



University of Zurich



**Passives around the World and in  
Southeast Asia  
A Typological and Functional Overview**

Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok  
August 20, 2010

**Mathias Jenny**

University of Zurich, Switzerland  
and  
INALCO, Paris, France

# **Organization of the presentation**

## **I. The broad picture - theory and data**

1. What is Passive? Formal and functional descriptions and explanations
2. Around the world - How is Passive encoded? How universal is Passive?

## **II. Turning to the neighborhood**

3. Southeast Asian languages - Are there really Passive constructions?
4. Discussion: Why there are (arguably) no Passives in Southeast Asian languages

# 1. What is Passive?

## Traditional (eurocentric) definition

Passive is a (morphologically marked) verb form that is used to make the (direct) object subject of the sentence and leave off or demote the original subject.

**The dogs<sub>S</sub> bit the boy<sub>O</sub>.** → **The boy<sub>S</sub> was bitten by the dog<sub>OBL</sub>.**

The Passive is usually (considered) a derived verb form, as opposed to the Active, which is considered basic.

**bite** → **be bitten**

Passive voice derives an *intransitive* verb from a *transitive* verb  
(**reduced valency**);

cf. Causative: *intransitive* → *transitive*, *transitive* → *ditransitive*  
(**increased valency**).

## Structural definition (Croft 2001)

- ▶ Active is the basic voice type.
- ▶ The English Passive can be described in contrast to the English Active as [...]
  - a. A is encoded like an Oblique (if it is expressed at all)
  - b. P is encoded like a Subject
  - c. V is morphologically distinct from V in the Active
- ▶ The English Passive is taken to be the “Universal Passive”, which is the basis for typological comparison.
- ▶ There are animacy/SAP constraints on Passives in many languages (Passive more common with P [animate] or [1st/2nd person])

## **Functional definition (Keenan and Dryer 2007)**

“Passives [...] may be considered foregrounding constructions compared with the syntactically less marked and pragmatically more neutral active.”

### ***Properties of basic Passives:***

1. no agent phrase
2. the main verb in its non-passive form is transitive
3. the main verb expresses an action, taking agent subjects and patient objects in its non-passive form

### ***Generalizations about Passives:***

1. Some languages have no passives.
2. If a language has any passives it has ones characterized as basic above; moreover, it may have only basic passives.

## Functions of Passives

### a. Pragmatic

Foregrounding of Undergoer/Patient → change of perspective

*The hunter shot a deer.*                      Perspective: Hunter > deer  
*The deer was shot by the hunter.*      Perspective: Deer > hunter

Topicalization of non-prototypical argument:

*What happened to **John**?*                      [John = Topic]  
***He** was bitten by a dog.*                      [S = Topic]  
*?A dog bit **him**.*                                  [O = Topic]

**Subjects are better topics than Objects.**

## b. Syntactic

Subject continuity, coordinate NP deletion, relativization, nominalization, etc.(language specific syntactic rules).

English (Passive)

*The dog<sub>i</sub> bit John and Ø<sub>i</sub> ran away.*

*John<sub>i</sub> was bitten by the dog and Ø<sub>i</sub> ran away.*

Dyirbal (Antipassive)

*bayi yaɾa baŋgun dʷugumbiɾu balgan badʷijnu.* [balgan ‘hit’]

‘The woman hit the man<sub>i</sub> and Ø<sub>i</sub> fell down.’

*bagul yaɾagu balan dʷugumbil balgalŋanu badʷijnu.* [balgal-ŋanu ‘hit-ANTI’]

‘The woman<sub>j</sub> hit the man and Ø<sub>j</sub> fell down.’

Active → Antipassive: **ERG** → **ABS**  
**ABS** → **DAT**

## Relativization constraint in Malagasy: Only Subjects can be relativized

\* *ny lamba izay man-asa amin'ity savony ity ny zazavavy.*  
the clothes that ACT-wash with.this soap this the girl  
intended: 'the clothes that the girl washed with this soap'

*ny lamba izay sasa-n amin'ity savony ity ny zazavavy.*  
the clothes that wash-PASS with.this soap this the girl  
'the clothes that are washed with this soap by the girl'

*ity savony ity izay an-asa-n'ny zazavavy ny lamba.*  
this soap this that INSTR-wash-PASS.this girl the clothes  
'the soap that the girl washed the clothes with'

