

## Impersonals and Passive

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Grammatical voice typologies often establish a primary opposition between active and passive voice, with the middle voice as an intermediate category. Syntactically, a passive construction is a detransitivized counterpart of an active construction. But semantically, the passive retains the same number of thematic 'roles' as the active, typically with a change in relative prominence. The impersonal constructions found in Balto-Finnic, Celtic, and in various Balto-Slavic languages form part of a personal-impersonal opposition that is orthogonal to the active-passive contrast. Although impersonals may serve the same communicative function as the passive, they represent a distinctive grammatical strategy for 'suppressing' reference to the subject. Like the periphrastic counterparts formed with English 'one', French *on*, or German *man*, morphological impersonals are (i) not syntactically detransitivized, and retain direct objects, (ii) may often be formed from unaccusative verbs, which lack passive counterparts, and (iii) tend to imply an indefinite human subject, which cannot usually be specified further by an agentive oblique.

The passive in (1b) is syntactically intransitive but semantically transitive. In Relational Grammar (RG) terms, the alternation in (1) involves the 'demotion' of the logical subject to an oblique, and the 'promotion' of the logical object to a surface subject. This change inverts the relative prominence of the logical subject and object. Whereas the logical subject is normally more prominent than the logical object in active constructions, the opposite is true in the corresponding passive. However, this shift just reflects the tendency for surface subjects to be more prominent than direct objects in general, and for all governed grammatical functions to be more prominent than oblique dependents. Passivization clearly affects argument prominence, and a passive construction may be used for the purpose of inverting the prominence relations of the active. However, this change can be regarded as a side-effect of the change in grammatical relations in a passive construction and need not be incorporated into the definition of a passive.

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### Subjectless Passives

In some languages and language families, passives may be formed from intransitive verbs. This formation is usually possible in Germanic languages, though not in modern English, possibly due to the general loss of subjectless constructions. The passive counterpart of an intransitive verb is syntactically nontransitive and governs no grammatical functions. These constructions are sometimes termed 'impersonal passives' though subjectless passive is preferable, as it avoids further overloading the overused term 'impersonal'. An example of a subjectless passive in German is given in (2), in which the logical subject in (2a) corresponds to the oblique in (2b).

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Following Jespersen (1924), it is customary to describe the surface subject of the active construction as the 'logical subject' and the surface object of the active as the 'logical object.' In an intransitive personal passive corresponding to an active transitive verb, the logical object is realized as the surface subject of the passive. The passive verb cannot govern a direct object (unless the corresponding active is ditransitive), though the participant role associated with the logical subject remains implicit, and may usually be expressed as an oblique dependent. The German examples in (1) illustrate these properties of the personal passive. The logical subject that is realized as the surface subject in the active (1a) corresponds to the optional oblique in the passive (1b). The logical object is realized by the accusative object in (1a) and by the nominative subject in (1b).

- (1a) *Die Kinder haben den Igel gefüttert.*  
 the.NOM children have the.ACC hedgehog fed  
 'The children have fed the hedgehog.'
- (1b) *Der Igel wurde (von den Kindern) gefüttert.*  
 the.NOM hedgehog was by the.DAT children.DAT  
 fed  
 'The hedgehog was fed by the children.'

- (2a) *Einige Leute haben auf der Straße gejubelt.*  
 some people have in the street celebrated  
 'Some people celebrated in the street.'

- (2b) *Auf der Straße wurde (von einigen Leuten) gejubelt.*  
 in the street was by some people celebrated  
 'There was celebrating (by some people) in the street.'

Subjectless passives may allow the logical subject to be expressed an oblique dependent, as in (2b), though the use of an 'agentive oblique' is almost never as felicitous with subjectless passives as it is with personal passives. Since intransitives have only one thematic role, the prominence shift in the passive often involves the relation between this role and the activity denoted by the verb. Hence personal and subjectless

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passives tend to perform slightly different communicative functions. Both constructions may ‘background’ or ‘downgrade’ the logical subject relative to the activity denoted by the verb. The prominence of the activity is particularly enhanced if no other dependent is expressed, as in the case of subjectless passives without agentive obliques. The personal passive can also ‘foreground’ the logical object. In English, for example, a personal passive with an agentive oblique may be used to alter theme-rheme relations that would be regulated in other languages by word order alternations within active constructions. The subjectless passive lacks this function, but can be used instead to express indefinite or generic statements.

