

Case Theory and Norwegian Impersonal Constructions: Subject-Object Alternations in Active and Passive Verbs*

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It is proposed that nominative and accusative Case are both assigned by structural positions at surface structure. From this it follows that Case-absorption is not and cannot be part of the definition of passive. It is shown that a definition of passive without Case-absorption captures the data of personal and impersonal passives in Norwegian with minimal machinery. It also accounts for Case-assignment in impersonal constructions with active verbs without any additional statements. The difference between English and Norwegian with respect to the "forced movement" in English passive is accounted for by appealing to a difference between the two languages in their permissibility of expletive subjects.

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1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This paper concerns subject-object alternations in active and passive verbs. By subject-object alternation we mean the phenomenon that occurs when an argument of the verb can occur either in subject position or postverbally. When the argument or arguments is/are in postverbal position, the subject is filled with an expletive, and we have what we will call an impersonal construction. The personal construction (1b) is related to the impersonal (1a) by NP-movement.

- (1) a. *expl* V . . . (NP) . . .
b. NP_i V . . . e_i . . .

Note that this is a slightly untraditional use of the notion "impersonal". Some impersonal constructions will not have a personal counterpart, as for instance the passive of an intransitive verb, because in such a construction there is no NP to move.

The verb in an impersonal construction can be either active or passive. As an illustration of subject-object alternations and the

corresponding impersonal-personal alternations, consider (2) and (3), with a passive and active verb, respectively:

- (2) Det ble skutt en mann <--> En mann_i ble skutt e_i
 there was shot a man
 (3) Det rømte noen fanger <--> Noen fanger_i rømte e_i
 there escaped some prisoners

(2) is a subject-object alternation with a passive verb, and (3) with an active verb. The personal version on the righthand side is derived from the impersonal via NP-movement.

A property of the impersonal construction that we will *not* discuss here is the indefiniteness effect on the THEME argument. Rather, the question we want to address is how Case-assignment works in constructions with subject-object alternations with active and passive verbs, and in particular, how postverbal NPs are assigned Case in the impersonal constructions.

What we would like to explore here is the idea that Case is assigned to an NP by virtue of the syntactic position it occurs in at surface structure. A consequence of this is that there will be no difference between active and passive verb forms with respect to Case-assignment, because the verbs themselves do not assign the Case under this proposal.

2. SUBJECT-OBJECT ALTERNATIONS WITH PASSIVE VERBS

Let us consider Case-assignment in impersonal constructions with passive verbs. In line with the idea that NPs are assigned Case at surface structure by structural positions, the postverbal NP in e.g. the impersonal passive (2) will be assigned objective Case. This necessitates a theory of passive without Case-absorption, i.e., a passive theory like that of Chomsky (1981: 124), but *without* the Case-absorption part.

Let us call the passive theory that does *not* include absorption the "non-absorption theory", and compare the two theories with respect to passive in Norwegian and English. We present four arguments that the non-absorption theory yields a simpler account of passive than the absorption theory, based on data from Norwegian. (The point that Case-absorption should not constitute a core property of passive has also been made in Sobin (1985), based on Ukrainian. See also Kornfilt (1985) on Turkish.)

(i) The non-absorption theory includes *no* reference at all to complementation. A direct prediction of this is that passive should apply no matter what type of complement the verb has, if any at all. This prediction is borne out in Norwegian, as illustrated in (4):

- (4)
- | | |
|------------|--|
| a. V | Det ble danset
there was danced |
| b. V NP | En mann _i ble skutt e_i
a man was shot |
| c. V PP | Bildene _i ble stirret på e_i
pictures-DEF was stared at |
| d. V NP PP | Boken _i ble lagt e_i på bordet
book-DEF was put on table-DEF |
| e. V NP NP | Han _i ble gitt e_i en presang
he was given a present
+ |
| f. V P S | Det ble advart mot å bade
there was warned against to bathe |
| g. V S | Det ble prøvd å stoppe et tog
there was attempted to stop a train |

The absorption theory, however, refers to properties of complementation, in that it specifically says that Case is absorbed. Mentioning Case implies that the verb to be passivized should be the kind of verb that assigns Case, i.e. that has an NP-complement.