**Similar constraints in other Austronesian languages, e.g. Tagalog and other Philippine languages => several voice constructions, not just Active and Passive.**

### c. Semantic

*The hunter shot the deer.*

*The deer was shot (by the hunter).*

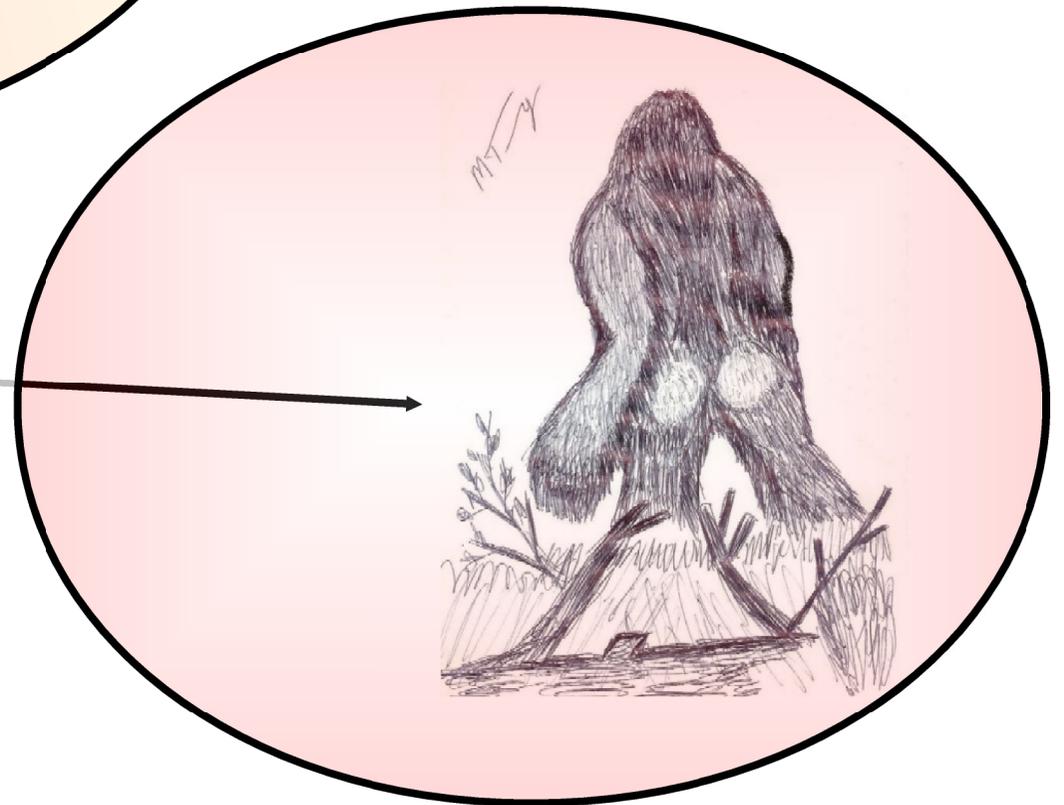
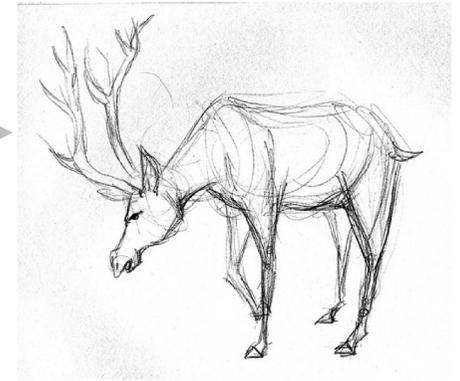
Flow of energy:	hunter > deer	deer (energy flow ended)
Event:	dynamic	potentially stative
Control:	hunter	none
Focus on:	hunter	deer

Focus is on Undergoer, i.e. end point of action

Action is by default conceived as completed

Passive often has perfective/resultative/stative meaning

**Derived Subject (= Patient) often definite/referential (language specific rules)**



A passive sentence is not always semantically identical to its active counterpart. This is the case especially when the agent phrase is not referential or definite:

*Each child was kissed by no politician.*

≠

*No politician kissed each child.* (Keenan and Dryer 2007:340)

