

TITLE: Passive agents: prototypical vs. canonical passives

CATEGORY: oral

Passive agents, unlike, passive subjects or verbal marking, have received relatively little typological attention. This may be attributed at least in part to the fact that overt agent phrases are often considered as a secondary diachronic development and peripheral to the passive construction itself. One reflection of this is their absence from Shibatani's (1985) passive prototype. By contrast, an overt agent is an integral feature of what has been traditionally considered to be a typical or canonical passive.

In this paper it will be shown that passives with, as opposed to without, agents also emerge as more canonical under the canonical approach to typology currently being developed by Corbett (2005) and his associates. There are two primary reasons for taking the agentive rather than the agentless passive to be the canonical construction. The first is that it is the presence and nature of the agent phrase which allows us to distinguish the passive from the impersonal, inverse, stative, anticausative and other constructions which comprise the multidimensional space of the voice continuum (see e.g. Croft 2001; Langacker 2004; Shibatani 2006). The second reason is that the existing restrictions on the expressibility of agents and the means adopted of expressing them can be shown to correlate with other features of reduced canonicity of passive constructions relating to subjecthood (the presence and nature of the subject) morphological marking of passives (the existence and type of marking used), the semantic effects associated with the construction (e.g. adversity, empathy, ability), and its overall productivity.

As the role of the agent phrase in distinguishing the passive from other constructions has been often discussed, we will concentrate on the second line of argument, i.e. on the properties of passive agents relative to other facets of the construction. Drawing on data from a sample of 300 languages with passive constructions we will argue that a passive construction is more as opposed to less canonical if the agent has the following semantic, morphological and syntactic characteristics: it is expressible overtly but not obligatorily, it is human, specific, lexical, semantically agentive and encoded as an adjunct. Our analysis will highlight the advantages of the canonical approach to typology by showing the interplay between the various features of the construction on several dimensions and demonstrating the extent to which they may be seen to converge in the canonical construction.

References

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