

Passive: Introduction

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1. Active and Passive

Basic question:

In the vast majority of analyses and frameworks, active and passive sentences are related in some way (e.g., via transformations, or via lexical rules; see below). But why should this have to be the case?

Answer (Perlmutter & Soames (1979)):

There are identical selectional restrictions. One ends up with a redundant analysis if the restrictions are stated twice in the grammar, once for active sentences, once for passive sentences.

- (1) a. Hypothesis A:
Active and passive sentences are derived from different underlying structures. The underlying structure of each is essentially the same as its surface structure.
- b. Hypothesis B:
Active and passive sentences are derived from the same underlying structures.
- (2) *Active sentences*
 - a. Object:
 - (i) The legislature impeached the senator.
 - (ii) *The legislature impeached the wallpaper.
 - b. Subject:
 - (i) The governor reapportioned the legislature.
 - (ii) *The wallpaper reapportioned the legislature.
- (3) *Passive sentences*
 - a. New subject:
 - (i) The senator was impeached by the legislature.

- (ii) *The wallpaper was impeached by the legislature.
 - b. *By*-phrase:
 - (i) The legislature was reapportioned by the governor.
 - (ii) *The legislature was reapportioned by the wallpaper

Conclusion:

Hypothesis B is right. In a classic transformational approach, there are two versions of it:

- (4) a. Hypothesis B₁:
The underlying form of sentences is active. Passives are derived from actives by an optional rule of passivization.
- b. Hypothesis B₂:
The underlying form of sentences is passive. Actives are derived from passives by an optional rule of activation.

Problem:

It is not a priori clear which hypothesis is the more adequate one. In particular, notions like *frequency* do not help. German main clauses are presumably much more frequent in most corpora than embedded clauses; still, it's embedded clauses that determine basic word order in the VP (Bierwisch (1963)).

- (5) *German word order:*
 - a. dass Maria den Brief ab-schickt
that Maria_{nom} the letter_{acc} off-sends
 - b. Maria schickt den Brief ab
Maria_{nom} sends the letter_{acc} off
 - c. dass Karl das Buch lesen will
that Karl_{nom} the book_{acc} read wants
 - d. Karl will das Buch lesen
Karl_{nom} wants the book_{acc} read
 - e. Das Buch will Karl lesen
the book_{acc} wants Karl_{nom} read
- (6) *Idioms:*
 - a. Everyone took advantage of their inexperience.
 - b. Advantage was taken – of their inexperience by everyone.
 - c. Their inexperience was taken advantage of – by everyone.
(pseudo-passive)
- (7) *Restrictions on determinerless 'advantage'*
 - a. She has a big advantage.
 - b. *She has advantage.

- c. His advantage is significant.
- d. *Advantage is significant.

(8) *Assumptions:*

- a. If the underlying form is active (B_1), passivization can derive (6-b) and (6-c).
- b. If the underlying form is passive (B_2), activation can apply on the basis of either (6-b) or (6-c).

Conclusion:

Hypothesis B_1 necessitates fewer assumptions about whether *advantage* can or cannot show up without a determiner.

A possible further conceptual argument: Potter's problem.

(9) *Potter's problem:*

- Deletion applied to some structure can only affect material that is part of the structure; but with insertion/epenthesis, things are more complicated because it is a priori unclear exactly what kind of material can or must be inserted into a given structure.
- Prof. McGonagall: 'So ... today we are starting *Vanishing Spells*. These are easier than *Conjuring Spells*, which you would not usually attempt until NEWT level, but they are still among the most difficult magic you will be tested on in your OWL.' She was quite right; Harry found the *Vanishing Spells* horribly difficult." (J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. London: Bloomsbury, 2003, p. 232.)

Note:

This would then have consequences for the modelling of phenomena like *applicative formation* (cf. Baker (1988) vs. Pytkäinen (2000)) and *causativization*.

2. A Syntactic Approach: The Passive Transformation

(10) *Transformations:*

A transformation T takes a phrase marker (syntactic tree) P_1 and maps it onto another phrase marker P_2 .

1. SD: 'Structural Description'
2. SC: 'Structural Change'
3. X, Y, Z, W are variables over arbitrary (including empty) strings of words.