Not all active transitive predicates have passive counterparts:

*John weighs 70 kilos.*

*\*70 kilos are weighed by John.*

# Voice in Role and Reference Grammar

Passive and Antipassive consist of two distinct, independent processes:

## 1. Privileged Syntactic Argument (PSA) modulation

*Default selection principles:*

- a. Syntactically accusative construction: highest-ranking macrorole is default choice.
- b. Syntactically ergative construction: lowest-ranking macrorole is default choice. (vVIP 282)

“PSA modulation voice: permits an argument other than the default argument to function as the Privileged Syntactic argument.”(vVIP 302)

	PSA	PSA modulation
Accusative construction	A	Passive: U → PSA
Ergative construction	U	Antipassive: A → PSA

## 2. Argument modulation

Demotion of original PSA to non-argument status (oblique or  $\emptyset$ )

“Argument modulation voice: gives non-canonical realization to a macrorole argument.” (vVIP 302)

**English Passive**

**A** → **INSTR**

**Dyirbal Antipassive**

**U** → **DAT**

Some languages combine PSA modulation and argument modulation, other have only one of the two processes, or apply the two separately in different constructions.

A specific voice construction is used to accommodate specific semantic, pragmatic or syntactic needs. It involves a specific “**syntactic template**”, which is always language or construction specific.

**cf. Constructions in Cognitive Grammar, Construction Grammars.**

## Argument modulation without PSA modulation (vVIP 295, 298)

Icelandic

*það var mikið dans-að.*

it was much dance-PPP

‘There was much dancing’

German

*Es wurde viel ge-tanz-t.*

it became much PREF-dance-PPP

**Base intr. => only one argument => no PSA modulation possible**

Ute (Uto-Aztec)

*ta'wá-ci 'u sivããtu-ci 'u-wáy pa<sub>x</sub>á-qa.*

man-NOM the goat-ACC the-ACC kill-ANT

‘The man killed the goat.’

*sivããtu-ci 'u-wáy pa<sub>x</sub>á-ta-xa.*

goat-ACC the-ACC kill-PASS-ANT

‘The goat was killed (by one).’

*sivããtu-ci 'u-wáy pa<sub>x</sub>á-xa-ta-xa.*

goat-ACC the-ACC kill-PL-PASS-ANT

‘The goat was killed (by several).’

**U remains Accusative;**

**A is not expressed but controls number agreement.**

## 2. Around the world - Passives and similar constructions

### I. “Real Passives” - morphological (synthetic)

Latin (Indo-European)

<i>amo</i>	‘I love’	→	<i>amor</i>	‘I am loved’
<i>amas</i>	‘you <sub>SG</sub> love’	→	<i>amaris</i>	‘you are loved’
<i>amat</i>	‘he/she loves’	→	<i>amatur</i>	‘he/she is loved’
<i>amamus</i>	‘we love’	→	<i>amamur</i>	‘we are loved’
<i>amatis</i>	‘you <sub>PL</sub> love’	→	<i>amamini</i>	‘you are loved’
<i>amant</i>	‘they love’	→	<i>amantur</i>	‘they are loved’

Separate endings for all persons, tenses, moods in the Passive voice. Agent oblique with preposition *ab/a* ‘by, from’, optional. Also impersonal without A: *curritur* ‘there is running going on, someone runs’, *dicitur* ‘they say, it is said’.

### Lost in modern Romance languages:

French

*je suis aimé*

Italian

*sono amato*

Ladin

*eu vegn amà/eu sun amà*

Sre (Mon-Khmer)

*cal paʔ mpon.*

wind open door

‘The wind opened the door.’

→ *mpon gə-paʔ mə cal.*

door PASS-open by wind

‘The door was opened by the wind.’

**Active unmarked, Passive marked by prefix *gə-*; Agent oblique.**

Malagasy (Austronesian)

*man-tsangana ny lai aho.*

ACT-put.up the tent 1SG.S

‘I put up the tent.’

(*man-tsangana* → *manangana*)

*a-tsanga-ko ny lai.*

PASS-put.up-1SG.NONS the tent

‘The tent is put up by me.’

**Active and Passive morphologically marked (symmetrical voice);  
Agent in Passive = non-Subject**

Swahili (Bantu)

*maji ya-meenea nchi.*

water NC-cover land

‘The water covers the land.’

