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Noncanonical Passives: A Typology of Voices in an Impoverished Universal Grammar

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Abstract

Noncanonical passives crosslinguistically exhaust the space of possible variation, supporting an approach whereby Universal Grammar is underspecified for the characteristics of voice and the properties of any particular construction are learned through experience. Languages considered include Passamaquoddy and Ojibwe (Algonquian); Dutch and Icelandic (Germanic); Ukrainian (Slavic); Welsh and Irish (Celtic); Hindi (Indo-Aryan); Acehnese, Indonesian, and Mangarai (Malayo-Polynesian); Sason Arabic (Arabic); Bemba and Kirundi (Bantu); Lithuanian (Baltic); Turkish (Turkic); and Mandarin (Sinitic).

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the field of theoretical syntax has seen an outpouring of detailed research on less- and understudied languages. This has substantially enriched our understanding of the typological possibilities in human language, as well as their consequences for theoretical analysis. In this article, I focus on voice constructions that are distinct from the default active voice yet deviate from the canonical properties of passive voice; I refer to these as noncanonical passives. Important to the discussion is the distinction between two types of subjects (McCloskey 1997). The thematic subject has a characteristic semantics, usually an agent, and a characteristic syntactic position low in the clause, within the verb phrase; henceforth, I refer to it as the agent. In contrast, the grammatical subject is a syntactic requirement for clauses to have subjects, and is associated with a high position in the clause. In a typical active clause, the agent will raise to become the grammatical subject, but other elements may become the grammatical subject, notably the thematic object; henceforth, I refer to it as the theme. The properties that I take to be characteristic of canonical passives are the following:

- Agent demotion. The agent is semantically present but is not syntactically present as a noun phrase in its characteristic thematic position. Instead, the agent is either interpreted as existential ('someone') or associated with a 'by'-phrase.
- Theme promotion. The theme raises from its low syntactic position associated with the interpretation as a theme to the grammatical subject position.
- Morphological marking. The verbal morphology is distinct from the active voice.

In examining noncanonical passives across languages, we find that a language may exhibit a voice construction with any subset of these properties—all logical possibilities are attested. This finding lends support to a radically underspecified innate component of language, which places no limits on possible voice constructions.

The following discussion identifies, in turn, constructions that exhibit each subset of the three properties of canonical passives.

2. TWO OUT OF THREE

I begin the discussion in this section by investigating the existence of noncanonical passives that exhibit two out of the three properties of canonical passives. In the first subsection, I describe constructions that lack only agent demotion.

2.1. Lacking Agent Demotion

In this subsection, I consider constructions that pattern as canonical passives only for the second and third properties. Specifically, a theme syntactically starts out in its canonical thematic position and then raises to the grammatical subject position, and the verbal morphology is distinct from the active; unlike canonical passives, however, the agent is syntactically present as a noun phrase in its canonical thematic position.

The first instantiation of this cluster of properties I discuss here is the inverse construction, as found in many Algonquian languages (see, e.g., Klaiman 1992 for an overview); the inverse contrasts with the direct construction, which is a simple active. The inverse is typically morphologically marked on the verb, through a morpheme and/or through distinct agreement morphology. This morphology, broadly speaking, encodes that the theme is of lower rank on the animacy hierarchy than the agent, although languages differ in the specific configurations that trigger the inverse.

Indeed, since both the agent and theme are syntactically present in their thematic positions, some analyses have treated the phenomenon as purely morphological (see, e.g., Aissen 1989, Béjar & Rezac 2009). However, there is clear evidence for at least some Algonquian languages—as demonstrated, for example, by Bruening (2001, 2005, 2009) for Passamaquoddy (Algonquian: Maine, USA; New Brunswick, Canada)—that the inverse involves promotion of the theme, that is, syntactic movement of the theme to a grammatical subject position above the agent. The key examples involve clauses in which both the subject and the object are third-person animates, but one, the proximate, patterns as higher on the animacy hierarchy than the other, the obviative. (Proximate corresponds roughly to a higher degree of topicality.) Bruening applies a standard binding test that distinguishes syntactic argument (A-)positions, including the thematic subject/object positions and the grammatical subject position, from nonargument (A'-)positions, including positions associated with topicalization, *wb*-question formation, and relativization. Specifically, quantificational noun phrases must bind any associated pronoun from a higher (c-commanding) A-position (for discussion of the underlying theoretical principle, see, e.g., Reinhart 1983, Ruys 2000, Büring 2004). Thus, in the direct, a quantificational agent occupies a higher A-position than the theme,¹ so the agent can bind into the theme; a quantificational theme cannot bind into the agent, however, since the theme never occupies an A-position higher than the agent:

- (1a) Yatte wen (‘)-nomiy-a-l [NP skitapiy-il nenuw-a-c-il].
 each who 3-see-DIR-OBV man-OBV IC.KNOW-DIR-3 CONJ-PART.OBV
 ‘Each person_i saw the man he_i knows.’
 (Bruening 2005, p. 12)
- (1b) [NP Skitap musqitaham-ac-il] ‘-koti-tqon-a-l psi=te wen-il.
 man hate-3 CONJ-PART.OBV 3-FUT-arrest-DIR-OBV all=EMPH someone-OBV
 ‘A man that he_{*i} hates will arrest everyone.’
 (Bruening 2005, p. 13)

In the inverse, however, a quantificational theme can bind into the agent, indicating that it has raised to occupy an A-position above the agent, presumably the grammatical subject position (see Bruening 2001, 2005, 2009 for further argumentation and details):

- (2a) Yatte wen pilsqehsis ‘-kis-cem-ku-l w-ikuwoss-ol.
 each who girl 3-PFV-kiss-INV-OBV 3-mother-OBV
 ‘Her_i mother kissed each girl_i.’
 (Bruening 2005, p. 13)
- (2b) Psi=te wen ‘-kosiciy-uku-l w-ikuwoss-ol.
 all=EMPH who 3-know-INV-OBV 3-mother-OBV
 ‘His_i mother knows everyone.’
 (Bruening 2005, p. 13)

Oxford (2019) also argues for movement of the theme to an A-position above the agent in the Algonquian inverse, focusing on Oji-Cree (Algonquian: Ontario and Manitoba, Canada) on the basis of similar data. In example 3a the verb ‘kiss’ is direct and the quantificational agent binds into the theme, whereas in example 3b the verb ‘kiss’ is inverse and the quantificational theme binds into the agent:

¹Indeed, the agent occupies two A-positions higher than the theme: the thematic subject position and the grammatical subject position.

