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THE PASSIVE IN AKAN

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THE title of this paper is likely to arouse curiosity. This is quite understandable: most of the languages which have come to be associated with *Voice* as a linguistic category have at least two distinct grammatical features. The first is that they have a sub-class of verbs which exhibit affixal forms labelled *active* and *passive*. This is true, for example, of languages like English, French, Latin and Greek. (cf. English *love/loved*; French *aime/aimé*; Latin *amo/amor*; Ancient Greek *phileo/philoumai*). The second is that in most of these languages a noun functioning as goal in an active sentence becomes the subject in the corresponding passive sentence, the noun-actor being introduced after the verb by a preposition as exemplified by (1) and (2):

1. The board interviewed the candidate (active)
2. The candidate was interviewed by the board (passive)

It is worth noting that in the second of these English sentences the agent may or may not be expressed depending on a number of factors, e.g. whether or not the referent is known or identifiable from the context. Akan does not exhibit inflectional affixes which correspond to the active and passive in the IE languages. Neither are the nouns functioning respectively as actor and goal strictly permutable in the usual sense of the term in the surface structures of sentences which I am going to call passives.

On the face of it this might seem to be an important difference between Akan and those Indo-European languages from which examples have been cited above. It should be pointed out, however, that even in the Indo-European languages the overt expression of the agent is not a crucial feature of the passive. The passive without the agent seems to be statistically more frequent than the passive with an expressed agent.¹ In more recent years, comments by linguists on some of the IE languages seem to give support to the view that the two features referred to above as characterizing the passive—i.e. presence of morphological affixes and syntactic re-arrangement—need not be overt realizations of the passive at all. I refer, in particular, to two articles, one by Michael Grady (1965) and the other by Anderson (1968). Grady argues that sentences like—

4. Newports smoke fresher.
5. The new pop-top cans open easier.

are medio-passives. By a medio-passive construction he means a syntactic pattern which is active in realization but passive in meaning. 'In such sentences . . . the subjects, according to the intuition of the native speaker, don't really do anything.' To him the distinction between the traditional English passive and his medio-passive can be found in surface phenomena, 'seen as depending on a formal characteristic: absence or presence of *be-en*.' (4) and (5) are passive because in both the subject of the sentence is the recipient of the action.

¹ See, for example, Jespersen (1924) who reports that, at the time he was writing, between 70 per cent and 94 per cent of passive sentences met in English texts were without an expressed agent. That is, sentences like *The man was arrested by the police* were statistically less frequent than those of the type *The man was arrested*.

Anderson discusses a number of sentences including pairs like the following and suggests that the set marked (a) are *passive* or *non-ergative*:

6. (a) The bread cuts easily.
(b) He cuts the bread easily.
7. (a) His uncle drowned.
(b) He drowned his uncle.
8. (a) The floor polishes well.
(b) He polishes the floor well.

Like the sentences quoted by Grady, 6 (a), 7 (a) and 8 (a) are action-directed sentences in which the recipient of the action is the grammatical subject. It should be noted that in none of the sentences quoted either by Grady or Anderson is the grammatical subject the actor or agent. Secondly, in none of these sentences is the agent expressed. Thirdly, in none of them is the verb passive in form. The interpretation of these sentences rests on the assumption that there is a distinction between the *passive* as a grammatical feature and the *realizations* of the passive.

In the same article, Anderson quotes Goodwin (1894) as saying that the Greek word *apothneskein* 'to die, be killed' is the passive of a *apokteinein* 'to kill'. The interesting thing to note about this observation is that *apothneskein* has an active ending.²

This is not the place to comment on the merits and weaknesses of these interpretations of the English sentences and Greek forms. Their validity would have to be tested against a mass of evidence in the respective languages. It is important to note, however, that the presence or absence of some morphological affix is irrelevant to the interpretation. A more relevant question, it seems, is whether there is a universal or near-universal notion expressed in most languages to which the label *passive* could be attached. It seems to me there is. I also think it possible to characterize the notion *passive* in very general and abstract terms by referring to the role of the *participants* (*actor* and *goal* or recipient, see Halliday, 1967) and their relation to the action in a speech act. It is only reasonable to expect that the realization of a general notion like the passive in terms of morpheme arrangement will differ from language to language. In Eskimo and other languages, for example, the contrast between the *casus passivus* and *casus activus* (as they are called in the grammar books) is manifested morphologically as in English and other IE languages; but unlike these the morphological affix is attached not to the verb but to the noun functioning as actor (ergative).

