

Two Voices to Answer Haider’s Prayer: A Document

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In a recent *lingbuzz* post,¹ Hubert Haider confesses his discontent with many aspects of current and recent work in generative grammar. His complaints range far and wide, and we extend our sympathies to him. To fully address, still less ease, his discomfort would go well beyond the possibilities of this (or perhaps any other) response. But here we would like to actively raise our two voices in defence of our recently posted *lingbuzz* “document”² and, more generally, in defence of postulating the functional head Voice.

In Defence of Voice

We are all native speakers of a natural language. As linguists, we naturally start from our native tongue (hard-nosed scientists might consider this a sign of lack of rigour, but even cosmology began on and with the Earth). Haider naturally, understandably and, in much of his work, very insightfully, begins from German. We would like to begin with the first author’s native tongue, Albanian.

The first paper to postulate a Voice projection made extensive use of Albanian (and Greek) data; this was Rivero (1990). Rivero was responding to earlier proposals (among them Baker, Johnson & Roberts 1989) that the passive morpheme should be placed under Infl. She argues instead “that Voice heads its own maximal projection, in line with current proposals for inflectional phrases such as Tense and Agr” (Rivero 1990: 135). She also argues that Voice must be structurally closer to VP than Tense or Agr owing to the fact that it affects the realisation of argument structure. Slightly later, Kratzer (1996) gave both syntactic and semantic arguments in favour of Voice, in her words “severing the external argument from its verb”, a position that Haider (2020) has also argued against again on the basis of German. It is important to note that both Rivero (1990) and Kratzer (1996) (just) precede, or coincide with the earliest stages of, the Minimalist Program; in Haider’s terms, they predate our expulsion from the pre-minimalist Eden.

Haider (p. 14) prays for examples of clear cases of Voice. Albanian generously answers his prayer. The full complexity of the Albanian voice system is shown in Rivero’s (1990: 140) Table Two and analysed (using post-paradisical minimalist technology) in Kallulli & Trommer (2011).³ More specifically, Albanian provides evidence of one general, widely accepted, kind for postulating a functional head: verbal inflection. We see this in (1):

- (1) *Dokumenti po shkruhet.*
document.the prog write.nact.3sg,pr
‘The document is being written.’

This example illustrates a further important point: the non-active morpheme (which is syncretic for passive, anticausative, middle, reflexive), realising Voice, is closer to the verb root than Tense or Agreement. If we assume Baker’s (1985) Mirror Principle (roughly, morphological

¹ See: <https://lingbuzz.net/lingbuzz/008473>

² See: <https://lingbuzz.net/lingbuzz/008426>

³ See footnote 1 of Kallulli & Roberts (2024).

operations mirror syntactic ones), functional heads closer to V will be realised closer to the verb root than those “further away”. The morphological shape of the complex verb in (1) therefore supports a clause structure in which the Voice head is closer to VP than Tense or Agr, as Rivero pointed out. The Greek data points in exactly the same direction.⁴ As Rivero also points out, this line of reasoning simply extends the line of argumentation concerning the relation between tense/agreement marking, clause structure and verb-movement influentially established by Emonds (1978) and Pollock’s (1989) pre-expulsion analysis of French.

A second way to answer Haider’s prayer comes from the second author’s native tongue, among many other languages. Analyses of the English auxiliary system going back to the date of our entrance into paradise, 1957, posit that the passive auxiliary is always the last in the sequence:

(2) Hubert might have been being cited.

Here we see the order of auxiliaries *Modal – Perfect – Progressive – Passive*, with the ingenious operation of affix-hopping placing the characteristic suffix which is the exponent for each of these categories (respectively, zero Tense,⁵ Perfect *-en*, Progressive *-ing*, Passive *-ed* in (2)) on the next category to the right; this is the essence of the extremely influential and insightful analysis in the oldest testament of generative grammar, Chomsky (1957). This again motivates a clausal structure in which Voice is lower than Mood, Tense and Aspect positions (agreement is harder to discern in English; see footnote 5), adjacent to VP as affix-hopping of *-ed* in (2) shows. So the morphological evidence from Albanian and the syntactic evidence from English converge on (a) the motivation for Voice and (b) the position of Voice below other clausal functional heads and adjacent to VP.

