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Chapter 8

The discourse function of the passive

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0. Introduction

The number of studies on the use and function of the passive - both studies on individual modern languages and typological ones - is rapidly increasing. Within the framework of Functional Grammar Dik's initial ideas on the passive construction have been elaborated by Bubenik (1983) and De Vries (1983). In this article I will describe certain aspects of the so-called personal passive by using the notion of perspective that figures in Dik's definition of the function Subject (for example 1978: 92). I will use as an illustration examples from classical Latin. My article is organized in the following way: I start with some statistics in order to show that the frequency of the passive is higher than most studies would suggest. Next I make a few observations on the presence, or rather absence, of Agent expressions in passive sentences. I will argue that Svartvik's (1966) distinction of agentive and non-agentive passive sentences is useful, as can be shown on the basis of certain properties of the sentences involved. I then proceed to a discussion of the function of the passive in discourse and reject two current views, viz. the view of the passive as a device for either discontinuity (for example in Givón (ed. 1983)) or continuity (already to be found in Ernout 1908).

1. Statistics

In Latin the number of passive verb forms (both finite and non-finite) has been computed at ca. 16% of all verb forms (Flobert 1975). The percentage does not differ markedly from the figures given for modern languages such as German and English. There is considerable variation between various authors and types of text. I will come back to this later on. I see no reason to doubt the value of the calculations one finds in the literature. However, in my opinion it is not sufficiently clear what criterion has been used in establishing the frequency of the passive. With one exception (Kilby 1984: 58) all studies I have seen compute the frequency of the passive verb forms on the basis of the total number of verb forms in a certain corpus, which, in my view, is not very fair: there is not much sense in comparing passive verb forms with, for example, the forms of

the verb to be or Latin *esse* which, formally speaking, have active endings. A verb like *esse* simply does not allow passive forms, so there is no sense in calling *est* ('(he) is') an active form. The real frequency of the passive can only be established by comparing the passive forms of verbal lexemes which allow both an active and a passive form (that is to say two- or three-place predicates) with the active forms of the same class of verbal lexemes. I will give an impression of the frequency of passive verb forms in two Latin texts,¹ comparing the actual number of finite passive verb forms which might be transformed into active verb forms with active verb forms which might reasonably be transformed into passive verb forms. By 'reasonably' I mean, among other things, that I have left out of account imperative and second person so-called adhortative subjunctive forms which cannot be transformed into passive verb forms (a passive imperative does not exist in Latin). Participial phrases have also been left out of account because the Latin verb system is quite defective in this respect. The procedure of course implies decisions about which verbs may occur in the active and the passive and about the notion of 'passive' itself: for example, are gerund forms to be regarded as passive forms? I have decided to leave these out of account, because they are not simple passive forms, to say the least. An examination of ca. 100 finite clauses in a comedy by Plautus (*Mostellaria*, with some additional cases from the *Miles Gloriosus*) and in Book I of Cicero's philosophical treatise *De Republica* yielded rather interesting results: whereas the overall percentage of passive verb forms is about 10% of all verb forms in Plautus (Flobert 1975), the result of my approach is that lexemes that allow both passive and active forms do in fact occur as passive verb forms in 18% of the cases concerned. The figure is even remarkably higher in the case of Cicero. According to Flobert the frequency of passive verb forms in Cicero's philosophical works is ca. 30%. I computed that no fewer than 43% of the finite verb forms of those lexemes that do allow both active and passive are in the passive voice. Now, although the frequency of passive verb forms in Cicero's *De Republica* may be, and in fact is, higher than in other types of text, it is nonetheless obvious that in certain circumstances the selection of the passive is not particularly marginal.

The percentages given above illustrate a fact that is mentioned in several studies on the variation in frequency in various authors and various texts. For Latin Ernout (1908) observed a considerable increase of the use of the passive from archaic Latin (including Plautus) onwards, a phenomenon for which he suggested a diachronic explanation (see below). In modern languages the passive construction occurs much less frequently in everyday speech than in scholarly

texts, for example. To my knowledge, Granger (1983) is the only study that tries to explain why differences in frequency are found. According to her, colloquial conversation as opposed to non-colloquial text types like 'discussion' and 'oration' contains relatively few activity verbs as opposed to mental process verbs which in many languages do not passivize easily (1983: 318). Hence there is a low number of passive verb forms. In other words, the subject matter of the discourse influences the probability of occurrence of passive verb forms in certain types of text. I have not been able to establish this for Latin (as yet).

