Passives and middles
Li8, week 6

Outline
- Passive voice
- The get passive
- Middles
- Unaccusatives

Voice
- English has both ‘active’ and ‘passive’ voice:
  1. a. Mary ate the pizza.
     b. The pizza was eaten by Mary.
  2. a. John gave the book to Mary.
     b. The book was given to Mary by John.

Passive voice

Differences between active/passive
- The subject of active can be present in a by–phrase or else is not syntactically represented in the passive
  3. The Pizza has been eaten (by someone)
- The object of the active corresponds to the subject of the passive (hence a transitive verb becomes intransitive, as above);
- The passive is morphologically marked by the passive auxiliary ‘be’ plus past participle (as we saw in week 2).

Verbal passives vs. adjectival ‘passives’
- Ambiguity between a passive and an adjectival reading in cases like:
  4. a. The bowl was broken.
     b. ‘Someone broke the bowl.’ (eventive)
        ‘The bowl was in pieces.’ (stative)
- The eventive reading is called the ‘verbal passive’, the stative reading is termed the ‘adjectival passive’.

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Syntactic differences between verbal and adjectival ‘passives’ (i)

- Adjectives can (sometimes) be modified by very, too etc., but verbal passives cannot (i.e. sufficient but not necessary).
- The restrictions were (*very / *too) relaxed.
- The meeting was (very / too) relaxed.
- Successful replacement with seem, look or remain indicates an adjective (again this is sufficient but not necessary):
  7. Owen was injured for three weeks in the match.
  8. Owen was injured for three weeks in the match.
  9. *Owen seemed / looked / remained injured in the match. (but marginal adjectival interpretation is grammatical)

Syntactic differences between verbal and adjectival ‘passives’ (ii)

- Only adjectives may be prefixed by un-:
  10. The opera was (*un)finished by Mozart.
  11. The opera was (un)finished for years before it was performed.
- Adjectival participles always stative; verbal passive may be eventive or stative:
  12. *John is knowing the answer. (stative disallows progressive)
  13. The answer was known by everyone.
  14. *The answer was being known by everyone. (adjectival)
  15. Mary is being surrounded by loved ones. (eventive only)
  16. The set is being designed in Paris. (eventive only)

Adjectival or verbal passive?

i. The villain was wanted by the police.
ii. The shop windows are opened in the summer.
iii. These lectures are attended by all first year students.
iv. He was disappointed by bad news.
v. These chairs need fixing!

- Eventive/stative meaning
- Very/too
- un
- look/remain/seem
- Progressive

Raising to subject

(18) TP
   T
   must
   V
   have
   V
   been
   V
   the pizzas

(19) TP
   T
   must
   V
   have
   V
   been
   V
   the pizzas

The surface subject is thematically the object
How can we tell the fronted object occupies subject position not some other position?

Why do objects raise to subject?

- Case theory: all NPs require Case to be licensed (accusative, nominative, genitive, dative etc.)
- Passive verbs (i) lack an external argument and (ii) do not assign accusative case.
- This is usually attributed to the passive morphology absorbing accusative case/subject theta-rule.
- So objects of passive verbs need to move to receive Case.
- The subject position is empty, so they move there ad receive nominative Case.
- This works well for most instances of the passive, but it faces some potential challenges from other cases...

What elements can be raised to subject position in the passive? (i)

- In English, many different types of objects can raise:
- (most but not all) direct objects (cf. H&P 2002: 1432)
  20. The car was damaged in the accident.
  21. a. *A decent car was lacked by John.
      b. *The liquid was contained by the bottle.
- Special case: ditransitive objects
  22. John gave a book to me. => A book was given to me by John.
  23. John gave me this book. => I was given this book by John.
  24. John gave me this book. => This book was given me by John.
What elements can be raised to subject position in the passive? (II)

- object of a ‘selected’ preposition:
  1. His choice was approved by everyone. (mobile)
  2. But this is subject to lexical variation (and does not seem to correlate with the mobile/fixed distinction):
     a. Mary was looked after by all of her grandchildren. (fixed)
     b. *Mary was taken after by all of her grandchildren. (fixed)
     c. ‘God was believed in by the whole congregation.’ (mobile)

- Passivisation of the object of an ‘unselected’ preposition is sometimes possible:
  1. The airport was flown ??from/?around/to by the pilot.

Cross-linguistic patterns

- Languages with morphological case systems (e.g. German, Icelandic) generally restrict passive to direct objects marked with accusative case. Conversely, Norwegian, with no morphological case system, is more permissive (like English):
  1. Jon gav Marit ei klokke.
     Jon give.PAST Marit a watch
     ‘Jon gave Marit a watch.’
  2. Jon vart gitt ei klokke.
     Jon be.PAST give.PP a watch
     ‘Jon was given a watch.’
  3. Ei klokke vart gitt Jon.
     a watch be.PAST give.PP Jon
     ‘A watch was given Jon.’ (see Áfarli 1989 for more details)

Implications for the analysis?

- Is the connection to accusative Case marking in German & Icelandic good or bad for the proposed analysis?
  1. Why are the following sentences potentially problematic for the proposed analysis?
     a. I was given this book by John.
     b. %This book was given me by John.

