

Passive constructions: Universals and language description

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This paper starts out from an interest in passive universals and general-theoretical issues and then moves to the methodological question of how to identify passives for cross-linguistic comparison. I emphasize that language-particular description is only indirectly related to comparison: It can profit from it via transparency and inspiration, but fieldworkers are independent of general theorists in developing their analyses.

1. Overview

This paper revisits universals of passive constructions, a topic that has been on the agenda of linguistics at least since Keenan (1975) and Perlmutter & Postal (1977). I discuss passive constructions such as those in (1b), as well as a number of related constructions, such as the antipassive construction in (2b).

(1) Turkish passive voice alternation

a. *Musa ev-i temizle-di.*
Musa house-ACC clean-PST
'Musa cleaned the house.'

b. *Ev temizle-n-di.*
house clean-PASS-PST
'The house was cleaned.' (passive construction)

(2) Warronggo antipassive voice alternation (Tsunoda 2011: 428)

a. *Bama-nggo gamo-Ø yangga-n.*
man-ERG water-ABS search-NF
'The man looked for water.'

b. *Bama-Ø gamo-wu yangga-gali-n.*
man-ABS water-DAT search-ANTP-NF
'The man looked for water.' (antipassive construction)

Passive constructions are well-known because a similar construction type exists in English and most other European languages, but what is universal about them is less well known. Greenberg (1963) did not say anything about passives, and since the 1980s, the generative literature has not made claims about universals of passives either.¹

In this paper, I will discuss five universals that were proposed in the earlier literature (§2), and on the basis of a rigorous definition of 'passive' as a comparative concept (§3), I will endorse three of them as probably true universals, while rejecting the others as ill-defined (§5). The paper also briefly discusses a range of non-passive constructions that are nevertheless somewhat similar to passives (§4). Then after discussing some problems

¹ Chomsky (1981: 126) noted that passive constructions are diverse across languages, arguing that uniformity can be found only in more abstract notions such as "Case theory" or "theta theory".

with the earlier definitions (§6), I will suggest explanations for the three universals (§7). Finally, I offer some discussion of the relation between language description and the comparative study of languages (§8).

2. Some universals of passive constructions

Since Siewierska (1984) at the latest, linguists have studied passive constructions in a broadly cross-linguistic perspective and with an interest in universal patterns of passive constructions. While not all languages have passives, passive constructions are found throughout the world and are by no means limited to European languages. In Siewierska's (2005) survey of 373 languages (part of the *World atlas of language structures*), there are 162 languages with a passive, and 211 languages lacking a passive.²

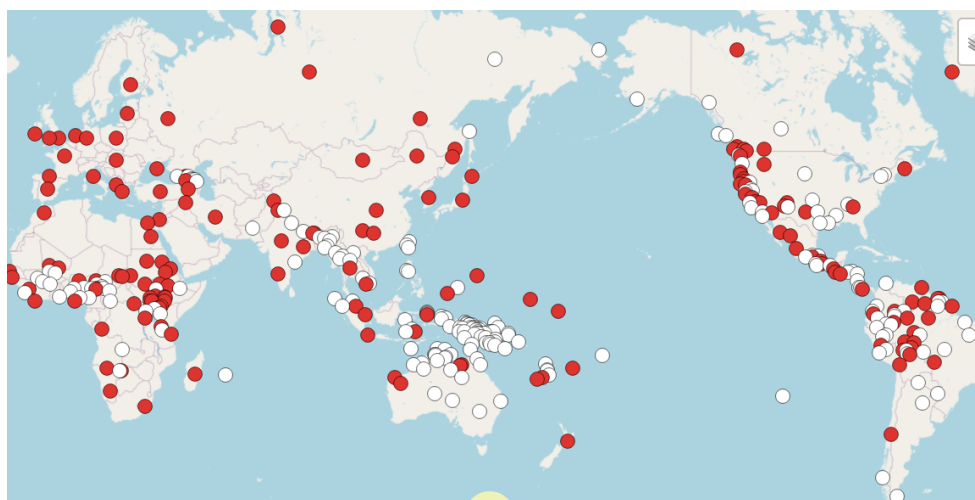


Figure 1: Passives worldwide

(red = the language has a passive), map by Siewierska (2005/2013)

Let us now consider five possible universals of passive constructions, listed below. Universals are important because they tell us about Human Language in general, and this is the focus of the present paper. (See also Kiparsky (2013: 8) for some universals of passivization.)

Universal 1

In a passive construction, the oblique agent nominal is always optional. (Keenan & Dryer 2007: 330)

Universal 2

If a passive marker can additionally have reflexive function, then it can also have anticausative function (e.g. Haspelmath 1987: 35).

Universal 3

If active and passive constructions differ with respect to topicality of agent and patient, then the patient is more topical in the passive, or the agent is less topical, or both.

Universal 4

The verb always has a passive marker in a passive construction (e.g. Haspelmath 1990).

² In the much larger Grambank database (Skirgård et al. 2023), the figures are similar: 829 languages have a morphological passive, while 1114 lack one (<https://grambank.clld.org/parameters/GB147>).

Universal 5

If a language has passives of intransitive verbs then it has passives of transitive verbs. (Keenan & Dryer 2007: 331)

I will discuss each of these proposed universals below (§5 and §7), but first I will make some general methodological remarks. My approach differs from that of many other linguists in that I do not think that analyses of particular languages (p-linguistics) necessarily lead us to greater insights about Human Language. Many phenomena are simply language-particular and not of wider relevance. If one cares about Human Language in general (g-linguistics), one must look for universal phenomena (Haspelmath 2021c). Only universals can be explained by general theories, whereas most phenomena of particular languages are best explained by particular theories. Empirical universals are often underestimated: Many linguists seem to think that “universals research” is just one minor branch of linguistics (part of “linguistic typology”; e.g. Croft 2003). But actually, there is no general linguistics without universals, so in order to gain some general understanding of passives, one needs to know what is universal about them.