Another fact, which has recently been noted for English, concerns the uneven distribution of passive verb forms within a specific text. Weiner and Labov (1983) have argued on the basis of an extensive corpus study that the chance of a passive verb form occurring does not so much depend on factors such as Subject continuity but rather on the voice of the preceding verb form: if a passive verb form precedes, the chance of a following verb form being passive is remarkably higher than if an active verb form precedes. In other words, passives seem to form clusters. A first impression is that, in Latin too, the distribution of passive and active verb forms is quite uneven. This might suggest that not only subject matter and text type are involved, but also the way of presenting the subject matter. I will come back to this later.

2. Agent expressions

In Latin, as in English and German, the Agent - where Agent is used in a broad sense for the first argument of a two- or three-place predicate - of an action or process may be expressed in passive sentences, but normally this does not actually happen. Conversely, if the Agent is explicit it may be omitted without causing the remaining expression to be ungrammatical. In fact, the number of instances of obligatory Agents in passive sentences given in the literature² is very limited and these are open to other explanations. Examples like German

- (1) a. Das Dach wurde von vier Säulen getragen
 the roof was by four columns carried
 'The roof was supported by four columns'
 b. *Das Dach wurde getragen

and

- (2) Das Tal wird von einem Fluss durchzogen
 the valley was by a river traversed
 'The valley was traversed by a river'
 b. *Das Tal wird durchzogen

are mentioned without any context, which may explain their oddity. The optionality of Agent expressions may be seen in various ways with respect to the relationship between active sentences and their passive counterparts. For example one might hold that passives are derived predicates with certain characteristics of their own to which optionally an Agent satellite may be added (for arguments in favour of assuming a difference in meaning between active and passive sentences see Keenan 1981 and Pinkster 1984). Flobert (1975: 564) and others regard the passive as an intransitivization device.³ In my view the overwhelming absence of Agent constituents should neither be neglected nor used as an argument too rashly. One ought to distinguish at least two types of absence of Agents: the first type is constituted by those cases in which no specific Agent is involved, the other by those cases in which a specific Agent is involved which may be identified on the basis of the information presented by the context and/or situation but need not be mentioned explicitly. I follow Svartvik's (1966) terminology in distinguishing 'non-agentive' and 'agentive' passive sentences, the latter category being divided into 'agentful' and 'agentless' sentences. These distinctions may be exemplified by the following sentences:

- (3) *siquidem quid agatur in caelo quaerimus*
 if at least what nom act_{3sg} pass in heaven abl seek_{1pl} act
 ('Since we are now seeking what is going on in the heavens',
 Cic. Rep. 1, 19) - Non-Agentive: compare *fiat* ('is happening')
- (4) *haec pluribus a me verbis dicta sunt*
 these more abl by me abl words abl say_{3pl} pass
 ('I have treated this matter at considerable length',
 Cic. Rep. 1, 12) - Agentive-agentful: compare the active translation in the Loeb-edition
- (5) *commemorare eos desino, ne quis*
 mention pres inf act they acc stop_{1sg} act lest someone nom
se aut suorum aliquem praetermissum queratur
 self acc or his (own) gen someone acc omit perf inf pass complain_{3sg} act
 ('I will refrain from mentioning their names, lest someone complain of the omission of himself or some member of his family',
 Cic. Rep. 1, 1) - Agentive-agentless: the Agent ('by me') can be inferred from the main clause)

It is not always easy to decide whether a passive sentence is non-agentive or agentless. However, a decision can be arrived at by examining first whether the predicate involved may occur in the active voice at all with the same meaning - which is not always easy either -, and, second, whether it is possible to identify the Agent on the basis of the information contained in the context and/or sit-

uation. Latin has a marginal alternative for non-agentive passive sentences in sentences with an active third person plural construction, exemplified by (6), but (3) and (6) differ at least in one respect: in (6), just as in the case of English *they*, the unspecified Agent is always human. This need not be the case in the third person singular passive construction (example (3)).