Adopting Chomsky’s (1957) analysis in this way severs the passive auxiliary from the passive participle which shows exponence of Voice in languages like English which have periphrastic passives (so there is no “urge” on the part of the passive auxiliary “to unite with the functional passive head” (Haider, p. 14)). German too has a periphrastic passive (perhaps more than one, if Haider is correct) with the auxiliary *werden*, as in (3):

(3) Hubert wurde zitiert.

Since German is OV, and clausal heads (with the exception of C) appear to the left of their complements, we typically find that German auxiliaries appear in the opposite order to English ones once we control for V2, IPP and the lack of a direct counterpart to the English *be – ing* progressive. We can in fact see this in Haider’s (2024: 15) (8), given here as (4):

⁴ Latin *-r* is external to tense and agreement, as forms such as *amor* (love-1sg-Passive; “I am loved”) show. Calabrese (2024) discusses this and shows that it is due to the origin of the *-r* endings as enclitics. Clitics are not subject to the Mirror Principle, only affixes are. Albanian confirms this, in that one exponent of Voice is the clitic *u* which appears high in the clause: see Kallulli & Trommer (2011) and footnote 3.

⁵ In places, Haider seems unhappy with the postulation of phonologically empty elements. However, it is extremely difficult to provide an analysis of the English verbal system without (a) acknowledging that English verbs show both tense and agreement marking and (b) many tense and agreement combinations show zero exponence. This extends to the affixes “supported” by *do*, as in (i):

(i) I don’t like Mondays.

Here *do* “supports” 1Sg Present, which, with the sole exception of *am*, is always null in English.

- (4) [Geändert *werden müssen*] hätte es bereits im Juni.
 [changed *been shall-Inf*] had it already in June
 ‘It should already have been changed in June.’

Inside the brackets we observe the order *Verb – Passive Aux – Modal Aux*, the mirror image of English *should be changed*.⁶ So German and English are parallel in these respects. Of course the constituent containing *geändert werden müssen* has been fronted in (4). This implies that this is not simple VP-fronting but rather fronting of the clausal functional category headed by *müssen*. This category contains VoiceP and the passive auxiliary *werden*, so the problems with putative covert or downward movement of *werden* mentioned by Haider (2024: 15) simply do not arise (but they wouldn’t anyway since the auxiliary is severed from Voice).⁷

The ever-generous Albanian, in addition to showing synthetic non-active voice as in (1) and clitic passives with *u* (mentioned in footnote 4), also has periphrastic non-actives in the perfect, as shown in (5b) as opposed to the active (5a):

- (5) a. *Autorët kanë shkruar një dokument.*
 authors.the **have** write.prt a document
 ‘The authors have written a document.’
- b. *Një dokument është shkruar (nga autorët).*
 a document **is** write.prt (by authors.the)
 ‘A document has been written (by the authors).’

In (5), the only difference between the active and the passive is in the choice of auxiliary. Here the main verb is invariant; following Rivero (1990) and Kallulli & Trommer (2011) we take the auxiliaries to occupy an Aspect head, Perfect. Voice, here with null exponence both in the active and the passive, occupies a lower position.

We hope that the foregoing might go some way to answering Haider’s prayer. We believe that in their different ways, Albanian, English and German give converging morphological and syntactic evidence for a clausal functional head Voice, situated in a structurally “low” position in the inflectional field and very close to VP. There is much more evidence for VoiceP in the current literature; in our survey of recent work on passives (https://homepage.univie.ac.at/dalina.kallulli/downloads/Kallulli_Roberts_Passive_Revised.pdf), nearly all the works cited postulate a VoiceP despite differing significantly on a number of other important points, not least of them the structural status of the external argument in passives (on which the two present authors continue to disagree; see Roberts 1987, Kallulli 2007).