Most linguists, however, study particular languages, so in §8, I will briefly say how I envisage the relationship between language description and general linguistics.

3. *Passive* defined as a comparative concept for general linguistics

The term *passive* is well-known to linguists and has long been used not only to describe particular languages such as Latin, Sanskrit or English, but also for broader comparison. The first broadly comparative study on passives covering dozens of languages (von der Gabelentz 1861) was soon forgotten, but comparative work became prominent again in the 1970s and 1980s (Keenan 1975; Perlmutter & Postal 1977; Siewierska 1984). In line with this tradition, I propose to define *passive voice alternation* as in (3a), and *passive voice construction* as in (3b). Recall the example of a passive voice construction from Turkish in (1b) above: *Ev temizle-n-di* ‘The house was cleaned’.

(3) a. **passive voice alternation**

In a passive voice alternation, the uncoded alternant is transitive (with A- and P-arguments), and in the coded alternant, the basic A is downgraded, and the basic P corresponds to S.

b. **passive voice construction**

A passive voice construction is the coded alternant in a passive voice alternation.

A passive voice alternation is a kind of valency alternation in which one of the alternant constructions shows affixal coding on the verb, while the other alternant does not show any coding. In general, a voice alternation is a kind of valency alternation, i.e. a pair of verbal sister constructions with different but related valencies, in which there is coding on the verb (Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019). The conceptual framework for valency and voice constructions that I use here is explained in more detail in Haspelmath (2022a).³

Voice alternations (= pairs of sister constructions with affixal coding on the verb) are best illustrated by vertical correspondence diagrams, as in Figure 2.

³ Note that the definitions do not make use of any kind of dynamic process metaphor. There is no “valency-changing operation”, and no “passivization”. In many contexts, such metaphors are unproblematic, but I avoid them because they might suggest that there is necessarily a particular directionality of the alternation.

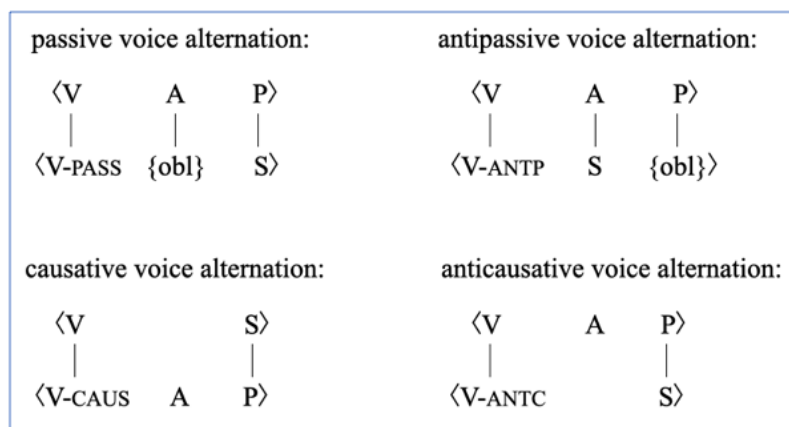


Figure 2: Passive, antipassive, causative and anticausative alternations

In each of the four diagrams shown in this figure, there is one uncoded alternant (at the top) and one alternant with verb coding (at the bottom). Passive is the mirror image of antipassive: In the former, the P becomes S and the A is downgraded in the coded alternant, while in the latter, the A becomes S and the P is downgraded. Similarly, causative and anticausative alternations are mirror images of each other: The causative voice adds an A argument, and the anticausative voice removes an A argument.

These alternations can also be represented in a different, linear form, where subscript variables (X, Y, Z) stand for shared semantic roles (corresponding to the vertical lines in Figure 2). The symbol “ \approx ” links related sister constructions to each other. (The formulations in (4a-b) are very similar to those in Farrell (2005: 65-72), and there are strong parallels also with the concepts developed in Creissels (2024).)

- (4) a. passive $\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$
 $\approx \langle V\text{-PASS}, \{\text{obl}\}_X, S_Y \rangle$ ‘(X) acts on Y’
- b. antipassive $\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$
 $\approx \langle V\text{-ANTP}, S_X, \{\text{obl}\}_Y \rangle$ ‘X acts (on Y)’
- c. causative $\langle V, S_X \rangle$
 $\approx \langle V\text{-CAUS}, A_Z, P_X \rangle$ ‘X acts’
 ‘Z makes X act’
- d. anticausative $\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$
 $\approx \langle V\text{-ANTC}, S_Y \rangle$ ‘X causes Y to change’
 ‘Y changes’ (see also §5.1)

The definitions given here are largely in line with much of the earlier literature (see also Kulikov 2011; Zúñiga & Kittilä 2019) and should not be particularly controversial, but what I emphasize here is that they can be applied to all languages using the same criteria. In contrast to the early typological work of the later 20th century (Keenan 1975; Siewierska 1984; Haspelmath 1990), they do not make use of a notoriously non-universal notion of “subject”, but instead rely on the comparative role-types S, A and P (Haspelmath 2011). And they do not make use of the notion of “inflectional category”, which cannot be defined clearly in such a way as to distinguish “inflectional voice categories” reliably from “derivational valency-changing constructions” (Haspelmath 2024). They also do not make reference to “operations” or other kinds of grammatical processes, so that there is no need to establish the direction of derivation. The asymmetry consists purely in the presence of a verbal affix in one alternant, and its absence in the other alternant.⁴

⁴ Languages may also have symmetrical-voice alternations, where active-like, passive-like, and antipassive-like voice constructions are all coded by verbal affixes (see 45.3 below).