- (6) *Xenocratem ferunt respondisse*
 Xenocrates acc say_{3pl} act answer perf inf act
 ('Xenocrates is said to have replied', Cic. Rep. 1, 3)

The non-agentive passive sentences, therefore, cannot simply be regarded as an alternative for active sentences. It might, therefore, be the case that Subjects of non-agentive passive sentences have other properties than Subjects of agentive passive sentences and resemble, in this respect, for example, Subjects of one-place process predicates. I will come back to this later. On the other hand, the absence of Agent constituents in agentive passive sentences need not surprise us at all. In active sentences in Latin, too, the Agent is quite frequently not expressed if its identity is obvious on the basis of the information contained in the context and/or situation. Anyway, the Agents might have the same properties in both agentful and agentless sentences. They might even have the same properties as Agents of active sentences.

An application of the distinction between agentive and non-agentive passive sentences to the texts of Plautus and Cicero shows that these texts do not differ very much as to the number of non-agentive passive sentences - in both about half of the number of passive sentences. They do differ, however, and very markedly so, as to the presence of the Agent in agentive passive sentences. Whereas in Cicero the Agent is expressed in 39 out of 46 sentences, the proportion in Plautus is just the other way around: 7 out of 49 sentences (Table 7):

(7) Explicitness of Agents

	Agentful	Agentless
Cic.	39	7
Plt.	7	42

The difference in frequency of expression of the Agent between Plautus (and other archaic Latin texts) and Cicero (and his contemporaries) has been used as evidence

for a diachronic development by Ernout (1908) and Calboli (1962). Ernout suggests, in fact, that in prehistoric times the passive was a means of impersonalisation which did not allow the expression of an Agent, that is as some sort of basic passive in the sense of Keenan (1981). However, it is very unlikely that the difference in frequency is due to a diachronic development. The explanation must be sought in the difference between the types of text involved. Whereas Plautus deals primarily with interhuman activities between Agents and Goals ('Goal' also used in a broad sense) present on the stage, Cicero's *De Republica* contains a discussion, and Cicero's introduction to it, about heavenly bodies and principles of government, the 'presence' of which depends entirely on the discussion partner mentioning them. This is confirmed by the fact that both in active and in passive sentences the percentage of inanimate Agents is higher in Cicero than in Plautus (Table 8):

(8) Percentages of inanimate Agents

	Pass.	Act.
Cic.	32%	13%
Plt.	9%	8%

3. The function of the passive

Functional explanations of the use of the passive can be found from antiquity onwards. One such explanation is that the passive expression, especially the so-called impersonal one, is used in order to avoid mentioning the Agent, i.e. the 'demotion' function of the passive or the function of 'deperspectivization' of the Agent (De Vries 1983). Another explanation is that the passive is used in order to avoid ambiguity (Ernout 1908). As a matter of fact, the material I have used shows a remarkably higher number of passive Accusative and Infinitive constructions than active ones. This might result from a desire to disambiguate formally identical accusative Subjects and Objects in this construction. Furthermore, there are several explanations which all have in common that they refer to certain properties of the Subject Goals of passive sentences. Ernout (1908) suggests that the passive is used in order to continue the Subject of the preceding sentence or clause (compare Svartvik 1966). In several studies on the German passive it has been shown that Subject Goals of passive sentences usually contain old information (are 'thematic') whereas Agents in passive sentences contain

information (are 'rhematic') (compare Pape-Müller 1980: 124; Schoenthal 1976: 115). A more or less opposite view about the Subject Goals of passive sentences can be found in studies in Givón (ed. 1983). My data, as I will now explain, point in a different direction.