On the other hand, it is not clear what the predictions of the absorption theory are as regards other complement types such as intransitive verbs and clausal complements. Does it say that these cannot be passivized, or does it say that they can? It depends on how one thinks of Case-absorption: If absorption is obligatory for passive to apply, then even verbs with clausal complements absorb Case, and hence necessitates the assumption that clauses are assigned Case. Furthermore, one has to say then that clauses are exempt from the Case-filter, as an explanation for why they do not have to move to subject in passive (or why they can not). Also, something must be said in the absorption theory about the possibility for passivizing intransitive verbs in Norwegian and other languages where this is possible.

So, the non-absorption theory needs to say nothing at all in order to predict the full range of data. It follows directly that e.g.

intransitive verbs and verbs with clausal complements should be able to passivize, while the absorption theory needs to invoke additional machinery in order to explain passivization of verbs taking complements other than direct objects.

(ii) In a passive sentence, the subject position is θ -vacuous. A consequence of this is that an NP may move to this position without violating the θ -criterion. Note now that there is nothing in the non-absorption theory that also says that the NP *must* move to that position. That is, in the non-absorption theory, a postverbal NP may *stay* in object position without violating the Case-filter, since without absorption there is Case. Also, since the subject position is θ -vacuous, it *may move* to this position. This correctly predicts that an argument NP can optionally choose to stay in object position or move to subject. Compare the data in (4) with (5), where an NP has stayed in object position:

- (5) a. Det ble skutt en mann
there was shot a man
b. Det ble stirret på bildene
there was stared at pictures-DEF
c. Det ble lagt en bok på bordet
there was put a book on table-DEF
d. Det ble gitt ham en presang
there was given him a present

In the absorption theory, some additional machinery is necessary to "cancel" the effects of absorption to get the impersonal passives in (5), while nothing extra is necessary in the non-absorption theory.

(iii) In the absorption theory a consequence is that only the NP that is Case-marked by the verb in the active is forced to move in the passive. This NP is (usually?) the direct object, so in effect this expresses the traditional notion that passive crucially involves the change of the direct object to subject. Since the non-absorption theory does not refer to any particular postverbal NP in its definition (in fact, does not refer to complementation at all), it follows directly that any postverbal NP may move into subject position.¹ Consider (6)–(8), which show direct objects, indirect objects and prepositional objects moving to subject:

- (6) V NP NP
a. Det ble gitt ham en gave
there was given him a present
b. Han_i ble gitt e_i en gave
he was given a present
c. En gave_i ble gitt ham e_j
a present was given him
- (7) V NP [P NP]²
a. Det ble lagt en duk på bordet
there was put a cloth
b. Duken_i ble lagt e_i på bordet
the-cloth was put on the-table
c. Bordet_i ble lagt en duk på e_j
the-table was put a cloth on
- (8) V [P NP]
a. Det ble stirret intenst på bildene
there was stared intensely on the pictures
b. Bildene_i ble stirret intenst på e_i
the-pictures was stared intensely on

The passives in (7)–(8) with the stranded prepositions are incompatible with the absorption theory. First of all, the prepositions are not reanalyzed with the verbs in these cases, as evidenced by the fact that adverbials and NPs can intervene between the verb and the stranded preposition. Hence, nothing can prevent the preposition from assigning Case to the NP or trace after it. In order to get a personal passive in the absorption theory, the movement of the NP in for example (8a) must be forced by the Case-filter. However, the Case of the preposition cannot be absorbed, so the absorption theory here actually predicts that only the impersonal passive (8a) and not the personal passive (8b) should exist.³

(iv) The non-absorption theory claims that impersonal passive is more "basic" than personal passive, since personal passives are derived from impersonals. The absorption theory claims the opposite, i.e., the basic passive is where the logical object occurs in subject position. Some support for the absorption theory here comes from the fact that there are "more" impersonal passives than personal passives: For every personal passive, there is an impersonal passive, but there are impersonal passives that have no personal counterpart. This is illustrated in (9):

- (9) a. Det ble danset
there was danced
b. Det ble påstått at Jon var dum
there was alleged that John was stupid

That is, in the non-absorption theory nothing needs to be said to capture this, while in the absorption theory, something must be said about these facts, amounting to assigning them exceptional status—e.g. that clauses do not need Case, and e.g. that intransitives do not assign Case. However, this introduces redundancy into the system, since the passive morphology in the absorption theory will have to sometimes absorb Case and sometimes not.