Traditionally, linguists of European languages distinguish not only a “passive voice”, but also a corresponding “active voice”, which is the “unmarked voice” form as opposed to the “marked” passive voice. But this makes sense only on the older view that active and passive are values of the inflectional category “voice”. In the conceptual framework used here, voice constructions by definition have (affixal) verb coding, so there can be no (uncoded) “active voice construction”.

4. Further constructions that are clearly related to passive constructions

Let us now look briefly at four construction types that bear some resemblance to passive constructions and have sometimes been treated under the heading of “noncanonical” passives (Legate 2021). These construction types do not fall under the passive concept of §3, but it is useful to consider them in the present context in order to contrast them with passives.

4.1. Anticausative alternations

Anticausative alternations (Nedjalkov & Sil’nickij 1969; Haspelmath 1987; Inglese 2022) are like passive alternations in that they are transitive-intransitive alternations and have an extra marker on the verb in the anticausative alternant, as illustrated in (5) (anticausative suffix *-iki*).

(5) Luragooli (Bantu; Gluckman & Bowler 2016: 272)

a. *Sira a-hani muriango.*
Sira 3SG.G1-close door(G3).
‘Sira closed the door.’

b. *Muriango gu-han-iki.*
door(G3) 3SG.G3-close-ANTC
‘The door closed.’

But in contrast to the passive alternant, the anticausative alternant does not have an agent in its valency frame at all, as can be seen when we compare the two construction pairs in (6a) and (6b) (repeated from (4a) and (4d) above). While the uncoded alternant has two participants in both cases (X and Y), the anticausative alternant has only one participant (Y). Note that the curly brackets {...} indicate that an argument may be entirely suppressed in the valency frame, even though it is still present semantically.

(6) a. passive $\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$
 $\approx \langle V\text{-PASS}, \{\text{obl}\}_X, S_Y \rangle$ ‘(X) acts on Y’

d. anticausative $\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$ ‘X causes Y to change’
 $\approx \langle V\text{-ANTC}, S_Y \rangle$ ‘Y changes’

Anticausatives are thus necessarily valency-reducing, whereas passives can be valency-preserving (the agent can be expressed as an oblique argument in many languages). As the passive agent is often absent, anticausative and passive clauses often look very similar, but they differ in that passives, but not anticausatives, can have agent-oriented adverbials (‘the door was closed deliberately’, but not ‘#the door closed deliberately’).

4.2. Desubjective alternations

Next, let us look at alternations which are passive-like in that the agent is demoted or suppressed, but in which the patient is not shifted to S. Such constructions have often been called “impersonal passives”, but they do not fall under the definition of passive, and they are better called *desubjective* (Haspelmath 1990: 34). In Irish, the suffix *-adh* marks the desubjective form.

(7) Irish (Noonan 1994: 280; 286)

- a. ***Bhuail*** *Liam Seán.*
hit.PST Bill John
‘Bill hit John.’
- b. ***Bual-adh*** *Seán (le Liam).*
hit-DESUBJ John by Bill
‘John was hit (by Bill).’
- c. ***Tug-adh*** *abhaile inniu í.*
bring-DESUBJ home today her.OBJ
‘She was brought home today.’

We see the difference between passives and desubjectives in the two construction pairs in (7a) and (7b). While the P becomes an S in the passive, it remains a P in the desubjective.

- (8) a. passive ⟨V, A_X, P_Y⟩
 ≈ ⟨V-PASS, {obl}_X, S_Y⟩ ‘(X) acts on Y’
- b. desubjective ⟨V, A_X, P_Y⟩ ‘X acts on Y’
 ≈ ⟨V-DESUBJ, {obl}_X, P_Y⟩

4.3. Symmetrical voice alternations

Some languages have constructions which look somewhat like passives but which alternative with constructions that also have verb coding. In Tagalog, for example, we have an alternation as in (9a-b), where some authors have said that (9b) is a passive because the patient ‘fish’ is in the nominative case. The infix ⟨*um*⟩ is generally said to express Actor Voice, while the suffix *-in* expresses Undergoer Voice.

(9) Tagalog (Foley 2008: 23)

- a. ***B(um)ili*** *ng isda sa tindahan ang lalake.*
⟨ACTVOICE⟩buy ACC fish LOC store NOM man
‘The man bought fish in the store.’
- b. ***Bibilh-in*** *ng lalake sa tindahan ang isda.*
buy.FUT-UNVOICE ERG man LOC store NOM fish
‘The man will buy fish in the store.’

The Undergoer Voice does not qualify as a passive construction because the agent is not oblique-marked in (9b).⁵ Moreover, both the verb in (9b) and the verb in (9a) has a voice marker (*-in* and *-um-*, respectively). Thus, instead of a passive alternation, we are dealing with a symmetrical-voice alternation, as schematized in (10).

⁵ It is not an antipassive construction either, because the patient is not oblique-marked in (9a).

(10) **Tagalog Actor/Undergoer Voice**

⟨V-ACTVOICE, X[NOM], Y[ACC], Z[LOC]⟩ ‘X acts on Y at Z’
 ≈ ⟨V-UNVOICE, X[ERG], Y[NOM], Z[LOC]⟩

Now one might question whether the preposition *ng* in (9b) (*ng lalake* ‘the man’) is an ergative marker, and one may want to treat it as an oblique marker instead. But this is not in line with the definition of *oblique*, because we can identify oblique markers only in relation to the non-oblique role-types A, P and S. And these role types rely on the existence of a single dominant construction for agent-patient events (Lazard 2002).

