

Handout 5: Missing agents: Passives, middles and inchoatives

Seminar *Argument structure*, Andrew McIntyre

1 Introduction

- Alternations in which agents/causers are suppressed:
- (1) **Passive:** a. John read the book. b. The book was read (by John).
- (2) **Middle:** a. People read the book easily. b. The book reads easily.
- (3) **Causative-inchoative alternation** (causative alternation):
 - a. John broke the plate. causative variant
 - b. The plate broke. inchoative variant
- Reasons to study such data include that they teach us a lot about implicit arguments, and that they raise questions about which variant of the alternation is basic, if any.
- We discuss the main properties of each construction, illustrating a few of the problems discussed in the literature.

2 Passive

- Passive in English: auxiliary *be/get* plus lexical verb in participle form. Agent is suppressed, optionally realised in a *by*-phrase; V's object becomes subject:
- (4) *The car was/got destroyed (by Grandma).* (cf. *Grandma destroyed the car.*)
- No *by*-phrase if speaker doesn't know, care, or want to say, who the agent is.
- Passive with *by*-phrase is preferred to active for information-structural reasons, e.g. desire to put old information before new info, or to put heavy constituents in final position.
- (5) a. {The^{??}A} book was bought by Mary yesterday. [definite = old; indef = new]
b. A book was bought for the institute yesterday.
- (6) a. I saw a documentary about Uganda last night...
b. ...It was made by a journalist who spent two years there.
c. ??...A journalist who spent two years there made it.

Differences between *get*-passive and *be*-passive

- In *get*-passive, the passive subject must be somehow *affected* by the event:
- (7) a. Claudine **got** followed by Jean. (implies chasing, stalking, detective work etc.)
b. Claudine **was** followed by Jean. (following need have no effect on Claudine)
- (8) a. IPA symbols can't {be/*get} read by this scanner.
b. Your textbook won't get read if you call it *Linguistics for Retards*.
- (9) The {band/*volcanic eruption} got watched by thousands.

A. In (10) we see that **effected** (created) objects in *get*-passives are not accepted by all speakers. How would this connect to the affectedness requirement just seen? Why are sentences like (11) better than those in (10)?

- (10) a. Now look over to the elegant house on the left. ^(?)It got built in 1836.
b. ^(?)Do they know when the wheel got invented?
- (11) a. He planned a book on Proto-Indo-European textual deixis, but it never got written.
b. They designed a skyscraper but it never got built.

B. What do the data in (12) tell us about the interpretations of the subjects of *get*-passives?

- (12) a. She **decided to** get arrested. / ^{??}She **decided to** be arrested.
b. The battle-weary soldier {got/*was} injured **on purpose** so he would be sent home.
c. He {got/*was} arrested **by smoking weed**.
d. She **almost** got arrested. [possible reading: she almost did sth. to get arrested]
e. He {got/*was} killed deliberately because he wanted to be a matyr.

3 Middle Constructions

- (13) a. The book reads/translates well. b. This shelf dismantles easily.
c. Bureaucrats bribe easily. d. The thread won't pick up, it's part of the carpet.
- Middles don't refer to specific events, but to *possible* events. They are thus generic statements, hence their use in the simple present rather than the progressive.
- Middles suggest that properties of the argument appearing as subject allow/disallow the type of event named by the verb to occur. This might explain (14). A book can have properties which suggest that it will be easy to sell it (e.g. sensational content) but it is harder to find inherent properties of books that make them easy to buy.
- (14) a. This book will sell easily b. *This book will buy easily
- (15) This book reads easily thanks to {the large print/the good writing/*my new glasses}.
- Speculation: The fact that the argument appearing as subject determines whether the event could occur or not makes it similar to a causer, which might explain why middle sentences involve reflexive items in many languages (French, German...).
- Middles tend to co-occur with adverbs or negation, presumably because they would be uninformative otherwise. Cf. *one-legged people/*legged people; early riser/*riser*.

