Modelling the syntactic ambiguity of the active vs passive impersonal in LFG

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Although the *passive* is one of the most scrutinized constructions across varying theoretical and typological perspectives, some subtypes consistently pose categorization problems, both for linguists and for speakers acquiring their mother tongue. Based on historical and synchronic data from Icelandic, Irish, Polish and Ukrainian, we argue that so-called "impersonal passives" are in principle syntactically ambiguous, and can be interpreted either as canonical passives with an "empty" [e] subject, or as impersonal actives with a null unspecified human [pro$_{arb}$] subject (see also Haspelmath 1990, who observes that "...intransitive desubjectives are indistinguishable from passives of intransitive verbs").

Transitive "non-promotional" passives are a key example. The syntactic properties of the Ukrainian *–no/to* construction (cf. Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002) show that even constructions governing accusative objects may be categorized as impersonal passives, contra Haspelmath (1990: 35) and Blevins (2003), *inter alia*. In this paper, we will discuss the on-going development of a new Transitive Impersonal construction in Icelandic (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002), and compare the syntactic properties of the Icelandic construction with the diachronic development in the Irish autonomous form and the Polish *–no/to* construction where the reanalysis has been completed. The innovative Icelandic construction takes the form in (2); compare the standard passive illustrated in (1):

(1) *Að lokum var* **stelpan** *valin í aðalhlutverkið.* **(Standard passive)**
    at end   was girl.the-NOM chosen-FEM in lead.role.the
(2) *Að lokum var valið* **stelpuna** *í aðalhlutverkið.* **(Transitive Impersonal)**
    at end   was chosen-NEUT girl.the-ACC in lead.role.the

Note that the Transitive Impersonal in (2) could be translated in either of two ways: (a) as a passive, or (b) as an active with an unspecified human (hence "impersonal") subject.

    a.   In the end, the girl was chosen for the lead role.
    b.   In the end, they chose the girl for the lead role.

The proper analysis of the new Transitive Impersonal construction has been the subject of lively debate in recent years, but there is no disagreement that a major syntactic innovation is taking place, and that the construction is rapidly gaining ground. This system-internal change is not the result of borrowing, nor is it the result of phonological change or morphological weakening.

Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir argue that the new Transitive Impersonal in Icelandic is embarking on the same path towards a syntactically active construction that has been completed for the Irish autonomous form (McCloskey 2007, Graver 2011) and the Polish *–no/to* construction (Kibort 2001, 2004) but unlike the Ukrainian *–no/to* construction (Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002; Maling 1993, 2006; *inter alia*). The contrasting syntactic behaviour of the *–no/to* construction in Polish vs. Ukrainian indicates that the readily observable data, e.g. accusative case, under-determines the analysis; it is only by looking at a wider range of syntactic properties (e.g. unaccusative verbs, agentive *by*-phrases, reflexives and other bound anaphors, and subject-oriented adjuncts) that we can determine whether the verb's agent argument is mapped onto a thematic subject position, or onto an implicit "demoted subject" oblique or adjunct. We agree with Haspelmath that "[t]he difference between passive and desubjective is of a syntactic rather than a semantic nature..." (Haspelmath 1990: 58).

The historical dimension is significant. As the Icelandic, the Irish and the Polish cases tell us, the syntactic behaviour of such constructions can change over time, and the transition from impersonal passive to impersonal active can take many centuries to complete. In Polish, accusative case in the *–no/to* construction is already occurring productively by the 15th century (Lavine 2000, Meyer 2010). For the Irish autonomous form, accusative appears on verbal objects as early as the 10th C; unaccusative verbs occur from the earliest written periods, but agentive *by*-phrases are still found as late as the 17th-18th C. Because this construction is genuinely syntactically ambiguous (Maling & O'Connor 2015), the two interpretations, together with their alternative possible syntactic analyses, can co-exist for a long time.

To model the syntactic ambiguity of the two constructions, we assume and develop further the existing LFG analyses of the basic variants of the passive construction and the active impersonal construction described in Kibort (2001, 2006). Using the existing tools of Kibort's Mapping Theory we offer the first LFG model of the non-promoting passive – it results from the combination of two operations on argument structure: passivisation (downgrading of the first, unergative argument of the predicate to oblique) and object preservation (restricting the second argument of the predicate pre-specified as [-r] in order to preserve it as a direct object). We assume that argument structure mappings such as the ones specified for passivisation, object preservation, impersonalisation and other operations provide the syntax with the correct semantic interpretation of the arguments found in syntactic valency frames of actual predicates in a given language.

Morphologically impersonalised predicates may be found with the following syntactic valency frames:

(3) a. $\text{PREDICATE}_{\text{impers}} \langle \ \text{OBJ}_{\text{pat/th}} \ \rangle$　　　　　　b. $\text{PREDICATE}_{\text{impers}} \langle \quad \rangle$

And predicates used in the non-promoting passive may be found with the following valency frames:

(4) a. $\text{PREDICATE}_{\text{pass+obj.pres.}} \langle \ \text{OBJ}_{\text{pat/th}} \ \text{OBL}_{\text{ag}} \ \rangle$　　b. $\text{PREDICATE}_{\text{passive}} \langle \ \text{OBL}_{\text{ag}} \ \rangle$

　　 a'. $\text{PREDICATE}_{\text{pass+obj.pres.}} \langle \ \text{OBJ}_{\text{pat/th}} \ \rangle$　　　　b'. $\text{PREDICATE}_{\text{passive}} \langle \quad \rangle$

If both the active impersonal and the non-promoting passive construction co-exist in a language and share the same realisation – for example due to being on a path of grammatical change from one construction to the other – the surface syntax of both unergative transitive and unergative intransitive predicates may be ambiguous between the two constructions: compare (3a-b) and (4a'-b') which have identical valency frames.

Finally, we show that the proposed argument structure models of the passive and the impersonal can handle both directions of grammatical change. In the process of change from the impersonal passive to the active impersonal (as has occurred in Polish), the omission of the oblique agent allows the agent to be re-interpreted as the PRO subject. Conversely, in the process of transition from the active impersonal to the impersonal passive (as in Kaqchikel; Broadwell & Duncan 2002), an adjunct of cause/reason could be introduced to mean 'because of *x*', initially coindexed with the agentive PRO subject, then the construction could switch to being passive.

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