In the description of Akan sentences that follows we shall be guided by the assumption that there is a distinction between the *notion* 'passive' which belongs to deep grammar and the *realization* of the passive—a surface phenomenon. We shall examine a number of sentences in the language and suggest alternative interpretations for them. We accept the interpretation which makes use of the notion passive not merely because it is the simplest of the possible interpretations but, more important, because it takes account of the meaning of the sentences and also of the fact that they conform to the general characteristics exhibited by passive sentences in other languages.

² Note that *apothneskein*, though active in form, takes the genitive of agent with a passive meaning.

In Akan there is a subclass of transitive verbs which I have referred to elsewhere³ as Middle, membership of which includes *hye* 'burn'; *bue* 'open'; *nane* 'melt' and which occur in pairs of sentences like the following:

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 9. (a) <i>ɔbarimã nõ buée dãn 'nõ</i> | 'the man opened the door' |
| (b) <i>ɔdãn nõ buéi</i> | 'the door opened' |
| 10. (a) <i>akuafós nõ hyee afúó 'nõ</i> | 'the farmers burnt the wood' |
| (b) <i>afúó nõ hyee</i> | 'the bush burnt' |
| 11. (a) <i>mēnānēē nkú 'nõ⁴</i> | 'I melted the oil' |
| (b) <i>nkú nõ nānēē</i> | 'the oil melted' |
| 12. (a) <i>ɔsée n'ásɛm</i> | 'he spoiled his case' |
| (b) <i>n'ásém sée</i> | 'his case was spoiled' |
| 13. (a) <i>ɔsée siká 'nõ</i> | 'he wasted the money' |
| (b) <i>siká nõ sée</i> | 'the money was wasted' ⁵ |

Note that all the sentences are action-directed, but whereas in those marked (a) the subject is not acted-upon, in those marked (b) it is. In interpreting and describing these pairs of sentences a crucial decision to make is whether the sentences of each pair contrast semantically. If they have the same semantic meaning, cognitively, they are stylistic variants and we interpret them as having the same set of deep underlying syntactic markers. It seems to me, however, that the sentences of each pair are semantically contrastive. A sentence like

14. *duá nõ bui* 'the tree fell'

does not necessarily mean

15. *obí buu duá 'nõ* 'someone felled the tree'

If we accept this as valid for each such pair of sentences then we should at some point in the description identify the syntactic feature that accounts for this semantic difference.

There are a number of possible ways open to us in approaching the problem. One is

³ Boadi (1965).

⁴ Low tones are not marked. The symbol (') placed between two adjacent high tones indicates that the second is slightly lower than the preceding one.

⁵ These verbs form, perhaps, the largest subclass of transitive verbs in Akan. They include *bue* 'open'; *hyé* 'burn'; *nāne* 'melt'; *hón* 'dissolve'; *bèrè* 'prick a sore'; *twé* 'drag'; *kyèa* 'tilt'; *gyènè* 'make sediment settle'; *sén* 'fade'; *yèrà* 'lose'; *pètè* 'knead'; *pònè* 'separate from stem'; *sone* 'filter'; *toa* 'join'; *fɔn* 'lose flesh or weight'; *kyim* 'turn'; *muni* 'roll'; *pae* 'split'; *yam* 'grind'; *kōā* 'bend'; *toro* 'weaken spiritually'; *pepa* 'erase'; *dwōm* 'narrow'; *dwaha* 'weaken'; *kuntun* 'bend'; *tēnē* 'straighten'; *pira* 'hurt'; *hwie* 'pour'; *kyēn* 'harden'; *te* 'tear'; *mōā* 'shrink'; *pōā* 'shrink'.