4 Implicit agents/causers

Evidence that there is an implicit agent/causer in passives, but not in inchoatives, middles:

- Purpose clauses:
 - (16) a. The ship was sunk in order to collect the insurance money.
b. *The ship sank in order to collect the insurance money.
c. *The book translates easily in order to make it available to French audiences.
- Agent-oriented adverbs (refer to properties of agent, not just event):
 - (17) a. The ship was sunk carefully/deliberately.
b. *The ship sank carefully/deliberately.
c. *The book translates carefully.
- Realisation of causer/agent in a *by*-phrase:
 - (18) a. The ship was sunk by a group of killjoys.
b. The ship sank (*by a group of killjoys).
c. The book translates easily (*by bilinguals).

C. Why could the following data be taken to show that passives have implicit agents/causers while inchoatives do not? If unsure, compare with (27)-(31).

- 1. a. I cleared the table b. *The table cleared c. The table was cleared.
- 2. a. I cut the bread b. *The bread cut c. The bread was cut.

D. Decide which of the following constructions allow **reflexive** interpretations (in which implicit agent and patient are identical). How does the possibility of a reflexive interpretation correlate with the presence or absence of an implicit agent?

- 1. Different kinds of *nominalisations* (nouns derived from verbs):
 - a. die Anmeldung der Studenten / the enrolment of the students
 - b. das Anmelden der Studenten / the enrolling of the students
- 2. Normal (verbal) passives vs. adjectival passives:
 - a. das Kind wurde angezogen / the child was being dressed
 - b. das Kind war angezogen / the child seemed very well-dressed

5 The causative alternation

5.1 Examples, basic observations

- (19) a. *John snapped the wire.* (causative variant)
b. *The wire snapped* (inchoative variant)
c. Likewise: *break, crack, chip, shatter, drop, turn, bend, crease, capsize, freeze, empty, shut, loosen, oxidize, peel off, explode, blacken*
d. Change in form, suppletion: *rise/raise, fall/fell, die/kill, eat/feed*
- (20) a. *I buzzed/rang the bell* b. *The bell buzzed/rang*
b. *I stood/leant the statue against the wall*
c. *The mother burped the baby; The doctor bled the patient*
- (21) a. The scientist ran the rats through the maze b. The rats ran through the maze
b. Likewise: *jump/gallop horses, drive cars, fly planes, march soldiers, walk the dog*
- Many languages (e.g. German, French) have different types of inchoative variants:
- (22) a. Die Tür ist aufgegangen. b. Der Tür hat **sich** geöffnet
- Questions:
a) is one variant derived from the other, and if so, which & how?
b) with which types of verbs is the alternation possible?

5.2 The approach of Levin & Rappaport (1995)

5.2.1 Which verbs alternate?

- **Internally caused verbs:** some property of argument in inchoative variant causes the event; with **externally caused verbs** someone/something else is responsible.
 - Internally caused verbs don't transitive:
- (23) a. I shook/shuddered/trembled b. The monster shook/*shuddered/*trembled me
(Only specific types of entities can *shudder, tremble* (*the table shook / *shuddered / *trembled*). These verbs require subjects to which some kind of independent movement can be attributed, e.g. people)
- (24) a. The leaves/fire burnt b. I burnt the leaves/*fire
(Fires are active in the burning process, leaves aren't, they are more patient-like; cf. *what happened to the {leaves/*fires} is that they burnt; what the fire did was burn.* This is a case where the same verb can have internal or external causers.)
- (25) *The gardener blossomed the flowers
- (26) I leant/*slouched him against the wall
- All externally caused verbs have a transitive variant, but they lack an intrans. variant if the event cannot happen spontaneously, i.e. without some other agent:
- (27) a. The wind cleared the sky b. The sky cleared
- (28) a. I cleared the table b. *The table cleared
- (29) a. The days lengthened b. *The dress lengthened
- (30) a. The shellac record broke. b. *The world record broke.
- (31) a. *The bread cut b. *Kennedy assassinated. c. *The orange peeled
d. The plate broke e. The screw loosened/*tightened f. The door shut
- Some verbs have trans. uses only for some speakers, e.g. (32). L&R ascribe this to different opinions on whether they are int. or ext. caused. **Problem:** The only evidence given on the int/ext causation of these verbs is their (in)transitivity. This is circular in the context of an argument that (in)transitivity depends on the ext/int causation distinction.
- (32) [%]Pine needles deteriorated/disintegrated the roof [[%] = good only for some speakers]
[%]The secret service disappeared several dissidents
- Data which seem to contradict the theory (I couldn't find any others):
- (33) *The farmer grew rice/a beard* [shouldn't it be internal causation?]
- (34) *A bomb/building exploded* vs. *I exploded a bomb/*building* [wouldn't the explosion of bombs be more likely to be internal causation than that of buildings?]

