

Passives and Problems in Classical Greek and Modern English

Douglas Q. Adams
University of Chicago

There is in English the well-known, if little understood, phenomenon whereby "three-place predicate" (or "indirect object") verbs can form two passives: (1) by taking the direct object and making it the subject (hereafter called for convenience the "accusative passive") or (2) by taking the indirect object and subjectivizing it ("dative passive"). In both cases the verb is put in its passive form. Hence:

- (1) John gave Mary the book. (John gave the book to Mary.)

but either

- (2) The book was given to Mary. (the accusative passive)
(3) Mary was given the book. (the dative passive)

Historically speaking passives such as (2), the accusative passive, have always been possible in English whereas dative passives are relatively recent.

A roughly similar situation obtained for classical Greek. From an active sentence (or more exactly its underlying structure) such as (4) one could derive either (5) or (6).

- (4) ho Iōánnēs édōke tō biblíon tēi Maríai.
'(the) John gave the book (the) to-Mary'
(5) tō biblíon édoto tēi Maríai hupō toū Iōánnou.
'the book was-given to-Mary by (the) of-John'
(6) hē Maríā éáoto tō biblíon hupō toū Iōánnou.
'(the) Mary was-given the book by (the) of-John'

The underlying structure of both (1) and (4), in terms of a theory of case grammar, would probably be (7),

- (7) Verb Agent (Experiencer) Object Goal

where the Agent is the giver (John/Iōánnēs) and the Object the thing given (the book/tō biblíon).

With regard to the recipient, the choice of the underlying case is more cloudy. The present theory considers the recipient (Mary/Maríā) to be the Goal of the action of giving which, indeed, it

certainly is. However, if the recipient is a sentient being as in the above examples it is hard not to also equate him/her with the Experiencer case (hence the parenthetical Experiencer in (7) since the recipient is assumed to be taking part in the transaction (i.e. "experiencing" the giving) at least passively. This passive role helps account for the oddness of (8).

(8) I gave John the book but he wouldn't take it.¹

¹Unless, of course, "give" is read as a synonym of "hand" or the like.

Perhaps, then, for sentences such as these, both cases should be in the deep structure with the caveat that Experiencer must equal Goal.

When the recipient, however, is an inanimate noun (such as "library") it is clearly only the Goal of the action as it in no way can experience the giving. If we were concerned only with the English data we would, I think, be tempted to ignore our qualms about animate indirect objects being Experiencers as well as Goals since there is no syntactic evidence that would lead us to want to set up a different underlying structure for (9) as opposed to (1).

(9) John gave the book to the library.

When one examines the Greek data one's qualms, however, return in full force since there it is precisely the sentences of type (1) (i.e. (4)) which can and type (9) which cannot take dative passivization. In other words, for it to undergo subject formation, the indirect object of an active verb in Greek must be animate. This fact would be very nicely accounted for if one assumed that an underlying Experiencer were somewhere in the deep structure and that the passive rule somehow made reference to it. There is, then, no direct translation of (10) possible in Greek.

(10) The library was given a rare sixteenth century book by one of its principal benefactors.

The critical transformations in the current version of generative case-grammar are formulated as follows:

$$\text{Acc-marking: } \begin{array}{ccccccc} & & C_i & & & \text{acc} & \\ & & & & & & \\ V & (C)^* & [X] & X & \Rightarrow & 1 & [2] & 3 \\ 1 & & 2 & 3 & & & & \end{array}$$

Condition $C_i = E, O, G$

$$\text{Passivization: } \begin{array}{ccccccc} V & (C)^* & \text{Acc.} & X & \Rightarrow & \left[\begin{array}{c} V \\ +\text{passive} \end{array} \right] & 3 & 2 & 4 \\ 1 & 2 & 3 & 4 & & & & & \end{array}$$