- (3a) kahkina ihkwewak otoci:ma:wa:n otawa:shi:mowa:n.
 all women.PROX kiss.3>3.DIR their.child.OBV
 ‘All the women_i (PROX) kissed their_i child (OBV).’
 (Oxford 2019, p. 9)
- (3b) kahkina ihkwewak otoci:mikowa:n otawa:shi:mowa:n.
 all women.PROX kiss.3>3.INV their.child.OBV
 ‘Their_i child (OBV) kissed all the women_i (PROX).’
 (Oxford 2019, p. 9)

Such effects have been reported in other Algonquian languages as well but have been attributed to the proximate/obviative distinction, rather than the direct/inverse (see, e.g., Dahlstrom 1986, Brittain 1999.) Oxford (2019) disambiguates these options for Oji-Cree by using an embedded clause with two obviative arguments (the matrix subject being proximate). The direct versus inverse contrast remains. In example 4a, the verb ‘kiss’ appears in the direct form and the quantificational obviative agent binds into the obviative theme; in example 4b, in contrast, the verb ‘kiss’ appears in the inverse form and the quantificational obviative theme binds into the obviative agent:

- (4a) Tepit oki:-wa:pama:n [kahkina ihkwewan e-oci:ma:wa:c
 David.PROX saw.3>3.DIR [all women.OBV kiss.3>3.DIR
 otawa:shi:mowa:n].
 their.child.OBV]
 ‘David (PROX) saw [all the women_i (OBV) kiss their_i child (OBV)].’
 (Oxford 2019, p. 12)
- (4b) Tepit oki:-wa:pama:n [kahkina ihkwewan e-oci:mikowa:c
 David.PROX saw.3>3.DIR [all women.OBV kiss.3>3.INV
 otawa:shi:mowa:n].
 their.child.OBV]
 ‘David (PROX) saw [their_i child (OBV) kiss all the women_i (OBV)].’
 (Oxford 2019, p. 12)

Such data support an analysis of the inverse in Oji-Cree, in which the thematic object is promoted to an A-position above the thematic subject. Further research is needed to probe such disambiguating data in other Algonquian languages in which the basic contrast has been observed.

Returning to the main thread, the Algonquian inverse is the first example of a construction that has two out of three of the properties of the canonical passive: theme promotion and morphological marking. The construction lacks demotion of the agent, however; thus, the literature on the inverse is unanimous in emphasizing that the construction is not a (canonical) passive.

Another example of a noncanonical passive that lacks agent demotion is found in the Austronesian language family. There are two broad instantiations. The first, nonactor voice, involves distinct morphological marking and theme promotion, but whether the theme is promoted to a grammatical subject position or to an A'-position (e.g., topic or focus) remains controversial. The literature is rich—see, for example, Kroeger (1993), Schachter (1976, 1996), Voskuil (1996), and Richards (2000) on the Tagalog (Austronesian: Philippines) nonactor voice. The second, object voice, as found in many languages of Indonesia, clearly involves promotion of the theme to an A-position but typically involves a lack of morphological marking (this absence being sometimes, but not always, distinct from the active). Therefore, I defer discussion of the object voice to Section 3, below.

2.2. Lacking Promotion of Theme

In this subsection, I consider two distinct instantiations of noncanonical passives that exhibit demotion of the agent and morphological marking but lack promotion of a theme. Both are commonly referred to as impersonal passives.

The first subtype is well known and involves passivization of an unergative. As unergatives are intransitive verbs lacking an object, the passive of an unergative cannot involve object promotion. Example 5a illustrates for Dutch (Germanic: The Netherlands; glosses added) and 5b for Icelandic (Germanic: Iceland):

(5a) Er wordt hier door de jonge lui veel gedanst.
there becomes here by the young.people a.lot danced
'It is danced here a lot by the young people.'
(Perlmutter & Postal 1984, p. 107)

(5b) Það var talað hátt.
it was talked loudly
'There was loud talking.'/'Someone spoke loudly.'
(Sigurðsson 2011, p. 149)

The second subtype involves passivization of a transitive in which the theme remains a grammatical object, for which I adopt the descriptive label "grammatical object passive" (Legate 2014). Perhaps the first well-studied instance of a grammatical object passive comes from Ukrainian (Slavic: Ukraine), where the lexical verb is marked with *-no/-to* participial morphology and co-occurs with an auxiliary (for discussion, see, e.g., Sobin 1985, Billings & Maling 1995, Lavine & Freidin 2002, Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Lavine 2013, Legate 2014). In the grammatical object passive in example 6a, note the presence of accusative case morphology on the theme, the lack of verbal agreement with the theme, and the presence of a demoted agent in a 'by'-phrase. A canonical passive is provided in example 6b for comparison:

(6a) Cerkvu bulo zbudovano Lesevym.
church.F.ACC be.PST.N build.PTCP Lesiv.INS
'The church was built by Lesiv.'
(Sobin 1985, p. 658)