In order to answer the question whether the passive may be viewed as a device for either establishing continuity or interrupting continuity, I have compared two properties of Subject Goals in passive sentences with those of Object Goals and Subject Agents in the active sentences studied in the Cicero text while limiting myself to passive and active sentences as defined in section 1.⁵ The properties involved are 'identifiability' in the preceding context, or in the situation (one might also speak of 'givenness') and - in cases where the Subject Goal is co-referential with a constituent in an immediately preceding clause or sentence - the syntactic function of this constituent. From this comparison it becomes clear whether Subject Goals are primarily Goals (and therefore resemble Object Goals in active sentences), or primarily Subjects (and therefore resemble Subject Agents in active sentences). The results can be found in (9):

(9) Givenness and syntactic function (1)

	Passive (92 sentences)	Active (100 sentences)	
	Subject Goal	Subject Agent	Object Goal
Known from context or situation	53%	77%	48%
Subject in preceding clause or sentence	23%	39%	12%

The table shows, among other things, that the Subject Goal in passive sentences is known from the preceding context or situation in 53% of the sentences involved and fulfils the function of Subject in the preceding clause or sentence in 23% of the sentences involved. On the basis of these data it might be inferred that - at least in this text - the Subject Goal occupies a position in between Subject Agent and Object Goal. Passivization, therefore, might seem to produce, or at least to correlate with, discontinuity of givenness and particularly of Subject.

This conclusion would fit in with the result of the examination of a variety of other texts, where, however, my students and I did not limit ourselves to passive and active sentences in a narrow sense, as defined above. However, if one re-arranges the material and compares only the agentive passive sentences with the agentive active sentences the result is quite different, witness Table (10):

(10) Givenness and syntactic function (ii)

	Agentive passive (47 sentences)	Agentive ⁶ active (98 sentences)	
	Subject Goal	Subject Agent	Object Goal
Known from context or situation	62%	79%	48%
Subject in preceding clause or sentence	38%	40%	12%

In agentive passive sentences the Subject Goal is much more like the Subject Agent as far as continuity is concerned than like the Object Goal. The 'bad' result of Table (9) on the other hand derives from the fact that Subject Goals in non-agentive sentences are highly discontinuous. So the answer to the question whether passivization is a continuity or a discontinuity device must be that it is both. I will elaborate on this further on.

Which then are the Goals that 'profit', so to speak, most from the fact that they appear as Subjects instead of as Objects? Table (11) shows the frequency of combination of Agents and Goals with the features animate/inanimate in the agentive active and agentive passive sentences:

(11) Animate/inanimate combinations

Agentive active

Agent	Goal	
	animate	inanimate
animate	15%	72%
inanimate	2%	11%

Agentive passive

Agent	Goal	
	animate	inanimate
animate	11%	55%
inanimate	21%	13%

Table (11) shows, among other things, that in 72% of the active sentences involved the Agent is animate and the Goal inanimate. In the passive sentences the percentage of this combination is lower (55%). On the other hand, the combination of inanimate Agents and animate Goals is more frequent in passive than in active sentences. This proves that a major effect of passivization is the presentation of animate Goals as Subjects of their sentences. This seems to confirm the idea found in the literature that there is a relationship between animacy and Subjecthood. However, in the material used for this paper the majority of Subjects of passive sentences are inanimate entities, especially in the case of the non-agentive passive sentences. So passivization cannot simply be regarded as some sort of animacy promotion device either.

So far we have seen that the passive is used both when continuity and when discontinuity of the Subject is at stake. How can we account for this? The most natural answer to this question seems to be that passivization is not at all a device relevant to continuity of givenness and Subject. Adopting Dik's definition of Subject, the function of the passive is to present an action or process from a perspective in which the Goal is taken as the point of departure as opposed to active expressions in which roughly the same action or process is presented from the perspective of the Agent. The reason why a speaker or writer should want to present a state of affairs from the perspective of the Goal or from that of the Agent in those cases in which both an Agent and a Goal are involved is probably a matter for psychological research. Yet, the linguistic material may suggest a few answers.⁷

A first reason for, or perhaps even a condition on, the selection of a particular perspective is that the speaker or author considers the facts to be reported interesting enough to present them from the perspective of the Subject chosen. This may be because he identifies himself in some respect with the Subject (compare Allerton 1980 on the notion of 'empathy') or because he deems it worthwhile for the listener (reader) (or sometimes even profitable for himself) to have the information presented in that way. This principle, to my mind, explains several of the sentences that have been adduced to illustrate the supposed difference in meaning between active and passive sentences, for example (12) and (13):

- (12) a. John supports the Democratic Party
b. The Democratic Party is supported by John
- (13) a. The army was deserted by the private
b. The army was deserted by Simon Bolivar

(12) is cited by Keenan (1981: 22) as an illustration of a difference in 'affectedness' between active and passive sentences. In (12b) the Democratic Party seems to be more dependent upon John's support than in (12a). (13) is given by Longacre (1983: 229ff) for more or less the same reasons.⁸ I would like to maintain that in both examples the difference, which I accept, is precisely the difference which arises when the perspective for the presentation of a State of Affairs is changed.

