

Passive and Passive-like Constructions in Hmong

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1. The relation between form and function: some basic issues

The pairing of linguistic form to discourse function has been much discussed in the literature over the last several years. Prince (1996) phrases the question thusly: what is it exactly that discourse functions are associated with? Particular form-function pairings do not appear to be cross-linguistically universal; a given linguistic – that is, syntactic – form may be associated in different languages with distinct discourse functions. Indeed, language change often occurs when language learners treat an L2 form as though it bears the function associated with a related form in L1 (see Prince 1996, 1998 for a discussion of topicalization in Yiddish and English; Snyder 1999 for a discussion of reflexivity in Tahitian and Tahitian French).

Chomsky (1993) states that in a principles-and-parameters approach, the notion of grammatical construction is eliminated. However, as Prince (1996) and Goldberg (1995) note, it is difficult to explain form-function pairings without recourse to the notion of form. One approach might be to claim that either the syntax or the discourse function is basic and that the non-basic element is derived from the primitive. On the syntax-as-basic side, consider Safir's definiteness effect; in the function-as-basic camp, Givón, Chafe, and other functional linguists, who argue that form is an iconic reflex of function.

Another possibility is to argue that it is not that *either* form *or* function is basic, but rather that it is the form-function correlation which is basic. This position is taken by linguists working within Construction Grammar (Zwicky 1987; Goldberg 1992, 1995). Advocates of this position are not necessarily committed to the functionalist iconicity view, but rather they believe that linguistic form is somehow "motivated" by discourse function (Goldberg, p.c.).

A final possibility is to argue that the form-function pairing is essentially arbitrary. This approach has been taken by Prince, Birner, and Ward, among others. Prince (1996) posits an abstract universal Construction-template which may be mapped onto one syntactic form in one language and to another syntactic form in another language or onto more than one syntactic form in a sin-

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gle language. In extracting the notion of Construction from surface syntactic form, Prince remains consistent with both the Chomskyan P&P approach and the Construction Grammarians. She further claims that it is not the syntactic form itself but rather the template-form pair in a particular language that can have an arbitrarily associated discourse function (perhaps, then, form-function pairings are better understood as sets of ordered triples).

In this paper we investigate certain phenomena involving the passive construction. To that end, we begin with a discussion of passives cross-linguistically, presenting claims from the typological discussion in Keenan (1985). We then turn our attention to some relevant facts from Hmong, looking closely at some constructions which have been identified in the literature as passives. Finally, in light of the foregoing discussion, we will revisit the question of the place of constructions and the inherent arbitrariness or motivation of form-function pairings. It will be our ultimate claim that the Hmong constructions we will discuss may only be properly understood as passives on a Prince-style construction-as-template model.

2. Passives in the literature

Keenan (1985) says that languages vary considerably with regard to the productivity of their passive constructions; some languages seem to lack passives altogether (see Keenan for references). But note that, as stated, this raises questions for Prince's construction-as-template model; if she is correct, construction templates are universal, and it is only their surface instantiations which differ cross-linguistically. We might modify the notion of grammar as follows to make Keenan's claim consistent with Prince's: if a grammar is understood as the mapping from template to surface form, then the inconsistency disappears. In essence, Keenan is observing that the passive construction as canonically understood, though common, is not cross-linguistically universal. The question remains: if the passive template is universal, do we expect to find syntactically similar, truth-functionally equivalent instantiations of it in all languages? That is, does the existence of a universal construction template entail the surface realization of that template in all languages? In other words, is a universal template inevitably mapped to syntactic form?

For the purposes of this paper, we define a passive construction as a construction where the agent is unexpressed or expressed as an oblique and the non-agent is expressed as a grammatical subject. Keenan provides several criteria to distinguish basic passives. First, a basic passive has no agent phrase; it lacks an NP which functions as the semantic but not the syntactic subject of a verb in an expression derived from that verb. Second, a basic passive is derived from a transitive, activity (non-stative) main verb, i.e. one that expresses

an activity taking an agent subject and a patient object. He states the typological generalization that if a language has any passives, it has passives which may be characterized as basic. This claim has several consequences. First, if a language has passives with agent phrases, then it has passives without agent phrases.

- (1) a. The cookies were eaten *by Gilligan*.
b. The cookies were eaten.

Another consequence of the typological generalization is that if a language has passives of stative verbs (e.g. *lack, have*, etc.) then it has passives of activity verbs.

