The creole passive¹

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1. Introduction

The passive construction in several (but not all) Caribbean creole languages, contrasts sharply with that of its lexifiers, which include English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, and Dutch. I will use the term 'bare passive' to refer to the type of passive construction which is considered here. It has the properties enumerated in (a-c):

- (a) The verb in the creole bare passive appears in its bare form. In contrast, passives in the lexifier languages require passive morphology.
- (b) The verb in the creole bare passive may appear with the usual range of modifiers. In contrast, passives in the lexifier languages specifically require a passive auxiliary.
- (c) The creole bare passive does not admit the expression of an Agent. In contrast, the lexifier languages allow the expression of an Agent in a so-called by-phrase.

In sum, the creole bare passive differs from a corresponding active construction in the following way only²:

(d) The Theme argument is promoted to subject position.

The absence of any form of overt passive marking has long been thought typologically curious (Keenan and Dryer 2010), emanating from a view that argument expression and verbal morphology are tightly interrelated. Although Keenan (1985) defines the "basic" passive on the basis of the absence of an agent with an otherwise transitive verb, without reference to morphological marking (247), he also claims that "passive VPs are naturally expressed in the simplest case as syntactic and morphological modifications of transitive verbs" (25) and distinguishes between two broad types of passives, periphrastic passives which use a passive auxiliary along with morphological modification, and strict morphological passives which don't include an auxiliary. Nowhere in his discussion is there an acknowledgement that 'bare' passives exist. In contrast, Cabredo Hofherr (to appear) explicitly notes that subject demotion and object promotion are "logically independent of morphological voice marking" (55). She

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 $^{^2}$ I will not address the question here whether a null morpheme marks the passive, as argued for instance by LaCharité & Wellington (1993). Suffice it to note that the reliance on context to resolve the ambiguity of an example such as (15b) in Section 6 does not suggest the presence of a disambiguating morpheme.

cites evidence from Jamaican Creole and Gur, the latter a Niger-Congo language, hence in the broad substrate family for languages such as Jamaican Creole.

The overview of passive constructions in the *Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures* (APiCS, <u>https://apics-online.info</u>) shows that a clear majority of these languages have a passive: only 23 out of 76 languages surveyed lack a passive altogether. Velupillai (2012:266) points out that "[i]t is somewhat more common cross-linguistically for languages to lack passives than to have them", and that this contrasts with the pattern which emerges from APiCS. Of the 76 languages surveyed there, 29 languages use a passive without verbal coding, either as the sole passive construction, or alongside a construction using verbal coding. A clear majority of languages with bare passives are found in the Caribbean.³

In this squib, I will consider some properties of the creole bare passive in two Caribbean creoles, Berbice Dutch and Jamaican Creole. I will address the semantic restrictions on the passive subject, and the presumed preference for perfective aspect of bare passives. I will rely on my own fieldwork observations of passive constructions in Berbice Dutch Creole (BD) and on a combination of earlier work and my own observations of passives in Jamaican Creole (JC).

2. The Berbice Dutch passive construction

BD passives are marginal in the sense that they are rarely attested in free speech. As I noted in Kouwenberg (1994:452), only a dozen spontaneously produced passives appear in hundreds of pages of transcribed recordings. The verbs which participate in these spontaneously produced passives are *twa* 'put, arrange' (4 occurrences), *mja* 'make, create' (2 occurrences), *bugrafu* 'bury', *deki mu* [take go] 'carry', *kori* 'construct' (lit. 'work'), *pari* 'weave', *furu* 'steal', *wafi* 'wash, clean', and Guyanese Creole English (GCE) derived *beri* 'bury' (1 each).

Passive use of *twa* and *wa/i* is illustrated in (1), of *deki mu* in (2). These passives denote resultatives, and the verbs appear with Perfective aspect suffixes. We will return to aspect in relation to passive voice in sections $6-7^4$.

(1) BD: ∫i kali wari, o twa-tε moi, alma gutu o waʃi-tε moi an ting 3SG.POSS small house 3SG put-PFV nice, all thing 3SG wash- PFV good and thing 'His small home, it had been arranged nicely, everything, it had been cleaned and so on.' (Kouwenberg 1994:452)

³ A contrast is evident between Caribbean and West African creoles in APiCS. The former display either bare passives or alternate between bare passives and "typical" passives (using verbal coding in the form of an auxiliary and/or morphological coding). Among the latter, English-lexifier varieties lack passives altogether, while Portuguese-lexifier varieties divide between "upper Guinea" varieties with verbal coding, and Gulf of Guinea varieties with bare passives. The relative uniformity and lack of divisions by lexifier among Caribbean creoles is quite different from the divisions along lexifier and regional lines for West African creoles. This intriguing contrast makes substrate-based arguments for the Caribbean patterns less probable.

