

A Unified Analysis of Passives and Anticausatives

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1. *Goal*: The main goal of this paper is to examine certain properties of passives and anticausatives across several languages and the ensuing ramifications for a universal theory of the passive and the anticausative. The crucial observations are: (i) across languages the anticausative alternant of a causative-inchoative alternating pair systematically involves morphological marking that is shared by passive (and/or reflexive) predicates; (ii) children use *from*-phrases instead of *by*-phrases in the passive in English (Clark and Carpenter 1989); and (iii) while in (adult) English passives sanction *by*-phrases and anticausatives sanction *from*-phrases but not vice versa, languages that collapse (at least some of the time) the morphological distinction between passives and anticausatives (e.g. Albanian, Latin, Modern Greek) typically also fail to differentiate between *by*- and *from*-phrases (or their distribution), hence patterning with English child language and Old English. The central claims I would like to put forward are: (i) universally the passive and the anticausative arise from the suppression of a feature in little *v* that encodes the ontological event type of the (verbal) root; (ii) *by*- and *from*-phrases simply make reference to this ontologically different feature; (iii) the differences between adult and child English and English and languages that do not distinguish between *by*- and *from*-phrases are due to differences in aspectual encoding; (iv) rationale clauses (RCs), licensed in passives but not in anticausatives, are controlled by animate participants introduced **not** by non-oblique arguments (implicit or syntactically present, depending on the theory), but by *by*-phrases and these may in turn be either overt or implicit.

2. *State of the art*: Central to theories of passive is the fact that the so-called logical subject (Marantz 1984) is realized in a *by*-phrase, as in (1a). Depending on the theory, this fact has been taken to show that the syntactically suppressed argument of a passive verb is present in argument structure (Grimshaw 1990), or that the passive morpheme *-en* is itself an argument (Baker, Johnson and Roberts 1989). In contrast, the fact that anticausatives are bad with *by*-phrases, as in (1b), is taken to mean that the binding of the external cause in anticausatives takes place in the mapping from the lexical semantic representation to argument structure (Levin and Rappaport Hovav 1995).

(1) a. The window was broken by John / the wind. vs. (1) b. *The window broke by John / the wind. Likewise, the licensing of RCs in passives (2a) but not in anticausatives (2b) has been taken as evidence that passives but not anticausatives contain an implicit or syntactically encoded argument.

(2) a. The boat was sunk to collect the insurance. vs. (2) b. *The boat sank to collect the insurance.

3. *By-phrases vs. from-phrases in English*: While anticausatives in English cannot license *by*-phrases, they can license *from*-phrases identifying the (external) cause of an event, as in (3a). However, *from*-phrases are bad when the external causer is an animate participant, as in (3b).

(3) a. The window cracked from the pressure. vs. (3) b. *The window cracked from John.

The contrast between (3a) and (3b) is replicated also with non-alternating unaccusatives, as in (4a) vs. (4b), though not with all of them, as in (4c).

(4)a. M. died from cancer. (4)b. *M. died from John. (4)c. The refugees arrived *from the invasion. Moreover, *from*-phrases are uniformly disallowed in passives, as in (5).

(5) a. *Mary was killed from cancer. (5) b. *Mary was killed from John.

4. *Albanian, Latin, Modern Greek (MG)*: Unlike in English, passives and anticausatives in Albanian/Latin/MG are (often) formally indistinguishable. These languages also collapse *by*- and *from*-phrases. In these cases the contrast between (3a) and (3b) is not replicated, as illustrated in (6).

(6) Alb: *Dritarja u kris nga presioni / nga Xhoni.*
window.the non-act crack.Aor,3S from/by pressure.the / from/by John.the

(i) 'The window cracked from the pressure' (ii) 'The window was cracked by the pressure'

(iii) 'The window was cracked by John' (iv) 'The window cracked because of John'

The anticausative alternant of the Albanian verb *kris* 'crack' appears either in non-active voice as in (6), or in active voice as in (7a), without effecting any difference in interpretation (i.e., the situation here is unlike in e.g. French, where interpretive differences are claimed to exist between the version with the reflexive clitic and that without. The formally active anticausative may combine with a

by/from-phrase only when the causer is an inanimate participant, as in (7a) vs. (7b), replicating in this way the English pattern (3a) vs. (3b).