- (2) a. Mary Ann has a new hut.
b. *?A new hut is had by Mary Ann.
- (3) a. Ishaâti i-fit-e ibifuungo bibiri (Kinyarwanda)
shirt it-have-ASP buttons two
'The shirt has two buttons' (Keenan (1985)'s 11a)
b. Ibifuungo bibiri bi-fit-w-e n'îshaâti
buttons two they-have-PASS-ASP by-shirt
'Two buttons are had by the shirt' (Keenan's 11b)

Finally, if a language has passives of intransitive verbs then it has passives of transitive verbs.

- (4) a. Tashi goci-*ru* (Taramahua)
not sleep-PASS
'One doesn't sleep' (Keenan's 62a)
b. Gao ne ?a-*ru*
horse 1.sg.SUBJ. give-PASS
'I was given a horse' (Keenan's 62b)

We will now turn our attention to some potentially problematic constructions in Hmong which have been labeled passive in the previous literature.

3. Hmong passives

Two different forms in Hmong roughly satisfy the description of a passive construction. They differ in the choice of auxiliary verb, the semantic role of the underlying object, aspectual properties, and degree of affectedness of the referent of the promoted NP.

3.1. *Raug*-passive

The first construction we will consider uses the auxiliary *raug*, a verb meaning ‘to hit,’ or *mag*, ‘to trap.’ In this construction, the underlying object has the thematic role of patient (Harriehausen, 1990). It appears as the leftmost NP in the passive construction followed by *raug*, the underlying agent NP, the main verb, and then, in some cases, a pronoun coreferential with the patient. This resumptive pronoun only appears when the patient is [+human], but not when the patient is [-human]. The *raug*-passive form seems to emphasize the action, rather than the resultant state, similar to the English *get*-passive. In addition, in the literature the *raug*-passive has been regarded as semantically adversative (Mottin, 1979; Fuller, 1985).

Example (5) illustrates a case in which both agent and patient are [+human]. Sentence (5a) illustrates Hmong’s canonical SVO word order; in example (5b) the patient is promoted and the auxiliary *raug* appears in second position. Because the patient is [+human], it also appears as the resumptive pronoun *nws*. In (6b), the patient is [-human], and so inclusion of the resumptive pronoun is ungrammatical. Example (7b) is identical to (6b), but in this case the arguments are [+human]. As expected, (7b) the resumptive pronoun is acceptable.

- (5) a. Kuv nwj Xeeb
1.sg kiss Xeeb
‘I kissed Xeeb’
b. Xeeb raug kuv nwj nws
Xeeb PASS 1.sg kiss 3.sg
‘Xeeb got kissed by me’
- (6) a. Ib tug nas-tsuag tom nws tus aub
one CLF rat bite 3.sg CLF dog
‘A rat bit his dog’
b. Nws tus aub mag ib tug nas-tsuag tom \emptyset /*nws
3.sg CLF dog PASS one CLF rat bite 3.sg
‘His dog got bitten by a rat’
- (7) a. Tub tom Maiv
Tub bite Maiv
‘Tub bit Maiv’
b. Maiv mag Tub tom nws/?? \emptyset
Maiv PASS Tub bite 3.sg
‘Maiv got bitten by Tub’

3.2. *Yog*-passive

The second construction we will consider uses the auxiliary *yog*, which is also the copula ‘to be.’ In the *yog*-passive, the underlying object has the thematic role of experiencer. In contrast with the *raug*-construction, here the resultant state is emphasized, and no resumptive pronoun is possible, even when the experiencer is [+human], as shown in (8b).

- (8) a. Neeb tu tus tub no
 Neng raise CLF boy this
 ‘Neng raised this boy’
 b. Tus tub no yog Neeb tu \emptyset /*nws
 CLF boy this BE Neng raise 3.sg
 ‘This boy was raised by Neng’
- (9) a. Dr. Seuss sau phau ntawv no
 Dr. Seuss write CLF book this
 ‘Dr. Seuss wrote this book’
 b. Phau ntawv no yog Dr. Seuss sau
 CLF book this BE Dr. Seuss write
 ‘This book was written by Dr. Seuss’

Now that we have presented the basic facts, we will move on to some further data and consideration of how passive-like these constructions may be said to be.

