

Areal Questions of the Passive Voice

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Abstract

The present article gives an overview of the passive voice in languages of Northern Europe and the Northern Russian dialect from the perspective of areal linguistics. The North of Europe is an area where the density of population is now lower but once used to be higher than in other areas of Europe. That could explain the behaviour of the passive used in the given area, namely that intransitive verbs can also be passivised and the logical object in a passive phrase may appear in the accusative case.

Keywords

passives, intransitive verbs, accusative case, density of population, nominative typology

1. Introduction

There are a number of similarities that present themselves in languages of Northern Europe. The passive voice is a linguistic area that can be used to test new linguistic theories and its historical development provides a mirror for us to see the development of human thinking. Research into such phenomena has a lot in store to explore. The approach used could be pure descriptive or historical and also areal. In the present article a justification will be given in favour of using an areal approach and also the tools of historical linguistics.

2. Regular phenomena in Russian and Swedish

Both Russian (and here the discussion is about standard Russian, not a dialect of Russian) and Swedish have synthetic and analytic passives. The Russian sentences 1) – 2) and their Swedish equivalents 3) – 4) exemplify them:

1) *Письма пишутся от руки.*
letterSGNOM write3PLPASS
handSG.INSTR

2) *Письма были написаны от руки.*
letterPL.NOM copPRAET.PL
writePART.PRAET.PASS
handSG.INSTR

3) *Breven skrivs av hand.*
letter PL writePASS PREP hand
SG.NOM

4) *Breven blev skriven av hand*
letterPL copPRAET
writePART.PRAET.PASS PREP
handSG.NOM

’(The) letters are written by hand.’

’(The) letters were written by hand.’

Sentences 1) and 3) are examples of synthetic, while sentences 2) and 4) are examples of analytic passives. It ought to be observed that there is no real correlation between the choice of the passive form and the tense in these languages, however, there is a correlation between the choice of the passive form and the aspect in Russian: perfective verbs only occur in the analytic form, whereas imperfective verbs typically occur in the synthetic passive form.

Secondly, as far as the synthetic passives forms are concerned, their formal marker goes back historically to a reflexive pronoun meaning 'self' in both languages and coincides in Russian with the postfix of reflexive verbs and in Swedish with the marker of deponent verbs. Examples 5) – 7) are from standard Russian, and examples 8) – 9) are from Swedish. Examples 5) and 8) represent the classic synthetic passive, just like examples 1) and 3) above. Example 6) presents us (in the neutral reading) a classic example of a reflexive verb, whereas 7) demonstrates a less classic, less typical case of a reflexive verb. Note that 7) cannot be an instance of a passive sentence by virtue of the above rule that perfective verbs always occur in the analytic passive. Example 9) from Swedish demonstrates an occurrence of a so-called deponent verb. In Swedish true or classic reflexive verbs occur with a marker that is closer to the original reflexive pronoun and thus agrees in person and number with the subject as in French or Spanish, for example.

5) *Дворец посещается многими туристами.*

castleSG.NOM visitSG.3.PRAES.PASS manyPL.INSTR touristPL.INSTR
'The castle is visited by a lot of tourists.'

6) *Маша моется.*

MashaNOM washSG.3.PRAES:REFL

7) *Когда родился твой сын?* '

when bearPRAET.MASC.REFL yourSG.MASC sonSG.NOM
'When was your son born?'

8) *Slottet besöks av många turister.*

castleSG.DEF visitPRAES.PASS prep many touristPL.INDEF
'The castle is visited by a lot of tourists..'

9) *När föddes din son?*

when bearPRAET.PASS yourSG.UTR sonSG.INDEF
'When was your son born?'

In summary, the postfix *-ся* in Russian and the suffix *-s* in Swedish are not only genetically, that is, historically related, but occur in the same functions.

Incidentally, there are linguistic phenomena outside the realm of passive forms and reflexive verbs where Russian and Swedish behave in a strikingly similar way. There are two different sets of third person personal pronouns in both languages, one for cases when the referent of the third person possessive pronoun is coreferent with the subject, and one where it is not. For example, there could be two different equivalents of the possessive pronoun if we translate the English sentence *Maria loves her husband* into either Russian or Swedish depending on whether the referent loves her own husband or another woman's husband. This phenomenon seems to be a preservation of an Indo-European heritage, a distinction that has disappeared by now in most IE languages.

