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The History of the Prepositional Passive in English

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Active sentences occurring with a single prepositional phrase (PP) have been attested with great frequency in all stages of English. Some of these active sentences can be related to passive transforms in which the active prepositional object appears as the passive subject, e.g. 'He is laughed at.' These passive transforms have been given the term 'pseudo-passives' by Chomsky and 'prepositional passives' by Lightfoot.¹ Lightfoot claims that prepositional passives are one of three types of passive innovations that occurred in English simultaneously between 1450 and 1500 and follow from the loss in the grammar of abstract Oblique case.² That is, sentences such as

(1) SU + Vi + Pr + NPdat

became eligible to undergo the transformational passive, which moves a post-verbal NP, because their post-verbal NPs were no longer base-assigned Oblique case and the intransitive verb (Vi) + preposition (Pr) was reanalyzed as a transitive verb (Vt). Thus some prepositional objects in Type 1 sentences were reanalyzed as direct objects.³ However, since in Lightfoot's theory accusative case is not base-assigned, we should expect to find a transformational passive operating in OE to derive passives from sentences such as the following:

(2) SU + Vi + Pr + NPacc.

Many sentences in OE fitting the structural description in (2) are adduced in Visser on pages 394-396.

In this paper I will show first that, contrary to Lightfoot's prediction, there is little evidence for passive counterparts to sentences with the structural description in (2); secondly, that prepositional passives are not 15th century innovations but rather occur as early as 1300; thirdly, that the history of prepositional passives can be systematically related to the pragmatic properties of a semantically and pragmatically-based model of Transitivity; and fourthly, that correspondence with such a Transitive Prototype accounts for sentences like 'He was laughed at' while sentences like 'The tree was painted under' are excluded.⁴

Type 2 sentences having an accusative (i.e. non-Oblique) complement to Vi + Pr were plentiful in OE.⁵ Examples are:

(3) Bleow he on hi. 
   Vi   Pr A
   'He breathed into them.'

(4) ic clype to be, drihten. 
   Vi  Pr 0
   'I call to you, Lord.'
(5) Hig hrymap to me and ic gehire hira hream. 
   \begin{array}{ll}
   \text{Vi} & \text{Pr} \ 0 \\
   \end{array}
   \[ '	ext{They cry out to me and I hear their alarm.}' \]

(6) \text{pa ongan hine eft langian on his cydde.} 
   \begin{array}{ll}
   \text{Vi} & \text{Pr} \ \ A \\
   \end{array}
   \[ '	ext{Then he began again to grieve for his kin.}' \]

(7) \text{pa syrwde Herodias ymbe hine.} 
   \begin{array}{ll}
   \text{Vi} & \text{Pr} \ \ A \\
   \end{array}
   \[ '	ext{Then Herod laid traps for him.}' \]

The object pronoun in (3) is clearly in the accusative case. In (4) and (5) he and me are marked '0' for Objective since at this period in OE the second and first person dative pronouns had already replaced their accusative forms. The noun 'kin' is in the citation form in (6) and the third person accusative pronoun appears in (7). On Lightfoot's analysis, each of these accusative objects of prepositions in OE and all others like them are theoretically subject to being reanalyzed as direct objects since they are not Oblique and since the Vi + Pr in each case can be reanalyzed as transitive. Yet prepositional passive counterparts to (3)-(7) such as:

(3') They were breathed into.
(4') Lord, you are called to.
(5') I was cried out to and I heard their alarm.
(6') His kin were grieved for.
(7') He was laid traps for.

are not attested in OE. For early ME, only one instance of a prepositional passive with an accusative-governing preposition is given in Visser (p.2123):

(8) \text{pe mycle spire is ronnen aboute.} 
   \begin{array}{ll}
   \text{aux} & \text{PP} \  \ \text{Pr} \\
   \end{array}
   \[ '	ext{The great spire is run around.'}' \]

While the infrequency of occurrence of accusative prepositional passives in OE and ME texts might not accurately reflect the frequency of occurrence of this construction in the spoken language of that time, Lightfoot's analysis forces him to include constructions of this type in OE and ME. That not one OE example of this type of prepositional passive is adduced as a counterpart to the many corresponding active sentences which meet the structural description of the transformational passive suggests that such prepositional passives did not exist in OE and early ME for other reasons. These reasons emerge as the history of Type 1 sentences is elucidated.