(6b) Cerkva bula zbudovana v 1640 roc'i.
church.F.NOM be.PST.F build.PTCP.F.SG in year
'The church was built in 1640.'
(Sobin 1985, p. 654)

The construction is more widely attested, however. A much-discussed case comes from an innovative construction in Icelandic; while there is debate on the status of the construction as a passive or an impersonal (see Section 3), it is now clear that it can exhibit agent demotion (for discussion and argumentation, see, e.g., Maling & Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, Maling 2006, Eythórsson 2008, Jónsson 2009, Sigurðsson 2011, Legate 2014, Sigurðsson & Stefánsdóttir 2014). Example 7a illustrates; the theme 'me' bears accusative case, is definite and yet appears low in the structure (low definite grammatical subjects of canonical passives are ungrammatical), and fails to trigger agreement. Example 7b illustrates a canonical passive for comparison:

(7a) Það var barið mig.
it was beaten.DFLT me.ACC
'I was beaten.'
(Eythórsson 2008, p. 173)

- (7b) Ég var barinn.
 I.NOM was beaten.M.NOM
 ‘I was beaten.’
 (Eythórsson 2008, p. 174)

Although ‘by’-phrases are seldom used in Icelandic with low themes, even in the canonical passive, Sigurðsson & Stefánsdóttir (2014) demonstrate that speakers do spontaneously provide a ‘by’-phrase interpretation of an ‘af’-phrase with the grammatical object passive, even though this preposition is ambiguous between ‘by’ and ‘from’ and so the ‘by’ interpretation is not forced:

- (8) Nýlega var keypt mikinn kvóta af
 recently was bought.DFLT much.M.ACC.SG quota.M.ACC.SG from/by
 útgerðarmanninum Aðalsteini Guðmundssyni.
 fishing.vessel.owner.the A. G.
 ‘Recently, a large quota was bought from/by the fishing vessel owner A.G.’
 (Sigurðsson & Stefánsdóttir 2014, p. 317)

Grammatical object passives are also found outside the Slavic and Germanic language families. In the Celtic language family, the verb form traditionally referred to as the autonomous can have a grammatical object passive structure, at least in Welsh and a high register of Irish (e.g., Thorne 1993, Noonan 1994, Nolan 2006, Ó Sé 2006, Borsley et al. 2007, McCloskey 2007, Legate 2014). Example 9 illustrates a high-register grammatical object passive in Irish, and example 10 illustrates a grammatical object passive in Welsh:

- (9) Is ag an Uachtarán a ceapfar breithiúin na Cúirte Uachtaraí
 COP at the president COMP appoint.IMPERS.FUT judges the court supreme
 ‘It is by the President that judges of the Supreme Court will be appointed’
 (Ó Sé 2006, p. 109)
- (10) Torrwyd y cwpan (gan Megan).
 break.PST.IMPERS the cup by Megan
 ‘The cup was broken by Megan.’
 (Borsley et al. 2007, p. 283)

See the references cited above for arguments that the themes in such examples remain grammatical objects. For Irish, these include (lack of) agreement, word order, and case marking on pronouns; for Welsh, these include (lack of) agreement, clitic distribution, and mutation patterns.²

This construction also exists in Hindi (Indo-Aryan: India). As is well documented, Hindi exhibits differential object marking, whereby the grammatical object may be marked with *ko*, which is otherwise the dative case marker (for conditions on the presence of *ko* on themes, see, e.g., Mohanan 1994, Aissen 2003). The passive may retain this morphology, resulting in a grammatical object passive (see Mahajan 1995 for discussion of the construction). Example 11b reproduces

²I have added glosses for the Irish example. My preliminary consultant work on Welsh indicates that this construction is structurally ambiguous, patterning for transitives as a grammatical object passive and for intransitives as an impersonal (see the discussion of Turkish in Section 3.3, below, for a closely related pattern). The Welsh construction is also sometimes described as high register, although my consultant finds it stylistically unmarked.

one of the arguments that the theme remains a grammatical object, from the ability to antecede anti-subject-oriented pronouns:³

(11a) raajaa dwaaraa saare šerō ko maar diyaa gayaa
king by all tigers DAT kill give.PFV.M.SG go.PFV.M.SG
'All the tigers in the jungle were killed by the king'
(Mahajan 1995, p. 294)

(11b) siitaa_j dwaaraa salmaa_i ko uske_{i/*j} ghar bhej diyaa gayaa
Sita by Salma DAT her home send give.PFV.M.SG go.PFV.M.SG
'Salma was sent to her home by Sita'
(Mahajan 1995, p. 294)

In summary, there is ample evidence for the existence of noncanonical passives with morphology distinct from the active and with the agent demoted, but without promotion of the thematic object.

2.3. Lacking Morphology Distinct from Active

Finally, I discuss passives that are noncanonical only in lacking morphology distinct from the active. Two exemplars come from Austronesian languages. The first is Acehnese (Malayo-Polynesian: Aceh Province, Indonesia), as analyzed in my earlier work (Legate 2012, 2014) (see also Lawler 1977). A basic pair follows; notice that the verbal morphology is identical, consisting of a voice prefix cross-registering the features of the agent (see Legate 2012 for an analysis):

(12a) Uleue nyan di-kap lôn.
snake that 3_{FAM}-bite me
'The snake bit me.'
(Legate 2012, p. 497)

(12b) Lôn di-kap lé uleue nyan.
I 3_{FAM}-bite by snake that
'I was bitten by the snake.'
(Legate 2012, p. 497)