3. Irregular phenomena in a number of Northern languages

Two interesting, and presumably related, phenomena should be mentioned here: intransitive verbs can be passivised and the logical object can appear in the accusative case by a verb with passive morphology (in contrast to the usual nominative case in passive phrases). Here we raise examples from the Northern Russian dialect (as opposed to standard Russian referred to so far) and from Lithuanian, Norwegian and German. Examples 10) – 11) demonstrate the former phenomenon from the Northern Russian dialect and Lithuanian respectively. Examples 12) – 13) also show that intransitive verbs can be passivised in Norwegian and German respectively. While the latter examples could perhaps be ascribed to the fact that the two languages are genetically related, examples 10) and 11) appear to be less justifiable using this type of explanation. Here we are inclined to think that we have got an areal phenomenon, the more so, as example 10) is absolutely ungrammatical in standard literary Russian. If we consider the other interesting fact, the presence of the logical object by a passive verb form in the accusative case, we can spot a similarity in a Slavic and a Germanic language, Northern Russian and Norwegian, in examples 14) – 15). We should add, however, that it is only Northern Russian where the accusative case is marked explicitly as in Norwegian, as with other Germanic languages, nominal cases do not get specific morphological markers, but the syntactic position of the logical object being placed after the verb suggests that we have got an instance of an abstract accusative before us in example 15).

Examples 10) and 14) are from Hrakovskij (Hrakovskij 1974: 5 – 45).

10) *Мною езжено*

I.INSTR travelIMP.PART.PRAET.PASS

'I (have) travelled.'

11) *Mano vaihščiota*

I.INSTR walkPART.PRAET.PASS

'I (have) walked. '

12) *Det ble danset (hele natten)*

pleonastic pronoun copPRAET dancePART.PRAET.PASS

'They danced (all night).'

13) *Es wurde (die ganze Nacht) getanzt.*

pleonastic pronoun copPRAET dancePART.PRAET.PASS

'They danced (all night).'

14) *У меня было теленка зарежено*

at I.GEN copPRAET.SG calfNOM.SG.ACC cutPART.PRAET.PASS.

NEUTR

'I cut a calf.'

15) *Det ble skutt en ulv*

pleonastic pronoun copPRAET shootPART.PRAET.PASS indef. article wolfSG

'A wolf was/has been shot.'

4. Edging towards an areal explanation

In the previous section the idea was raised that the similarities might be attributable to an areal phenomenon. Why is it so? Alternatively, we might as well assume that different phenomena belong to different stages of evolution of language or that certain languages and dialects are genetically related to one another. At the same time we should take into account geographical and sociological circumstances that characterise the region of our continent under discussion. One does not need a PhD degree in geography to know that the density of population of Italy is circa 8–10 times higher than that of Sweden. The population is much higher in Italy because it is easier to cultivate the land in the South, where the climate is more favourable. Nevertheless, things used to be different, as in the era when people lived off fishing and hunting Northern regions maintained higher numbers of population. Animals up North grow bigger than animals in the South, so hunters had an easier job in the Northern region. It was sufficient to kill one animal to have enough food for the whole tribe for supper. If we consider that in the past there were more people living in a certain region and now the same region is scarcely inhabited it becomes easier to understand why the region has preserved a great deal of archaic phenomena, linguistic and in general cultural phenomena if we consider the following:

There may have existed a people or perhaps several more or less closely related peoples whose language or language family had an impact on the languages of European peoples that inhabit Northern regions now. So when Indo-European and Finno-Ugric peoples occupied our continent their main goal was to find land where

they could grow crops, fruit and vegetables irrespective of whether they came from one or several directions contemporaneously or at different times. In regions that were favourable for them and where they were not confronted by large numbers of population they soon took over control. However, in areas that were densely populated by a prehistoric people and that were not so suitable for agriculture and animal husbandry they also took control but they had to share power with representatives of the people or peoples that lived there earlier. Because the ancestors of present-day Northern countries did not have an overwhelming majority and thus were unable to suppress the previous inhabitants of the region under discussion totally the economic, political and cultural influence might have been bidirectional, i.e. representatives of the prehistoric people(s) also had an impact on the way of living of Scandinavian people. This phenomenon is called that of linguistic substratum. This reasoning explains why Northern regions abound in archaic phenomena, that is, why it is that one finds more remnants of languages of prehistoric times in the North than in the South. At the end of the following section examples will be mentioned from two non-European languages where the category of grammatical voice appears to be a less clear-cut and shows up as a less independent category than in most European, in particular, Indo-European and Finno-Ugric languages. In order to study the question more closely and accurately it will be important to look into the passive structures of Finnish, a member of the Finno-Ugric language family also spoken in the region.