3.3 How passive-like are these constructions?

On the basis of cross-linguistic generalizations about passives, it has been claimed that the Hmong constructions are marginal passives (Fuller, 1985, among others). First, languages often mark a passivized verb morphologically. However, as an isolating language, Hmong lacks inflectional morphology altogether, so the passivized main verb is not morphologically marked in any way. Secondly, passives often use a stative-existential verb for the passive auxiliary. While one passive construction in Hmong uses the copula, the other uses the active verb(s) *raug* ‘hit’ or *mag* ‘trap.’ Typologically, though, other possibilities are not uncommon; the use of these particular verbs appears to be an areal feature (Keenan, 1985).

A more unusual and significant characteristic of the Hmong passive is that the construction almost always appears with the underlying agent expressed. When it is missing, the construction is ambiguous and can be in-

terpreted either as a passive or as an active in which a third party has caused agency:

- (10) Kuv raug ntaus
I PASS hit
'I got hit' or 'I hit (something) (because someone made me do so)'
- (11) Tus nab raug tom
CLF snake PASS bite
'The snake got bitten' or 'The snake bit (someone/thing) (because someone forced him to do so)'

As mentioned above, the underlying patient of a *raug*-passive preferentially appears as a resumptive pronoun. The agent must be expressed when the resumptive pronoun is used, as illustrated in (12c).

- (12) a. ? Lawv raug nws kaw
3.pl PASS 3.sg lock-up
'They got locked up by him/her'
- b. Lawv raug nws kaw lawv
3.pl PASS 3.sg lock-up 3.pl
'They got locked up by him/her'
- c. * Lawv raug kaw lawv
3.pl PASS lock-up 3.pl
'They got locked up'
- d. Lawv raug kaw
3.pl PASS lock-up
'They got locked up' or 'They locked up (someone)'

Example (8b), repeated below as (13), shows that the resumptive pronoun is not licensed in *yog*-constructions.

- (13) Tus tub no yog Neeb tu \emptyset /*nws
CLF boy this is Neng raise 3.sg
'This boy was raised by Neng'

When a verb can appear with either auxiliary, the resumptive pronoun is only licensed in the *raug*-construction:

- (14) a. Nws raug kuv yuav nws/?? \emptyset
3.sg PASS 1.sg marry 3.sg
'She got married to me'

- b. Nws yog kuv yuav \emptyset /*nws
 3.sg BE 1.sg marry 3.sg
 ‘She is married to me’ or ‘She’s the one that I married’

In addition, the resumptive pronoun must be coreferential with the promoted patient:

- (15) a. *Lawv_i raug nws kaw lawv_j
 3.pl PASS 3.sg lock-up 3.pl
 ??
 b. *Lawv_i raug nws kaw nws/kuv/køj
 3.pl PASS 3.sg lock-up 3.sg/1.sg/2.sg
 ??

As illustrated in this section, both the *raug*- and the *yog*-constructions preferentially express the thematic agent. Although not a violation of Keenan’s Subgeneralization 1, this preference seems in conflict with this claim.

Subgeneralization 1: If a language has passives with agent phrases then it has them without agent phrases (Keenan’s G-2.I, 249).

Typological generalizations are intended to express the “unmarked” case. In the case of Hmong, however, the “unmarked” or “basic” passive construction contains the agent. When the agent is unexpressed, the resulting sentence is ambiguous. In addition, as we’ll see below, the agent appears not to lose all syntactic subjecthood properties. As such, despite their functional similarity with passives in other languages, it is difficult to reconcile the Hmong passive constructions with definitions based on crosslinguistic generalizations about the properties of agent phrases.

3.4 Subjecthood and Hmong passives

If these constructions are in fact syntactic passives, the promoted NP should show syntactic subject properties. Hmong lacks morphological markings for both case and verbal agreement, so these usual criteria do not provide useful tests for subjecthood in Hmong. Raising, too, is marginal at best, and so this also is not a helpful diagnostic for subjecthood in Hmong, as shown here where raising an NP higher than *zoo-li* ‘seem’ is unacceptable.