Given the morphological identity of the two verb forms, the noncanonical passive had previously been analyzed as an active, with the preposition *lé* 'by' interpreted as an ergative case marker (Durie 1985). Legate (2012) provides multiple arguments against such an analysis, demonstrating that the *lé*-phrase patterns as a prepositional phrase for topicalization patterns, *wh*-question strategies, and an inability to float quantifiers, as well as optionality. Here I reproduce an additional, interpretive argument. When the agent is absent, an active analysis would expect the agent

³Mahajan (1995) argues that the agent in the 'by'-phrase functions as a grammatical subject; however, the arguments are not convincing. The first argument involves reflexive binding but does not control for logophoric uses of the word *apne* 'self.GEN' (for recent discussion of logophora, see Charnavel 2019). The second is the impossibility of binding anti-subject-oriented pronouns, but it is not demonstrated that the subject orientation is specific to only grammatical subjects, rather than also being sensitive to agents. Two others involve ability to control, which is not a valid test for subjecthood (see, e.g., van Urk 2013 for related discussion). The final argument shows that a 'by'-phrase is easier to extract from an island than the adjunct 'at home'; see Rizzi (1990) for related discussion.

to be interpreted as a (null) pronoun (i.e., pro drop), and hence show the definite interpretation expected of pronouns. A passive analysis, by contrast, would expect the missing agent to be interpreted as an existential ‘someone/something’. The following sentences show that in the absence of a ‘by’-phrase, the interpretation of the agent is indeed indefinite. The first example continues with a specific statement of ignorance, which would have been infelicitous on a definite pronoun interpretation, equivalent to ‘It bit the child, #but I don’t know by what.’ The second example shows that the missing agent cannot be identified with a salient referent from the discourse, ‘that snake’; instead, a pronominal inside a ‘by’-phrase is required for that interpretation:

- (13a) Aneuk miet nyan ka i-kap, tapi lôn hana lôn-tupeue lé peue.
 child small that PFV 3FAM-bite but I not 1SG-know by what
 ‘The child was bitten, but I don’t know by what.’
 (Legate 2012, p. 510)
- (13b) Kalon uleue nyan! Aneuk miet nyan i-kap #(lé jih).
 look snake that child small that 3FAM-bite by it
 ‘Look at that snake! The child was bitten #(by it).’
 (Legate 2012, p. 510)

As for the theme, I argue (Legate 2012) that it patterns as a grammatical subject in its ability to be controlled, in lacking Condition C reconstruction effects, and for quantificational binding (see discussion of this test in Section 2.1). I illustrate quantificational binding here. Examples 14a and 14b demonstrate that in the active voice, a quantificational agent binds into the theme, but a quantificational theme does not bind into the agent. Example 14c illustrates that in the passive, by contrast, a quantificational theme does bind into the agent, and hence must have raised to an A-position above the agent:

- (14a) Karap mandum gurèe geu-peu-runoe mured geuh.
 almost all teacher 3POL-CAUS-learn student 3POL
 ‘Almost all the teachers_i taught their_i students.’
 (Legate 2012, p. 505)
- (14b) Gurèe jih geu-peu-runoe karap mandum mured.
 teacher 3FAM 3POL-CAUS-learn almost all student
 ‘His/her_{k/ni} teacher taught almost all the students_i.’
 (Legate 2012, p. 505)
- (14c) Karap mandum mured geu-peu-runoe lé gurèe droe-jih.
 almost all student 3POL-CAUS-learn LE teacher self-3FAM
 ‘Almost all the students_i were being taught by their_i own teacher.’
 (Legate 2012, p. 506)

For a second Austronesian exemplar, see the work by Arka & Kosmas (2005), who argue that Manggarai (Malayo-Polynesian: Flores, Indonesia) exhibits an unmarked passive. A basic active-passive pair is provided below:

- (15a) Aku cero latung=k
 1sg fry corn=1sg
 ‘I fry/am frying corn’
 (Arka & Kosmas 2005, p. 88)

- (15b) Latung hitu cero l=aku=i
 corn that fry by=1SG=3SG
 ‘The corn is being fried by me’
 (Arka & Kosmas 2005, p. 88)

More common, perhaps, are embedded unmarked passives. I provide an example below, from Akkuş’s (forthcoming) discussion of causatives in Sason Arabic (Arabic: Turkey) (see also, e.g., Pitteroff 2015 for German). Akkuş (forthcoming) demonstrates that ‘make’ in Sason Arabic can embed a passive, where the passive verb appears in a bare infinitival form. When ‘make’ is itself active, promotion of the object is less clear because the embedded theme is licensed as an object by ‘make’. When ‘make’ is also passivized, however, the theme raises to become the matrix grammatical subject, behaving as a grammatical subject for neutral word order, the impossibility of clitic left-dislocation, and subject agreement (as evident in the second example):

- (16a) kemal sa xassil potad mı mara-ma pir-e.
 Kemal made.3M wash.INF clothes by woman-a old-F
 ‘Kemal had the clothes washed by some old woman.’
 (Akkuş forthcoming, p. 21)
- (16b) potad in-so xassil mı mara-ma pir-e.
 clothes PASS-made.3PL wash.INF by woman-a old-F
 ‘Clothes were made to be [washed by some old woman].’
 (Akkuş forthcoming, p. 21)

In summary, noncanonical passives with any two out of three of the canonical properties of passives are attested.

3. ONE OUT OF THREE

Having demonstrated that noncanonical passives may exhibit any two out of the three core properties of canonical passives, I turn in this section to noncanonical passives that exhibit only one of these properties.

3.1. Only Demotion of Agent

In this subsection, I consider noncanonical passives in which the morphology is nondistinct from the active, the theme is not promoted, and yet the agent is demoted as in a canonical passive.