A second reason for selecting a particular constituent to fulfill the function of Subject may be that the speaker (or writer) wants to continue the perspective from which the State of Affairs in the preceding sentence or clause is presented. If the constituent which is taken as the point of departure is an Agent, the State of Affairs must be expressed in the active voice. Conversely, if the constituent involved is associated as a Goal with a two- or three-place predicate the State of Affairs must be expressed in the passive voice. An example of the latter is (14):

(14) si qui sunt, qui philosophorum auctoritate moveantur
if any_{nom} be_{3pl} who_{nom} philosophers_{gen} authority_{abl} move_{3pl} pass

('If there be any who are influenced by the authority of philosophers', Cic. *Rep.* 1, 12)

However, a speaker (or writer) may want to change the perspective - a third reason for selecting a particular constituent as Subject of the sentence -, either for a special purpose, or quite simply because one cannot go on presenting States of Affairs from the perspective of the same entity. A special purpose may be, as in (15), rapid action in the report of a battle:

(15) invadunt urbem somno vinoque sepultam.
invade_{3pl} act city_{acc} sleep_{abl} wine_{abl} - and buried_{pass part} acc

caeduntur vigiles portisque patentibus omnes
kill_{3pl} pass watchmen_{nom} gates_{abl} - and open_{abl} all_{acc}

accipiunt socios
welcome_{3pl} act comrades_{acc}

('They storm the city, buried in sleep and wine; slay the watch, and at the open gates welcome all their comrades', Verg. *A.* 2, 265-7).

In (15) the Greeks are the Subject Agent of *invadunt* (active). They are also the implied Agent of *caeduntur* (passive). However, their victims (the Trojans) occur as Subject Goal of the clause. In the following coordinate clause the Greeks return as Subject Agent of *accipiunt* (active). So both continuity of perspective and discontinuity of perspective may determine the selection of a particular entity as the Subject of its sentence or clause. Subject selection, in other words, is a consequence of perspective selection, which in turn is related to, but not entirely dependent upon, suprasentential factors such as narrative structure, text type, and so on. There may even be some sort of continuity of perspective in combination with discontinuity of Subject. Examples are (16) and (17):

(16) itur in antiquam silvam, stabula alta ferarum;
go_{3sg} pass in old_{acc} wood_{acc} stables_{acc} high_{acc} beasts_{gen}
procumbunt piceae, sonat icta securibus illex
fall_{3pl} pines_{nom} sound_{3sg} strike_{pass part} nom axes_{abl} illex_{nom}
fraxinaeaeque trabes cuneis et fissile robur scinditur
ashen_{nom} - and logs_{nom} wedges_{abl} and splintering_{nom} oak_{nom} cleave_{3sg} pass

('They pass into the forest primeval, the deep lairs of beasts; down drop the pitch pines, and the illex rings to the stroke of the axe; ashen logs and splintering oak are cleft with wedges', Verg. *A.* 6, 179-82).

(17) tum emplastrum hoc modo fit: arida medicamenta per
then plaster_{nom} this_{abl} way_{abl} become_{3sg} dry_{nom} medicaments_{nom} by
se teruntur, deinde mixtis iis instillatur
self_{acc} rub_{3pl} pass then mix_{pass part} dat these_{dat} drop_{3sg} pass

aut acetum aut si quis alius non pinguis umor
either vinegar_{nom} or if some_{nom} other_{nom} not fat_{nom} liquid_{nom}

accessurus est et ea rursus teruntur
come_{3sg} fut and these_{nom} again rub_{3pl} pass

('Then a plaster is made in this way: dry medicaments are rubbed down separately, then when they have been mixed, either vinegar is dropped in or any other liquor free from fat that is at hand, and these ingredients are rubbed together again', Cels. 5, 17, 2B).

