Passive and passivization across languages in dynamic and typological perspectives: conceptual and methodological challenges

The 57th Annual Meeting of SLE will take place from 21 - 24 August at the University of Helsinki

Researchers at all levels working on relevant topics are encouraged to submit abstracts. For this workshop, we invite both empirically-based and theoretically-oriented studies, with a special focus on methodological approaches (theory-based, corpus-based or experimental) to unlock the category of voice, in particular in the domain of diachronic and typological linguistics. We welcome all studies highlighting the gradient nature of voice; case studies on understudied developments of passive constructions, as well as from understudied languages are particularly welcome.
Please send an anonymous abstract of max. 300 words (including examples and excluding references) before November 5, 2023 to sle.passive@ispan.edu.pl. In a separate file, send us a cover sheet including your name, affiliation, and title.

Notifications of inclusion into the WS proposal will be sent by November 20, 2023, and the notification of the workshop by SLE is expected one month later. If it is accepted, participants will be asked to submit a full abstract by January 15, 2024. See details on the conference website: https://societaslinguistica.eu/sle2024/

Keywords: voice, passive, gradience, language change, grammatical categories

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Voice is one of the most extensively studied grammatical categories, both from purely formal and from a typological perspective, including semantic and pragmatic perspectives. A large body of extant publications reveal significant cross-linguistic variation of what is classified as passive constructions and what constitutes their properties (e.g., Croft 1994; 2001: 283–319; Givón 1990: 563–644; Keenan 1985; Kemmer 1993; Klaiman 1991; Palmer 1994: 142–75; Shibatani 1985; 2006; Siewierska 1984; Kittilä and Zúñiga 2019; Wiemer 2011). What these studies have in common is that the passive construction is typically defined through a comparison with its active counterpart (e.g., Dik 1989: 219–21; Payne 1997: 204), which in turn follows from the syntactic correspondence between the subject of the passive clause and the object of the active, as well as the syntactic correspondence between the subject of the active clause and the (usually optional) oblique agent phrase in the passive. Siewierska (1984) is straightforward when she says that we talk about the passive when "the event or action expressed is brought about by some person or thing that is not the passive subject, but the subject of the corresponding active, and that the person or thing if not overt is at least strongly implied" (Siewierska 1984: 256). As a result,

the active and the passive are seen as each others' opposites, and the syntactic correspondence is given more prominence than other differences, such as impersonalisation (or agent-defocusing; see in particular Shibatani 1985), inactivisation (Haspelmath 1990: 59–62) or topicality change (Givón 1979: 295–303). Furthermore, a number of constructions are either not included in the studies of voice (e.g. Crystal (2003) does not definition recognize reflexives as proper voice constructions) or reference to them is simply avoided.

A formal and syntax-oriented definition of a passive construction is not operational in a number of studies, in particular those that are oriented typologically or diachronically. When incipient passives are studied, it is not always possible to draw a clear-cut boundary between the active and the passive and we may expect to find ambiguous cases, difficult to classify as either passive or active (or middle). Furthermore, there is no diachronic connection between the active and the passive clause, as their correspondence is purely synchronic. In other words, the passive construction arises out of an active (or middle) voice construction, which however is not the same as its synchronic active counterpart, i.e., *John kicked a ball* is not the source construction of *A ball was kicked by John*. What we need is a more nuanced tool which enables us to see voice as a gradient rather than an absolute phenomenon from a dynamic view (e.g., Toyota 2008), in order to classify the extant forms on a scale rather than place them in two distinct classes.

In the typological studies of the passive we find a wide array of constructions coding the grammatical voice, that is, the relationship between the participant roles of NP arguments of a verb and the grammatical relations borne by those same NPs (Toyota 2008: 136). In a given language these constructions do not exist independently: they are related to each other, whether the relationship is syntactic, semantic or functional. This feature of grammatical voice has been called the voice continuum, (*passives form a continuum with active sentences*, Shibatani 1985: 821). In the context of a diachronic study, the concept of voice continuum allows us to see how the source constructions, originally in the active voice, gradually move towards (and eventually become) the passive voice constructions. We may also expect other types of shifts, e.g. from passive to active (e.g. Maling 2006 describes such a shift in Icelandic). However, both in the process and after its completion, we expect to find constructions which cannot be unequivocally categorized as either active or passive voice.

Specific research questions to be addressed include (but are not limited to):
— Linguistic theories that can shed light onto the nature of passivization
— The emergence and development of passive voice and its possible paths of grammaticalization
— The links between formal and semantic aspects of passivization
— Medio-passive voice and its sentence function in diachronic perspectives
— Passive voice and passivity in the linguistic-philosophy
— Categorial shifts: from participles to adjectives

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