The first exemplar comes from Bemba (Bantu: Zambia) (reinterpreting Kula & Marten 2010).⁴ Canonical passives in Bemba are marked with *-w*, from Proto-Bantu **-u*, and the theme triggers grammatical subject agreement (example 17a);⁵ in contrast, the noncanonical passive has no passive morpheme, and the grammatical subject agreement slot is filled with invariant class two agreement (example 17b); and class two encodes a human plural grammatical subject in the active (example 17c):

- (17a) úmu-náni w-alí-ípík-w-a na supuuni
 3-food SBJ3-PST-cook-PASS-FV with 9.spoon
 ‘The food was cooked with a spoon’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 127)

⁴Thank you to Nancy Kula for assistance with Bemba data.

⁵Kula & Marten (2010, p. 116) note that the canonical passive is becoming “increasingly restricted to more marginal grammatical contexts.”

(17b) bá-álí-poos-a ify-ákulya ku bá-ána
 SBJ2-PST-throw-FV 7-food by 2-children
 ‘The food was thrown away by the children’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 118)

(17c) abá-àna bá-álí-poos-a ify-ákulya
 2-children SBJ2-PST-throw-FV 7-food
 ‘The children threw the food away’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 118)

Note that despite the human plural subject agreement morphology, this does not pattern as an impersonal with a third-person indefinite human subject ‘they’ (as in ‘They say it’s going to rain’); the agent may be expressed in a ‘by’-phrase and need not be human:

(18a) bá-álí-ly-a ify-ákulya ku mu-mbúlu
 SBJ2-PST-eat-FV 7-food by 3-wild.dog
 ‘The food was eaten by the wild dog’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 119)

(18b) bá-álí-tób-a ibééndé ku cii-mu-ti
 SBJ2-PST-break-FV 9.bowl by 7-3-tree
 ‘The pounding mortar was broken by the tree’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 119)

Thus, the agent is indeed demoted. Nevertheless, Kula & Marten’s (2010) argumentation shows that the theme remains a grammatical object. The theme may optionally raise, but when it does it triggers object agreement:⁶

(19) ify-ákulya bá-álí-í-poos-a ku bá-ána
 7-food SBJ2-PST-OBJ7-throw-FV by 2-children
 ‘The food, it was thrown away by the children’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 118)

Furthermore, this optional raising behaves as A’-movement, not A-movement. It does not show the locality restrictions of A-movement to the grammatical subject position,⁷ whereas raising of the theme in the canonical passive does. Thus, the ditransitive verb ‘give’ forms an asymmetric canonical passive in which the recipient can raise to the grammatical subject position (example 20a) but the theme cannot (example 20b). In the noncanonical passive, in contrast, the raising is discourse-related A’-movement; thus, either the recipient (example 21a) or the theme (example 21b) can optionally raise:

(20a) umw-ána á-álí-péel-w-a in-dáláma (kulí Nsáma)
 1-child SBJ1-PST-give-PASS-FV 10-money (by 1.Nsama)
 ‘The child was given money (by Nsama)’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 124)

⁶The object agreement is optional for inanimates and obligatory for animates.

⁷Interestingly, once it has raised, the theme can undergo relativization in the pattern normally reserved for grammatical subjects. Kula & Marten (2010) take this as indicating that the theme has an intermediate status between grammatical object and grammatical subject. I take this rather to suggest that the “subject” relativization is based on highest DP, rather than subjecthood (see, e.g., Cheng 2006 for related research analyzing purported subject relativization strategies in several Bantu languages in terms of too-local movement).

(20b) * in-dáláma shí-alí-péel-w-a umw-áana (kulí Nsáma)
 10-money SBJ10-PST-give-PASS-FV 1-child by 1.Nsama
 ‘Money was given to the child (by Nsama)’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 124)

(21a) umw-áana bá-alí-mu-péél-a in-dáláma kulí Nsáma
 1-child SBJ2-PST-OBJ1-give-FV 10-money by 1.Nsama
 ‘The child was given money by Nsama’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 125)

(21b) in-dáláma bá-alí-péél-a umw-áana kulí Nsáma
 10-money SBJ2-PST-give-FV 1-child by 1.Nsama
 ‘Money was given to the child by Nsama’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 125)

The theme also patterns as an object for *wh*-questions: Grammatical subjects must be clefted, whereas questioned objects may remain in situ (Kula & Marten 2010). In the canonical passive, the theme is the grammatical subject and so must be clefted when questioned and cannot remain in situ (example 22a); in contrast, the theme in a noncanonical passive can be questioned in situ (example 22b):

(22a) * i-léé-nw-iw-a í-nshi?
 SBJ.9-PROG-drink-PASS-FV 9-what
 ‘What’s being drunk?’
 (N. Kula, personal communication)

(22b) bá-pépéek-é í-nshi ku mu-mbúulu?
 SBJ2-chase-PFV 9-what by 3-wild.dog
 ‘What was chased by the wild dog?’
 (Kula & Marten 2010, p. 121)

I conclude that Bemba exhibits a noncanonical passive characterized by agent demotion but neither thematic object promotion nor morphological marking distinct from the active.

For an additional exemplar, see Šereikaitė (2020a,b) for a construction in Lithuanian (Baltic: Lithuania) that she terms “active existential.” The verb exhibits active morphology and the theme is a grammatical object, yet she provides extensive argumentation that the agent is demoted—existentially closed, as in a passive.⁸ I provide examples below demonstrating that the active existential agent cannot bind either a reflexive (example 23a) or a pronoun (example 23b), thus patterning with the agent of a passive (examples 24a and 24b).⁹ This is explained if in both constructions the agent is not syntactically present as a noun phrase and so cannot bind (see Šereikaitė 2020a,b for further details and argumentation):

(23a) Lyg šaud-ė dien-ą mišk-e *su (sav-o ginkl-u).
 as.if shoot-PST.3 day-ACC forest-LOC with self-GEN gun-INS
 ‘It seems that someone_i fired shots in the woods during the day (*with his_i own gun).
 (Šereikaitė 2020a, p. 23)

⁸This construction raises an additional point of variation which I have not focused on in this review: In some constructions, including the Lithuanian active existential, a demoted agent cannot be syntactically realized in a ‘by’-phrase.