(11) *Passive transformation* (optional; informal version, Chomsky (1957)):
If S_1 is a grammatical sentence of the form

$$NP_1 - Aux - V - NP_2,$$

then the corresponding string of the form

$$NP_2 - Aux+be+en - V - by+NP_1$$

is also a grammatical sentence.

(12) *Passive transformation* (optional; less informal version, Chomsky (1957)):

	X	NP	Aux		Y	V	Z	NP	W	
SD:	1	2	3		4	5	6	7	8	⇒
SC:	1	7	3+be+en		4	5	6	by+2	8	

3. A Lexical Approach: Lexical Rules

Hypothesis:

Active and passive sentences are not transformationally related. Rather, a lexical rule is operative in the mental lexicon that systematically produces passive forms of (transitive) verbs on the basis of active forms, by modifying the argument structure, the case assignment properties, and (possibly) the morphology.

(13) *A lexical passive rule in Lexical Functional Grammar* (LFG; Bresnan (1982)):

- a. (SUBJ) → \emptyset / (OBL_{AG})
- b. (OBJ) → (SUBJ)

Sells (1985, 161): "Ignoring the morphological change [...] this takes the argument associated with the object of the active form and makes it the subject, and either assigns the argument paired with the old subject or the null function to an oblique agent phrase."

(14) *A lexical passive rule in Lexical Decomposition Grammar* (LDG; Wunderlich (1993)):

$$\begin{array}{ccc}
 V(x, y) & \rightarrow & V(x, y) \\
 +\theta + \theta & & +\theta \\
 +\text{CASE} & &
 \end{array}$$

A possible argument for a lexical treatment:

Passivization can feed other seemingly lexical operations, like *attributive adjective formation*.

- (15) *Attributive adjectival use of passive participles:*
 a. spared prisoners
 b. eaten food

4. A Lexical Approach: Government and Binding Theory

Note:

The approach to passivization in Chomsky (1981) and much related work is inherently *lexical*, although it is often wrongly characterized as *syntactic*. There are four steps in the approach to passivization in Chomsky (1981), and only the very last (and least crucial) one is syntactic: (i) argument reduction, (ii) case absorption, (iii) morphological reflex, (iv) case-driven movement.

- (16) *Step I: Argument reduction:*
 A passive version of a verb is produced by a lexical rule where the external θ -role of the active form of the verb is absorbed:
 $V(x, y) \rightarrow V(-, y)$
- (17) *Step II: Case absorption:*
 A passive verb thus generated in the lexicon cannot assign accusative case, even if the corresponding active verb form can.
 $V_{acc}(-, y) \rightarrow V_{-}(-, y)$

Note:

This does not have to be stipulated separately. It follows from *Burzio's Generalization*.

- (18) *Burzio's Generalization* (Burzio (1986)):
 If V does not take an external argument, it cannot assign structural accusative case.
- (19) *Independent evidence for Burzio's Generalization: Unaccusative verbs* (Perlmutter (1978), Burzio (1986), Grewendorf (1989)):
 a. dass [TP T [VP Maria ankommt]]
 that Maria_{nom} arrives
 b. dass [TP T [VP dem Fritz ein Fehler unterlief]]
 that the Fritz_{dat} a mistake_{nom} happened
- (20) *Object status of nominative arguments of unaccusative verbs:*
 a. Was₁ sind [DP t₁ für Leute] angekommen?
 what are for people_{nom} arrived
 b. *Was₁ haben [DP t₁ für Leute] dort gearbeitet?
 what have for people_{nom} there worked

- c. [VP₂ Ein Fehler unterlaufen] ist dem Fritz noch nie t₂
 a mistake_{nom} happened is the Fritz_{dat} yet never
 d. *[VP₂ Ein Film gefallen] hat dem Fritz nicht t₂
 a film_{nom} pleased has the Fritz_{dat} not