In OE active sentences PPs could appear pre- or post-verbally. The following orders of PP, V and SU are attested in Visser (pp. 394-396): (SU) PP (SU) V (SU) and (SU) V (SU) PP (*SU). (SU) indicates attested (and (*SU) indicates non-attested) positions of the SU relative to pre- and post-verbal PPs. This distribution applies to PPs with full (nominal) NPs which could be either dative or accusatively marked. With full NPs the Pr precedes its object. When the object of the preposition (more accurately the
adposition) is a pronoun, the adposition usually follows its object. For pronominal objects in the accusative case, the following orders of pronoun (Pro), adposition (Pr), SU and V are attested in Visser (pp.396–397): (SU) Pro (SU) Pr V (SU). More interesting for the present analysis of the history of prepositional passives is the position of the Pr when its object is in the dative case. When the pronoun is clearly dative, the adposition is in post-verbal position. To illustrate the orders SU Pro V Pr and V Pro SU Pr, Visser (p.396) gives the following four sentences:

(9)  ..., donne heo hropende him cigeab to.  
D  V  Pr  
'... When they shrieking cry out to him.'

(10)  ða stodan him twegen weras big.  
V  D  Pr  
'Then two men stood by him.'

(11)  ða ongan se Catulus him spigettan on.  
D  V  Pr  
'Then Catullus began to spit on him.

(12)  se here him fleah beforan.  
D  V  Pr  
'The army fled before him.'

Apparently, the rule for end-position of an adposition governing a dative pronominal object was productive in OE. Gaaf (1930, p.2) claims the post-position order was "particularly frequent in OE." In contrast, only one instance of Pr in post-verbal (and sentence-final) position with an accusative Pro object is given in Visser (p.397). It will be inferred, therefore, that dative prepositional objects in OE active sentences condition the placement of the Pr after the verb.

The position of the Pr relative to other verb forms in OE is always immediately before, e.g., an infinitive, in-flect or uninflected; before a present participle; and before a past participle. In OE relative clauses, the Pr is always pre-verbal except in the comparatively infrequent cases when pied-piping occurs, i.e. when the Pr preceded its relativizer. For example the relative pronoun þæt (the nominative-accusative form of the demonstrative se), always referring to a neuter antecedent in the singular, could only be preceded by an accusative-governing preposition in a relative clause; e.g. from Gaaf (ibid., p.5) we see

(13)  Seo menniscnys waes underfangen fram ðam godcundum worde,  
through þæt de ealle þing sind geworhte.  
'Humanity was received from the divine word through which all things are created.'

(14)  þa þa he þyder comon, and umbe ðeber þing gesprecon haefdon  
umbe þæt hi sprecan woldon þa angan Thomas his spacee.  
'When they came there and had spoken about (an)other thing about which they wanted to speak, then Thomas began his speech.'
where *durch* ('through') and *umbe* ('about') both accusative-govern-
ing prepositions, are pied-piped. Because of the restrictions on
*paet* in OE (i.e. it can only occur with accusative-governing pre-
positions), instances of pied-piping with this particular relati-
vizer are rare. The most frequently used relative pronoun *be* ('who,' 'which,' 'that') and *paer* ('where') were never preceded by the Pr;
rather in these relative clause types, the Pr was always pre-verbal.
The same is true for comparative clauses introduced by *swa* which
were precursors of relative clauses introduced by *as*. Pied-piping
could occur with the less frequently used 'which,' 'what,' 'whom,'
and 'whose.' These cases together with the infrequent cases of
pied-piped *paet* constitute the limited productivity of pied-piping
in OE. When in late OE (about 1150) *paet* became neutral regarding
gender, number and case, it became like Indeclinable *be* and was no
longer accompanied by its Pr at the beginning of the relative clause.
Shortly afterwards in early ME *paet* replaced *be* altogether to become
the most frequently used relative pronoun. It is clear from these
facts concerning relative pronouns and the restricted occurrence of
pied-piping that Prs in relative clauses in OE were predominantly
pre-verbal.

