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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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

(3) Bleow he on hi.  
Vi Pr A

'He breathed into them.'

(4) ic clype to þe, drihten.  
Vi Pr O

'I call to you, Lord.'

(5) Hig hrymab to me and ic gehire hira hream.  
           Vi      Pr  O

'They cry out to me and I hear their alarm.

(6) þa ongan hine eft langian on his cyðde.  
                           Vi      Pr      A

'Then he began again to grieve for his kin.

(7) þa syrdwe Herodias ymbe hine.  
           Vi                  Pr      A

'Then Herod laid traps for him.

The object pronoun in (3) is clearly in the accusative case. In (4) and (5) þe and me are marked 'O' 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) þe mycle spire is ronnen aboute.  
                           aux      PP      Pr

'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









- (36) c.1225 Heo shal beo ... leafdiluker leoten of ...  
'She shall be regarded as ladylike.'
- (37) c.1300 þis maiden ... feled al so bi her þi, þat sche  
was yleyen bi.  
'This maiden felt also by her thigh that she was  
lain by.'
- (38) c.1303 þe vessel ... þat Goddes temple was seruede with-alle.  
'The vessel ... that the temple of God was served with.'
- (39) c.1338 Waltere was smyten þorgh wiþ a lance.  
'Walter was smitten through with a lance.'
- (40) c.1340 children -- unarrayde, unkepeide, and noght tente to  
as þam aughte for to be.  
'Children -- undressed, unkempt and not tended to  
as to them ought for to be.'
- (41) c.1360 how it may ... be comen to.  
'How it may ... be come to.'
- (42) c.1370 criste and his colage mygt not be dispensid wiþ.  
'Christ and his [following] may not be dispensed with.'
- (43) c.1370 he was tormentid and after he was spit upon.  
'He was tormented and after he was spit upon.'
- (44) c.1370 tribulacion ne shuld not fro his course with  
grutching be þoght on.  
'Tribulation should not from his course with  
grudging be thought on.'

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.<sup>8</sup> 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 1 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 1 sentences to the Transitive Prototype facilitates but does not necessarily motivate the application of Passive while a lack of correspondence of Type 1 sentences with the Prototype impedes Passive.

#### Notes

1. See Chomsky's Aspects of the Theory of Syntax (1965, p.142) and Lightfoot's Principles of Diachronic Syntax (1979, p.276).
2. A general discussion and critique of Lightfoot (1979), (1980), is found in section 1.4.1 of Thornburg (1984).
3. Many Type 1 (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 1-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') purhsecan ('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 prefixes 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 beforan 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.'

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