But in addition to lacking a construction without voice coding on the verb, Tagalog and many other Western Austronesian languages lack a single dominant agent-patient construction. Both the Actor Voice construction and the Undergoer Voice construction are fairly frequent in discourse. But since the term *transitive* is defined in terms of A and P (Haspelmath 2011: 562), and A/P are defined in terms of the single or dominant agent-patient construction, Tagalog is INDETERMINATE with respect to transitivity: None of its valency constructions are transitive.⁶

4.4. Simple agent omission

Finally, let us look at simple agent omission, another construction that can be mistaken for a passive. In Lezgian, the way to say ‘the book was bought’ is by simply omitting the agent from the clause, as seen in (12b).

(11) Lezgian (Haspelmath 1991: 8)

a. *Farida ktab qaču-na.*
 Farid(ERG) book(ABS) take-AOR
 ‘Farid bought the book.’

b. *Ktab qaču-na.*
 book(ABS) take-AOR
 ‘The book was bought / One bought the book.’

I would say that this is not a valency alternation at all, because the agent argument is not suppressed (or demoted) in (11b) – it is simply withheld. ARGUMENT WITHHOLDING is the omission of an argument that is interpreted as unspecified and indefinite, as in *They ate*, or *She is writing*. In such cases it is clear that the argument referent exists, but it need not be recoverable from the context. With agents, withholding is not common in European languages, but patient withholding is frequent. It can be seen, for example, in (12) from Italian.

(12) *Marco spazzò e lavò a fondo prima di partire.*
 Marco swept and washed at base before to leave
 ‘Marco swept and cleaned thoroughly before leaving.’ (Cennamo 2017: 264)

There is little cross-linguistic research on argument withholding, but it is clearly distinct from passive constructions in that there is no verbal coding. Below in (14) we will see another related construction that does not have verbal coding either but is still more similar to passives.

⁶ This also means that from a cross-linguistic perspective, there is no basis for calling the preposition *ng* an accusative in (9a) and an ergative in (9b) (see Haspelmath 2022b on the definition of *accusative* and *ergative* in transitive clauses). However, I use these labels in the glosses here in order to make the constructions in (9a-b) more transparent for readers.

5. Problems with Universals 4 and 5

Now that we have seen how passive constructions are defined and how they differ from a number of related constructions, let us go back to the five universals that were presented at the beginning of this paper (§2). It turns out that two of them cannot be regarded as universals of passives in view of what I said, namely Universals 4 and 5.

Universal 4

The verb always has a passive marker in a passive construction (e.g. Haspelmath 1990).

Universal 5

“If a language has passives of intransitive verbs then it has passives of transitive verbs.” (Keenan & Dryer 2007: 331)

These two “universals” are actually definitional if we adopt the above definition of *passive construction*, so they are not empirical claims (but tautologies).

First, a passive must be related to an uncoded construction with A and P, i.e. a transitive construction. “Passives of intransitives” exist in particular languages (e.g. in Turkish, as in (13)), but this is an extension of the concept, and they are not part of the definition.

(13) Turkish (Legate et al. 2020: 775)

Türkiye-de her gün trafik kaza-ları-nda öl-ün-ür.

Turkey-LOC every day traffic accident-PL-LOC die-PASS-AOR

‘In Turkey people die (lit. ‘it is died’) in traffic accidents every day.’

Given the definition, Universal 5 is not an empirical statement.⁷

Second, the existence of a passive marker (Universal 4) is part of the definition, so the claim that I made in 1990 is not an empirical claim by the new definition. In 1990, I defined passive without reference to a verbal marker, but in the current definition, a passive must have a verbal marker. Some languages have constructions such as (14), where the agent is oblique-flagged. Such constructions are sometimes regarded as passives without verbal coding, but I call them “oblique-agent constructions” (Haspelmath 2022a).

(14) Bambara (Cobbinah & Lüpke 2012: 136)

a. *Û be nɔ̃ dan.*

3PL PRS millet sow

‘They sow millet.’

b. *Nɔ̃ be dan (u fê).*

millet PRS sow (they by)

‘Millet is sown (by them).’

⁷ One could define *passive* in such a way that a verb-coded construction associated with demotion of S to oblique would count as passive, but if a language did not have passives of transitives using the same verb coding and oblique marking, such a construction would hardly be called “passive”. For example, Russian has a “dative dispositional construction” marked with a verbal suffix *-sja* in which the S-argument of the basic verb shows up in the dative, a kind of oblique case (e.g. *Ivan ne spit* ‘Ivan doesn’t sleep’ vs. *Ivan-u ne spit-sja* ‘Ivan is not disposed to sleep’). This construction occurs only with intransitive verbs, but nobody would call it a passive.

(15) **oblique-agent alternation**

$\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$ 'X acts on Y'
 $\approx \langle V, S_Y, obl_X \rangle$

In addition, some languages have passive-like constructions in which no agent is possible, as illustrated by (16b) from Jamaican Creole.

(16) Jamaican Creole (Kouwenberg 2023: 241, 244)

a. *Mieri rait di leta.*

Mary write the letter
 'Mary wrote the letter.'

b. *Di leta rait.*

the letter write
 'The letter has been written.'