⁴ Abbreviations used in the examples are as follows: CMPL completive, COMP complementizer, COP copula, DEF definite, DEM demonstrative, F feminine, HAB habitual, IMPFV imperfective, IRR irrealis, NEG negator, PASS passive, PFV perfective, PL plural, POSS possessive, PROX proximate, RESULT resultative, SG singular

BD ant A. deki-tɛ mu-tɛ so
 Aunt A. take-PFV go-PFV so
 'Aunt A. had been carried over there.' (Kouwenberg 1994:468)

3. The Jamaican Creole passive construction

Bailey (1966) cites the examples in (3) and notes that the Agent cannot be expressed in such constructions (p. 81). The examples in (4) are from Cassidy (1982:61), who claims that statements with animate subjects, such as c., are ambiguous between an active and passive reading – in this instance, between 'it pierces (something)' and 'it is pierced'. We will return to this issue in section 5.

(3)	JC:	a. di eg-dem mash 'the eggs are broken'	
		b. di leta rait 'the letter has been written' (Bailey 1966)	
(4)	JC:	a. De property sell 'The property was sold'	
		b. <i>De food buy</i> 'The food is bought'	
		c. As you touch it, it bore 'As soon as you touch it, it is pierced'	
		[commenting on the penetrability of jellyfish] (Cassidy 1982)	

Alleyne (1980:81) points out that the bare verb in Caribbean Creoles such as JC expresses a perfective. Therefore, passive constructions such as these, like the BD passives in (1), are interpreted as denoting resultatives.

4. Alternative expressions

The most common strategy for backgrounding agents in both BD and JC is by way of active constructions with impersonal subjects. This is usually accomplished by using a 3PL pronoun (BD *eni*, JC *dem*), but BD also uses generic *kene* 'person' or *gutu* 'thing' in active constructions with passive-like interpretations.

(5)	BD:	eni furu-te eke oboko-apu
		3PL steal-PFV 1SG chicken-PL
		'They stole my hens / My hens have been stolen' (Kouwenberg 1994:449)
(6)	BD:	gutu masi jefi-t e andri fan eni foroteki eni kriki musu
		thing must eat-PFV some from 3PL before 3PL get much
		'Something must have eaten some of them / Some of them must have been eaten
		before they got a chance to multiply.' (Kouwenberg 2007:39)

While the referential BD 3PL pronoun may have human, non-human animate and inanimate referents, its non-referential use in the impersonal constructions is restricted to human agents. This is like the observation of similar constructions in English (Cabredo Hofherr 2022:47).

JC also has what Patrick (2007:137) refers to as "a standard-like *get* passive". This periphrastic passive is illustrated in (7)-(8) below, and it is immediately followed by an active

construction with a 3PL subject in (8). It should be noted that JC *shat* is uninflected 'shoot', despite deriving from an inflected form *shot* in the lexifier.

(7)	JC:	Shi mos gyet biit.		
		3SG.F must PASS beat		
		'She must be beaten' (Craig 1980:116)		
(8)	JC:	iz so im get shat op . Dem shat im COP thus 3SG get shoot up. 3PL shoot 3SG 'That's how he got shot up. They shot him / He was shot' (Patrick 2007:137)		

Allsopp (1983) points out that the prevalence of active constructions which express passive equivalents has led some authors to claim that the passive voice does not exist in these languages. While this is clearly disproven by the large percentage of languages with bare passives in APiCS, it is the case that elicitation of passive constructions can run up against difficulties as we shall see in the following sections.

5. Restrictions on the subject of the bare passive

Cassidy (1982:61-62) points out that statements containing animate subjects, such as the following, are ambiguous between an active and passive reading, and that the ambiguity must be resolved by the context in the absence of grammatical marking of the passive:

- (9) JC: a. *Him gwine ketch* 'He will be caught' also: 'He will catch (something)'
 - b. *Shark can eat* 'Shark can be eaten' also: 'Sharks can feed (on something)'
 - c. *How de pickney fe feed*? "How are the children to be fed?' also: How are the children to feed?'
 - d. *Tiger would like all him fren and neighbour fe come when him gwine bury* 'Tiger would like all his friends and neighbours to attend when he is to be buried' also: '...when he is burying (something)'

Allsopp (1983) examines this issue in some detail, and argues that ambiguity does not normally arise even with animate subjects as "the signalling of passivity depends consistently on and seems in fact to be controlled by the NATURE OF THE SUBJECT in its relation to the verb" (p. 145, his emphasis). Craig (1980) appears to hold a similar position, appealing to "the nature of the subject" to explain the unacceptability of (10a) without the passive auxiliary *get* in contrast with (10b).