As may be deduced from the glosses, they all express a change from one physical state to another. Apart from the syntactic properties which are discussed in the rest of this paper, (i) the occurrence of these verbs in certain types of nominalized constructions results in structural ambiguity, e.g. *dua nó bu* 'the fall of the tree' or 'the felling of the tree'; (ii) the occurrence of some of these verbs in subject-predicator-type constructions also results in structural ambiguity; e.g. *m'ahye* 'I have burnt it' or 'I am burnt'; (iii) some of these verbs defy one important syntactic rule in Akan. As has been pointed out several times elsewhere, the 3rd Person Inanimate Pronoun is never overtly expressed if it occurs as the direct complement of a transitive verb. With some of the middle verbs, however, the 3rd Person pronoun is overtly marked in all such constructions. Compare *mihui* 'I saw (it)' with *mèkyéa no* 'I tilted it'.

to subcategorize the middle verbs simultaneously as transitive and intransitive. The sentences

16. (a) *obuu duá 'nó* ' he felled the tree '

would be assigned, among others, the feature [+ Transitive]. The sentence

(b) *duá nó bui* ' the tree fell ',

on the other hand, would have the contrastive feature [- Transitive]. The semantic difference between the two sentences and members of all other such pairs would be accounted for at the syntactic level by Transitivity.

This interpretation can be objected to on a number of grounds. One is that it says nothing revealing about the occurrences of the identical nouns in the two sentences. It could be argued, of course, that statements about transitive and intransitive verbs could be stretched to cover nouns: in the one sentence, the noun follows a transitive verb; in the other, it precedes an intransitive verb. But this merely skirts round the problem. To explain the semantic difference between the two sentences in terms of syntax, what is called for is a statement about functional units like *actor* and *goal* and their relations to the *action*. In considering relational values like actor and goal the linear array of morpheme classes and subclasses is irrelevant. The interpretation misses an important functional relation, namely, that both sentences are action-directed and that, despite the fact that the same noun occurs in different positions relative to the verb in the two sentences, it is the goal of the action.

A second objection, less important, perhaps, is that the proposal requires additional statements which complicate the grammar of Akan unnecessarily, otherwise it will fail to distinguish between sentences containing middle verbs and those in which occur verbs like *sere* ' laugh ', *mũnã* ' frown ' which are used both transitively and intransitively, e.g. *mẽseré nó/mẽseré* ' I laugh (at him) '; *mẽmũnã nó/memũnã* ' I frown (at him) '.

A second possible way of describing these pairs of sentences is to say that each member of a pair has an actor-noun and a goal-noun. That is, in terms of sequence, all the middle verbs are used transitively and never intransitively. Thus, in the sentence

17. *ɔbarimã nó buu duá nó* ' the man felled the tree '

the nominal *ɔbarimã nó* functions as the actor and *duá nó* the goal. In this case, the two nouns are not identical. In

18. *duá nó bui* ' the tree fell ',

on the other hand, the nouns functioning as actor and goal are identical. The sentence, according to this interpretation, could be rephrased as

19. *duá nó buu duá 'nó* ' the tree felled the tree '

or

20. *duá nó buu ne hó* ' the tree felled itself '

where the two occurrences of *duá* ' the tree ' are co-referential.

There are a number of difficulties with this interpretation. One is that the actor of the sentence

21. *duá nó bui* ' the tree fell '

need not be *duá nó* ' the tree '. Secondly, there are a number of verbs in the subclass of

middle verbs which will render this interpretation useless. They occur in pairs of contrastive sentences like

22. (a) *māsée* 'I have been destroyed; I have been spoiled'
 and (b) *māsée mē hó* 'I have messed up myself'
23. (a) *ɔagyéhé* 'he has lost vitality'
 and (b) *ɔagyéhé ne hó* 'He has made himself cheap and ridiculous'

The members of each of these pairs contrast semantically; therefore this interpretation cannot be applied uniformly to all the verbs in this subclass.