(17) **agent-suppressing alternation**

$\langle V, A_X, P_Y \rangle$ 'X makes Y happen'
 $\approx \langle V, S_Y \rangle$ 'Y happens'

In 1990, I did not know that such oblique-agent and agent-suppressing alternations exist, but in West Africa and in creole languages, they seem to be fairly widespread, and maybe also elsewhere. Thus, nothing is lost by defining passive in such a way that the verbal marker is necessary.

One problem with treating alternations such as (15) as passives is that without verbal marking, the direction of derivation is not clear. Instead of calling (14b) "passive-like", one could in principle also call (14a) "applicative-like" (because the oblique agent is promoted to core argument). Another good reason for making the verbal marker part of the definition is that in this way, passives and antipassives are completely parallel (as seen in the top row in Figure 2). Antipassives have occasionally been defined in a way that includes "uncoded antipassives", but this gives very strange results for English (the alternation *shoot the bear/shoor at the bear* would end up as an antipassive alternation, which does not correspond to current usage). Thus, it is best to include verbal coding in the definition of both passive and antipassive alternations. This also allows us to distinguish clearly between voice alternations (i.e. those with verbal marking) and other valency alternations.

As a result, only Universals 1, 2 and 3 of §2 can be maintained as potential universal claims given the current definition. In §7 below, I will offer some ideas concerning the explanation of these universals.

6. Problems with earlier definitions

Let us now look at a few earlier definitional statements for the notion of a passive constructions, and compare them with the definition given above in §3.

(18) a. Perlmutter & Postal (1977: 399)

- A direct object of an active clause is the (superficial) subject of the "corresponding" passive.
- The subject of an active clause is neither the (superficial) subject nor the (superficial) direct object of the "corresponding" passive.

- b. Siewierska (1984: 2)
 “The term *passive* has been used to cover a wide variety of constructions in many different languages.”
- c. Comrie (1988: 12)
 “I will not attempt to set up necessary-and-sufficient conditions to delimit [the passive], for the simple reason that I do not believe that such conditions are viable – while they can be established by fiat, there is no reason to suppose that any such definition will be linguistically significant.”
- d. Haspelmath (1990: 27)
 A construction is called passive if:
 – the active subject corresponds either to a non-obligatory oblique phrase or to nothing; and
 – the active direct object (if any) corresponds to the subject of the passive; and
 – the construction is somehow restricted vis-à-vis another unrestricted construction (the active), e.g. less frequent, functionally specialized, not fully productive.
- e. Keenan & Dryer (2007: 327)
 “What is distinctive about the observable form of passives is localized within the predicate or verb phrase (understood broadly enough to cover auxiliary verbs). By contrast, topicalizations and dislocations are not generally marked in the predicate; the VPs in the topicalized and dislocated sentences cited above are identical to the VPs in their untopicalized and undislocated versions.”
- f. Legate (2021: 158)
 “The properties that I take to be characteristic of canonical passives⁸ are the following:
 – Agent demotion: The agent is semantically present but is not syntactically present as a noun phrase in its characteristic thematic position. Instead, the agent is either interpreted as existential (‘someone’) or associated with a ‘by’-phrase.
 – Theme promotion: The theme raises from its low syntactic position associated with the interpretation as a theme to the grammatical subject position.
 – Morphological marking: The verbal morphology is distinct from the active voice.”

I begin the discussion with Perlmutter & Postal’s (1977) definition, because it is the first in the modern comparative literature. However, it is not clear whether it is meant as a definition, because they call their two conditions (object promotion and subject demotion) “universals of passivization”, even though these conditions are definitional. It seems that Perlmutter & Postal did not distinguish between definitions and universals, probably because they thought of syntactic functions like subject and object (“grammatical relations”) as innate elements of universal grammar (UG) (see also Keenan 1975 for a very similar approach). Since Dryer (1997), this view has been gradually abandoned by many comparative syntacticians.

Siewierska (1984) did not discuss the issue of defining passives but provided a rich source of examples as food for further thought. Comrie (1988) discussed it but refused to define passives, perhaps because he thought of passives as a natural kind. With natural kinds, one can presuppose their existence and focus on investigating their properties

⁸ See also Siewierska & Bakker (2013) on “canonical passives”.

without having a definition. If they are natural kinds, “establishing definitions by fiat” is indeed pointless.

My 1990 definition was explicitly formulated in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and while it was “established by fiat”, the fact that it allowed some universal statements (especially Universal 4, which we saw above) seemed to show that this notion was significant (in some sense). However, the definition also presupposed the grammatical relations “subject” and “direct object”, so at the least it would have to be reformulated in terms of S, A and P.

Keenan & Dryer’s (2007) definition (similar to Keenan’s 1985) highlights the difference between passive constructions and topic-fronting constructions. A clause such as *They saw Kim* can give rise to a passive clause *Kim was seen by them*, and fronting is also possible without verbal marking as in *Kim they saw*, but this is not a passive. “Marking within the predicate” is somewhat vague, but it is very similar to the condition that there must be a verbal affix in passives. Keenan & Dryer say a bit more about this:

“No language forms passive sentences by assigning a characteristic intonation contour to an active, or by inserting a sentence-level particle in an active, or by inverting the subject and the auxiliary of an active. Rather, passives are formed by deriving verb phrases in certain ways...”

This sounds like an empirical claim, but it is really definitional of passives, though the authors do not say this clearly.

Finally, Legate gives a standard definition of “canonical passives” but she notes that the three criteria can occur independently, so there is nothing special about the “canonical” cases (they might be the “least controversial” ones, but this would be purely for historical reasons). Like many earlier definitions, it presupposes notions such as “grammatical subject position”, which are not cross-linguistically applicable.