- (21) *Step III: Morphological reflex:*
 A verb [V (-, y)] generated by steps I and II is accompanied by passive morphology.
- (22) *Step IV: Case-driven movement:*
 In languages like English, where the VP-internal argument DP cannot get nominative case from T in its in-situ position, and/or where T has an EPP feature that requires the generation of SpecT, case-driven movement takes place.
- (23) *A sample derivation:*¹
 a. $kiss_{acc}(\underline{\theta_1}, \theta_2) \rightarrow kiss_{acc}(-, \theta_2)$ (lexicon)
 b. $kiss_{acc}(-, \theta_2) \rightarrow kiss_{-}(-, \theta_2)$ (lexicon)
 c. $kiss_{-}(-, \theta_2) \rightarrow kiss-ed_{-}(-, \theta_2)$ (lexicon)
 d. Merge ($kiss-ed(-, \theta_2)$, *John*) \rightarrow [VP *kiss-ed John*]
 e. [...]
 f. Move ([T' [T *was*] [VP *kiss-ed John*]], *John*) \rightarrow
 [TP *John*₁ [T' [T *was*] [VP *kiss-ed t*₁]]] (syntax)

Note:

In languages in which T does not have an EPP property, and nominative case can be assigned directly to VP-internal items, there is no (obligatory) movement to “subject” position (i.e., SpecT).

- (24) *Passive without movement in German* (Haider (1993)):
 a. dass der Karl der Maria zum Geburtstag wahrscheinlich ein
 that the Karl_{nom} the Maria_{dat} for the birthday probably a
 Buch schenkte
 book_{acc} gave
 b. dass – der Maria zum Geburtstag wahrscheinlich ein Buch
 that the Maria_{dat} for the birthday probably a book_{nom}
 geschenkt wurde
 given was

¹ Convention: Underlining indicates external arguments, i.e., arguments that are base-generated outside of the projection of the predicate that they are arguments of.

Further issues, no. 1

(25) *The status of 'by' phrases:*

- a. Jason was killed by Medea.
- b. Fritz wurde von Maria umgebracht.
Fritz_{nom} was by Maria killed

Problem:

Where does the agent argument in the *by* phrase come from, and why is it realized as part of a PP?

Further issues, no. 2

(26) *Impersonal passive in German:*

- a. Hier wird jetzt gearbeitet.
here is now worked
- b. Getanz't wurde nicht.
danced was not
- c. *Hier wird jetzt gefallen.
here is now pleased
- d. #Jetzt muss gestorben werden.
now must died be

Problem:

The canonical Government-Binding approach predicts impersonal passives (i.e., passives with intransitive verbs) to be possible in principle. However, it is not quite clear why passivization is possible with unergative intransitive verbs (where the sole argument is VP-external), but not with unaccusative intransitive verbs (where the sole argument is VP-internal).

Ad hoc solution:

One can stipulate that step I only applies to external (i.e., underlined) arguments (as opposed to highest arguments).

Further issues, no. 3

(27) *Passivization in Chinese:*

- a. Zhù lǎoshī pǐyélè wǒ-de kǎoshì
Zhu professor mark-ASP my test
'Professor Zhu marked my test.'
- b. Wǒ-de kǎoshì bèi Zhù lǎoshī pǐyélè
my test by Zhu professor mark-ASP
'My test was marked by Professor Zhu.'

(28) *Passivization in Aceh (Austronesian, Malay; Sumatra):*

- a. Gəpnyan ka gi-cəm lón
she PERF kiss I
'She (already) kissed me.'
- b. Lón ka gi-cəm lé-gəpnyan
I PERF kiss by she
'I've (already) been kissed by her.'

Problem:

In some languages, it seems as though passivization can take place without a morphological reflex.

Solution:

The core of passivization is step I: argument reduction. Everything else is of secondary importance, and subject to parametric variation.

Further issues, no. 4

(29) *Transitive passives in Ukrainian:*

- a. Cerkv-a bul-a zbudova-n-a v 1640 roc'i
church-NOM/FEM was-FEM build-PASS-FEM in year 1640
'The church was built in 1640.'
- b. Cerkv-u bul-o zbudova-n-o v 1640 roc'i
church-AKK/FEM was-NEUT build-PASS-NEUT in year 1640
'The church was built in 1640.'

Problem:

In some languages (among them Ukrainian, Northern Russian varieties, Czech), passivization does not imply absorption of structural accusative case.

Solution:

Burzio's Generalization does not hold without qualification. Again, the core property of passivization is argument reduction; all other steps are secondary.