In (16) Aeneas' men have gone into a wood and are gathering wood. The action of cutting the trees is presented from the perspective of the trees. *procumbunt* and *sonat* are one-place predicates with which the trees can only be presented as Subject. *scinditur*, however, is the passive form of a two-place predicate, chosen here to continue the perspective. From the grammatical point of view the Goal *robur* might just as well have been presented as the Object.⁹ Similarly, in (17)

a series of States of Affairs in which different entities are involved is presented from the same perspective: that of the components of a plaster.¹⁰

4. Conclusion

The passive appears to be a device which the speaker (or writer) may use at his will, according to his individual wish with respect to the presentation of one or a series of States of Affairs. He may, but need not, choose to continue a certain perspective and as a consequence he may, but again need not, choose either the active or the passive expression for a certain State of Affairs. This means that rules for the use of the passive in discourse cannot be given, only indications of the probability of its use, or 'tendencies' (Bolkestein, this volume) in certain contexts or situations. It appears that different tendencies can be established for different types of passive sentences, viz. agentive and non-agentive passive sentences.*

NOTES

* I thank Machtelt Bolkestein, Caroline Kroon and Hotze Mulder for their comments on content and style of an earlier version of this paper.

¹ The choice of these texts is, of course, quite arbitrary. However, the overall conclusions presented below are also valid for other types of Latin texts (compare Pinkster 1984).

² Stein (1979: 126-129) gives English examples. The sentences in (1) and (2) are from Höhle (1978: 140).

³ Mackenzie (to appear) deals with a problem which in certain respect resembles the one discussed here.

⁴ *queratur* is a so-called deponent verb form ('passive form: active meaning').

⁵ My approach differs from both Givón (ed. 1983) and Weiner-Labov (1983). In these studies subject constituents of all sentences are taken into account.

⁶ By 'agentive' active sentences I mean active sentences with the exception of sentences like (6) above ('they').

⁷ Compare, among others, Granger (1983), Kilby (1984), Pape-Müller (1980).

⁸ Both examples seem to be Bolinger's, in an article which I have not been able to read.

⁹ Hahn (1930: 19) comments upon the 'choppy' style in these lines which 'is well-suited to the subject-matter, and may have been deliberately retained by Vergil for this very reason' (Vergil is imitating Ennius).

¹⁰ This type of 'perspective' is comparable with the phenomena discussed by Hannay (this volume) and Bolkestein (this volume).

Chapter 9

Semantic and syntactic functions in Toba Batak: some implications for functional grammar

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1. Introduction

An apparently unique property of the model of Functional Grammar (hereafter, FG) proposed in Dik (1978) is the capacity of the so-called expression rules of the grammar - the rules responsible for case marking, word order, and other aspects of surface morphosyntax - to refer to information about three distinct types of argument functions: semantic functions such as Agent, syntactic functions such as Subject, and pragmatic functions such as Topic. If this capacity is indeed unique to the FG model, then any evidence that the capacity is required in order for the grammar of some language to achieve descriptive adequacy must count as *prima facie* support for FG as opposed to other grammatical theories.

In this paper I propose to offer this kind of support for FG in the form of evidence that the morphosyntactic rules of the Toba dialect of Batak, an Austronesian language of Sumatra, must in fact refer to the three types of functions that are recognized in FG. I also propose to show, however, that, with respect to two of these three types of functions, semantic and syntactic, Batak points to certain inadequacies in existing versions of FG. In particular, I shall argue that, if FG is to give a descriptively adequate account of Batak morphosyntax, then the inventory of functions recognized in the theory must be expanded so as to include one new semantic function, the Actor, and two new syntactic functions, the Adjunct and the Trigger. But since, in the course of justifying the need for these new functions, I also call attention to various rules of Batak morphosyntax that are sensitive to information about semantic and syntactic functions (and, to a lesser extent, pragmatic functions), I provide general support for the FG account of functions in relation to grammar at the same time that I propose specific revisions of this account.

Before attempting to justify the proposed revisions of FG, I shall first need to provide some background information about the structure of the Batak transitive clause. Batak, then, is a verb-initial (or, more generally, predicate-initial) language. In a simple transitive clause, a verb is followed by two nominal arguments, the first of which has the syntactic function I refer to as Adjunct, the second the syntactic function I refer to as Trigger. (These terms,