- (10) JC: a. Bari *(get) lik Barry *(PASS) hit 'Barry was hit'
 - b. di guot **lik** DEF goat hit 'The goat was hit' (Craig 1980:116,117)

In other words, Craig (198) and Allsopp (1983) assume an "unlikely Agent" constraint, whereby a passive reading automatically arises in case (i) a normally transitive verb appears with a subject only, and (ii) the subject is an unlikely Agent of the verb.

I have found it impossible to replicate these findings. While I have no doubt that Craig observed the passive construction in (10b), JC speakers I consulted invariably rejected the construction. Instead, despite setting up an appropriate context⁵, they suggested either the periphrastic *get* passive in (10'a), or the active construction with an impersonal subject in (10'b).

(10)′	JC:	a. Di guot get lik	b. Dem lik di guot
		DEF goat PASS hit	3PL hit DEF goat
		'The goat was hit'	'They hit the goat'

This may be indicative of a change in the direction of a true animacy constraint, whereby animate subjects are unacceptable subjects of a bare passive and require the presence of an auxiliary. Given that JC is in contact with and under pressure from its lexifier, a development in this direction is not unexpected.

This is not true of the BD situation. Although (11) is the only instance of an animate subject – in this instance, a human subject – among the small number of spontaneously produced passives in BD, elicited examples such as (12)-(13) suggest that there is no animacy constraint as such in the formation of BD bare passives:

(11)	BD:	o bεri-tε mεtε alma ſi gutu-apu 3SG bury-PFV with all 3POSS thing-PL 'She was buried with all her possessions' (Kouwenberg 2007:38)
(12)	BD:	di obokohan ku-t ϵ , bat ju nimi da wati ka DEF rooster catch-PFV but 2SG know COP what NEG 'The rooster was caught, but you don't know what it is (that caught it).' (<i>ibid</i> :465)
(13)	BD:	di hondo bugrafu-te o noko buma ka DEF dog bury-PFV 3SG NEG-RESULT throw-away NEG

'The dog was buried, it hasn't been thrown away.' (*ibid*:467)

I should point out that elicitation of BD passives generally proved difficult, irrespective of the nature of the subject. For instance, the following passive construction was variously rejected and accepted by the same speaker on different occasions, in elicitation sessions involving similar contexts (Kouwenberg 1994:464-465):⁶

⁵ The context in which elicitation was attempted was one of a goat having been hit down by a car.

⁶ (14a/b) contrast in the form of the subject: a 3SG pronoun in (14a), which was rejected, a DP in (14b), which was accepted. However, the spontaneous production of a passive with a 3SG inanimate subject in (1), and with a 3SG human subject in (11), as well as the elicited passive with a 3SG animate subject in (13) shows that the contrasting judgements in (14) are unlikely to be due to the syntactic form of the subject.

(14)	BD:	a. *o	kapu-te	b. di	kene	kapu-te
		350	G cut-PFV	DEF	⁷ persoi	n cut-PFV
		atte	empted reading: 'He was operated'	'He	e was o	perated'

So while elicitation is challenging, it does not appear that there is a restriction on the nature of the subject in BD.

6. Perfective Aspect and the bare passive

In their overview of passives in pidgin and creole languages, Haspelmath et al. (2013) cite examples of "typical" passives (i.e., passives containing passive coding in the form of verbal morphology or an auxiliary), of passives without verbal coding (bare passives), and of alternative constructions with passive readings. In all instances, their examples are of resultatives. Examples of passives cited in the APiCS database for different languages are also predominantly resultatives, with very few exceptions.

Winford (1993:125) claims that in Caribbean English Creoles (CEC), to which JC belongs, "[t]he passive use of transitive verb is in general more common and acceptable in the perfective than in other tenses and aspects", and that '[a] close association between passive voice and perfective aspect is quite common cross-linguistically". In actual fact, as we will see in section 7, imperfective passives are common and may have been overlooked precisely because of the assumed close association with perfective aspect.

