VOICE -- BEYOND THE PASSIVE

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When American linguists think of the term _voice_, as applied to
the verbal system of a language,[1] they generally think only of
active and passive, since those are the only well-developed voi-
ces in modern English. The Indo-European system from which Eng-
lish was derived, however, was quite different. To judge from
the daughter languages in which the PIE system was most fully
preserved (ancient Greek and Sanskrit, in particular), a more
fundamental distinction in PIE was that between active and middle
voices, the middle including within its functions, without fur-
ther formal distinction, the relationship that we would call pas-
sive. Because it is often not possible to tell the difference,
formally, between passive and middle in these languages,[2] these
two categories must have been viewed as having something impor-
tant in common. (For this reason it would seem worthwhile to
preserve the term _voice_ for the broader grammatical phenomenon
which encompasses all three distinctions--active, passive, and
middle.) The purpose of this paper, then, is to explicate how
the active/middle distinction differs from the active/passive
one; how languages like English handle whatever is included in
the middle that is not included in the passive; and at what lin-
guistic level the passive can be lumped with the middle, when
that is what has been done.

The passive has been argued to be fundamentally a strategy to
move NP's in and out of subject position.[3] In an accusative-type
language, the subject of most active sentences is agentive--that
is, the subject is automatically assumed to be the agent of the
action, if that reading is semantically possible. Furthermore,
the subject is in general a _sine qua non_ of the sentence. So if
the agent is to be de-emphasized or outright avoided (whether be-
cause it is unknown, irrelevant, or to be suppressed), some
strategy must be available to remove the agent subject and re-
place it with either a dummy or an NP having some other function
in the sentence proposition. The nonagentive passive fulfills
these needs. Thus, for example, we can neatly avoid confessing
who broke the window by saying The window was broken. Since sub-
ject position is a more or less highly "priviledged" position (a
subject's reference and quantifiers are independently, rather
than dependently, evaluated; and the subject is generally easier
to relativize, to topicalize, etc.) (Keenan, 1974 and Dec. 1974),
the speaker will need a strategy for "promoting" nonagentive NP's
to subject position so that they can carry syntactic and semantic
structures which are unavailable or awkward in other positions.
The nonagentive passive also fulfills these needs; and the agen-
tive passive fulfills them without requiring that the agent be
dumped altogether.

The new subject, of course, is not the expected agent of the

action; and in order to avoid intolerable ambiguity, the deviant function of the subject with respect to the action expressed in the verb must be marked in some way. Presumably it could be marked in the NP itself; or it could be marked in the verbal complex (that is, by an affix to the verb or by an auxiliary). Most commonly we find it marked in the verbal complex somewhere; and so we have an opposition in the <u>verb</u> system which shows how the subject <u>NP</u> is to be understood. In short, we have a system of verbal voice. Theoretically, however, there are other ways of showing the voice relationships than by marking them in the verbal complex, so I shall retain the term <u>verbal voice</u> for whatever gets marked in the verb and use the term <u>grammatical voice</u> for the broader set of voice relationships, wherever they may be indicated in a given language.

By this analysis, then, English can be said to have a verbal voice system which includes active voice (<u>The cat scratched it</u>) and passive voice (<u>The cat was scratched</u>). In the passive voice we can either specify the agent (<u>The cat was scratched by the dog</u>) or exclude it; and the nonagentive subject can correspond either to the direct object of the active (<u>A dollar was given to the man by Snodgrass</u>) or--and this is less common among languages--to a more "inaccessible" direct object (<u>The man was given a dollar by Snodgrass</u>).[4] Note that, although only one contrast is marked in the verbal complex, namely active against passive, provision is also made to mark the nonsubject nouns in such a way that their functions can be unscrambled without intolerable ambiguity, for whatever combination of promoted and demoted nouns arises. Thus the agent, which is marked only by word order in the active, gets <u>by</u> as a relational marker in the passive, and the indirect object (unless promoted to subject) must keep with it the <u>to</u> which it could often drop in the active.[5]

The passive, then, is a device for promoting the NP's in and out of subject position. The middle voice, by contrast, seems to function fundamentally as a strategy for marking identities between the surface subject and other NP's in the sentence proposition. Since linguistic literature on the middle voice is almost nonexistent, let us take some examples from ancient Greek (Sanskrit works in almost exactly the same way) to see how it behaves.

When a Greek author chooses the middle over the active voice for a particular verb, he is expressing what is usually described by Greek teachers as the "involvement" of the subject in the action--the fact that the agentive subject is also affected in some way by the action.[6] What does this mean? In English, the most "middly" kind of expression we have is a colloquial sentence like <u>I bought me a new hat</u> or <u>I fixed me a sandwich</u>, containing what a classical grammarian would have called a "dative of interest." A transitive Greek middle, indeed, has much this semantic structure:

ACTIVE:
αἱρ-ῶ μοῖραν.
hair -ō moiran
take act. share
"I take a share."