⁹A minority of speakers allowed a pronoun with the passive agent, which Šereikaitė (2020a) hypothesizes is due to accommodation.

- (23b) Vali-*q* kvieči-*a_i* i j-*o_{k/}*i* biur-*a*.
 Valius-ACC invite-PRS.3 to his-GEN office-ACC
 ‘Someone_{*i*} is inviting Valius to his_{*k/*}*i office.’
 (Šereikaitė 2020a, p. 28)
- (24a) Ši-*ame* fabrik-*e* darbuotoj-*ai* (*yra*)
 this-LOC factory-LOC employee-NOM.M.PL be.PRS.3
 rūšiuoja-*m-_i* (*pagal sav-*o_i* įsitikinim-*us*).
 divide-PRS.PASS.PTCP-NOM.M.PL according.to self-GEN belief-ACC.PL
 ‘In this factory, the employees are being divided (*according to his own [the agent’s] beliefs).’
 (Šereikaitė 2020a, p. 22)
- (24b) Darbuotoj-*ai* (*yra*) rūšiuoja-*m-_i* pagal
 employee-NOM.M.PL be.PRS.3 divide-PRS.PASS.PTCP-NOM.M.PL according.to
 j-*o_{k/}%i* įsitikinim-*us*.
 his-GEN belief-ACC.PL
 ‘The employees are divided according to his [%the agent’s] beliefs.’
 (Šereikaitė 2020a, p. 27)

Examples of noncanonical passives with only subject demotion that are limited to embedded contexts are also found; see Akkuş (forthcoming) on Sason Arabic indirect causatives, as well as Sigurðsson & Wood (2020) and Legate (forthcoming) on Icelandic indirect causatives.

3.2. Only Promotion of Theme

In this subsection, I consider noncanonical passives that exhibit only promotion of the theme, but neither demotion of the agent nor morphological marking distinct from the active.

The first construction, which I refer to as object voice following recent literature, appears in a class of Malayo-Polynesian Austronesian languages, including several varieties of Indonesian/Malay (e.g., Chung 1976, Guilfoyle et al. 1992, Sneddon 1996, Arka & Manning 1998, Cole et al. 2008, Yanti 2010, McKinnon et al. 2011), Balinese (Wechsler & Arka 1998; Arka 2003, 2008), varieties of Javanese (Connors 2008, Sato 2012), Acehnese (Legate 2014), and Madurese (Jeoung 2017), among others. The verb in the object voice is bare, in contrast with the canonical passive, which bears a designated prefix. The active voice also bears a designated prefix, but this prefix is usually optional either generally or in some contexts/registers, hence my treatment of this construction as lacking distinct passive morphology. A basic triple is provided for Indonesian below. The object voice appears first, followed by the active and the passive for comparison:¹⁰

- (25a) Buku itu dia baca
 book that he/she read
 ‘The book, (s)he read it’
 (Arka & Manning 1998, p. 2)
- (25b) Amir mem-baca buku itu
 Amir ACT-read book that
 ‘Amir read the book’
 (Arka & Manning 1998, p. 1)

¹⁰Since English lacks an object voice, the construction is variously translated as a passive or an active with a topicalized theme.

- (25c) Buku itu di-baca oleh Amir
 book that PASS-read by Amir
 ‘The book was read by Amir’
 (Arka & Manning 1998, p. 2)

This construction has been extensively investigated, and its properties are well established. The agent is not demoted but is syntactically generated as a noun phrase in the agent position and remains in situ. Thus, it appears below all verb phrase external material and adjacent to the verb. The demoted passive agent, by contrast, appears in an optional ‘by’-phrase positioned along with other prepositional phrases. Illustrative data from Acehnese follow; in the object voice (example 26a), the agent is obligatory and any other positioning for it is ungrammatical; in the passive voice (example 26b), the agent is optional and freely ordered with the other prepositional phrases:

- (26a) Sie teungoh Fatimah tagun keu lôn bak dapu.
 meat PROG Fatimah cook to 1SG at kitchen
 ‘Meat is being cooked by Fatimah for me in the kitchen.’
 (Legate 2014, p. 51)
- (26b) Sie ji-tagun lé Fatimah keu lôn bak dapu.
 meat 3FAM-cook by Fatimah to 1SG at kitchen
 ‘The meat was cooked by Fatimah for me in the kitchen.’
 (Legate 2014, p. 26)

The theme is promoted to the grammatical subject position. For example, in Acehnese a raised quantificational theme can bind into the agent (example 27a), indicating that it has raised to an A-position, and it can be controlled PRO (example 27b), indicating that it is the grammatical subject:

- (27a) Tieptiep aneuk mak_i droe-jih_i lindong.
 every child mother self-3FAM protect
 ‘Every child_i is protected by his/her_i mother.’
 (Legate 2014, p. 50)
- (27b) Aneuk miet nyan_i di-tém PRO_i dokto peu-ubat.
 child small that 3FAM-want doctor CAUS-medicine
 ‘The child wants to be treated by the doctor.’
 (Legate 2014, p. 50)

Another possible exemplar comes from OVS constructions in Bantu languages; see, for example, Ndayiragije’s (1999) discussion of Kirundi (Bantu: Burundi). In the OVS construction, the raised theme in example 28a triggers agreement, as it does in the passive in example 28b. The OVS construction patterns with the active in example 28c, however, in lacking the passive suffix and in that the agent is not demoted—notice that the agent appears in an optional ‘by’-phrase in the passive but not in the active or the OVS construction:

- (28a) Ibitabo bi-á-guze Petero.
 books 3PL-PST-buy.PFV Peter
 [Lit.: ‘Books bought Peter.’]
 ‘Peter (not John) bought books.’
 (Ndayiragije 1999, p. 412)

- (28b) Ivyo bitabo bi-á-ra-guz-u-e (na Petero).
 those books 3_{PL}-PST-F-buy-PASS-PFV by Peter
 ‘Those books were bought (by Peter).’
 (Ndayiragije 1999, p. 412)
- (28c) Petero a-á-ra-guze ibitabo.
 Peter 3_{SG}-PST-F-buy.PFV books
 ‘Peter bought books.’
 (Ndayiragije 1999, p. 412)

While Ndayiragije (1999) argues that the theme moves to an A-position, which would indeed make the OVS construction an example of this type of noncanonical passive, other researchers have considered it to be A'-movement related to topichood (for related discussion, see, e.g., Henderson 2006, 2011; Marten & van der Wal 2014; and references therein). I leave this issue to further investigation.

3.3. Only Morphological Marking

Finally, I consider constructions that exhibit only passive morphology but do not involve either agent demotion or theme promotion. I do not consider the well-attested phenomenon whereby the passive is marked with more general nonactive morphology that also appears on related non-passive constructions, including unaccusatives, middles, and reflexives, although these might also fall under this category (see, e.g., Haspelmath 1990, p. 36).

Instead, I highlight three particularly significant cases. The first comes from Irish, as discussed by McCloskey (1996), and involves the perfective passive, which is morphosyntactically passive and semantically perfective. A basic example is as follows:

- (29) Tá teach ceannaithe agam.
 is house bought by.me
 ‘I have bought a house.’
 (McCloskey 1996, p. 254)

Remarkably, in some varieties this perfective passive may be used on a subtype of unaccusatives that McCloskey (1996) terms “salient unaccusatives,” whose only argument is embedded inside a prepositional phrase. Thus, their perfective passive does not involve any argument demotion or promotion at all, as they lack any nominal argument. Example 30 illustrates an active salient unaccusative, and example 31 a perfective passive salient unaccusative:

- (30) Bhí ag éirí réasúnta maith liom i líníocht.
 was rise.PROG reasonable well with.me in drawing
 ‘I was doing fairly well in drawing.’
 (McCloskey 1996, p. 248)
- (31) go bhfuil éirighthe leis sa n-obair
 C is rose with.him in.the work
 ‘that he has done well in the business’
 (McCloskey 1996, p. 257)

Thus, in such examples, the passive morphology functions only to encode the perfective aspect. This is an important reminder that passive morphology may be co-opted for other uses in the language that may be unrelated to argument structure.

The second example comes from Turkish, as discussed by Legate et al. (forthcoming). This work demonstrates that the passive suffix in Turkish marks a (canonical) passive only on verbs that have a structural case marked object in the active. For all other verb types, the verb bearing passive morphology patterns as an impersonal; the highest argument is a null impersonal pronoun, and there is no argument demotion at all. Legate et al. (forthcoming) provide extensive argumentation for this analysis; I reproduce two arguments here. Example 32a illustrates the unergative verb ‘dance’ suffixed with the passive morpheme; its null agent behaves as a syntactically present impersonal pronoun in that it can bind a reciprocal benefactive. Example 32b, in contrast, illustrates the transitive verb ‘cook’ with the passive morpheme. It is indeed passivized, with its theme raised to the grammatical subject position; its null agent behaves as demoted, not syntactically present as a noun phrase, in that it cannot bind a reciprocal benefactive ‘for each other’:

- (32a) Düğün-ler-de birbirleri için dans ed-il-ir.
 wedding-PL-LOC each.other for dance do-PASS-AOR
 ‘During weddings, people dance for each other.’
 (Legate et al. forthcoming, p. 16)
- (32b) Pılav bayram-da (*birbirleri için) pişir-il-di.
 pilaf holiday-LOC each.other for cook-PASS-PST
 ‘During the holiday, pilaf was cooked (*for each other).’
 (Legate et al. forthcoming, p. 16)

The following examples show the same contrast for depictive secondary predicates. In example 33a, the impersonal agent of the unergative verb ‘run’ is syntactically present as a noun phrase that can be modified by the depictive ‘drunk’. In example 33b, in contrast, the demoted passive agent of the transitive verb ‘discuss’ is not syntactically present as a noun phrase and so cannot be modified by ‘drunk’:

- (33a) Sahil-ler-de, hep sarhoş koş-ul-ur.
 beach-PL-LOC always drunk run-PASS-AOR
 ‘On beaches, one always runs drunk.’
 (Legate et al. forthcoming, p. 16)
- (33b) *Böylesine önemli karar-lar asla sarhoş tartış-il-ma-malı.
 such important decision-PL never drunk discuss-PASS-NEG-must
 ‘Decisions of such importance should never be discussed drunk.’
 (Legate et al. forthcoming, p. 16)

This exemplar is important in that the passive and the impersonal are often appropriate in similar discourse situations and may be easily confused when the impersonal pronoun is null (see, e.g., Malchukov & Siewierska 2011 on the typological and historical relationships between passives and impersonals). Recent research suggests that morphological identity of passives and impersonals within a single language may be more common than previously believed [see, e.g., Tan & Köhler 2019 on Sakha (Turkic: Sakha, Russia), Šerekaitė 2020b on Lithuanian].

