

Passives with intransitive verbs: typology and distribution

Nataliia Neshcheret, Alena Witzlack-Makarevich

University of Kiel

Introduction: It is often taken for granted that passivization is a process operating on transitive verbs. Passives of intransitive verbs are an attested, but typologically not sufficiently studied phenomenon. As has been observed in the studies of Blake (1990), Blevins (2003), Perlmutter (1978), Postal (1986), passivization of intransitive verbs is subject to restrictions which are based on the semantics of the intransitive predicate, e.g. their being unergative or unaccusative. Perlmutter (1978) predicts that passivization of unaccusative verbs is impossible cross-linguistically (see examples (1a) and (1b) for passivization of unergative and unaccusative verbs respectively in Turkish). This paper considers empirical evidence for the prediction of Perlmutter (1978) by undertaking an exploratory analysis of passivization of intransitive verbs.

(1) Turkish (Altaic; Turkey; Perlmutter 1978: 177)

a. unergative verb:

Bu hapishaneden sık sık kaçılır.
this prison often RDPL run.away
'From this prison it is often run away.'

b. unaccusative verb:

**Bu hapishaneden sık sık kaybolunur.*
this prison often RDPL disappeared
'From this prison it is often disappeared.'

Methods: In the present study passivization constraints on intransitives were analyzed in a sample of 87 languages which have a basic passive construction. Three main types of languages were set up based on the topic under investigation: languages with passivizable a) unergative verbs, b) unaccusative verbs, and c) both unergative and unaccusative verbs (i.e. without a split in intransitive verbs). Examples from languages belonging to the first group provide evidence supporting the hypothesis of Perlmutter (1978), passivization patterns in languages from the two other groups violate it.

Results: Passivization of intransitive verbs appeared to be a widespread phenomenon: it is attested in more than a half of the languages in the sample and is genealogically wide-spread. The results of the study provide evidence for passivization of both unergative and unaccusative verbs. On the whole, around 16% of all languages with passives in the sample allow passivization of unergative verbs, 4.6% of unaccusative, and 15% of both subclasses of intransitive verbs. The majority of the languages with passivizable intransitive verbs (around 56%) exhibit a split in the syntactic properties of intransitive verbs, allowing either only unergative or only unaccusative verbs to passivize.

Conclusions: The results of the study suggest that it is more common for languages to allow passivization of intransitive verbs rather than to prohibit it. The prediction of Perlmutter (1978) does not hold for at least 20% of the languages in the sample (see example (2a) for grammatical passivization of an unaccusative verb in Hungarian and (2b) for an ungrammatical passive of an unergative verb).

(2) Hungarian (Uralic; Hungary; Kenesei et al. 1998: 284)

a. unaccusative verb:

Le vol-t hull-va egy levél.
down be-PST.3SG fall-SCVB a leaf
'There was a leaf fallen down.'

b. unergative verb:

**Énekel-ve vol-t.*
sing-SCVB be-PST.3SG
'There was sung.'

Methods: We came across languages without a split in the passivizability of intransitive verbs, that is, when passivization of both unergative and unaccusative verbs is possible, but also for languages, where the only

subclass of intransitive verbs that can undergo passivization is that of unaccusative verbs. On the other hand, restrictions on passivization are based on the semantics by large: if a language allows passivization only for a group of intransitive verbs, then these will be either unergative or unaccusative predicates.

Abbreviations: 3SG 3 person singular, PST past tense, RDPL reduplication, SCVB simultaneous converb.

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