Thus, most of the earlier definitions have some problems, but there is one that comes fairly close to the present proposal, and which I would like to highlight here. This is Siewierska’s (2005: 434) definition in the *World atlas of language structures*.

- (19) “A construction has been classified as *passive* if it displays the following five properties:
1. it contrasts with another construction, the active;
 2. the subject of the active corresponds to a non-obligatory oblique phrase of the passive or is not overtly expressed;
 3. the subject of the passive, if there is one, corresponds to the direct object of the active;
 4. the construction is pragmatically restricted relative to the active;
 5. the construction displays some special morphological marking of the verb.”

This definition is very much like the definition that I proposed in §4 above. It uses the terms “subject” and “direct object”, but if these are taken as equivalent to A and P, then there is no difference except for the fourth condition: That the construction is “pragmatically restricted”.

In Haspelmath (2011: 539), I gave a definition of passive that also included such a condition (“a special construction, contrasting with a functionally less restricted active construction”), but the new definition in (3) above no longer includes this condition.⁹ The reason is that the functional restrictedness must be part of the definitions of A and P (and

⁹ My earlier (2011) definition does not mention verbal coding of the passive, thus potentially including oblique-agent and agent-suppressing constructions (as described in §6). Part of the reason why I include verbal coding in the present definition is in order to have parallel definitions of *passive* and *antipassive*, and to be able to formulate a simple and clear definition of the term *voice* (which is a verb-coded valency alternation), as noted in §5.

thus of the notion of a transitive construction). A and P are defined on the basis of the notion of the major two-argument construction of a language (Lazard 2002: 152), and if a language does not have a dominant construction for typical physical-effect verbs (such as ‘break’ or ‘kill’), then it cannot be said to have A or P or a transitive constructions.¹⁰

7. Explaining the universals

Let us now get back to the three universals from §X that can still be stated as universals if we adopt the definition of (3a-b). I repeat the universals here for convenience.

Universal 1

In a passive construction, the oblique agent phrase is always optional. (Keenan & Dryer 2007: 330)

Universal 2

If a passive marker can additionally have reflexive function, then it can also have anticausative function (e.g. Haspelmath 1987: 35).

Universal 3

If active and passive constructions differ with respect to topicality of agent and patient, then the patient is more topical in the passive, or the agent is less topical, or both.

For the purposes of the present paper, I will assume that the generalizations are well-supported, although this has not been documented systematically. While the literature on passives is generally abundant (especially on passives of the bigger languages), there is no large-scale cross-linguistic study apart from Siewierska (2005). But from my own experience, I trust that there is a very good chance that these generalizations are indeed correct. Kiparsky (2013: 8) also lists several passive universals, among them Universal 1.¹¹ So next we can ask what explains these universals. Can we learn about deeper properties of Human Language from them? The following remarks will be tentative and sketchy, but they indicate directions where I think further work may be promising.

7.1. Universal 1: Obligatoriness and optionality

The first universal, concerning the optionality of passive agents, is surprisingly difficult to explain. However, this does not matter so much because it is not a strong claim anyway. Impressionistically, it appears that most nominal constituents are optional in most languages, and that only a minority of languages require the presence of subject nominals and object nominals as English does.

Even in languages with obligatory subject and object nominals, oblique nominals are rarely obligatory. English provides examples of obligatory obliques (*She put the book on the table* / **She put the book*; *He relies on her* / **He relies*), but it seems that they are uncommon in the world’s languages.

Adjunct nominals are always optional (almost by definition), and some authors have said that oblique agents in passives are “adjuncts”. I do not agree with this way of viewing oblique agents (see also Riesberg 2014), but the optionality of adjuncts and the optionality

¹⁰ The lack of A and P is uncommon, but symmetrical-voice languages of the Philippine type cannot be said to have a transitive construction, as noted above.

¹¹ Kiparsky’s eleven proposed universals also include Universals 4 and 5, plus quite a few others that are not relevant in the present context because Kiparsky assumes a different way of identifying passives.

of oblique arguments seem to be related. The topic of optionality and obligatoriness of arguments certainly deserves further study.

7.2. Universal 2: Reflexive–anticausative–passive coexpression

A well-known example of a reflexive–anticausative–passive coexpression pattern (or “polysemy” pattern) comes from Russian, as illustrated in (20). The suffix *-sja* can occur in a reflexive construction, an anticausative construction or a passive construction.

(20) Russian

- a. *Mal’čik moet-sja.*
 boy washes-REFL
 ‘The boy washes (himself).’
- b. *Palka lomaet-sja.*
 stick breaks-ANTC
 ‘The stick breaks (intr).’
- c. *Dom stroit-sja.*
 house builds-PASS
 ‘The house is being built.’

Since Haspelmath (1987: 35) and Croft et al. (1987: 187), linguists have drawn coexpression maps about reflexive–passive “polysemy” (also called “semantic maps”; Haspelmath 2003; Georgakopoulos & Polis 2018), as in Figure 1.