Further issues, no. 5

(30) *Passivization and lexical case: lexical datives in German:*

- a. Wir werden der Sache nachgehen.
we_{nom} will the thing_{dat} pursue
- b. *Die Sache wird nachgegangen.
the thing_{nom} is pursued

- c. Der Sache wird nachgegangen.
the thing_{dat} is pursued
- (31) *Passivization and lexical case: lexical genitives in German:*
- a. Dort gedachte man der Kämpferinnen und
there commemorated one_{nom} the_{gen} fighters_{gen,fem} and
Kämpfer des antifaschistischen Widerstands.
fighters_{gen,masc} the_{gen} antifascist resistance_{gen}
- b. *Dort wurden die Kämpferinnen und Kämpfer des
there were the_{nom} fighters_{nom,fem} and fighters_{nom,masc} the_{acc}
antifaschistischen Widerstands gedacht.
antifascist resistance_{gen} commemorated
- c. Dort wurde der Kämpferinnen und Kämpfer des
there was the_{gen} fighters_{gen,fem} and fighters_{gen,masc} the_{gen}
antifaschistischen Widerstands gedacht.
antifascist resistance_{gen} commemorated

Note:

This is expected, given that it is only the structural accusative feature that is absorbed in step II, not a lexical case feature of V. Thus, these cases are ordinary instances of impersonal passives.

5. Verbal vs. Adjectival Passive

Standard assumption:

There is reason to distinguish between verbal passives, which may be syntactically formed, and adjectival passives, which are formed in the lexicon. (See Wasow (1977), Williams (1981), Bresnan (1982), Levin & Rappaport (1986), among many others.)

Note:

The two kinds of passive are known in German as *Vorgangspassiv* ('verbal passive') and *Zustandspassiv* ('adjectival passive').

- (32) *Un-prefixation:*
- a. The rules are ungiven (Subject = theme)
also cf.: unopened, unshaven, unmarked, untouched
- b. *We are ungiven (the rules) (Subject = goal)
- (33) *Wh-movement:*
- a. How firmly promised are these things ?
- b. *How firmly promised were those people ?

- (34) *θ-role variability:*
- a. adjectival passive: always theme
- b. verbal passive: theme, goal, source:
(i) Those people were promised these books
(ii) These books were promised to those people
- (35) *Passive auxiliary selection:*
- a. Die Geisslein sind/waren versteckt
the goatlings are/were hidden
- b. Die Geisslein werden/wurden versteckt
the goatlings are/were hidden
- c. Die Geisslein sind/waren versteckt worden
the goatlings are/were hidden been
- (36) *'By'-phrases (though this restriction is nowadays often disputed):*
- a. *Die Geisslein sind von niemandem versteckt
the goatlings are by no-one hidden
- b. Die Geisslein werden von niemandem versteckt
the goatlings are by no-one hidden
- c. Die Geisslein sind von niemandem versteckt worden
the goatlings are by no-one hidden been
- (37) *Temporal adverbs:*
- a. Das Fenster ist seit gestern geöffnet (= offen)
the window is since yesterday opened (= open)
- b. #Das Fenster wird seit gestern geöffnet
the window is since yesterday opened
- (38) *Control into purpose clauses:*
- a. *Der Reifen war aufgepumpt [CP um die Fahrt fortzusetzen]
the tire was inflated in order the journey to continue
- b. Der Reifen wurde aufgepumpt [CP um die Fahrt fortzusetzen]
the tire was inflated in order the journey to continue
- (39) *Analysis of adjectival passives in Government-Binding theory (Borer (1984)):*
- a. Affixation by passive morphology: *ed*
- b. Category change: [+V,-N] → [+V,+N]
- c. Complete suppression of the external argument of V
- d. Externalization of an internal argument of V
- e. Case absorption
- f. Deletion of a VP-internal object slot

6. More Types of Passivization in German

Note:

In addition to Vorgangspassiv (regular verbal passive) and Zustandspassiv (adjectival passive), German has several more passive (-like) constructions that all minimally involve the crucial, defining step I: argument reduction. See Höhle (1978).

6.1. Recipient Passive

Note:

There are actually two verbal passives in German, one with the passive auxiliary *werden* and one with the passive auxiliary *bekommen* (*kriegen*) (also cf. *get*-passives in English). The second type of passive is sometimes called “recipient passive”. It mainly shows up in double object constructions; the phenomenon may not yet be fully grammaticalized (e.g., there is an animacy restriction).