Debates about the universal syntactic properties of passives have turned largely on which properties of personal passives are regarded as definitional, and which are either merely characteristic or else consequences of the definitional properties. RG accounts such as Perlmutter and Postal (1984) identified object promotion as the primary effect, which was taken to entail the demotion of the logical subject. The traditional alternative articulated in Comrie (1975), treated subject demotion as the primary effect of passivization, with promotion as an ‘opportunistic’ side-effect. Since personal passives exhibit both demotion and promotion, they provide no basis for deciding between these choices. Subjectless passives have played a pivotal role in this debate, because they exhibit the same form variation and subject demotion as personal passives, but show no evidence of promotion. As Comrie (1977) argued, any passive rule that is meant to apply to personal passives like (1) and to subjectless passives like (2) would have to demote subjects, not promote objects, since there is no obvious object to promote in (2a). The RG response involved the promotion of non-obvious (‘dummy’) objects to induce demotion in cases like (2b).

### Unaccusativity

It is frequently noted in descriptive and pedagogical grammars that certain verbs and verb classes appear to resist passivization within a language. Theoretical and typological studies have likewise suggested that these classes are not entirely arbitrary. If a language allows passives of intransitives, it will tend to restrict this process to verbs that are, broadly speaking, volitional or agentive. Verbs corresponding to *dance*, *ski*, *smoke*, or *shout* will characteristically have passive counterparts. Verbs corresponding to *elapse*, *expire*, *shiver*, *remain*, *be*, and *arrive* will usually not. This restriction is illustrated by the unacceptable subjectless passive (and gloss) in (3b).

(3a) *Einige Leute sind auf der Straße geblieben.*  
some people are in the street remained  
‘Some people have remained in the street.’

(3b) \**Auf der Straße wurde (von einigen Leuten) geblieben.*  
in the street was (by some people) remained  
\*\*‘There was remaining by some people in the street.’

The most widely accepted account of the contrast (2b) and (3b) is provided by the Unaccusative Hypothesis of Perlmutter (1978), which posits a basic split between two classes of intransitives. The first class, termed unergative, contains verbs like *dance* or *ski*, whose surface subject corresponds to a logical subject. The second class, termed unaccusative, contains verbs like *remain* or *be*, whose surface subject corresponds to a logical object. Classifying *jubeln* ‘celebrate’ as unergative and *bleiben* ‘remain’ as unaccusative offers the following account of the contrast between (2b) and (3b). If passivization is defined as demoting logical subjects, it follows immediately that “[n]o impersonal Passive clause in any language can be based on an unaccusative predicate” (Perlmutter and Postal, 1984: 107). A passive rule that demotes logical subjects will simply fail to apply to verbs without logical subjects. Since the lack of a logical subject is exactly what defines unaccusatives as a class, it follows that they should never passivize.

A similar analysis can be extended to many of the transitive verbs that resist passivization. Verbs like *last*, *weigh*, and *resemble* rarely have passive counterparts, though traditional descriptions tend either to handle these exceptions on a case-by-case basis, or to relate the problem to the lack of a ‘genuine’ object. If these—highly nonvolitional—verbs are also classified as transitive unaccusatives, they fall under the same generalization that covers the intransitive cases.

### Impersonals

In some languages, one finds a distinctive type of impersonal construction occupying the communicative niche associated with passive constructions. This construction is obligatorily subjectless and usually receives an ‘active indefinite’ interpretation, in which the subject is construed as referring to an unspecified human subject, or to people in general. The functional overlap with passives often encourages a ‘passive’ classification in theoretical descriptions, and somewhat less often in the specialist and pedagogical literature. However impersonal constructions differ from passives in a number of significant respects, which are summarized in Blevins (2003). Perhaps the most important is the fact that they may be