Nom-marking:	V	C [X]	X	⇒	1	nom [2]	3
	1	2	3				

Assuming for the moment that all indirect objects, whether animate or not, are marked in the deep structure as Goal and only as Goal, this formulation and this ordering will correctly generate any and all accusative passives but only those. Since it is assumed that the Goal will always follow the Object, and since accusative-marking operates by going through a sentence and simply taking the first case it can work on, no indirect object could ever be made the object of subject formation. The situation is really no better if we were to assume that animate indirect objects (such as Mary/Mariā) were also marked as Experiencers as well as Goals. If this were the case, Accusative-marking would always operate on the Experiencer and we would end up with a host of dative passives as long as the indirect objects were animate but no accusative passives and still no dative passives for inanimate direct objects.

Two possible outs immediately suggest themselves. Chomsky has suggested the first in Syntactic Structures where (in case-grammar terms) there is an optional rule ordered before accusative-marking which switches Object and Goal.

(11)	X	Ob.	Goal	Y	⇒	1	3	2	4
	1	2	3	4					

This allows either the direct or indirect object to become the eventual surface subject. The rule is not as ad hoc, at least in English, as it first seems. Something like it is needed on independent grounds, e.g. to produce sentences (12) and (13).

- (12) John gave the book to Mary.
 (13) John gave Mary the book.

This theory, of course, carefully ignores any notion of Experiencer in the indirect object as being superfluous to the proper working of its grammar.

In Greek one also finds the same surface structure difference of ordering corresponding to (12) and (13) above. Here, however, this particular reordering seems no different at all from countless other variations of surface order which give Greek a "free word order" as opposed to English's "fixed word order". Since this "scrambling" of constituents is obviously a very late phenomenon (for instance it must operate after all surface cases have been introduced) in the derivation it would be unable to account for the necessary reordering before passivization which is a fairly early rule. It would, of course, be possible to have a Chomsky-like rule (as in (11)) and a "scrambling" rule but since they accomplish exactly the same end and since it is impossible to distinguish their results syntactically except for the different effect when the optional rule of passivization has not operated it would seem that to posit such

a rule as (11) is entirely an artifact of our pre-conceived theory and thus, at best, ad hoc. Also the Chomsky-like rule would have to be constrained in Greek so that it would occur only if the Goal were animate--a further infelicity to be avoided if at all possible.

The second solution, however, is even less likely. It would entail rewriting the accusative-marking rule into something like the following form:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 (14) & V & (C) & \left. \begin{array}{c} E \\ O \\ G \end{array} \right\} & X & \Rightarrow & 1 \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{acc} \\ [2] \end{array} \quad 3 \\
 & 1 & 2 & 2 & 3 & & \\
 \end{array}$$

where the symbolism is intended to mean that one (and only one) of the cases in the curly brackets must be marked as accusative but the choice is free. There would then be further constraints and "cleaning up" rules to give those cases not chosen their appropriate surface forms. Such a solution is theoretically dubious, at least as proposed here, and has to be shored up with more ad hoc props than the first.

Some other syntactic and historical data not directly concerning three-place predicates may be relevant here. For instance, there seem to be certain verbs in English which optionally fail to undergo accusative-marking. This means that the case normally marked for the accusative will turn up by later rules with some sort of preposition. Hence:

- (15) He swam (across) the river.
- (16) He ruled (over) mighty and diverse nations.

Theoretically, since the passive rule specifically mentions accusative in its structural description, we should be unable to obtain passives of any kind from these sentences. However a sentence such as (17) seems, to me, unexceptional.

- (17) The three kingdoms were ruled over by a single sovereign.

