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Refining the canonical characterization of the passive

In contrast to many other constructions, there is considerable agreement among scholars in relation to what constitutes a canonical passive (see e.g. Givón 1979, Shibatani 2006; Comrie 2007). The characterization in Siewierska (2005) may serve as an illustration of what is typically thus regarded. According to this characterization a construction is a passive if:

- i it contrasts with another construction, the active;
- ii the subject of the active corresponds to a non-obligatory oblique phrase of the passive or is not overtly expressed (but only implied);
- iii the subject of the passive, if there is one, corresponds to the direct object of the active;
- iv. the construction is pragmatically restricted relative to the active;
- v. the construction displays some special morphological marking of the verb.

Yet for anyone familiar with the variety of passive constructions found among the world's languages, it is clear that this characterization is not detailed enough to enable us to discriminate fully among them in the linguistically interesting way envisaged by the approach to canonicity advocated by the Surrey group.

For example, while (ii) defines as atypical the obligatory expression of an agent (with the aim of differentiating the passive from the inverse) and correctly allows for both agentive and agentless passive, it does not identify either the agentive or the agentless passive as canonical. Thus which of the two belongs to the canonical, as opposed to prototypical (see Shibatani 1985) passive needs to be established. The properties in (iii), cater for passives with and without subjects but do not differentiate between the two in relation to canonicity, which is particularly significant with respect to passives formed from transitive as opposed to intransitive verbs and how these differ from impersonal constructions (see e.g. Blevins 2003). Nor does (iii) specify the semantic or pragmatic properties of passive subjects characteristic of a canonical passive. As for (v), the requirement of verbal marking does not discriminate between different types of marking (e.g. synthetic vs. analytic), or between types of auxiliary verbs or affixes, or between the location of the passive affixes relative to other affixes, all of which may have a bearing on the status of a given passive construction particularly in languages with more than one passive (a frequent phenomenon).

Passives in some languages also display features which are not even eluded to in the above characterization, such as those relating to tense and aspect, event type (e.g. specific vs. recurrent or potential), presence of adverse vs. beneficial connotations, association with specific text type and medium. These too need to be taken into account in establishing what constitutes a canonical passive construction.

The present paper will elaborate the properties of a canonical passive construction in terms of 35 oppositions, such as those mentioned above, relating to its morpho-syntax, semantics, pragmatics and discourse distribution and show how they converge in identifying as canonical an agentive passive with a nominative subject and synthetic, as opposed to analytic, verbal marking. The discussion will draw on a typological, corpus and diachronic data.

References

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