To summarize, we have presented four arguments that passive in Norwegian should not be defined in terms of Case-absorption: (i) that passive is insensitive to complementation type and should therefore not refer to complementation or properties of complementation, (ii) that there is free alternation between impersonal and personal passives, (iii) that any postverbal argument NP can move to subject (no particular NP must move because of particular Case-absorption), and (iv) that impersonal passive is more "basic" than personal passive.

We will return to the surface differences between English and Norwegian passive in a moment. Let me point out, however, that we assume that English and Norwegian should receive the same passive analysis. That is, at an underlying level, the passive processes in the two languages are the same. The surface differences between English and Norwegian will be made to follow from other, independent properties of English.

3. THEORETICAL PROPOSAL

Now that we have argued that Case-absorption is an untenable analysis for Norwegian passive, and assuming that English really is no different as regards this point, let us formulate what is necessary in order to have the non-absorption theory *follow* from general principles of grammar. That is, we do not want the Norwegian grammar to contain some special property that "blocks" a (universal) Case-absorption, rather, we want Case-absorption to be ruled out as a possible part of a universal analysis of passive. One thing (although of course not the only possible

thing) that would do this would be something that would pre-theoretically rule out Case-absorption as a possible notion of (universal) grammar.

What we would like to propose is the following: Case is assigned by structural positions, not by the verbs themselves. Let us formulate this hypothesis as a principle:

(10) *Case Assignment Principle*

Case is assigned by structural positions at surface structure (and idiosyncratic Case is assigned in argument structure)

i.e., nominative Case is assigned by the subject position [NP, S], accusative or objective Case by the object positions [NP, VP] and [NP, PP]. Idiosyncratic Case (as in Icelandic and German, see Zaenen et al. 1985) is linked to argument-slots in the argument structure of the respective verbs, so this kind of Case is also not assigned by the verb in the syntax.⁴ This means that the canonical structural Cases nominative and accusative cannot be changed by lexical operations on the verbs at all.

Some direct evidence in support of this hypothesis comes from passivization with double object verbs:

- (11) a. Det ble gitt ham en bok
there was given him (OBJ) a book
b. Han, ble gitt *e*, en bok
he (NOM) was given a book

The Case on the direct object *en bok* in (11) cannot be tested with a pronoun because of the indefiniteness effect. It is, however, clearly assigned objective when in an active sentence:

- (12) Kongen ga ham henne til gifte
king-DEF gave him (OBJ) her (OBJ) for marriage

The non-absorption theory of passive follows as a consequence of the Case Assignment Principle: Case cannot be absorbed by passive morphology on a verb since Case is not assigned by the verb in the first place, but rather by a structural position. The data presented in (2)–(8), of which some are repeated here in (13), are accounted for as follows:

- (13) a. Det ble danset
there was danced

- b. Det ble skutt en mann
there was shot a man
c. Det ble tenkt på problemet
there was thought about problem-DEF

By the Case Assignment Principle in (10), Case cannot be "absorbed" by passivization, and the argument NPs in the passive VP will be allowed to stay in postverbal position without causing Case-filter violations. Take (13b): If the argument stays in object position, it will be assigned the canonical Case for objects at surface structure; if it moves to subject, it will be assigned the canonical Case for subjects at surface structure. Since the non-absorption theory of passive follows from the Case Assignment Principle, intransitive verbs will passivize without further ado. Similarly with prepositional passives: Nothing is changed with respect to Case and complements from an active to a passive VP.⁵

This, then, concludes the analysis of how Case is assigned in impersonal constructions with passive verbs.