In some late OE texts a change in the position of the Pr in
relative clauses became noticeable, as the following three examples
from Gaaf (ibid., p.7) show:

(15) *pa* aeteowde me aefter *paem* wege *be* is aer com on, betwic
\[V \text{ Pr}\]
\[da \text{ peostro swa beorht scine} \text{nde steorra.}\]
'Then appeared to me along the way that I earlier came on,
amid the darkness such a bright shining star.'

(16) *se* ober had is, *be* se forma sprec\[to.\]
\[V \text{ Pr}\]
'The second rank is which the first addressed.'

(17) *eac* swilce *pa* gewaede *be* he bewunden waes mid waeron swa
\[PP \text{ aux Pr}\]
ansunde swylce hi eall niwe waeron.
'Also, the clothes that he was wrapped with were as
perfect as if they all were new.'

Visser (p.397) gives one more such example:

(18) *paet* sindon *da* usic feoh\[ad on.
\[Pr\]
'Those are the ones who fight against us.'

The above four examples from late OE prose texts illustrate the
beginnings of a syntactic change that was crucial to the develop-
ment of prepositional passives, i.e. preposition-stranding in
relative clauses. The OE pre-verbal Pr in early ME (by about the
middle of the 13th century) is invariably found after the verb in
relative clause constructions.

Such a thorough-going change from pre-verbal to post-verbal
position for the Pr in relative clauses requires an explanation; a
plausible one is available. Recall that the only OE environment
that conditioned the V + Pr order was an active sentence with
Pro(dat) + V (and sometimes, though very rarely, Pro(acc) + V).

Since dative pronouns always index animate NPs, we can say that animate pre-verbal objects condition post-verbal placement of the Pr. In the examples with relative clauses, however, (15)-(18) above, the 57 ME examples in Gaaf (ibid., pp.7-9) and the 16 ME examples in Visser (p.400), the pre-verbal NPs are all subjects of active clauses (example (17) instantiates the only passive relative clause). In the 57 examples adduced in Gaaf (representing a collection of 200), all but five of the subjects in the relative clauses are animate, the vast majority being personal pronouns. In the Visser set the only full NP is animate; the rest are all personal pronouns. On the basis of the above data representing early ME and ME relative clauses with stranded prepositions, we can conclude that the environment that conditioned post-verbal Pr placement generalized in late OE from 'animate pre-verbal (Pro) object' to 'animate pre-verbal NP' to 'pre-verbal NP.' Such a change in the conditioning factor for producing V + Pr everywhere in relative clauses except when pied-piping optionally applies is well-motivated by both OE and ME facts.

Now that productive prep-stranding in ME relative clauses has been documented, it is necessary to show how these and another clause type bear on the development of prepositional passives. The next logical step is to look for stranded Prs in relative clauses with passive verb forms. The following ME sentences are from Gaaf (ibid., pp.10-11):

(19) Blessed pe tre bat rigfulnes is don by.  
    aux PP Pr
    'Blessed the tree that righteousness is done by.'

(20) pei shewed me a boke bat my boke was examynde by.  
    aux PP Pr
    'They showed me a book that my book was examined by.'

(21) hir friends that she is ruled by, desireth of me XX marke.  
    aux PP Pr
    'Her friends that she is ruled by want 20 marks from me.'

(22) to beg is ... to ... ask bi side pe titel of worldly dede,  
    sum ping to be releuid by.  
    aux PP Pr
    'To beg is to ask (for) besides the title of worldly deed something to be relieved by.'

(23) mete and drynte bat he was costomed to [be] byfore norisshed by.  
    aux PP Pr
    'Meat and drink, that he was accustomed before to be nourished by.'

By analogy with these co-existing passive relative clauses with stranded by, it was a short step to prepositional passives.