→

*nchi i-meenea maji.*

land NC-cover water

‘The land is covered by water.’

**No morphological marking on V, but noun class agreement, therefore not merely topicalization. Agent expressed like DO.**

Kimbundu (Bantu)

*a-mu-mono.*

they-him-saw

‘They saw him.’

→

*nzua a-mu-mono kwa meme.*

John they-him-saw by me

‘John was seen by me.’

**Grammaticalized impersonal expression (3<sub>PL</sub> = non-referential, indefinite); Agent expressed as oblique NP.**

## Periphrastic constructions (analytic)

Latin perfect tenses: *Past participle* + ‘to be’

*amatus sum* ‘I have been loved’

*amata es* ‘you<sub>F.SG</sub> have been loved’

*amati sumus* ‘we have been loved’

## Origin of Italian and French Passive constructions.

Persian

*ali loget-ra be kar bord.*

Ali word-obj to work take

‘Ali used the word.’

→

*loget be kar reft.*

word to work went

‘Te word was used.’

**V ‘go’ as Passive auxiliary (also in e.g. Hindi; cf. Ladin ‘come’)**

## Different periphrastic constructions available

German

*Das Haus ist verkauft.*

the house is sell.PPP

*Das Haus wird verkauft.*

the house become sell.PPP

‘The house is sold.’

**be + PPP: Resultative**

**become + PPP: Dynamic**

*Er liess sich von ihr nicht einladen.* **let + REFL + INF: [+control]**

he let.PT REFL by her not invite

‘He didn’t accept her invitation’

*Er wurde von seinem Chef eingeladen.* **become + PPP: [-control]**

he become.PT by his boss invite.PPP

‘He was invited by his boss.’

## Periphrastic > synthetic

Swedish

*man värjer sig och fäkta-s.*

IMPERS defend 3.REFL and fight-REFL

‘One defends oneself and fights.’

*sig > =sig > -s*

**REFL > PASS**

*det finn-s en veg som du vill gå.*

it find-PASS a way REL 2SG want go

‘There is a way which you’ll want to travel.’

*Alternative construction:*

*jag är besegra-d, nu ger jag mig*  
1SG be.PRES defeat-PPP now give.PRES 1SG.SBJ 1SG.REFL

‘I am defeated, now I give in.’

**be + PPP = Passive; REFL = Reflexive**

## II. Alternative strategies (not Passive)

Kru (Niger-Congo): *no Passive available*

*tò pō slā ná.*

Toe build house DEF

‘Toe built the house.’

*ī pō slā ná.*

3PL build house DEF

‘They built the house.’ ~ ‘The house was built.’

Tongan (Austronesian): *Passive or reduced Active?*

*na'e.tamate'i ( 'e 'tevita) 'a koliate.*

killed                      ERG David      ABS Goliath

‘David killed Goliath.’ (without ERG: ‘Goliath was killed.’)

Hebrew (Semitic): *Passive available, but not always chosen*

*ganvu li et ha-mexonit.*

stole(3PL) to.me DO the-car

‘They stole my car.’ ~ ‘My car was stolen.’

Oneida (Iroquian): *unspecified Actor*

*úkhaʔ ok waʔ-ukw-alahsátho-ʔ.*

PART PART FACT-UNSP.SBJ.1OBJ-kick-PUNCT

‘Someone kicked me.’ ~ ‘I was kicked.’

**Agent not expressed.**

Taba (Austronesian): *encoded as “no agent”*

*i n=bes niwi.*

3SG 3SG=husk coconut

‘She husked the coconut.’

*niwi ta-bhes do.*

coconut NO.AGENT-husk REAL

‘The coconut has been husked.’

*cf.*

*ta-tagil yak.*

NO.AGENT-walk 1SG

‘I’m wandering around (with no destination in mind).’

***ta-* on transitive V marks ARG as U, on intransitive V marks non-agency of S.**

### 3. Southeast Asia - are there Passive constructions around?

#### Traditional descriptions - Thai

E.g. Pallegoix's Grammar (1850)

Passives in Thai are formed by use of the auxiliary *tôη*:

*khâa tôη tii*

1      pass    beat

'I am beaten.'