4. SUBJECT-OBJECT ALTERNATIONS WITH ACTIVE VERBS

Let us now look at non-passive impersonal-personal alternations. These constructions are similar to passives in that they have a θ -vacuous subject position, and in that the NP base-generated in object position can alternate between subject and object. Some examples of subject-object alternations with intransitive verbs are given below with various types of intransitive verbs:

- (14) a. Det omkom et helt mannskap (unaccusative/ergative)
there perished a whole crew
b. Et helt_i mannskap omkom e_i
- (15) a. Det rømte noen fanger (motion verb)
there escaped some prisoners
b. Noen fanger_i rømte e_i
- (16) a. Det åpnet seg en dør (reflexive verb)
there opened-REFL a door
b. Døren_i åpnet seg e_i

- (17) a. Det frøs-til en elv (inchoative)
there froze-to a river "The river froze"
b. Elven_i frøs-til e_i
- (18) a. Det brant et hus nede i byen (process verb)
there burned a house downtown
b. Et hus_i brant e_i nede i byen

If the constructions surface with the argument in base-generated position, the NPs will be assigned Objective Case at surface structure by virtue of being in object position (by the Case Assignment Principle). If they move to subject, they will be assigned Nominative Case at surface structure by virtue of being in that position. Unfortunately, there is no way of testing morphological Case in object position here, since pronouns cannot be used because of the Indefiniteness Effect.⁶

Thus, Case-assignment in the subject-object alternations with active verbs receives essentially the same analysis as the one for passives: An NP receives the Case canonically assigned to the structural position the NP occurs in at surface structure. Nothing extra needs to be said in the theory to explain the data; the subject-object alternations are given the same explanation in both active and passive constructions.

5. ENGLISH

Although we have no definitive explanation for the difference between English and Norwegian passive, the following gives an idea:

One may ask what prevents impersonal passives from occurring in English, if there is no Case-absorption. As an answer to this we would like to appeal to another property of English, namely the restrictions in that language against the use of expletive *there*-subjects (except in copula-constructions like 'there is/was X'). Thus, most of the sentences in (19) are generally considered bad by most English speakers:

- (19) a. There appeared a man at the door
b. ? There arrived a train
c. ??There came a man
d. ??There perished a crew

Thus, a general property of English seems to be that it has limitations on the use of sentences with expletive *there*-subjects (something similar also suggested in Baker 1983). Expletive *it* connected with sentential complements is perfectly good—this is another type of expletive exclusively reserved for clausal complementation in English. If this property is taken as a serious grammatical property, the difference between English and Norwegian, summarized in (20), will follow directly.

(20)		English	Norwegian
a.	impersonal passive of transitive verbs	no	yes
b.	passive of intransitives	no	yes
c.	impersonal unaccusative	no	yes
d.	impersonal unergative (e.g. run)	no	yes

The differences follow because all the constructions in (20) require *there*-subjects. Since English does not allow this, NP-movement will always fill the subject with a lexical NP. Furthermore, intransitive verbs do not passivize in English because there will be no NP to fill the subject position with.

Another question is why English does not allow prepositional passives with non-reanalyzed prepositions. A possibility here might be that English does not allow NP-traces with oblique Case-marking, following a suggestion of Hornstein & Weinberg (1981) (although they suggested a universal prohibition). Another explanation might be that English has V-P reanalysis, but that Norwegian does not, as suggested recently in Christensen (1986). Anyway, the answer to the differences in (20) are (i) English has non-productive use of *there*-subjects, and (ii) English does not allow preposition-stranding as a result of NP-movement.

6. CASE-MARKED NP-TRACES EXIST INDEPENDENTLY

As noticed, a consequence in the non-absorption theory and the Case Assignment Principle is that postverbal NP-trace will be Case marked in personal passives and in personal constructions in general. Before discussing whether this is a desirable consequence or not, let me just point out a general situation that arises in Norwegian prepositional passives. What we would like to argue

is that Case-marked NP-traces necessarily must exist in Norwegian prepositional passives.

Consider first the traditional arguments for V-P reanalysis in English prepositional passives. In an active sentence, an adverbial can intervene between the verb and the PP, as in (21a). However, when the verb is passivized, the stranding of the preposition is only good if it is adjacent to the verb, as shown in (21b, c):

- (21) a. The king slept restlessly in this bed
 b. *This bed has been slept restlessly in
 c. This bed has been slept in

The fact that adverbials cannot intervene has been taken as evidence that the verb and the preposition have been reanalyzed into a complex verb [VP]_v, since adverbials cannot intervene between elements below the word level (i.e. V⁰). Thus, there is no independently Case-assigning preposition in (21c), but rather a complex verb that has had its Case absorbed.