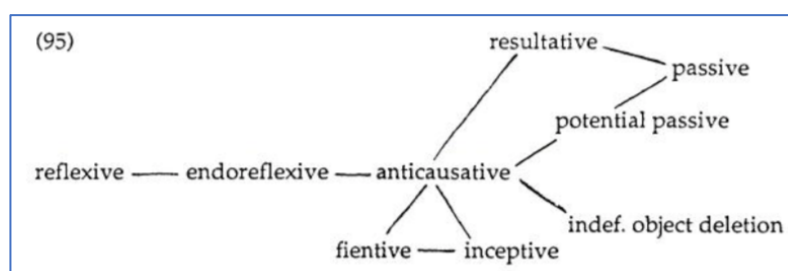


Figure 1: A coexpression map showing anticausative and related uses
 (Haspelmath 1987: 35)

Such diagrams represent the coexpression tendencies in different languages, but they do not imply any particular explanation. It is plausible that grammatical meanings or functions occur contiguous on the map when they are semantically related (as originally suggested by Haiman 1974), but it may well be that the explanation for these coexpression tendencies lies in diachronic regularities (Cristofaro 2010). For example, one may suggest that reflexive markers must pass through an anticausative phase before they extend to passive uses (see also Bahrt 2021 on coexpression or “syncretism” patterns in voice constructions). Then Universal 2 would be explained by a constraint on change (see Haspelmath 2019) rather than by a synchronic constraint. Here I remain agnostic about the best explanation of the coexpression tendency, but interested readers should consult Inglese (2022) for a recent study of the diachrony of anticausative constructions.

7.3. Universal 3: Deviations from usual associations between role rank and referential prominence

While the explanations of Universal 1 and Universal 2 are tentative or unclear, the explanation of Universal 3 seems quite clear: Passive constructions are strongly

associated with patient topicality because in the usual case, agents are more topical, and patients less topical. When this is reversed, languages tend to use extra coding, e.g. verb coding and oblique coding in order to highlight the unusual situation. Universal 3 is actually a special case of a much more general universal, the role-reference association universal of Haspelmath (2021: 125), given below as Universal 6.

Universal 6: The role-reference association universal

Deviations from usual associations of role rank and referential prominence tend to be coded by longer grammatical forms if the coding is asymmetric.

This universal builds on the observation that role ranks and referential prominence tend to be associated in language use, as summarized in Table 1. For example, in a transitive clause, the agent tends to be high in topicality and animacy, and the patient tends to be low in these regards. This can easily be seen in corpus counts from different languages (e.g. Haig et al. 2021).

| | HIGH | LOW | |
|-------------------------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| role rank | agent recipient | patient theme | (transitive) (ditransitive) |
| referential prominence: | topical animate human definite | nontopical inanimate nonhuman indefinite | |

Table 1: Associations between role rank and referential prominence
(Haspelmath 2021)

Universal 6 claims that deviations from these usual associations are often coded by longer grammatical forms, and there are a number of different ways in which grammatical forms can be longer. One way is by requiring an additional flag on one of the arguments, as in the oblique-agent construction in Bambara that was illustrated in (14b) above. A better-known construction type in which deviating patterns have longer grammatical coding is differential object flagging, as illustrated in (16) from Sardinian (where human-denoting nominals are accusative-marked, but inanimates and animals are not).

(21) Nuorese Sardinian (Bossong 1991: 148)

a. *a mortu a Serbadore*
has killed ACC Salvatore
'He killed Salvatore.'

b. *a mortu su lupu*
has killed the wolf
'He killed the wolf.'

A second way is by requiring extra marking on the verb, as in passive constructions, where there is also extra marking on the oblique agent (unless the agent is omitted). And there is a third possibility: In addition to having extra marking only on the agent or the patient, or on the verb and the agent, languages may also have extra marking only on the verb, as in some types of inverse constructions (Haspelmath 2025). And in some Austronesian languages, there are also passive-like constructions with verbal marking in which the agent is not oblique-flagged, as illustrated in (22a) below.

Universal 6 says nothing about the relationship between passive constructions (verbal marking in situations when the patient is topical) and differential object marking (nominal flagging when the patient is topical or otherwise referentially prominent), but it allows us to see these various construction types as reflecting the same broad regularity.¹² As I noted in Haspelmath (2021), these patterns can be explained by the efficiency theory of asymmetric coding, because it is efficient for languages to use extra coding for unusual (i.e. less frequently occurring) expressions or constructions.

8. Describing a language: in its own terms

Different languages have different structural systems, for example different phoneme systems (e.g. Simpson 1999), different tense-aspect systems (e.g. Dahl 1985), and different lexical semantic systems, as has been discussed in the tradition of structural semantics since the middle of the last century. A representative quote is the following:

“Every language has its own semantic *structure*. To the degree that the meanings of one language can be brought into one-to-one correspondence with those of another, we will say that the two languages are *semantically isomorphic* (have the same semantic structure). The degree of semantic isomorphism between different languages varies considerably.” (Lyons 1968: 55)

That different languages have different syntactic categories has also become clear in recent decades, especially through work by Dryer (e.g. 1997) and Croft (e.g. 2009) The cross-linguistic divergence of categories means that we cannot normally use the building blocks of one language to describe another language. In particular, it is often problematic to carry over the concepts from European languages to languages throughout the world, especially since European languages are quite peculiar in a number of ways (Cysouw 2011). Thus, each language must be described in its own terms (Boas 1911; Haspelmath 2020), rather than with general cross-linguistic categories.

If each language is described with its own grammatical concepts, this means that language describers are not dependent on general linguists for their analyses. If they find a phenomenon that looks unfamiliar, they can give it a completely new name. Consider the constructions in (22a) and (22b) from colloquial Jakarta Indonesian:

(22) colloquial Jakarta Indonesian (Sneddon 2006: 44)

a. *Gue di-tinggal pacar gua.*
I PASS-leave boyfriend my
'I was left by my boyfriend.'

b. *Saya di-telepon oleh kepala sekolah.*
I PASS-telephone by head school
'I was phoned by the school principal.'