- (16) a. Zoo-li coob tus neeg muaj teeb-meem nyuaj txog kev
 seem many CLF people have problem difficult about way
 nrhiav hauj-lwm lub sij-hawm no
 find work CLF time this

‘It seems that many people are having trouble finding jobs now’
(Fuller 4:43a)

- b. *Coob tus neeg zoo-li muaj teeb-meem nyuaj txoj kev
many CLF people seem have problem difficult about way
nrhiav hauj-lwm lub sij-hawm no
find work CLF time this

‘Many people seem to be having trouble finding jobs now’
(Fuller 4:43b)

- c. *Hauj-lwm thaum lub sij-hawm no zoo-li nrhiav nyuaj
work time CLF time this seem find difficult
‘Jobs seem to be difficult to find now’ (Fuller 4:43c)

Word order is rigidly SVO, where the first NP is the syntactic subject. In the constructions we have been considering, the promoted NP always appears leftmost in the sentence. Topicalized OSV constructions are highly disfavored, as in (17a); OVS scrambling is impossible, as in (17b).

- (17) a. ?Cov mov no, kuv niam ua tsis qab li
this rice here 1.sg mom make NEG tasty at all
‘This rice, my mom made this awful stuff’
b. Cov mov no ua kuv niam
this rice here make 1.sg mom
*‘my mom made this rice’

Word order is thus a reasonable diagnostic for subjecthood, and hence, in the *raug*- and *yog*-constructions, the promoted NP satisfies this criterion for subjecthood.

Subject-oriented adverbs provide the most useful diagnostic for subjecthood in Hmong. In (18a) *txhob-txwm* ‘deliberately’ must modify the action of the police. In (19a), the passive version, it modifies Hnub’s. In (19b), however, the adverb is between the agent and the main verb and can only modify the agent’s action, suggesting that this NP retains subjecthood properties. Example (20a) must be interpreted in the same fashion.

- (18) a. Cov tas-npluaj txhob-txwm ntes Hnub
CLF police deliberately arrest Hnub
‘The police deliberately arrested Hnub’
b. *Cov tas-npluaj ntes txhob-txwm Hnub
CLF police arrest deliberately Hnub
‘The police arrested deliberately Hnub’

- c. *?Cov tas-npluaj ntes Hnub txhob-txwm
CLF police arrest Hnub deliberately
'The police deliberately arrested Hnub' (Hnub got arrested on purpose)
- (19) a. Hnub txhob-txwm mag tas-npluaj ntes
Hnub deliberately PASS police arrest
'Hnub was deliberately arrested by the police' (Hnub got arrested on purpose)
- b. Hnub mag tas-npluaj txhob-txwm ntes
Hnub PASS police deliberately arrest
'Hnub was arrested deliberately by the police' (The police did it on purpose)
- (20) a. Maiv zoo-siab tu Hnub
Maiv happy care-for Hnub
'Maiv happily cares for Hnub'
- b. Hnub zoo-siab raug Maiv tu nws
Hnub happy PASS Maiv care-for 3.sg
'Hnub happily gets cared for by Maiv' (Hnub is happy)
- c. Hnub raug Maiv zoo-siab tu nws
Hnub PASS Maiv happy care-for 3.sg
'Hnub gets cared for happily by Maiv' (Maiv is happy)

Adverbs of this type modify NPs immediately to their left; this suggests that both the promoted NP and the lower agent NP have some subject properties.

Scopal properties are also somewhat helpful in determining subjecthood. As shown in (21)–(22), in canonical, active, SVO sentences, subjects have wider scope than non-subjects; however, lower indefinites can sometimes take scope over a higher NP, whereas lower universals cannot. In passives, illustrated in (23)–(24), the same pattern is found: the leftmost NP generally takes wide scope, but existentials, wherever they appear, also try to take widest scope.

- (21) Txhua tus tub nwj ib tug menyuam ntxhais
Every CLF boy kiss one CLF little girl
'every boy kissed a girl'
 $\forall \gg \exists, ??\exists \gg \forall$
- (22) Ib tug tub nwj txhua tus ntxhais
one CLF boy kiss every CLF girl

‘A boy kissed every girl’
 $\exists \gg \forall, * \forall \gg \exists$

- (23) Ib tug menyuam ntxhais mag txhua tus tub nwj nws
 one CLF little girl get every CLF boy kiss 3.sg
 ‘A girl was kissed by every boy’
 $\exists \gg \forall, * \forall \gg \exists$

- (24) Txhua tus ntxhais mag ib tug menyuam tub nwj nws
 every CLF girl PASS one CLF little boy kiss 3.sg
 ‘Every girl was kissed by a boy’
 $\forall \gg \exists, \exists \gg \forall$

With respect to scopal properties, the leftmost NP in passive sentences behaves like the subject in active sentences with canonical SVO word order. This provides further evidence for the subjecthood of the promoted NPs in passive constructions.