Such cases are admittedly marginal and fairly rare in English--not so in Greek. There one finds large classes of verbs which either optionally or obligatorily take a direct object in the dative or genitive. For instance,

- (18) epibouleúō autōi
'I plot to-him' (I plot against him)
- (19) árkhō autoū
'I rule of-him' (I rule him)
- (20) kataphronō autoū
'I despise of-him' (I despise him)

and many, many more. The most obvious explanation for these verbs is that they are marked in the lexicon not to undergo accusative-marking and hence their objects show up on the surface with cases other than the accusative. Before the Fifth century B.C. they behaved with regard to passivization exactly as we would expect on the basis of the current theory, that is to say, they could not be made passive. At about this time, however, we begin to find passives formed from these verbs freely. Hence the following examples.

(21) hai nêes ouk ekhrésthēsan Hdt VII 144
'the ships not were-used'

(22) hēmeîs hup' Athēnaíon epibouleuómetha Thuc. I 82,1
'we by the Athenians are-being-plotted-against'

What is even more striking, and more to the point, it was exactly at this time that Greek, which had originally been like the Romance Languages (and incidentally, modern Greek) in allowing only accusative passives, began to permit dative passives as well. Thus from a sentence like (23) we can get a sentence such as (24).

(23) epitrépei moi tēn díaton
'he-entrusts to-me the arbitration' (he entrusts
me with the arbitration)

(24) epitrépomai tēn díaton
'I-am-entrusted (with) the arbitration'

A sentence such as (25) is possible though rare.

(25) Hē díaitos eptrépetai moi
'the arbitration is-entrusted to-me'

A real example of the latter construction is the following,

(26) toîsi epetétrapto he phulakē Hdt. VII 10.
'to-them was-permitted the guard'

compare with,

(27) hoi tōn Athēnaíon epitetramménoi tēn phulaktēn Thuc. I
'the of-the-Athenians permitted the guard' 126,11

It would seem that at some time around the Fifth century B.C., then, the passive rule was reordered so as to occur before the accusative-marking rule since it no longer mentions [acc] in its structural description. In the new grammar, after passivization had taken place (optionally, of course), sentences underwent (or failed to undergo) accusative marking just as they always had.

This, of course, does not solve our original problem--it merely relocated it. Now the question is how the passive rule itself is to be written. Intuitively what seems to be happening is very much as

Fillmore formulated it in 1968, namely, there is some kind of subject formation rule (which is the same as the current theory's nominative-marking rule?) which operates on the cases in the underlying structure hierarchically. That is to say if there is an Agent it becomes the subject, if there is no Agent but there is an Instrumental it becomes the subject and so on. If, however, the case at the top of the hierarchy is not chosen but one further down the line then the verb is marked as [+passive] and everything proceeds normally from there on out. Presuming that this is what is happening, it is a lot easier to point out what the rule should accomplish as we have just done than to write a rigorous formula for it.

While not being able to formulate a transformation symbolically is considered, at least in some circles today, only a minor peccadillo--if that, there is at least one other problem that remains glaring. It seems fairly certain, at any rate among Indo-European languages, that accusative passives are entirely normal and expected while dative passives are rare. They arise relatively late and relatively seldom. To this day, for instance, there is no Romance language which allows them and even in languages which have acquired them, as did ancient Greek, their hold is tenuous and they tend strongly to disappear as we have mentioned vis-à-vis modern Greek. It seems then that dative passives are definitely more highly marked than their accusative counterparts. It would be expected then that the passive rule in English or classical Greek should somehow be more complex than such a rule in Spanish, say, or modern Greek. The tentative ideas we have discussed above are alike in that they don't show this fact very well. It is obvious that any theory of generative grammar, whether case-grammar or otherwise, is going to have to stretch to accommodate the kind of data that we have been discussing in English and classical Greek and it is going to have to show that this "stretching" is somehow more marked than the "relaxed" state that we find in the Romance languages.

Bibliography

- Fillmore, C. J. 1968. The Case for Case. in E. Bach and R. Harms, eds., *Universals in Linguistic Theory*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc. pp. 1-88.
- Gildersleeve, B. L. 1911. *Syntax of Classical Greek*, Pt. II. New York.
- Goodwin, W. W. 1894. *A Greek Grammar*. London.