The get–passive (I)

- Superficially the same as the be–passive, but with main verb get + past participle:
  1. The hijackers killed the hostages.
  2. The hostages got / were killed by the hijackers.

- More informal

- Not possible with stative verbs (The king was / *got feared by everyone)
The get passive (ii)

(41) Mary was arrested.
(42) Mary got arrested.
(=> she provoked the police, or she was careless)

- often associated with an agentive interpretation of the subject
- In some contexts, get is more or less obligatory:

(43) Mary deliberately got arrested.
(44) (cf. Mary was deliberately arrested: deliberate predicated of arrester)
(45) Mary managed to get/be transferred to another branch.

The get passive (iii)

- It is characteristic in clauses involving an adverse or beneficial effect on the referent of the subject:

(46) Mary got sacked / promoted.
(47) #The door got opened by Mary. But
(48) The letter got written eventually.

- It is incompatible with an ‘instrument’ under the deliberate control of an agent:

(49) John was killed with a Kalashnikov.
(50) *John got killed with a Kalashnikov.

The get passive (iv)

- With a reflexive object of get (the ‘complex catenative’ construction), an explicitly agentive interpretation is required:

(51) Mary got herself arrested.
- Compare:
(52) ?Mary successfully got arrested.
(53) Mary successfully got herself arrested.

Middles and unaccusatives

The middle alternation

(54) The noise didn’t frighten her.
(55) She doesn’t frighten easily.
(56) All good bookstores sell Mary’s books.
(57) Mary’s books sell well.

- It is not possible to express the agent with a by-phrase. Rather it must be unexpressed or sometimes can be expressed in a for-phrase

(58) *Mary’s books sell well by all good bookstores.
(59) Latin American novels don’t translate easily for Mary.

- It expresses a property of the subject (normally how readily it undergoes the action expressed by the verb);

Properties of middles

- Middles require some form of modality or negation or an adjunct of manner:

(60) Mary’s new book should sell. (modality)
(61) Mary’s new book just didn’t sell. (negation)
(62) Mary’s new book sells well / badly. (adverb)
(63) *Mary’s new book sells in all good bookstores. (zero)
(64) Compare: Mary’s new book is sold in all good bookstores.

- It has been argued that it requires an ‘affected’ object:

(65) Puppies neuter easily.
(66) *Puppies adore easily, but
(67) Mary’s book reads well.
**Unaccusative verbs**

- Some verbs are always unaccusative (their subject is a theme, not an agent) (cf. Haegeman 1991:306–336) for an intro.
- There/associate constructions:
  1. There have arisen several complications
  2. There remains little hope of finding survivors
- Auxiliary selection:
  Early Modern English, like Italian, French and Danish had auxiliary selection, unaccusatives taking 'be':

  1. She is fallen into a pit of ink (*Much ado about nothing, IV.i*)
  2. How chance thou art returned so soon? (*The Comedy of Errors, I.i*)

**The unaccusative (ergative) alternation**

- Some transitive verbs in English have an unaccusative alternation.

  1. I opened the door.
  2. The door opened.
  3. John melted the ice.
  4. The ice melted.

- subject of intransitive corresponds to object of transitive, and performs the role of theme (as is the case in passives and middles);
- subject (agent) of transitive is suppressed in the intransitive (as is the case in passives and middles).

**Differences between unaccusatives (ergatives) and middles (I)**

- The crucial difference is that middles are generic and cannot (normally) describe particular events in time.

  1. Yesterday the ice melted quickly. (ergative)
  2. Open, you stupid door! (unaccusative)
  3. The door opened.
  4. Your thesis reads quite well now.
  5. Your thesis is reading better every week.

- other semantic properties of middles are not shared by unaccusatives (cf. Fagan 1988)

**Differences between unaccusatives (ergatives) and middles (II)**

- Syntactic differences are much less obvious.
- Middles cannot occur in imperatives, whereas unaccusatives can:

  1. a. *Bribe easily, bureaucrat! (middle)
     b. Open, you stupid door! (unaccusative)

- Some verbs like ‘pound’ participate only in the middle alternation:

  1. Ice melts easily.
  2. The ice melted.
  3. Pig iron doesn’t pound flat easily.
  4. *The iron pounded flat.

**Derivation of middles and ergatives**

- Keyser & Rooper (1984): ergatives are lexically derived, middles are syntactically derived.
- So middles would have a syntax something like passives.
- Fagan (1988) argues that both are lexically derived.
- There are two lexical rules:

  1. Assign arb to the external theta-role.
  2. Externalize the direct theta–role (i.e. Make it into a subject)

- Lexical processes, unlike syntactic ones are expected to be idiosyncratic.

**Conclusions**

- Passives, middles and unaccusatives all involve the optional/obligatory loss of the agent and the promotion of the object (theme) to subject.
- They differ in how ‘productive’ they are, whether the agent can be expressed, their semantics, their morphology (presence/absence of auxiliary verb + past participle).
- They possibly differ as to where this ‘promotion’ takes place (in the syntax or in the lexicon).
Reading

The get–passive

The middle construction

Crosslinguistic aspects

Historical aspects

Other references