Be that as it may, the combination of passive voice and perfective aspect naturally yields a resultative reading, which led Winford (1993:117) to suggest that certain passive constructions may be interpreted as true intransitives. In these examples from Winford, CEC denotes Caribbean English Creole:

(15) CEC: a. *Mieri brok di windo*. 'Mary has broken the window'

b. Di windo brok. 'The window broke / has been broken' (Winford 1993:117)

- c. Di glaas brok jes so. 'The glass broke just like that.' (Winford 1993:135)
- d. Di windo brok. 'The window is broken.' (Winford 1993:136)

The unaccusative reading 'The window broke' in (15b) (anticausative in the terminology of Winford 1993) lacks agency and is therefore unlike the passive reading 'The window has been broken'. This is further illustrated in (15c), where the presence of *jes so* 'just like that' ensures that the construction is not available for passive interpretation. As (15b) shows, the unaccusative and passive use of *brok* are not formally distinguished.

Furthermore, as seen in (15d), *Di windo brok* is also 'The window is broken', where *brok* functions as predicate adjective. Alleyne (1980:97-98) went as far as to see the "passive transform" as generally yielding predicate adjectives, citing examples from Sranan and Saramaccan – languages where many forms move freely between transitive, intransitive, and adjectival uses. In contrast, Winford (1993:136) points out that only a few items across CEC languages are able to appear both as transitives and predicate adjectives (137). For JC, Forbes-Barnett (2019) similarly argues that the possibilities for forms to move between these

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categories is quite restricted. Furthermore, her work shows that while JC forms which engage in verb-adjective alternations are always able to appear as intransitives, only a relatively small class of forms appear also as transitives. This suggests that it is not passivization which creates deverbal adjectives; rather, a derivational relationship obtains between intransitives / unaccusatives and adjectives.

The acceptability of bare passives in CECs can be improved by the addition of particles which indicate that the verb's logical object is fully affected by the event. As Winford puts it, the verb – particle combinations "convey a stronger sense of direct effect on the patient objects" than the verbs "in isolation" (*ibid*: 127). Thus, in (16)-(17), it is implied that <u>all</u> yams were dug up and <u>all</u> the bread was eaten:

(16)	CEC	?Di yam-dem dig sins yeside.
		Di yam-dem dig-op sins yeside.
		DEF yam-PL dig-CMPL since yesterday
		'The yams were all dug up since yesterday.' (Winford 1993:126)

(17) JC Di bred it af.
DEF bread eat CMPL
'The bread was eaten.' (LaCharité & Wellington 1999:260)

Winford points out that the verb+particle combinations enhance transitivity, and sees their availability as evidence of a "close association between high transitivity and passivization" (*ibid*.). In other words, the presence of the particle signals both the agentive and the resultative nature of the event. While the particle is not a passive marker, its presence eliminates the ambiguity between passive and other readings which results from the lack of formal marking of passives.

The unmarked perfective passive in JC and other CECs with its potential for ambiguity between passive and adjective status corresponds to a passive marked by a perfective suffix in BD, which therefore leaves no doubt about the verbal category of the form in question. This is seen above in examples (1)-(2) and (11)-(14).

7. Imperfective Aspect, Mood, and the bare passive

Despite the presumed preference for perfective passives, Winford cites several examples of progressive passives, as illustrated here, and notes that "no restrictions of tense, aspect, etc., … apply to CEC passives' (1993:131):

- (18) JC Dis-ya fish naa sel. DEM-PROX fish NEG-IMPFV sell
 'This fish is not for sale' (i.e., not being sold) (Winford 1993:129, citing Bailey 1966)
- (19) CEC Di waal a **peent**. DEF wall IMPFV paint 'The wall is being painted.' (*ibid*:131)

My observation of passive use in Jamaica is that imperfective passives are common. The owner of the vehicle pictured in (20) created an original 'for sale' sign, using a JC imperfective passive:

(20) JC *It a sell* 3SG IMPFV sell 'For sale' [lit.: 'It is selling']



While the preceding examples illustrate episodic imperfectives, the following are of habitual imperfectives:

- (21) JC Lai a **tel**! lie IMPFV tell 'Lies are rampant!' [lit.: 'Lies are being told']
- (22) JC Shi no aks hau bil a pie, hau yaad stie, hau moni a spen 3sG.F NEG ask how bill IMPFV pay, how yard stay, how money IMPFV spend 'She hasn't asked how the bills are being paid for, what state the home is in, how funds are being spent.' [personal observation]

The close association between perfective and passive, or between resultative readings and passive voice is also not supported by my observations of passives in BD. Recall that BD perfective passives, as illustrated in the preceding, are marked by a perfective suffix $-t\varepsilon$ [PFV]. In contrast, in the spontaneously produced BD passives below, which denote habitual or customary activity (Kouwenberg 1994, 2007), the passive verb is bare. It appears with a preverbal habitual marker *das* in (23), unmarked in (24)-(25)⁷.

