

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, <https://apics-online.info>) 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 *wafi* 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 6-7⁴.

- (1) BD: *ʃi kali wari, o twa-tɛ moi, alma gutu o wafi-tɛ 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

- (2) 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. *De food buy* '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 *kɛnɛ* 'person' or *gutu* 'thing' in active constructions with passive-like interpretations.

- (5) BD: *eni furu-tɛ ɛkɛ 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-tɛ andri fan eni foroteki eni krika 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)

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 all yams were dug up and all 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-IMPV 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 IMPV 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 *-te* [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 kreke-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 hosu 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 kanε, 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’ (*ibid*:465)
- (29) BD di plangi-apu ma **sagi** moroko
 DEF board-PL IRR saw tomorrow
 ‘The boards will be sawn tomorrow’ (*ibid*: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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