MIDDLE:
αἱρ-οῦμαι μοῖραν.
hair-oumai moiran
take mid. share
"I choose (take for my own bene-
fit) a share."

ἤγαγ-ον γυναῖκα.
ēgag-on gynaika
led act. woman
"I led a woman."

ἠγαγ-όμην γυναῖκα.
ēgag-omēn gynaika
led mid. woman
"I married (led to myself / for my
own benefit) a woman."

πράττ-ω χρήματα.
pratt-ō khrēmata
 do act. things
"I accomplish (manage)
things."

πράττ-ομαι χρήματα.
pratt-omai khrēmata
 do mid. things
"I accomplish (manage) things for
myself; I make money."

In each of these examples, the middle voice is expressing the
fact that the subject is not only performing the action, as agent,
but receiving some benefit from it as well. This is the basic
sense in which the subject is seen to be "involved" in the action.
We could also say that the middle voice is signaling that what
would otherwise have to be expressed as the indirect object is
identical to the subject.

Viewing the middle in this way, as a means of signaling that
some nonsubject NP in the sentence proposition is identical with
the surface subject, we find that this analysis accounts for and
even predicts[7] the various uses of the middle in Greek. We have
begun with a full-dress transitive sentence, in which the direct
object is overtly expressed. There, a middle voice in the verb
is found to imply that what would logically be the indirect ob-
ject is identical to the subject. What if no direct object is
expressed? If the verb is known to be an intransitive verb,
which never takes a direct object, then the implication is still
that the identity holds between subject and indirect object:

πολιτεύ-ω
politeu -ō
be citizen act.
"I am a citizen / have civ-
ic rights."

πολιτεύ-ομαι
politeu -omai
be citizen mid.
"I act as a citizen / carry out my
civic rights for myself."

If, on the other hand, the verb is known to be transitive but no
direct object is overtly expressed, the direct object is taken to
be identical with the surface subject. The identity can be taken
either reflexively or reciprocally, according to context and in-
herent semantic likelihood:

λού-ω   τὰ ἱμάτια.
lou -ō ta himatia
wash act. the cloaks
"I wash the cloaks."

λού-ομαι
lou -omai
wash mid. (1 sg.)
"I wash myself."

λου-όμεθα
lou -ometha
wash mid. (1 pl.)
"We wash ourselves." OR "We wash
each other."

στεφαν-ῶμεν σέ
stephan-ōmen se
crown act. you
"We crown you."

στεφαν-ώμεθα
stephan-ōmetha
crown mid.
"We crown ourselves." OR "We
crown each other."

It does not take much thought to see that what is expressed in Greek by the middle marker in the verb is generally expressed in English by special pronouns.[8] Thus we have two reciprocal forms (each other, one another) and a whole set of reflexive pronouns (myself, yourself, etc.) which we can tuck into the proper grammatical position to show identity to the subject. English, in short, has settled on marking identity relations in the slots for the affected NP's, rather than in the verb. And since the function of these pronouns is the same as that of the Greek middle marker--to show identity with the subject--it comes as no surprise that these pronouns are barred from occurring in subject position.

What is more curious is that Greek also has a full set of (nonnominative) reflexive and reciprocal pronouns. If our analysis up to this point has been correct, we would expect that the middle voice and the reflexive/reciprocal pronouns are two different strategies to achieve the same end: namely to mark identities between the surface subject and some other NP in the sentence proposition. So why would a language want both of them? Evidently, to obtain a higher degree of logical expressiveness than a single, compact verbal voice marker can provide.

All that the middle marker does is to put an identity flag into the verb. It is up to the hearer to decide, by whatever means available (by context, by semantic appropriateness, by grammatical elimination of alternatives), which slot is to be filled in with an NP matching the subject, and whether it is to be understood distributively (reciprocally) or nondistributively (reflexively). By marking the NP itself, however, in the guise of a special pronoun substitute, all of these distinctions can be made overt. Many languages go only halfway, of course, not distinguishing direct object pronouns from indirect object pronouns.[9] But the full set of distinctions can generally be achieved more readily by marking the NP's than by developing a fully differentiated set of markers for the verb. Greek, in fact, uses both noun-marking and verb-marking systems. The middle can be and is used alone to indicate that an identity relation exists; or an active verb with a reflexive or reciprocal pronoun can be and is