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formed from a wider class of verbs, which typically includes unaccusatives as well as unergatives. Impersonals may also be formed from transitive verbs, and retain direct objects, which may occur with an object case. The ‘suppressed’ subject must often be interpreted as human, so that impersonal forms of verbs that select nonhuman animates are interpreted as anomalous. The use of an agentive oblique tends to be much less acceptable than with passives, and in some languages is judged fully unacceptable.

p0055 Impersonal constructions are characteristic of Balto-Finnic languages and are particularly well represented in Estonian. The glosses assigned to the Estonian examples (3a) and (3b) clearly emphasize an implicit human reference. The example in (3a) also shows that impersonals may be formed freely from unergative verbs like *tulema* ‘come’ and *minema* ‘go’. The example in (3b) shows that an impersonalized transitive retains a syntactic object, *uut maja*, that may preserve the partitive case that marks the object in a personal clause, such as *Ma ehitatan uut maja* ‘I am building a new house’. In the Finnish example in (3c), the pronominal object of the impersonal form *viettiin* occurs in the accusative, providing an even clearer indication of that it is an object.

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- (3a) *Tullakse ja minnakse.*  
come.PRES.IMP and go.PRES.IMP  
‘They [people] come and go.’ (Tuldava, 1994: 273)
- (3b) *Siin ehitatakse uut maja.*  
here build.PRES.IMP new.PART house.PART  
‘Here they are building a new house.’ (Tuldava, 1994: 273)
- (3c) *Hänet vietiin poliisiasemalle.*  
s/he.ACC take.PAST.IMP police station.ALLA  
‘S/he was taken to the police station.’ (Shore, 1988: 157)

p0060 Impersonal forms in Balto-Finnic inflect for the full range of tense/aspect/mood properties, and merely lack the agreement markers that occur on person forms. Fife (1993: 14) described a similar pattern in Celtic, remarking that “all Celtic languages possess an impersonal form for each tense which is neutral as to the person and number features of the subject.” In other languages, impersonals may be less tightly integrated into the grammatical system, suggesting in some cases the possibility of a contact-induced innovation (Veenker, 1967). For example, *no/to* forms in Slavonic (Billings and Maling, 1993) are historically neuter singular passive participles, which remain passive in Russian. In Polish, however, *no/to* constructions such as (4a) are impersonal, as they govern an accusative object and refer to an unexpressed human subject. Polish *no/to* forms may be

based on unaccusative verbs, and do not permit agentive obliques. Yet unlike Balto-Finnic or Celtic, each verb has a single *no/to* form, which receives a past interpretation.

- (4a) *Gazetę czytano.*  
newspaper.FEM.ACC read.PAST.IMP  
‘One/they read the newspaper.’
- (4b) *Tu się pije wódkę.*  
here REFL drink.3SG vodka.ACC  
‘One drinks vodka here.’ (Rothstein, 1993: 712)

Participial constructions may thus be passive in one language while their cognates are impersonal in another. The same variation characterizes reflexive constructions, which are again passive in Russian and other Slavonic languages, but clearly impersonal in at least Polish, as illustrated in (4b), and in Croatian and Slovene (Browne, 1993; Priestly, 1993). This variation indicates that the difference between passives and impersonals as morphosyntactic constructions cannot be associated with morphotactic form, any more than with communicative function.

In sum, passives and impersonals differ in syntactic transitivity: whereas passives are detransitized, impersonals merely suppress the syntactic expression of the subject. Both constructions have the same semantic transitivity, which distinguishes them from causative-inchoative alternations (which may also be marked by reflexive morphology). A causative sentence such as ‘The submarine sank the ocean liner’ has two thematic roles, a causer and causee. But the inchoative ‘The ocean liner sank’ has just the causee role: it is semantically as well as syntactically intransitive, with no grammatically implicit agency. Passive and impersonal constructions both likewise differ from the impersonal predicates that express weather conditions, natural forces, etc., in many languages. An impersonal predicate in this sense, which follows essentially Babby (1989), lacks a logical subject, and thus cannot participate in passive or impersonal constructions.

*See also:* Argument structure (01954); Middles (00290); Reflexives (00304); Relational Grammar & Arc Pair Grammar (02048); Thematic structure (01990); Unaccusativity (01993).

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