⁷ There is no grammaticalized expression of the habitual in BD, hence the fairly frequent intrusion of the Guyanese Creole English-derived preverbal habitual markers *das* and *justu*.

- (23) BD: dida das twa mosli di krεkε-apu wanga di mingi das strom that HAB put mostly DEF creek-PL where DEF water HAB flow 'That one (i.e. that type of fish trap) is mostly set in the creeks where the water is running.' (Kouwenberg 1994:452)
- (24) BD: o kori djas keke hoso di kori. dida, o pari keke di boks di 3SG work just like how DEM work. that, 3SG weave like DEF box DEM 'It is made in the same way as this one is made. That one, it is woven like this box' [speaking to customary basket weaving practices] (*ibid*:461)
- (25) BD: an di king, eni wari ben so boki **mja** ju nimi and DEF king 3PL house inside FOC money make 2SG know 'and the King, in their house, money was made you know' (*ibid*:453)

Episodic imperfectives are also observed, and marked by the presence of an imperfective suffix -a, illustrated here by a spontaneously produced example in (26), an elicited instance in (27):

- (26) BD keke dida kom kane, masi jenda riper-a like that come NEG, must be there repair- IMPFV
 'As if that one [i.e., the river ferry] isn't coming, (it) must be being repaired.' (*ibid*:461)
- (27) BD di tun kapu-a bat o no fama kanε
 DEF field cut- IMPFV but 3SG NEG finish NEG
 'The field is being cut, but it isn't finished yet' (*ibid*:465)

In all these instances, human agency is implied by the nature of the events: *twa* 'put', *kori* 'work', *pari* 'weave', *mja* 'make', *kapu* 'cut', and GCE-derived *riper* 'repair' denote events which require human agents. This is in line with Winford's claim that CEC passives are strongly agent-oriented (1993:129). JC and CEC examples (18)-(22) similarly contain verbs denoting events which require human agents.

BD prospective passives, marked by preverbal *ma* [IRR] preceding the uninflected verb, while not observed in spontaneous production, were accepted by speakers:

(28)	BD	tun ma kap nau, fi plandi field IRR cut now, COMP plant
		'The fields will be cut now, to plant' (<i>ibid</i> :465)
		The fields will be eat now, to plant (<i>ibia</i> .405)
(29)	BD	di plangi-apu ma sagi moroko
		DEF board-PL IRR saw tomorrow
		'The boards will be sawn tomorrow' (<i>ibid</i> :453)

In JC moreover, I have observed embedded passives in irrealis contexts denoting possibility and necessity, introduced by fi:

- (27) JC a. Gud no fi du? good NEG COMP do?'Isn't it that good deeds should be done?'
 - b. Gon fi put dong. gun COMP put down
 'Guns should be decommissioned.'
 [TV interview with Desmond Dekker, *aka* Ninjaman]
- (28) JC-influenced Jamaican English:

Need tree to **cut**, call Delroy. 'Need a tree / trees to be cut down? Call Delroy'



The relative ease with which these constructions are produced contradicts the usual observations in the literature on creole languages, where the rareness of passives is emphasized.

8. Concluding remarks

Elicitation of passive constructions can be challenging, as speakers prefer impersonal active constructions or, in JC, periphrastic constructions which make use of a passive auxiliary. In JC, a lack of formal marking makes perfective passives potentially ambiguous between passive and intransitive or predicate adjective readings. This ambiguity does not arise in BD, where perfectives are marked by a suffix. Acceptability of perfective passives can be improved in JC by the addition of particles which enhance both the agentive and resultative nature of the event, ensuring that a construction containing only a subject is interpreted as having an implicit agent.

Observations of spontaneously produced passives in BD and JC suggest that imperfective passives, with both habitual readings and episodic readings, are relatively easily produced. Also, irrealis passives can be observed in JC, and proved to be acceptable in elicitation in BD.

The literature on creole passives has focused largely on perfective passives which denote resultatives. This has meant that passive constructions appearing in more agentive imperfective or irrealis contexts have been overlooked.

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