used to specify the exact nature of the identity relation, if its
specification is important;[10] or--since both possibilities exist
in the language--the middle can even be reinforced by a reflexive
or reciprocal pronoun to lay exceptionally heavy stress on the
identity (e.g. Xenophon, Anabasis 1.8.29, οἱ μὲν φασι βασιλέα
κελεῦσαί τινα ἐπισφάξαι αὐτόν..., οἱ δ'ἑαυτον ἐπισφάξασθαι. hoi
men (some) phasi (say) basilea (king) keleusai (to have ordered)
tina (someone) episphaks-ai (to kill, active) auton (him), hoi d'
(others) heauton (himself, reflexive pronoun) episphaks-asthai
(to kill, middle). "Some say the king ordered someone to kill
him..., others (say) he killed himself." [Smyth, 391]). The
fact that Greek (not to mention all the other Indo-European lan-
guages) slowly reorganized its voice system so that the role of
identity-marking was taken over more and more completely by the
pronouns, and so that the verb markers were specialized to act as
NP promotion flags, is probably not unrelated to the obvious re-
dundancy of the Greek system and to the greater specificity of
the pronominal over the verbal marking system.

By now we have discovered how the active/middle distinction
differs from the active/passive one--namely by being a strategy
to handle a different underlying problem--and how languages like
English dispose of the problem to which the middle voice is ad-
dressing itself--namely, by the use of pronouns rather than a
verbal marker. But we have yet to discover how it comes that a
language like Greek can use its middle voice to include the func-
tions for which we use the passive. The passive, after all, has
nothing to do with NP identities, being instead a strategy to
move NP's in and out of subject position.

Such an amalgamation of functions seems to be explainable only
in terms of a semantic restructuring of the middle and passive
that has occurred fairly near the surface--a reanalysis which is
probably possible only if, for both strategies, the option has
been chosen to set a single flag in the verb instead of marking
the appropriate NP's or NP slots. Of all the relationships that
we have isolated so far for discussion, there is only one in
which the subject is not doing the action expressed in the verb.
That relationship is what is traditionally called the passive;
and English pits the passive against all the other situations,
which it lumps under "active" (plain active, plus reflexive and
reciprocal). But similarly, of all these relationships, there is
only one in which the subject is not affected by the action.
That is what we might call the "plain" active (nonreflexive, non-
reciprocal); and the Greek system of verbal voice pits this plain
active against all the other situations, which it lumps under
"middle." Since the terminology rapidly becomes confusing,
thanks to the lumping of functions, the argument is more clearly
presented in diagrams showing the relationship of the surface
subject to the action expressed in the verb (which is, inciden-
tally, the classic definition of voice):

PLAIN ACTIVE	SS ⟶	Subject does action to someone or something else
PASSIVE	SS ⟵	Action is done to subject by someone or something else
REFLEXIVE	SS ↻	Subject does action to itself
RECIPROCAL	SS ⇄	Members of plural subject do action to other members of pl. subj.
FULL-DRESS MIDDLE	SS ↪	Subject does action to someone or something else, in such a way as to affect self also

English groups the relationships according to an active/passive system as follows:

ACTIVE (outgoing arrows):
  Plain Active   SS ⟶
  Reflexive   SS ↻
  Reciprocal   SS ⇄
  Full Middle   SS ↪

PASSIVE (no outgoing arrows):
  Passive   SS ⟵

That is to say, the active subsumes all the cases in which the subject is agent (including reflexive, reciprocal, and full middle), and the passive takes care of the remaining case, the one in which the subject is _not_ performing the action. Greek, on the other hand, groups the relationships according to an active/middle system as follows:

ACTIVE (no incoming arrows):
  Plain Active   SS ⟶

MIDDLE (incoming arrows):
  Full Middle   SS ↪
  Reflexive   SS ↻
  Reciprocal   SS ⇄
  Passive   SS ⟵

That is, the active represents the one case in which the subject is not specified as being affected by the action; whereas the middle subsumes all cases in which the subject _is_ affected by the action--and in this way quite logically includes the passive as well as the reflexive and reciprocal.

Thus embedded in the middle system, of course, the passive is no longer obvious as a strategy devoted to moving NP's in and out of subject position. Nonetheless, it continues to solve the NP-moving problem well enough; it might even be possible to view the middle as _shifting_ NP's, in the special case in which two NP's are identical (i.e., an NP gets moved up to _and merged with_ the subject). So perhaps no more is required of the middle system by the synchronic exigencies of communicating.

Diachronically, however, one might wonder how an active/middle system could come about--in particular, whether it could ever arise from an active/passive system. We have the opposite transformation (from a middle to a passive system) well enough at-

tested in the histories of practically all the Indo-European languages: it involves the development of special pronouns as logically more specific ways of handling NP identities, together with the gradual restriction (or total reworking from a separate stative form) of a single voice-flag in the verbal complex to signal the one remaining relation, passive. But how proto-Indo-European got its middle system we have no way of knowing.

