

Li8 Structure of English  
Passives and middles  
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**1 PASSIVE VOICE**

- (1) Mary ate the pizza.  
(2) The pizza was eaten by Mary.

**1.1 Syntactic differences between active and passive**

- subject of active corresponds to a *by*-phrase or else is not syntactically represented in the passive;
- object of the active corresponds to the subject of the passive (hence the clause becomes intransitive);
- passive auxiliary *be* plus past participle in the passive.

**1.2 Verbal passives vs. adjectival 'passives'**

Ambiguity between a passive and an adjectival reading in cases like:

- (3) The vase was broken.  
'Someone broke the vase.' (eventive)  
'The vase was in pieces.' (stative)

**1.2.1 Syntactic differences between verbal passives and adjectival participles**

- adjectives can be modified by *very*, *too* etc. (sufficient but not necessary)

- (4) The restrictions were (\*very / \*too) relaxed.  
(5) The meeting was (very / too) relaxed.

- successful replacement with *seem*, *look* or *remain* indicates an adjective:

- (6) Michael Owen was injured for three weeks.  
(7) Michael Owen was injured in the match.  
(8) Michael Owen seemed / looked / remained injured for three weeks.  
(9) \*Michael Owen seemed / looked / remained injured in the match.  
(but marginal adjectival interpretation is grammatical)

- 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 (dynamic) or stative:

- (12) \*John is knowing the answer.  
(13) The answer was known by everyone.  
(14) \*The answer was being known by everyone.  
(15) \*Mary is being loved by everyone.  
(16) The set is being designed in Paris.

- *by*-phrase adjuncts are freely available with verbal passives, but available with adjectival passives only with stative verbs:

- (17) Troops surrounded the building. (ambiguous)
- (18) The building was surrounded early in the afternoon. (ambiguous)
- (19) The building was surrounded by troops. (forces stative reading)

### 1.3 What elements can be raised to subject position in the passive?

In English, a wide range of elements may be raised to subject in the passive:

- direct objects

- (20) The car was damaged in the accident.
- (21) (\*The money was lacked to buy a car.)

Special case: ditransitive objects

- (22) John gave me this book. => I was given this book by John.
- (23) John gave me this book. => %This book was given me by John.
- (24) John gave this book to me. => This book was given to me by John.

- object of a preposition

object of a preposition selected by its verb

- (25) The choice was approved of by everyone.

subject to lexical variation:

- (26) Mary was looked after by all of her grandchildren.
- (27) \*Mary was taken after by all of her grandchildren.

object of a locative prepositional phrase

- (28) My hat has been sat on.

- clausal object

- (29) Whether this will work has not been determined.
- (30) Not to go would be considered rude.

These have alternants with extraposition of the clausal object and insertion of an expletive *it* subject:

- (31) It has not been determined whether this will work.
- (32) It would be considered rude not to go.

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 like English:

- (33) Jon gav Marit ei klokke.  
Jon give.PAST Mary a watch  
'Jon gave Marit a watch.'
- (34) Jon vart gitt ei klokke.  
Jon be.PAST give.PP a watch  
'Jon was given a watch.'
- (35) Ei klokke vart gitt Jon.  
a watch be.PAST give.PP Jon  
'A watch was given Jon.'

(see Áfarli 1989 for more details)

### 1.4 The get-passive

Superficially the same as the *be*-passive, but with main verb *get* + past participle:

- (36) The hijackers killed the hostages.  
 (37) The hostages got / were killed by the hijackers.

- informal
- not possible with stative verbs (The king was / \*got feared by everyone)
- often associated with an agentive interpretation of the subject

- (38) Mary got arrested. (=> she provoked the police, or she was careless)  
 (39) Mary was arrested.

In some contexts, *get* is more or less obligatory:

- (40) Mary deliberately got arrested.  
 (41) (cf. Mary was deliberately arrested: *deliberate* predicated of arresster)

- (42) Mary managed to get / \*be transferred to another branch.

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

- (43) Mary got herself arrested.

Compare:

- (44) ??Mary successfully got arrested.  
 (45) Mary successfully got herself arrested.

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

- (46) Mary got sacked / promoted.  
 (47) #The door got opened by Mary.

- incompatible with an instrument under the deliberate control of an agent:

- (48) John was killed with a Kalashnikov.  
 (49) \*John got killed with a Kalashnikov.

## 2 MIDDLE AND UNACCUSATIVE ALTERNATIONS

### 2.1 *The middle alternation*

- (50) The noise didn't frighten her.  
 (51) She doesn't frighten easily.

- (52) All good bookstores sell Mary's books.  
 (53) Mary's books sell well.

- implied but necessarily unexpressed agent (*\*Mary's books sell well by all good bookstores*);
- expresses a property of the referent of the subject (normally how readily it undergoes the action expressed by the verb);

- requires some form of modality or negation or an adjunct of manner:

- (54) Mary's new book should sell. (modality)  
 (55) Mary's new book just didn't sell. (negation)  
 (56) Mary's new book sells well / badly. (adverb)  
 (57) \*Mary's new book sells in all good bookstores. (zero)

- requires an 'affected' object:

- (58) Puppies neuter easily.  
 (59) \*Puppies adore easily. **but**  
 (60) Mary's book reads well.

## 2.2 *The unaccusative (ergative) alternation*

- (61) I opened the door.  
 (62) The door opened.  
  
 (63) John melted the ice.  
 (64) The ice melted.

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

## 2.3 *Differences between unaccusatives (ergatives) and middles*

- middles are generic and cannot (normally) describe particular events in time;

- (65) Yesterday the ice melted quickly. (ergative)  
 (66) \*Yesterday Porsches drove well. **but**  
 (67) The novel read well the first time I looked at it.  
 (68) Your thesis reads quite well now.  
 (69) Your thesis is reading better every week.

- other semantic properties of middles are not shared by unaccusatives (ergatives);
- syntactic differences are much less obvious. Some verbs like *pound* participate only in the middle alternation:

- (70) Ice melts easily.  
 (71) The ice melted.  
 (72) John melted the ice.  
  
 (73) Pig iron won't pound flat.  
 (74) We pounded the iron flat.  
 (75) \*The iron pounded flat.

## 2.4 *Derivation of middles and ergatives*

- Keyser & Roeper (1984): ergatives are lexically derived, middles are syntactically derived;
- Fagan (1988): both are lexically derived.

### READING

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### **Crosslinguistic aspects**

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### **Historical aspects**

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