However, in Norwegian this is not the case; constructions similar to (21b) are grammatical, as illustrated in (22)–(23). This shows that verb-preposition reanalysis is not what lies behind the phenomenon of preposition stranding in Norwegian (see also Christensen (1986) for extensive argumentation that there is no V-P reanalysis in Norwegian, whereas there is in English):

- (22) a. Jentene_i ble gloddt intenst på e_i
 girls-DEF was stared intensely on
 b. Veien_i ble kjørt ganske rått på e_i
 road-DEF was driven quite roughly on
 c. Brennevinet_i ble drukket mye av e_i
 liquor-DEF was drunk lots of
 d. Treet_i hadde blitt kjørt rett inn i e_i
 tree-DEF had been driven straight into in
- (23) a. Bordet_i ble lagt en duk på e_i
 table-DEF was put a cloth on
 b. Ungen_i ble skiftet bleier på e_i
 kid-DEF was changed diapers on
 c. Mannen_i ble tatt bilde av e_i
 man-DEF was taken picture of
 d. Han_i er blitt reservert plass for e_i
 he is been reserved seat for

Since the prepositions are the Case-assigners, Case-absorption cannot "reach" them, and Case will be assigned to the crucial NPs in the passive. Thus, it seems to be an inescapable conclusion under any theory that the traces in (22)–(23) must be case-marked. In the non-absorption theory of passive, this follows directly, since nothing is changed in the verb's complement in the passive. For the absorption theory, (22)–(23) pose serious problems, as it is hard to see how it is possible to absorb the Case assigned to the prepositional objects, which would be necessary in that theory to get a personal passive.

We conclude from these data that Case-marked NP-trace is unpreventable in Norwegian in some cases, and must therefore necessarily be allowed in general.

7. SOME RESIDUAL PROBLEMS

As pointed out to me by Jane Grimshaw, allowing Case marked NP-traces in general will perhaps take away the only way to explain the ungrammaticality of the English sentences like (24), where *John* has been moved from the VP to subject position. I.e., the underlying form of (24b) would be *It seems to John that Mary is happy*:

- (24) a. *John_i is said of e_i that he is a fool
 b. *John_i seems to e_i that Mary is happy

The movement in (24) will not violate the θ -criterion, since the subject position of *seem* is θ -vacuous. It may seem that only a theory that disallows Case-marked NP-trace will be able to explain the ungrammaticality of (24).

An alternative way of explaining the ungrammaticality of (24) might be to appeal to the restrictions in English against preposition-stranding. One then has to say that *seem* and *say* cannot reanalyze with a preposition. Some support for this comes from the fact that for reanalysis to apply, the verb and the preposition must form a semantic coherent unit, and *seem to* and *say of* are probably not that. Note that *think of* is: *John was thought of as being happy*.

However, note that the same holds for Norwegian constructions with similar verbs:

- (25) a. Det virket på Marit som om Jon var syk
 there seemed to Mary as if John was ill
 b. *Marit_i virket på e_i som om John var syk

Since Case-marked traces are allowed under the present proposal, an explanation for the ungrammatical (24) and (25b) based on Case-marked NP-trace is of course unavailable. However, there seems to be an alternative explanation. Consider the following data, containing the verbs *vente* 'expect', *nå* 'reach', *hende* 'happen', *gå* 'go, traverse'. They can all occur in an impersonal construction with both arguments in the VP. We assume therefore that both arguments are base-generated in the VP. Since the subject position is θ -vacuous, an NP may move to subject from the VP. However, in these active sentences, only the THEME may move; the second NP, which we assume has a GOAL or PATIENT role, may not move.⁷ Consider (26)–(29):

