  
 262 In South America they occur chiefly among the languages of the  
 263 Amazon basin. They are particularly conspicuous in their  
 264 absence among the languages along the west coast of the  
 265 continent.

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