Worrying about features

One of Haider’s discontents regarding the minimalist program concerns its reliance on features. On passives, for example, he says “we learn that a sentence is passive because the voice feature of the eponymous functional head of the clause is valued “[+passive]”” (p. 14). Baldly stated

⁶ As the translation shows, the English translation is ‘should have been changed’, indicating that the highest auxiliary, the one which moves to C under V2, is the perfect “have”, *hätte*. English modals are always and only finite, in contrast with German as the non-finite *müssen* in (4) shows. English modals behave more like the German subjunctive marking seen on *hätte* here, but this difference between English and German takes too far from our central point and has no direct bearing on the similarities between the two languages regarding the Voice head.

⁷ Kallulli & Roberts (2024: 31) consider two options regarding the position of passive auxiliaries, see their (60a) and (60b); they consider that both structures may exist across languages. Here we have adopted a version of their (60b).

in this way, the adoption of the feature is hardly informative. However, if we say that the pronoun *I* is 1st-person, and capture this in our featural notation using among others, the feature [1], a similar sceptical remark could be made. But the use of the feature is intended to capture the fact that, as a value of a given head (Voice in the case of [passive]; Person in the case of [1]), this feature is in alternation with others – [passive] is one variant (kind, flavour, etc) of Voice, [1] is a variant of Person. This is just simple taxonomy.

Another feature which may be relevant here is “finite”. Again, to describe a finite clause as finite in virtue of the fact that some head in the clause be it C, T or v/V bears the feature +finite hardly seems insightful in itself. But of course we know that the finite/non-finite dichotomy is extremely important, notably in German, where V2 is characteristic of finite main clauses whilst non-finite clauses are always verb final and may be marked in addition to verbal inflection by *zu*. Furthermore, not all languages make a distinction between finite and non-finite clauses, notably Balkan Sprachbund languages, where subjunctive has historically supplanted the infinitive. So we see that such features are relevant for cross-linguistic variation, a point we return to below.

The use of formal features in the minimalist program attempts to go beyond this simple taxonomy by having the features interact in such a way as to drive derivations by “triggering movement”; there are numerous technical instantiations of this leading idea, some more sophisticated and appealing than others, but the overall ambition is clear and, we would argue, laudable: features of this kind are required for morphological taxonomy anyway, and so if we can exploit them to other syntactic ends we may be able to achieve a form of desirable ontological parsimony. How successful this is will depend on the number and nature of ancillary assumptions we need to make; Haider is rightly critical of some of these, but we disagree with him in that we see the overall goal as worth pursuing (and we believe that there has been some success over the past three decades too; but that would be another paper).

But we must concede one very important point to Haider. In several places, Haider points to the absence of a theory of features in current versions of the minimalist program: e.g. “in the absence of a theory about what a potential functional head or a potential functional feature is, anything goes anyway” (p. 17). This is unfortunately true: we have a reasonable extensional idea of what the features are (Person, Number, Case, Tense, Aspect, Mood, wh, D, Q ...), although even such lists are always incomplete, but no adequate intensional definition. A particular consequence of this is that it weakens, arguably undermines, the Borer-Chomsky Conjecture that parametric variation involves just these features. Regrettably, the Borer-Chomsky Conjecture predicts nothing about the limits to typological variation. However, in ongoing work, we are developing an alternative: that typological variation arises from the interaction of **Redundancy** and **Deficiency**, the way these notions are defined in the ongoing SFB “Language between Redundancy and Deficiency” (<https://sfb-redundancy-deficiency.uni-graz.at/en/>).⁸ We believe that this can solve the typological problem and even take us indirectly towards a solution to the deeper problem.

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⁸ The definitions of **Redundancy** and **Deficiency** given in the context of the SFB are as follows:

Redundancy: the output of an operation is insensitive to some feature specified in the input.

Deficiency: an operation that presupposes a certain feature applies to a grammatical entity that lacks it.

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