It may seem at first glance to be unlikely that an active/passive system could ever turn into an active/middle system. Yet the trend in Romance (and in Slavic) to enlarge the use of one-time reflexive pronouns to distinctly middle and even downright passive uses, as in French Je me lave les mains "I am washing my hands" (compare Greek λού-ομαι τὰς χεῖρας lou-omai (I wash, middle) tas (the) kheiras (hands), constructed in a closely equivalent way) and Les portes se ferment à deux heures "The doors are closed at two o'clock," seem to demonstrate the possibility of going full circle.

A sentence like Les portes se ferment... raises another question, however. After all, French does have a true, if little-used, passive, with which such "false reflexive" expressions are in contrast: Les portes sont fermées par nous (et pas par le concierge) "The doors are closed by us (and not by the doorman)." As in a true passive, the subject of a false reflexive is not the agent of the action (SS⟵), but this form differs in the implication that the subject is somehow bringing the action onto itself (SS⟳). Roughly the same difference exists in English between the plain passive and the so-called "get-passive"--

PLAIN PASSIVE   SS⟵   The cat was scratched.
                          The window was broken.
GET PASSIVE   SS⟸   The cat got scratched.
                          The window got broken.

The choice of a form like The window got broken over The window was broken seems to imply that the window somehow brought the catastrophe onto itself--if only by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Its presence, as it were, catalyses the action performed by a quite separate agent. This observation is reinforced by the notable ease with which the reflexive pronoun can be added to the get-passive (The cat got itself scratched), contrasted with the impossibility of doing so to the true passive.[11]

What we have here, then, would seem to be a logical extension of the surface analysis of the voice relationships, filling in the hole in the surface pattern. For we now have the three kinds of arrows represented singly

PLAIN ACTIVE   SS⟶
PLAIN PASSIVE   SS⟵
REFLEXIVE   SS⟳

and in every possible combination of two:

RECIPROCAL   SS⇄
FULL MIDDLE   SS⇒
CATALYTIC PASSIVE   SS⇐

This last link in the chain not only provides a more satisfying analysis of the passively used reflexive forms of Romance--

CATALYTIC PASSIVE SS⇐ Fr. Les portes se ferment à deux heures. "The doors get (themselves) closed at two o'clock."

but also provides a logical route by which an active/passive system could regroup to become an active/middle system. The reflexive/reciprocal (that is, NP-identity) marker can be seen extending into agent-demotion (passive) territory, and becoming ripe for reanalysis as a mark for any situation in which the subject is affected by the action, whether or not it is also the agent of the action. As such it is becoming not just a simple intransitive marker, but a genuine middle voice marker in a nascent active/middle system.12

NOTES
1
    I am excluding any consideration of the voice systems of ergative languages, treating only accusative languages.
    2
    The only formal distinction between passive and middle voice in Homeric Greek, for example, is in the aorist. Even in Classical Greek, there is no formal distinction of passive outside of the aorist and future tenses. Sanskrit shows a similar history of a very slow spread of the passive, but here the distinction begins in the present tense.
    3
    David Perlmutter and Paul Postal, Linguistic Institute, 1974.
    4
    Cf. Keenan and Comrie. Some languages, it seems, can promote from still less accessible positions, but only at the risk of considerable grammatical ambiguity.
    5
    Except in those few dialects in which one can say such sentences as It was given him. Not all languages are so unambiguous in this regard, however.
    6
    Cf. Lyons, 373, or Smyth, 392 (sec. 1728); see Smyth also for numerous examples, including many of the standard ones used here.
    7
    Given the NP positions accessible to this identity-marking operation in Greek. These seem to be: direct object, indirect object, and genitive (possessor) of direct object (as in λού-ομαι

τὰς χεῖρας lou-omai (I wash, middle) tas (the) kheiras (hands) "I am washing my hands").

8

Of course, we have other occasional tricks, such as substituting an entirely different verb with a different semantic structure (e.g. kill/die), or using the same surface morpheme sometimes transitively, sometimes intransitively (e.g. break).

9

French, for example, uses a form like se for reflexive or reciprocal direct or indirect object, indistinguishably. Special forms can be added to specify reflexive or reciprocal, if necessary, but are normally omitted.

10

At least, these seem to be the intentions. Unfortunately, there are no more native speakers of ancient Greek to verify such interpretations.

11

Pointed out to me by Edward Keenan.

12

Russian -сь / -ся, the so-called reflexive marker, has gone much the same route. Since this verbal suffix continues to contrast with the free-standing reflexive pronoun себя derived from the same PIE source, however, the resulting voice system is much more complex, not to say fragmented, than in Romance.

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