(40) Recipient passive in German:

- a. dass der Fritz der Maria das Buch geschenkt hat.
that the Fritz_{nom} the Maria_{dat} the book_{acc} given has
- b. dass die Maria das Buch geschenkt bekommt (kriegt).
that the Maria_{nom} the book_{acc} given gets
- c. dass der Maria das Buch geschenkt wird.
that the Maria_{dat} the book_{nom} given is
- d. *dass der Maria das Buch geschenkt bekommt (kriegt).
that the Maria_{dat} the book_{nom} given gets
- e. *dass die Maria das Buch geschenkt wird.
that the Maria_{nom} the book_{acc} given is

(41) Animacy restriction:

- a. dass man dem Plan die Zustimmung verweigerte
that one_{nom} the plandat the approval_{acc} denied
- b. ?*dass der Plan die Zustimmung verweigert kriegt
that the plan_{nom} the approval_{acc} denied got

(42) Recipient passive without recipients:

- a. dass man der Maria das Fahrrad geklaut hat
that one_{nom} the Maria_{dat} the bike_{acc} stolen has
- b. dass die Maria das Fahrrad geklaut gekriegt hat
that the Maria_{nom} the bike_{acc} stolen gotten has

(43) Intransitive contexts with a lexical dative:

- a. Hier wird keinem geholfen.
here is no-one_{dat} helped

- b. ?Hier kriegt keiner geholfen.
here gets no-one_{nom} helped
- c. *Hier wird keiner geholfen.
here is no-one_{nom} helped

Observation:

It looks as though passivization in German double object constructions can alternatively involve absorption of an accusative feature (with *werden*) or a dative feature (with *bekommen*). In other, closely related languages, such optionality may show up with a single passive auxiliary. This is the case in Norwegian, for instance.

(44) Passivization in Norwegian double object constructions:

- a. Jon₁ ble gitt en bok t₁
Jon_{nom} was given a book_{acc}
- b. En bok₁ ble gitt Jon₁
a book_{nom} was given John_{dat}

6.2. ‘Lassen’-Passive

Note:

In exceptional case marking (accusativus cum infinitivo) contexts with *lassen* (‘let’), passivization may apply to the embedded infinitival clause, but there is typically *no morphological reflex*.

(45) ‘lassen’-passive

- a. dass der König [den Sklaven den Wein reinbringen] lässt
that the king_{nom} the slave_{acc} the wine_{acc} bring in lets
- b. dass der König [– den Wein reinbringen] lässt
that the king_{nom} – the wine_{acc} bring in lets

6.3. Modal Passives

Note:

The passive auxiliary *sein* is not confined to adjectival passive contexts; it can also show up in modal passive constructions, implying either possibility or necessity. The readings can be disambiguated by the specific choice of *by*-phrase (*für* (‘for’) vs. *von* (‘by’)).

(46) Modal passives:

- a. Mindestens eine Aufgabe ist für jeden Studenten zu lösen
at least one exercise is for every student to solve
‘Every student can solve at least one exercise.’

- b. Mindestens eine Aufgabe ist von jedem Studenten zu lösen
 at least one exercise is by every student to solve
 ‘Every student must solve at least one exercise.’

6.4. ‘Gehören’-Passive

Note:

Another modal passive is formed with the passive auxiliary *gehören* (‘should be’, in this usage; lit. ‘belong’).

- (47) a. dass man den Graben zuschütten sollte
 that one the ditch_{acc} fill up should
 b. dass der Graben zugeschüttet gehört
 that the ditch_{nom} filled up should be

6.5. ‘Gehen’-Passive

Another modal passive: *gehen* (‘go’) as a passive auxiliary.

- (48) a. dass Maria die Tür öffnen kann
 Maria_{nom} the door_{acc} open can
 b. dass die Tür zu öffnen geht
 that the doornom to open goes

6.6. ‘Bar’-Adjectives

Note:

Yet another modal passive involves derivational morphology, viz., suffixation of the verb stem by the passive affix *bar* (‘able’).

- (49) a. Man konnte die Begegnung vermeiden
 one could the meeting avoid
 b. Die Begegnung war vermeidbar
 the meeting was avoidable

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