Finally, I consider an additional important subtype of noncanonical passive that exhibits only morphological marking distinct from the active; I focus on the Mandarin instantiation, the *bei*-passive (see, e.g., Feng 1995, 2012, Ting 1998, Huang 1999; see also Bruening & Tran 2015 for the Vietnamese *bi*-construction and for more general related discussion).¹¹ Example 34 illustrates a basic example:

¹¹I focus on the use of *bei* in the so-called long passive, which includes an overt agent.

- (34) Zhangsan bei Lisi da-le.
 Zhangsan BEI Lisi hit-PFV
 ‘Zhangsan was hit by Lisi.’
 (Feng 2012, p. 118)

The literature has converged on an analysis whereby the grammatical subject, here ‘Zhangsan’, is not generated as the theme of the lexical verb, here ‘hit’, but rather as a subject interpreted as perhaps an experiencer or an affected entity. Embedded under *bei* is a predication formed by A'-movement of a null element moved from the theme position of the lexical verb, ‘hit’. The embedded verb phrase is active, with the agent generated as the agent of the embedded lexical verb. The embedded predication is thus akin to that of a relative clause. Therefore, famously, the relationship between the matrix subject and the associated embedded theme position may be long distance (example 35).¹² Note that the English translation does not reflect the structure:¹³

- (35) jiaoshi_i bei op_i Laoshi pai John zhao ren qu sao t_i le.
 classroom BEI teacher send John find person go sweep PFV
 ‘The classroom was cleaned by someone who the teacher sent John to find.’
 (Feng 2012, p. 131)

Thus, this type of noncanonical passive is structurally passive-like only in its distinct *bei* morphology. Indeed, if this morpheme itself had an independent use as a lexical verb, then such a noncanonical passive would possess none of the core properties of a canonical passive.¹⁴

In conclusion, I have now identified at least one noncanonical passive representing every subset of the three canonical properties of passives. The discussion in this review has been organized around these three core properties of the canonical passive. Expanding beyond these three would yield many additional points of variation, but would require discussion extending well beyond the scope of this article.

4. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

In this review, I have shown that active-passive is neither a dichotomy nor a simple cline. The crosslinguistic landscape of noncanonical passive constructions is exceptionally rich, with the three characteristic properties of the canonical passive: (a) agent demotion, (b) theme promotion, and (c) morphological marking, varying independently. While the existence of noncanonical passives has been observed for some time (see, e.g., Chomsky 1980), theoretical analyses in different frameworks have proposed necessary links between agent demotion and theme promotion.¹⁵ For example, Postal (1986) and Perlmutter & Postal (1984) propose that agent demotion must be triggered by promotion of the theme, and therefore posit promotion of a null dummy theme for impersonal passives of intransitives (for criticism of this approach, see, e.g., Comrie 1977, Blevins 2003); this strategy is inapplicable for the grammatical object passives discussed in Section 2.2 and for the

¹²I have added glosses to this example.

¹³*‘The classroom was the teacher sent John to find a person to go and sweep (it)’ perhaps captures the flavor in English better.

¹⁴See Li (2007) for the historical development of *bei* from a lexical verb meaning ‘suffer, receive’ in the pre-Qin period.

¹⁵On morphological marking, see, for example, Haspelmath (1990, p. 27), who claims that “passive constructions without passive morphology do not exist.”

constructions discussed in Section 3.1, since these exhibit an overt theme but the theme does not undergo promotion.¹⁶ Another body of literature assumes that theme promotion is necessary when the agent is demoted,¹⁷ either because the passive morpheme absorbs the accusative case (e.g., Chomsky 1980, Jaeggli 1986, Baker et al. 1989) or because accusative case marking on the theme is dependent on the presence of a higher noun phrase (e.g., Burzio 1986, Marantz 1991, Baker 2015). The constructions discussed in Sections 2.2 and 3.1 counterexemplify this generalization as well. From another perspective, literature on locality would lead us to expect that agent demotion is necessary for theme promotion, since the theme should not be able to raise past the A-position of the agent to the grammatical subject position, which is also an A-position (for related discussion, see Rizzi 1990, Chomsky 2000, Collins 2005).¹⁸ The constructions in Sections 2.1 and 3.2, however, exhibit theme promotion without agent demotion.

Overall, our theory must allow these properties of the (canonical) passive to vary independently, rather than positing necessary dependencies between them. This is indeed achieved on an approach wherein there is little or no innate information specific to voice in the language faculty, but rather the properties of each voice construction must be learned on the basis of evidence. For an impoverished language-specific innate component, see, for example, Fitch et al. (2005), who argue on independent grounds that Universal Grammar consists only of the operation Merge, the operation that builds binary-branching structure (see also Yang 2016 for a compatible learning model).

This richness of empirical possibilities should not, however, make us complacent. On the contrary, it should remind us that careful testing is required for each construction in each language to disentangle the theoretical descriptive possibilities.

Finally, I observe one exception to the full attestation of possible voice constructions: the absence of what I call the “antiactive,” a construction in which the theme, instead of the agent, is merged in the higher thematic position, and the agent, instead of the theme, is merged in the lower thematic position. I leave to future research the issues of whether the apparent absence of antiactives is illusory, is explained through more general properties of human cognition, is explained through the language-learning process, or constitutes an additional property of human language that must be specified in Universal Grammar.

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¹⁶One goal of this approach was to rule out the crosslinguistic absence of passives of passives. See Legate et al. (forthcoming) for the demonstration that this absence is real but explained on an analysis whereby the passive involves not a rule converting the active to the passive but rather a distinct syntactic structure built independently from the active.

¹⁷Modulo expletive constructions in which the theme is linked to the grammatical subject position rather than raising to occupy it.

¹⁸The last of these proposes otherwise unmotivated verb phrase movement to circumvent the issue (for criticism, see Bowers 2010, chapter 2; Legate 2014, pp. 64–82).

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Errata

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