**Also:**      'I must beat.'

Auxiliary *tôη* was consequently replaced by less ambiguous *thùuk*, which more recently has been giving way to *doon*.

*tôη* still present in fixed expressions such as *phûu tôη hăa*, *phûu tôη sŏηsăy*

Same basic meaning of *tôη*, *thùuk*, *doon* (different nuances):

**'come into contact with something without intention or control'**

**Similar “auxiliary construction” in other SEA languages, e.g. Mon:**

*dɛh tɛh klo kit.*

3 touch dog bite

‘He was bitten by a dog.’

*tɛh* ‘come into contact with something without volition/control’

> ‘be affected by’, ‘be subject to’ [+ NP or clause, free]

> ‘do without control (over act or result)’ [postverbal, bound]

> ‘do without volition’ > ‘have to do’ [preverbal, bound]

> ‘do correctly, achieve the goal (without direct control)’ [postv., free]

*klo kit tɛh dɛh. dɛh tɛh ʔa rɔŋ-həʔuy. dɛh ləə tɛh klo miʔ.*

dog bite touch 3 3 touch go hall-medicine 3 tell touch OBL mother

‘A dog bit him. He had to go to the hospital. He inadvertently told his mother.’

***tɛh* indicates that an act is carried out without direct control or volition. Cf. Taba ‘no-agent’-expressions.**

## Are these constructions Passive?

*Pragmatic* foregrounding of patient - usually done by topicalization

Thai      *khâaw kin môt léew.*  
rice      eat    all    NSIT  
‘The rice has been eaten up.’

Mon      *lòc kòh ɽuə pòh toə ya?*  
text    MEDL    1SG    read    finish NSIT  
‘I have finished reading this book.’

Burmese (child comes crying to his mother and she asks what happened)  
*khwè kai? tɛ.*  
dog      bite    NFUT  
‘A dog bit [me].’

*Syntactic* PSA modulation, argument modulation - free omission of arguments in SEA languages. Subject continuity not necessary in coordinate structures for argument deletion.

Mon *klɔ<sub>i</sub> kəh plən kəh say kəh hədiəŋ Ø<sub>i</sub> krìp.*  
dog MEDL again MEDL bee MEDL chase run  
'The dog, in turn, the bees chased him and he ran away.'

**The dog is U of *hədiəŋ* and S of *krìp*. Superficially similar to ergative construction (cf. Dyirbal), *but*:**

*klɔ<sub>i</sub> kəh lɛ hədiəŋ Ø<sub>i</sub> krìp ʔa.*  
dog MEDL ADD chase run go  
'The dog also chased it and ran [after it].'

**The dog is A of *hədiəŋ* and S of *krìp*, i.e. accusative structure.**

Thai            *khon thán lăay mây hěn khûn BTS lɔɔy.*  
people INCL many NEG see go.up BTS EMPH  
'Many people don't seem to use the Skytrain.'

*BTS mây hěn mii khon khûn lɔɔy.*  
BTS NEG see have people go.up EMPH  
'The Skytrain seems **to be used** by no one.'

**Only Subject can be raised to matrix clause in English; No such constraint in Thai; Thai construction rather topicalization, not raising:**

?? *wan.níi pen wan rêek thîi BTS mây hěn mii khray khûn lɔɔy.*  
today be day first REL BTS NEG see have who go.up EMPH  
'Today is the first day the the Skytrain seems to be used by no one.'

*Semantic* not neutralized, semantic content fully present

**Thai *thùuk*, Mon *tèh* constructions only available if the Patient is really affected by the activity, usually negatively:**

Thai ?? *kêew bay níi thùuk láan léew.*  
glass CL PROX touch rinse NSIT  
'This glass has been washed.'

?? *bâan thùuk kwàat léew.*  
house touch wipe NSIT  
'The house has been cleaned.'

*mùu.bâan phûak kəbòt thùuk kwàat.láan lèew.*  
village group rebel touch wipe.out NSIT  
'The rebels' village has been wiped out.'

**Thai:** Grammaticalized *thùuk*-constructions more frequent in formal (written) registers, especially translations; hardly used in colloquial speech.

When used in colloquial Thai, *thùuk* is hardly semantically neutral; Agent phrase can occur only as Subject of activity verb, not as Oblique NP.