- (26) a. Det ventet ham en overraskelse
 there expected him a surprise
 b. En overraskelse_j ventet ham e_i (THEME moved)
 c. *Han_i ventet e_i en overraskelse (GOAL moved)
- (27) a. Det nådde ham et brev på julaften
 there reached him a letter on Christmas Eve
 b. Brevet_j nådde ham e_i på julaften (THEME moved)
 c. *Han_i nådde et brev e_i på julaften (GOAL moved)
- (28) a. Det hendte ham noe rart
 there happened him something strange
 b. Noe rart_j hendte ham e_i (THEME)
 c. *Han_i hendte e_i noe rart (PATIENT)
- (29) a. Det går et tog fra Oslo til Bergen
 there goes a train from Oslo to Bergen
 b. Toget_j går e_i fra Oslo til Bergen (THEME)
 c. *Oslo_j går toget fra e_i til Bergen (SOURCE)

Thus, there is a generalization to the effect that only THEME-NPs may move in an active sentence with θ -vacuous subject position. If this generalization also holds for English, it will explain why (24) is ungrammatical, because here a GOAL has moved.

Another problem is that the theory presented here predicts that in English double object passives both NPs should be movable to

subject, this is not true for English:

- (30) a. John_i was given e_i a present
 b. *A present_i was given John e_i

The same applies to some degree even in Norwegian. To me, the passive with the GOAL in subject is strongly preferable to THEME in subject, if the GOAL is a lexical NP (although it is acceptable with a pronoun, perhaps suggesting cliticization in that case):

- (31) a. Jon_i ble gitt e_i en gave
 b. ?En gave_i ble gitt Jon e_i

This might be a kind of ECP-effect: Note that the deviant sentences in (30)–(31) all have traces non-adjacent to the verbs, while the good versions have adjacent traces. (However, this is the opposite of the case with active verbs with double objects and empty subjects.)

8. OTHER ANALYSES

There are basically two other analyses that have been proposed for the impersonal passive and impersonal active constructions. One is Platzack (1983), drawing on Safir (1982). The solution here is mainly to co-index the expletive subject with the postverbal NP that is deprived of Case by absorption, thereby creating a chain where the first element is assigned Case and the second θ -role. This also accounts for the Indefiniteness Effect of the postverbal THEME-NP under certain assumptions. Furthermore, there is no Indefiniteness Effect in an impersonal prepositional passive, and this should follow under Safir/Platzack's account if the preposition here assigns the Case. When the preposition assigns the Case, there is no need for coindexing with the expletive subject. However, Case-absorption is at the very heart of this analysis, since without Case-absorption there would be no need for co-indexing. The problem for this account, then, is the personal passives with preposition stranding. A Case-marked trace will occur, and a situation with doubly Case marked chains emerges, which we presume is out in this theory.

The other analysis is what is proposed in Baker (1985). Here Case is not absorbed, but rather assigned to an abstract passive morpheme. In a language that allows impersonal passives of

intransitive verbs, Baker's theory will say that in such a language, it is optional whether Case is assigned to the passive morpheme. When it is not assigned to the passive morpheme, it can be assigned to the postverbal NP, thereby allowing it to stay in postverbal position. The problem again is the un-reanalyzed prepositional passives. Case assignment to passive morpheme or not, it is impossible to prevent the non-adjacent P from assigning its Case. Baker's ultimate solution is to say that there is in fact "abstract verb-preposition incorporation" in LF(?), such that the verb and the preposition abstractly form a complex verb, and thus can absorb the crucial Case. However, we leave it to the reader to evaluate such a proposal.

9. SUMMARY

We have here argued that passive in Norwegian and English should only be defined as involving (a) change to passive morphology, and (b) blocking of the external θ -role. We have argued that there should be no reference to Case or Case-"absorption" in the characterization of passive. This is made to follow by a proposed principle governing the analysis of case-assignment in general, namely by saying that nominative and accusative Case is a property of structural positions at surface structure, and hence cannot be affected by change in the morphology of the verb. (Note that the "Case-preservation" facts in Icelandic follow if one assumes that idiosyncratic Case is associated with elements of argument structure, and not of syntactic structure.) The difference in passive between Norwegian and English follows from (a) a prohibition against *there*-subjects in English, and consequently forced movement of an NP to subject position, and (b) a prohibition in English against NP-traces with oblique case-marking, or possibly some other restriction against preposition-stranding in NP-movement. The distribution of NPs in Norwegian active and passive sentences in relation to subject-object alternations and impersonal-personal alternations is explained by exactly the same mechanisms.

NOTES

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