Both have a verbal prefix *di-* ‘passive’, but the first construction lacks oblique marking on the agent, so it does not qualify as a passive according to the definition of §3. But Sneddon treats both of these as belonging to a single construction, called “Type-1 Passive”, in which the oblique preposition *oleh* is optional. From a language-particular perspective, this makes good sense, but the mapping onto the comparative concept ‘passive’ is not straightforward. However, this does not matter, because the criteria for a

¹² Interestingly, Moravcsik (1978) (in the very first paper that introduced the notion of differential object marking) already made the association between nominative-accusative variation in DOM patterns and in passive alternations.

good description are independent of issues of cross-linguistic comparison and universals. Sneddon also distinguishes another construction, “Type-2 Passive”, which has no verbal marking at all and is characterized only by a special word order (patient-agent verb). This construction is even less similar to the general passive concept of §3, but there are Indonesian-internal reasons for using the label “passive” for both.

Or consider an example from Japanese, where there is a passive suffix *-(r)are-* that can occur with many verbs, not only transitives as in (23b), but also intransitives as in (24b), and ditransitives as in (25b) (Ishizuka 2012: 57; 86; 58)

- (23) a. *Naomi-ga Ken-o tatai-ta.*
Naomi-NOM Ken-ACC hit-PST
‘Naomi hit Ken.’
- b. *Ken-ga Naomi-ni tatak-are-ta.*
Ken-NOM Naomi-OBL hit-PASS-PST
‘Ken was hit by Naomi.’
- (24) a. *Ame-ga watasitati-ni hut-ta.*
rain-NOM we-DAT descend-PST
‘Rain descended on us.’
- b. *Watasitati-wa ame-ni hur-are-ta.*
we-TOP rain-OBL descend-PASS-PST
‘We were rained on.’ (Lit. ‘We were descended on by rain.’)
- (25) a. *Ken-ga Mary-ni hon-o watasi-ta.*
Ken-NOM Mary-DAT book-ACC hand-PST
‘Ken handed Mary a book.’
- b. *Mary-ga Ken-ni hon-o watas-are-ta.*
Mary-NOM Ken-DAT book-ACC hand-PASS-PST
‘Mary was handed a book by Ken.’

The contrast in (23a-b) falls under the definition of a passive voice alternation in §3, but the two alternations in (24) and (25) do not. The basic form in (24a) is not transitive, but there is a passive-like *-(r)are-* counterpart in (24b). And while the basic form in (25a) is transitive, the passive-like counterpart in (25b) has the recipient as subject, not the patient. From a comparative perspective, only (23b) is thus a passive, but from a Japanese-internal descriptive perspective, it makes of course very good sense to treat all three alternation types together, as variants of a single construction type (this is what Ishizuka 2012 argues for, from a generative perspective).

Thus, language-particular generalizations do not always map straightforwardly onto cross-linguistic concepts. Languages are not always isomorphic semantically (as noted by Lyons), and they are not always isomorphic syntactically. But the comparative concepts must be defined in the same way in all languages, and as a result, they are not generally suitable for describing languages. Descriptive categories are separate from comparative concepts (Haspelmath 2018).

As a last example, let us briefly consider the English Passive construction as illustrated by the translation of (23b), *Ken was hit by Naomi*. This sentence does not show a verbal affix, so it does not fall under the definition of passive in §3. Instead, it has a copula-like “passive auxiliary”. That it should not qualify as a passive may be unexpected, because the English Passive is the best-known example of what has often been called “passive”. However, it is unclear how the definition in (3) could be modified in order to include it. “Auxiliary” is not a well-defined notion, so it would not be a good solution to include

auxiliaries in addition to affixes. As most of the world's languages with passives are more like Turkish, Swedish or Japanese in that they have passive affixes, I simply leave English Passives outside of the definition. From a worldwide perspective, this does not really matter, as there are not many languages (apart from the well-known Indo-European languages) that form their passives by “auxiliaries”.

9. Conclusions

In this paper, I proposed a definition of the comparative concept ‘passive construction’ for the purposes of stating and testing (and ultimately explaining) grammatical universals, and I contrasted the goal of making cross-linguistic generalizations with the goal of language description. It may seem uncontroversial that we need clear definitions for formulating testable universals, but until recently, this has not been high on linguists’ agenda. Like Comrie (1988), linguists have often downplayed the importance of definitions, on the grounds that they would be arbitrary (“established by fiat”). However, it is now clear to most researchers that in practice, our grammatical concepts are almost always arbitrary in the sense that they do not reflect innate categories of universal grammar (UG), and that the earlier goal of finding these innate categories cannot be reached at present.

Thus, descriptions of particular languages must make use of language-particular categories (“describing each language in its own terms”, §8), and cross-linguistic research (for the purpose of contributing to insights about Human Language in general (g-linguistics) must make use of comparative concepts. Which concepts are best suited for finding generalizations is an open question, but traditional terms such as *passive* and *antipassive* are best described as alternants in voice alternations in the tradition of Mel’čuk & Xolodovič (1970) and Zúñiga & Kittilä (2019). The definition proposed here is very much in line with Siewierska’s (2005) influential *WALS* chapter and it does not contradict most other definitions proposed in the literature. The definition of ‘passive’ in Grambank also follows Siewierska’s definition to a large extent (Skirgård et al. 2023).¹³

Finally, I considered three proposed universals of passive constructions and tentative explanations for these universals. There is still much uncertainty around the explanations and also about the empirical claims, but given the clear and simple definitions proposed here, it becomes easier to test such claims in the future.

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¹³ However, Cabredo Hofherr (2023) allows for uncoded passives, so she would include cases like (15) and (17) in her definition.

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