5.2.2 More on external and internal causation

- Int. caused verbs constrain their arguments more strictly, as only certain types of entities have the right properties to cause certain events internally, cf. *shake/shudder* in (23).
- Int. caused verbs are often agentive, but not always: *blush, tremble* (these aren't deliberate, so not really agentive), verbs of emission with inanimate subjects (*buzz, glow*).
- Int. caused intrans. verbs are mostly unergative, ext. caused always unaccusative (p.98). Exceptions: (a) verbs of existence/appearance (*exist, appear*) are unaccusative & not derived from causative verbs; (b) rare unacc. int. caused verbs: *blossom, bloom, decay*.

5.2.3 How L&R handle the argument structural effects of internal/external causation

- Intrans. ext. caused verbs are basically transitive, but have the causer arg. suppressed in a lexical operation (L&R call this *lexical binding*).
 - Two of the relevant linking rules used by Levin & Rappaport (1995:135,146,153f):
- (35) a. The argument of a verb that denotes the immediate cause of the eventuality described by that verb is its external argument [i.e. subject]
b. The argument of a verb that corresponds to the entity undergoing the directed change described by that verb is its direct internal argument. [i.e. direct object]
- Thus, arg. of int. caused verbs is put in object position and moves to subject position.
 - Internally caused verbs have their argument projected as subject (i.e. are unergative) because the rule in (35)(a) insists on **immediate** causes. Hence, (36)(a) is bad because *shudder* has an internal causer (namely John) which is the more immediate cause of the shuddering than the monster. There can't be two immediate causes of the one event. ((36)(b) is ok because we have two verbs, both of which have their respective immediate causes realised as their subjects.)
- (36) a. *The psycho shuddered John b. The psycho made John shudder

5.2.4 L&R's arguments that the transitive variant as basic (p.84f)

- A. Regarding cases like (27)-(28) where there is no intransitive variant, L&R claim that it's implausible to derive trans. variants from intransitive variants that don't exist.
- B. Verbs with a theme argument are unstable crosslinguistically, and tend to acquire trans. variants over time & in different dialects. Hence: *deteriorate* is starting to develop a transitive variant in some idiolects (*the weather deteriorated the roof*).
- C. In many languages the trans. form is morphologically simple, while the intrans. form is often marked in some special way (cf. the German reflexives above). This is easy to explain if we assume that the intrans. variant is derived fr. the trans.
Critique: the statistics don't necessarily prove anything about English. Maybe English is simply behaving in an unusual way by deriving the trans. variant from the intrans. one.
- D. Intrans. variants are compatible with *by itself* (in the meaning 'without help', not 'alone'). They suggest that *by itself* in this sense makes explicit the otherwise implicit causer argument of the verb, specifically suggesting that it is identical to the theme argument.
- (37) The plate broke by itself; the door opened by itself
Critique: it could be that it *adds* a causer argument to the structure rather than picking up on one that is present in the semantics. Notice also that other ways of making a causer argument explicit are impossible:
- (38) *The door opened/split by John (cf. passive: it was broken by John)

6 References

Levin, B., & Rappaport Hovav, M. (1995). *Unaccusativity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.