In summary, the development of prepositional passives being proposed here is as follows:
active sentences (Vi)

(24) I him laughed at.
    Pro-D Vi Pr
    OE

(25) I came onto the way.
    Vi Pr NP
    OE

relative clauses (Vi)

(26) Him that I (Pr) laughed at.
    Pr
    late OE

(27) Way that I (Pr) came onto.
    Pr
    late OE

relative clauses (Vt)

(28) Friends that ruled her.
    Vt DO
    early ME

(29) Friends that she was ruled by.
    aux PPr Pr
    early ME

reanalysis

(30) I him laughed at.
    Vi/Vt
    early ME

(31) Him that I laughed at.
    Vi/Vt
    early ME

(32) I came onto the way.
    Vi/Vt
    early ME

(33) The way that I came onto.
    Vi/Vt
    early ME

prepositional passive

(34) He was laughed at.
    aux PPr
    early ME (some)

(35) The way was come upon.
    aux PPr
    (increases)

A necessary step in the reanalysis of Vi + Pr into Vt was the change that came in late OE in the rule that produced post-verbal Pr placement. With this single change of word order, the variety of possible positions for the Pr in a clause was reduced to one productive position.7 Not until all prepositions could appear after the verb with great regularity could some Vi + Pr be considered as a syntactic unit comparable to a transitive verb. On this analysis, then, we would not expect OE constructions like (2), SU + Vi + Pr + NPacc, to be reanalyzed as transitive (as a theory that does not base-assign Oblique to accusatively marked NPs would allow, i.e. NPacc would be subject to 'move-NP') due to the fact that post-verbal position for PPs with accusative objects was just one of several possible positions for such PPs.

The first attested instances of the prepositional passive occur c.1225. Of the 11 citations listed in Gaaf (1930, pp.19-20), five overlap with the 28 examples in Visser (p.2123). The following are only some taken from Visser to illustrate this early ME innovation:
The above examples provide clear evidence that this innovation was well-attested prior to the 15th century. Examples for the period 1400-1500 are plentiful in Visser (p.2124) and the prepositional passive has remained productive in English since ME.

It remains to be shown how prepositional passives can be associated with the semantic and pragmatic properties of the Transitive Prototype and why such sentences as '*The tree was painted under' are ungrammatical.\(^8\) To accomplish these final goals it is necessary to construct active counterparts to some prepositional passives and to analyze their semantic and pragmatic properties. For (39)-(44) above, the counterparts in the active voice below may be proposed:

(39') SU smote through Walter with a lance.
(40') SU did not tend to the children.
(41') SU came to it.
(42') SU dispensed with Christ.
(43') SU spit upon him.
(44') SU thought on tribulation with grudging.

The identity of the SUs for the above cannot be known because an agent by-phrase does not occur in any of the examples for prepositional passives. Yet, by looking at the verbs involved with these constructions, the SUs are clearly agents who have control over the action expressed in the verbs. If human agents, then these SUs are also animate. Whether or not they are definite cannot be determined. In general, we can say that the SUs of the active counterparts of a sample of prepositional passives have the semantic properties of
the prototypical transitive subject, +control/-affected, and the +animate pragmatic property of the prototypical transitive subject. Four of the objects in the active sentences are animate; two are inanimate. The animate objects are entities affected by the actions expressed in their respective prepositional verb phrases and thus are assigned the semantic property of +affected. The inanimate objects are only weakly or indirectly affected by the actions expressed in their verbs. Here it will be argued that they are analogous to the prototypical DO in that they are metaphorically affected and they will also be assigned the semantic property of +affected and, since they are inanimate, the semantic property of -control. The objects in this sample, then, have the prototypical semantic property of +affected and in two cases have the prototypical pragmatic property of being less animate in relation to their SUs. On the basis of this small sample of active counterparts to prepositional passives, we may conclude that they tend to correspond with the Prototype of Transitivity, that their V + Pr phrases are comparable to transitive verbs and that their affected objects are analogous to direct objects. This correspondence does not impede the application of Passive to such active construction types. However, it should also be pointed out that the correspondence itself also does not motivate the application of Passive. That point will be addressed below. At this time, it will be argued that a lack of correspondence between Type 1 active sentences and the Transitive Prototype will impede Passive. That is, if the objects are not +affected, metaphorically or otherwise, then Passive will not apply to such Type 1 sentences. For sentences like 'he painted under the tree,' and 'she decided on the boat,' where 'tree' and 'boat' are not the +affected entities painted or chosen but merely locative adverbials, passive counterparts will not exist.