In sum, three tests are useful for identifying subjecthood in the passive: word order, subject-oriented adverbs, and scopal properties. Although these tests support the claim that the promoted NP is a syntactic subject, these diagnostics suggest that the constructions under discussion do not entirely conform to the syntactic definition of passive constructions traditionally given. In particular, the subject-oriented adverb facts shown in (19b) and (20c) indicate that the lower NP agent may retain some subject-like properties.

3.5. The differences in subjecthood properties between the two constructions

Keenan (1976) lists, among other properties of subjecthood, indispensability. While a non-subject may often simply be eliminated from a sentence with the result still being a sentence, subjects are usually indispensable. In Hmong, objects drop freely. Subjects are less apt to drop, but they may sometimes drop where the referent of the zero NP can be determined from the discourse context (Fuller), especially in the case of intrasentential anaphora, as shown in (26a):

- (25) a. Maiv ua cov laj tiamsis Hnub noj cov laj
 Maiv make CLF laj but Hnub eat CLF laj
 ‘Maiv made the laj, but Hnub ate it’
 b. Maiv ua cov laj tiamsis Hnub noj \emptyset
 Maiv make CLF laj but Hnub eat
 ‘Maiv made the laj, but Hnub ate it’

- (26) a. Maiv ua cov laj tiamsis nws tsis noj cov laj
 Maiv make CLF laj but 3.sg NEG eat CLF laj
 ‘Maiv made the laj, but she didn’t eat the laj’
- b. Maiv ua cov laj tiamsis ∅ tsis noj cov laj
 Maiv make CLF laj but NEG eat CLF laj
 ‘Maiv made the laj, but she didn’t eat the laj’
- c. ??Maiv ua cov laj tiamsis ∅ tsis noj ∅
 Maiv make CLF laj but NEG eat
 ‘Maiv made the laj, but she didn’t eat it’

The different availability of the resumptive pronoun in the two passive constructions in Hmong, illustrated in section 3.3, may be tied to indispensability and thus different syntactic properties. Where the resumptive pronoun occurs, in the *raug*-construction, it is coreferential with the promoted NP. Possibly, the resumptive pronoun has some subject properties and dropping it would violate the hierarchy suggested by the indispensability generalizations and cause ungrammaticality, as in (27a). The non-licensing of the coreferential resumptive pronoun in the *yog*-construction, as in (27b) on the other hand, suggests that here the promoted NP does not share the same syntactic subjecthood properties. As such, the status of the highest NPs may be different in these two constructions although their surface forms are both regarded as passives.

- (27) a. Nws raug kuv yuav nws/??∅
 3.sg PASS 1.sg marry 3.sg
 ‘She got married to me’
- b. Nws yog kuv yuav ∅/*nws
 3.sg BE 1.sg marry 3.sg
 ‘She is married to me’ or ‘She’s the one that I married’

4. Conclusions: Theoretical implications for form and function

In this paper we have presented data from Hmong which raise questions for earlier accounts of the properties of passives crosslinguistically. These passives display some unusual semantic and syntactic properties. The presence of agent phrases appears to be obligatory; in their absence, the resulting forms are ambiguous. In addition, the agent phrases appear to retain some subject properties. The two constructions regarded as passives differ from each other in the presence of a resumptive pronoun, indicating that they also differ with respect to the subject-like properties of their promoted NPs.

If the agency properties of the basic case in Hmong run contrary to the cross-linguistic norm, the basic form of the passive in Hmong differs from the basic form canonically observed. Two forms, similar function.

If the indispensability hierarchy suggests that the two promoted NPs in the two constructions differ with respect to their subjecthood properties, then the two constructions have two distinct forms. Both constructions are understood as passive. Two forms, similar function.

If, as in Construction Grammar, linguistic form is somehow motivated by discourse function, it is not clear why the mapping between form and function should ever differ cross-linguistically or intralinguistically, as we have seen above. If instead the passive is conceived not as a particular syntactic form, but rather as a template corresponding to some syntactic form, à la Prince (1996), then the fact that a passive-like meaning is associated with non-passive-like morphological and syntactic properties is unproblematic.

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