5. Why the passive?

The question arises why it is the passive voice, whose characteristics and special behaviour is to be studied when exploring areal phenomena in the North of Europe. Well, we do not claim that other fields of linguistics are unimportant or that there is nothing else to be compared in languages spoken in the region. At the same time one can draw the conclusion that the development of voice as a linguistic category, especially that of the passive voice, reflects the development of human thinking. There is agreement between linguists that stative or statal passive, when the passive voice expresses a state rather than an event existed before the formation of dynamic or eventive passive (Jespersen 1963: 274). It is important to note that, generally speaking, structures are older than their interpretations, and grammatical structures receive, or at least, are capable of receiving a new interpretation from time to time (Orosz 2012: 810). In the case of the statal passive the statal interpretation is older than the passive meaning. If we consider the stative interpretation of the example *The bench in the park was painted red* we can conclude that it differs from the example *The bench in the park was red* in that in the former sentence a background activity is referred to preceding the state emerging. In the literature the subtype of statal passive is called

'resultative' (результатив) as opposed to the other type of statal passive called 'stativ'(статив), where there is no activity whatsoever referred to in the background, e.g. *The house is surrounded by a stone fence* (Nedjalkov – Jahontov 1983: 10). It is the resultative interpretation, that is, the appearance of an activity preceding the state emerging that is newer than the meaning which simply registers a state. Put differently, the two sentences mentioned above *The bench in the park was painted red* and *The bench in the park was red* were, as a matter of fact, used synonymously by people living in the prehistoric age as neither of the two sentences registered an active participant in the background, that is, an agent. Though people living in the prehistoric age knew well that the state emerged as a result of some kind of actions, this knowledge was not encoded linguistically. A similar situation is found in Russian and Hungarian, where hearing the sentences including participial passive forms *Степан простужен* and *István meg van fázva* 'Stephen has a cold' speakers of the respective languages know that the given state emerged as a result of certain circumstances (e.g. Stephen did not put on his coat on a cold winter day), however, this knowledge is not encoded in the sentences under discussion linguistically, and there is no agent in the sentences. Unfortunately we cannot analyse voice-related phenomena of Hungarian in detail in the present article, because the issue would deserve more attention.

It follows that it was impossible to speak about the passive voice as such, either about its dynamic or statal interpretation, was impossible before the dynamic interpretation appeared (Orosz 2012: 811).

What other linguistic categories is the appearance of the dynamic passive related to? More accurately, we are investigating the appearance of the dynamic interpretation of a structure that we can call passive by virtue of the linguistic encoding of the overt or covert existence of a person or entity carrying out an action in the sentence. Answering the question raised above in the paragraph, there seem to be two important points to be mentioned: on one hand the formation of the syntactic category of subject as a rather abstract notion, on the other hand and in close relation thereto the transformation of the structure of a language from the ergative or active typology into the nominative one. The category of subject as we understand it today may cover a fairly wide range of semantic categories or thematic roles. That is why the emergence of this syntactic category as an independent one required a high level of abstraction of human thinking. If we consider example 10) – 15) above again what we face is a rather blurred notion of subject and object. We assume that the structures in question already existed at a time when the syntactic categories under discussion did not exist as such, i.e. they were not linguistically identified and encoded as a subject and an object. As far as the nominative typology, it does not go without the category of subject, however,

in the ergative and active typologies we find categories different from those of subject and object (Klimov 1972, 1977).

In order to support the theory of linguistic development from the perspective of voice-related phenomena in European languages we turn to two languages spoken outside Europe, where the category of subject occurs as a less clear-cut category in that the semantics of the referent of a word significantly influences to what extent it can be the subject of a sentence. In Korean (Asia) and in Navajo (North-America) there exists a rule that the subject has to be able to control the state of affairs at least as much as any other element of the sentence (Klaiman 1988: 51; 1991). Consequently, in Navajo the equivalent of the sentence *The girl drank the water* only occurs in the so-called active voice, whereas the equivalent of the sentence *The horse kicked the man* can only occur in the so-called passive voice (Klaiman c.f. and Orosz 2001: 4 – 5). It follows that the languages under discussion do not have a voice system comparable to that of European languages. At the same time we cannot fail to spot that in examples 14) – 15) above the logical objects of the sentences demonstrating a passive verb form found in the accusative case are also non-persons as they are animals being unable to control the events described by the sentence. We do not venture to draw a maverick conclusion claiming that the evolution or development of voice-related phenomena follows a universal pattern across totally different languages of the world and thus is encoded in the human mind and human thinking, but the examples raised above deserve more attention. Moreover, one should examine far more languages belonging to a wide range of language families all over the world and also far more example sentences within individual languages to reach a similar conclusion.

6. Conclusion

We conclude that the analysis of voice-related phenomena in the mirror of areal linguistics on one hand, and the research of languages and dialects spoken in certain regions within a grammatical framework, in particular that of the passive voice and reflexive verbs deserves more attention. If one could prove with certainty that there used to exist one or more ancient peoples whose language or language family had an impact on European languages, citizens of different Northern countries that now consider themselves as people belonging to non-related cultures, e.g. Swedes, Russians, Lithuanians, Finns, Norwegians might embrace one another finding long-forgotten relations in their neighbours. If one could raise evidence that ethnically different people now living in the North of Europe have a common background it might tighten the relationship between regions and countries now apparently belonging to different spheres of interest. People of Russia, Finland, Lithuania, Swede and Norway might look at each other differently and could collaborate on current issues they share preparing for the challenges they face as a result of present-day changes and developments of history.

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