- (7) a. *Dritarja krisi nga presioni.*
 window.the crack.act,aor,3sg from/by pressure.the
 ‘The window cracked from the pressure’
- b. **Dritarja krisi nga Xhoni.*
 window.the crack.act,aor,3sg from/by John.the
 ‘The window cracked from/by John’

5. *Making sense*: Taken together, the arguments here, in particular the fact that the distribution of *by-* and *from-*phrases even in (adult) English cannot be captured by appealing merely to the distinction between unaccusatives (whether anticausative or other) and passives, as well as the fact that there are languages that collapse the distinction between *by-* and *from-*phrases, suggest that *by-* and *from-*phrases might be more closely related than has been assumed in discussions that focus on the English passive. It is conceivable that *by-* and *from-*phrases do not differ as to their ability to identify arguments (either implicit or syntactically expressed, depending on the theory), but wrt other features that (might) eventually distinguish between the passive and the anticausative.

6. *Proposals unfolded*. I contend that the passive/anticausative distinction bears solely on the nature of the building blocks (i.e., primitives) that syntactic computation builds on. Specifically, I claim that the passive is derived from an activity predicate (through suppression of a [+act] feature in *v*), and the anticausative from a causative predicate (through suppression of a [+cause] feature in *v*). Note that unlike [+cause], the feature [+act] entails an actor, i.e., a participant capable of wilful agency. Passives (but not anticausatives) control into RCs and combine with so-called agent-oriented adverbs (AOAs) because RCs and AOAs simply make reference to participants capable of intentionality (i.e., actors). It would however be wrong to conclude on this basis that the animate participant in a passive construction is a non-oblique argument. In particular, there is at least one alternative, namely that the animate participant in the passive is *not* introduced by a non-oblique argument (implicit or syntactically present, depending on the theory), but by a *by*-phrase and this may in turn be either overt or implicit. This view is corroborated by the fact that animate causers are disallowed with *from*-phrases and anticausatives only license *from*-phrases but not *by*-phrases. Further empirical evidence for this view involves the fact that whenever a RC is licit, a *by*-phrase can be inserted overtly. Note also that AOAs are compatible with unaccusative syntax, as in (8).

- (8) a. *Gianni é caduto / *ha caduto apposta.* (Italian, Folli and Harley 2004: 47)
 John is fallen / has fallen on purpose.
- b. *Peter ist / *hat absichtlich eingeschlafen.* (German)
 Peter is / has deliberately fallen asleep

If a *by*-phrase makes reference to the feature [+act] solely (whose suppression ultimately results in non-assignment of the actor theta role in Spec, *v*P), i.e., if a *by*-phrase simply introduces an oblique actor, how can the fact that external causation verbs passivize – as in (9) – be accounted for?

(9) The window was broken by Pat.

A tentative answer builds on an insight from Emonds (2000), viz. that, due to the fact that English lacks a verbally finite synthetic passive, both verbal and adjectival passives are in a sense “more adjectival” than e.g. in Albanian/Latin/MG, which have a (partially) verbal finite synthetic passive. The idea is that the sentence in (9) implies that the breaking event was more sustained or involved an activity (on Pat’s part) as compared to the breaking event in an anticausative, such as ‘The window broke’, which happens spontaneously or all-at-once. That is, due to its adjectival nature, the English passive unlike the Albanian/Latin/MG passive induces an implicature of activity even for external causation verbs, which is clearly revealed through a comparison with the anticausative.

Finally, it is not unreasonable to assume that nominals denoting natural and/or other forces as in ‘The window was broken by the earthquake’ are personifications (Jackendoff 1990).

To conclude, the adult English passive can be made more compatible with both the child English passive and the Albanian/Latin/MG passive by relegating the differences to simple combinatorial properties of verb and prepositional types and their interactions with other event functors/aspectual operators, which are encoded differently morphologically across these languages.