As to what actually motivates the application of Passive to Type 1 sentences with PPs that correspond to the Transitive Prototype, it will be argued that two forces operate. One is to eliminate SUs which are not prototypical by avoiding constructions in which they appear. The second, a corollary to the first, is a tendency to topicalize NPs which are prototypical as SUs. Gaaf (ibid., p.19) has noted that in all the instances of prepositional passives adduced in his research "the agent is an individual that cannot or need not be specified, or some one whom the speaker or writer does not wish to be identified." The application of Passive is a most, if not the most, effective means of removing agents from active clauses. For Type 1 sentences corresponding to the Prototype of Transitivity, agent-removal is one possible motivator for the application of Passive. As for grammaticalizing agent-like NPs (animate prepositional objects in Type 1 sentences) to SUs of prepositional passives, it is recalled that four of the six objects in the sample active set (39'), (40'), (42'), (43'), are animate. Upon examining all the data available for early and mature ME occurrences of prepositional passives, it is clear that the sample set is representative of the data. For the period from 1225 to 1500, Visser and Gaaf adduce 104 examples of the prepositional passive. Of these, 79 of the SUs are personal pronouns (the great
majority) or full NPs that are animate. For the data available for the first 200 years of the existence of prepositional passives, 78% of the subjects in these constructions possess the prototypical pragmatic properties of +animate and +definite. Type I sentences having animate (prepositional) objects, therefore, are very likely candidates to be related to passive transforms.

In summary, it has been shown that the notion of animacy is relevant to the history of the prepositional passive in English. The original placement of prepositions after their verbs was related to the condition of pre-verbal animate objects, a condition which was generalized to include all animate pre-verbal NPs in relative clauses. Furthermore, the fact that objects that can be complements to many Vi + Pr are animate makes them likely to be promoted to subjects in passive sentences. It has also been shown that correspondence of Type I sentences to the Transitive Prototype facilitates but does not necessarily motivate the application of Passive while a lack of correspondence of Type I sentences with the Prototype impedes Passive.

Notes

3. Many Type I (and other) constructions cannot occur as passives, e.g. a. *He was suggested to that he leave.
   b. *The tree was painted under.
   c. *Nixon was written a book about.
Lightfoot (ibid., p.278, fn.2) offers a complex account for how these can be ruled out. A simpler means of excluding the Type I-related sentence, (b), will be given subsequent to the data analysis.
4. Lieber (1979) predicts the possibility of the existence of prepositional passives from a theory in which the object of a Pr is not base-assigned Oblique. However, her theory also wrongly predicts passive counterparts for accusative (non-base-assigned) objects of Prs.
5. Examples and citations are in Visser (p.395).
6. It could be argued that *to, big, on and beforan in (9)-(12) are to be analyzed as separable prefixes rather than post-verbal adpositions. Indeed, in OE as in present-day German, there were many verbs with adverbial prefixes, e.g. bigstandan ('to stand by'), onlocian ('to look at') þurhsecan ('to break through'), etc. However, as Gaaf (1930, p.13) points out: "In Old English it is sometimes difficult to decide whether a preposition (or adverb) and a verb form a compound or not. It seems that Anglo-Saxon scribes, too, felt some uncertainty on this point; if the printed texts are to be trusted, they vacillated between writing ingan and in gan, etc. ... utgan [and] gan ut." Gaaf also argues that variants such as bigstandan and stand bi(g) acquired semantic distinctions such that the former
retained its intransitive meaning 'to stand near' and the latter developed a more transitive meaning 'to stand near in order to assist.' Thus, in some instances verbs with adverbial pre-fixes assumed different meanings between separated and unseparated variants. Moreover, some of the formerly inseparable adverbials were homophonous with prepositions. Sentences (9)-(12) are to be compared to (3)-(7) in which to, on and ymbe occur in PPs governing accusatively-marked objects. In (9)-(12), however, the position of to, on, big and beforean relative to the dative pronouns is in clear contrast to that of on, to and ymbe in (3)-(7); whereas the latter are in post-verbal PPs, the former are post-verbal and sentence-final.

7. Excluding, of course, the comparatively infrequent and optional instances of pied-piping.

8. The Prototype of Transitivity is fully presented in Thornburg (1984). The properties referred to below do not represent binary values but rather relative 'degrees of.'

References