The third solution that is open to us is to postulate two large subclasses of nouns functioning as actor in the deep grammar and label them Personal and Impersonal, respectively. The sentence

24. *ɔbarímá nɔ buu duá 'nɔ* 'the man felled the tree'

would be interpreted as having a Personal noun (*ɔbarímá*) functioning as actor; *duá nɔ* would be the goal of the action. In the sentence

25. *duá nɔ buui* 'the tree fell'

duá nɔ would still be interpreted as the goal, the actor being Impersonal.

This is, probably, the most satisfactory of the three solutions proposed so far. It goes beyond surface structure and attempts to take into account the meaning of sentences. Such an interpretation, however, would require that all the nouns in the lexicon be assigned the feature *Personal* and none of them *Impersonal* because the Impersonal noun actor is a mere abstract place-holder without lexical realizations. There would thus seem to be a redundancy in the use of symbols in the description. Why mark all items in a dictionary Personal when there are no Impersonal ones to contrast with them?

There is a more serious objection to this interpretation, however. The actor of the sentence

26. *duá nɔ buui* 'the tree fell'

need not be Impersonal. It could be Personal but unexpressed. Indeed, it is possible to interpret all such sentences as having an unexpressed agent without specifying whether or not the agent is Personal. One difference between

27. *obí buu duá 'nɔ* 'someone felled the tree'

and

28. *duá nɔ buui* 'the tree fell'

is that in the one sentence, the agent is known and expressed; in the other, it may or may not be known, and, if it is known, it is left unexpressed. This is a semantic difference. There are other differences between the two sentences. In the second of the two sentences the goal is the subject; in the first it is the complement. We can account for all these differences by means of one deep syntactic feature.

I interpret this syntactic feature as the *Passive*. Sets of configurations derived from the deep grammar will be positively or negatively specified for the feature PASSIVE. That is, [+ Passive] and [- Passive] will appear somewhere in the deep grammar as disjunctive syntactic elements. Thus, the deep grammar will yield sets of features like the following:

- (a) Actor, Action, Goal, + Passive
 (b) Actor, Action, Goal, - Passive

If a set of features happens to include the feature [+ Passive], then it is automatically converted by the realization rules to surface strings like

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| 29. <i>duá nɔ buui</i> | ' the tree fell ' |
| <i>ɔdán nɔ hyee</i> | ' the house burned ' |
| <i>dadeé nɔ nānē'ē</i> | ' the metal melted ' |
| <i>ntōmá nɔ áte</i> | ' the cloth is torn ' |

Sentences like these are Passive. On the other hand, sets of features including [— Passive] will automatically be converted to surface strings like

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 30. <i>ɔbarímá nɔ buu duá nɔ</i> | ' the man felled the tree ' |
| <i>obí hyee dán 'nɔ</i> | ' someone burned the house ' |
| <i>stōmfós nɔ nānēē dadée 'nɔ</i> | ' the blacksmith melted the iron ' |
| <i>abɔfrá nɔ áte ntōmá 'nɔ</i> | ' the child has torn the cloth ' |

The passive in Akan, then, is a syntactic formative in the deep grammar which triggers the operation of two realization rules yielding two types of surface strings, respectively, provided certain conditions are satisfied, e.g. the presence of an actor-noun, goal-noun, action-middle verb. This syntactic formative has a number of surface characteristics, one of these being the non-representation of the noun functioning as actor.

One or two marginal questions. The first has to do with the descriptive status of sentences like

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| 31. <i>ɔkɔɔe</i> | ' he went away ' |
| 32. <i>ɔtɔɔ ntōmá</i> | ' he bought pieces of cloth ' |

which do not contain a middle verb. Are these passive or active? The answer is that they are not passive because the subjects of these sentences are not acted-upon. Neither are they non-passive because the speaker has no choice between them and other sentences whose subjects are acted-upon.