\*<sup>?</sup>*dèk thùuk phôw mĕe rák.*

child touch father mother love

‘The child is loved by her parents.’ (possible if sarcastic or ironic)

*dèk thùuk (mǎa) kàt (\*dooy mǎa)*

child touch (dog) bite ( by dog)

‘The child was bitten by a dog.’

**=> Construction is bi- rather than monoclausal with derived PRED**

## Other Passive-like constructions in Thai

*nǎŋsǔuu lēm níi khǐən múə sǎmǎy ʔəyútthəyaa.*  
book CL PROX write when period Ayudhya  
'This book was written during the Ayudhya period.'

*phâap níi wâat dooy sǐnləpin hèn châat.*  
picture PROX paint by artist of nation  
'This painting was done by a national artist.'

**V can be used either as transitive (“Active”) or intransitive (“Passive”).**

Also:

*nǎŋsǔuu thîi ʔàan léew khuuun hây hôŋ.səmùt.*  
book REL read NSIT return give library  
'returned the books that have been read to the library.'

**Are these underlying Passive forms?**

## What about other transitive-intransitive readings, like

*mêε ʔùn kεεη wáy.*

mother warm curry deposit

‘The mother kept the curry warm.’ (‘made it warm’)

*yaam pít prətuu tɔɔn sì thûm thúk wan.*

guard close door period four evening.hour every day

‘The guard closes the gates every night at ten pm.’ (‘makes it closed’)

*khǎw ʔòɔk nǎŋsǔuu láay lêm léew.*

3<sub>HUM</sub> move.out book many CL NSIT

‘He has published many books.’ (‘made them come out’)

## Are these unmarked Causative constructions?

## What about unmarked ‘Causative-Passive’ constructions:

*prûŋ.nii phǒm pay tham fan*  
tomorrow 1m go do tooth

‘Tomorrow I’ll go to see the dentist.’ (the dentist fixes my teeth)

*mûə.waan pay nûət maa.*  
yesterday go knead come

‘Yesterday I went for a massage.’ (the masseuse gave me a massage)

### Cf. Mon

*ŋuə.yèh teh ʔuə ʔa klon ɲìək.*  
tomorrow TOP 1SG go do tooth

### but

*nù kənɛʔ nɔʔ ʔuə ʔa kɒ ɲèh ɲət.*  
from yesterday PROX 1SG go give person knead

## Explanation of Thai (and other SEA) constructions

Verbs are underspecified in terms of semantic roles of arguments, i.e. they can be interpreted as **basic activities, causatives or passives**; the semantics of the verb and the arguments, together with the discourse and extralinguistic context assigns the roles (*p̀̀xt prətuu ~ prətuu p̀̀xt*).

Verbs in general are underspecified in terms of **aspectuality (*aktionsart*)**: Many verbs express an activity or a (resulting) state (*̀̀n kεεη ~ kεεη ̀̀n*) (cf. Jenny 2001).

### Usually:

the first argument of the activity reading is Agent/Actor

the only argument of the state reading is Patient/Undergoer

### With free omission of arguments, many expressions are ambiguous:

*dèk thîi thàay.rûup sèt léew ̀̀ok pay rɔɔ khâaη.nôɔk.*  
child REL take.picture finish NSIT move.out go wait outside

‘The children **whose pictures have been taken**

**or:** **who have taken pictures** go and wait outside.’

## Common construction in SEA languages: X [enter.into.contact.with] Y

with X = experiencer;

Y = object (NP) or event (expressed by a full clause)

Mon *ʔuə tɛh pɔ̀ŋ.*

1s touch bomb

‘I was affected by a bomb.’

*ʔuə tɛh kɔp kit.*

1s touch dog bite

‘I was affected by a biting dog.’

This construction emphasizes the fact that X is subject to/affected by Y; by implicature this is unpleasant to X (unpleasant experience is better news than pleasant). No argument modulation (Agent remain Subject), no reduction of valency (*khǎw thùuk khəmoj khûn bâan* ‘His house was broken in.’). PSA modulation? Patient becomes S of matrix clause, not base predicate. Matrix and embedded clause: **not verb serialization.**

This construction was taken to translate English Passives into Thai. It is not itself Passive, though there are some functional similarities. Its use is increasing in formal language, where it might eventually grammaticalize into a real Passive. This does not seem to be the case in colloquial varieties.

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