The second question that has to be resolved is whether to interpret pairs of sentences like the following as resulting from the application of the passive rule:

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| 33. (a) <i>Kwadwó se Ámmá</i> | ' Kwadwo looks like Amma ' |
| (b) <i>Ámmá se Kwadwó</i> | ' Amma looks like Kwadwo ' |

The relation between the subject and the complement in both sentences is reciprocal but it is not clear at all which of the two nouns functions as actor and which as goal. Other pairs of sentences are:

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|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 34. (a) <i>ɔben mē</i> | ' he is near me ' |
| (b) <i>meben nō</i> | ' I am near him ' |
| 35. (a) <i>Kwasí fura ntōmá</i> | ' Kwasi is in cloth ' |
| (b) <i>ntōmá fura Kwasí</i> | „ „ |

It is not enough to say that the sentences are not passive or non-passive merely because the verbs are not middle: we may have restricted our definition of the passive too severely. It is clear though that the difference between 33 (a) and 33 (b), on the one hand, and say 9 (a) and 9 (b), on the other, is not of the same order. The distinction between members of the latter pair is semantic, as we have shown; that between the

former is non-semantic. Unless one is prepared to regard the passive non-passive distinction as contrastive in one part of the grammar but predictable in another—which does not seem to me to be a useful way of viewing the problem—the reciprocal sentences should not be interpreted as passive or non-passive.

A more difficult case is the group of locative and possessive sentences of which the following are examples:

36. (a) *ɔbarímǎ nɔ wɔ siká* 'the man has money'
 (b) *siká nɔ wɔ ɔbarímǎ 'nɔ* 'the money belongs to the man'
37. (a) *nnɪpa wɔ sukúu nɔ 'mú* 'there are people in the school'
 (b) *sukúu nɔ mú wɔ nnɪ'pá* „ „ „

It can be shown that the possessive and locative *wɔ*'s are in non-contrastive distribution⁶ and it would be inconsistent to derive members of these pairs from the contrastive markers Passive and Non-Passive.

Finally, there are sentences like the following:

38. *asém yí dí'ká* 'this matter should be discussed'
 39. *wódí 'hwé(é)* 'you deserve to be thrashed'

These have a passive meaning. The subjects of these sentences are the recipients of the action. The agent, not expressed here, appears as the subject in the non-passive counterparts:

40. (a) *módí (asém yí) 'ká* 'you are justified in discussing the matter'
 (b) *Kwadwó dí wo hwé(é)* 'Kwadwo is justified in thrashing you'

The situation would be straightforward were it not for the occurrence of pairs of sentences like

41. (a) *wódí mē seré(é)* 'you are justified in laughing at me'
 (b) *mīdí seréé* 'I am justified in laughing'

41 (a) has the same surface structure as 40 (a) and 40 (b). 41 (b) has the same structure as the passive 38 and 39, but its meaning is not passive: the subject is the actor and not the goal. It should be mentioned also that it has no passive counterpart.

It would seem, then, that there is a subclass of non-middle verbs which form compounds with *dí* to give sentences a passive meaning. Membership include *ká* 'say'; *hwé* 'beat', *yé/yáw* 'insult'; *twe asó* 'punish', *bo(ro)* 'beat'; *kasa kyére* 'advise, talk to, warn'.⁷ Sentences containing compounds formed with *dí* and these verbs would be interpreted as deriving from sets of features of which [+ Passive] was one.

⁶ See Boadi (1969).

⁷ One could analyse sentences containing members of this subclass as *Noun dí + Noun Abstract* (e.g. *wódí 'hwéé* 'you deserve to be beaten'; *wódí kasa kyéré* 'you deserve to be warned') where *Noun Abstract* is a nominalized verb. But this fails to reveal the fact there is a difference between the relation of these nominalized verbs to their subjects, on the one hand, and that between other nominalized verbs to the subjects of sentences in which they occur. For example, there is a structural difference between *wódí 'hwéé* and *wódí seréé*.

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