Voice Phrases and their Specifiers

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1. Background

Main claim (Sternefeld (1995)):
The approach shares with Baker, Johnson & Roberts (1989) the assumption that passivization is a syntactic (rather than lexical) phenomenon. The external argument is present in the syntax (which is why it is syntactically active). However, Sternefeld does not assume that the “passive morpheme” is the external argument; rather, it’s an empty category pro that is merged in the canonical position for external arguments and subsequently raised to the specifier of a voice phrase (Kratzer (1996)).

(1) A simple example:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{Johnnom} \\
\text{DP} \\
\text{VoiceP} \\
\text{TP}
\end{array}
\]

(2) Core assumption:
The head of a passive VoiceP must license (via spec-head agreement) a pro that bears a subject theta role. (Passive auxiliaries are Voice heads that select special verb forms (so-called ‘status government’).)

Basic assumption about case:
There is a two-step approach to (structural) case: Case is first assigned and then licensed.

(3) Case assignment:
a. Within the VP:
   (i) nominative can be assigned by default;
   (ii) accusative can be assigned if nominative has been assigned; and
   (iii) dative can be assigned if accusative has been assigned.
b. Assignment of structural case is possible only once; if two cases in the domain of a verb are the same, one must be either a lexical case or an agreement case.

(4) Case licensing I: nominative:
Tensed T can license nominative case in its specifier position.

(5) Case licensing II: accusative and dative in German (‘linking’; one of three versions):
a. (i) Accusative case is licensed in VP on a direct object theta role
   (ii) Dative case is licensed in VP on an indirect object theta role
b. The Voice heads werdenpart and sein2a license accusative case marking on the subject theta role.
c. The Voice heads kriegenpart and bekomen2a license dative case marking on the subject theta role.

Note:
An entry like werdenpart signals that the passive auxiliary werden selects a participial form of the main verb (it status-governs a verbal form of type III, or assigns the verbal case III (past participle)).

2. Deriving Core Properties of Passive

I: Argument reduction:
There is no argument reduction (as in Baker, Johnson & Roberts (1989)). This is why the external argument is syntactically active. If a passive Voice head shows up, it requires a pro that bears a subject theta role (see (2)). Thus, only derivations will succeed in this context that have a pro merged in the VP as an external argument to begin with. Conversely, given that (2) is the only way to accommodate an external argument DP pro in English, its distribution is confined to passive contexts. (That said, it is not quite clear how external argument pros are excluded in non-passive contexts.)
II: Case absorption
There is no case absorption. In canonical passives (as in English), structural accusative case is assigned to pro in SpecVoice, as an instance of (5-b). That is why accusative case is not available for the object DP anymore, which therefore receives nominative case from T. (Again, this is similar to Baker, Johnson & Roberts (1989).)

III: Morphological reflex.
The morphological reflex results as a combination of the shape of the Voice head (the passive auxiliary in English and German) and the form of the dependent V that it selects (the past participle, e.g.). (Active clauses, by assumption, have no VoiceP, so they lack a designated morphological reflex.)

IV: Case-driven movement:
Given (4), there must be case-driven movement to SpecT. However, this issue is not really crucial: case assignment without movement would follow under an Agree-based approach, for instance.

3. Sample Derivations: German

Note:
The analysis can elegantly handle regular passive constructions and recipient passive constructions in German. In one case, pro has accusative case and is licensed by werden_parts in SpecVoice, in the other one, pro has dative case and is licensed by kriegen_parts in SpecVoice.

(6) Regular and recipient passive in German double object constructions:

a. dass der Fritz der Maria den Film geschenkt hat.
   that the Fritz nom the Maria dat given has

b. dass der Film der Maria geschenkt wird.
   that the film nom the Maria dat given

   c. dass die Maria den Film geschenkt bekommt (kriegt).
   that the Maria nom the film acc given gets

Notation:
(i) \( \uparrow \text{DP}_n \): DP\(_n\)'s case is assigned.
(ii) \( \text{DP}_n \): DP\(_n\)'s case is licensed.

(7) Regular passive in German double object constructions

(8) Unsuccessful derivations:

a. dass der Film pro der Maria geschenkt wird.
   that the film nom pro acc the Maria dat given

b. *dass der Film pro die Maria geschenkt wird.
   that the book nom pro dat the Maria acc given

   c. *dass die Maria pro dem Film geschenkt wird.
   that the Maria nom pro acc the film nom given

   d. *dass die Maria pro dem Film geschenkt wird.
   that the Maria nom pro dat the film acc given

Note:
(i) Any structure in which SpecVoice is not pro is excluded (because of (2)).
(ii) Any structure in which SpecT does not bear nominative is excluded (because of (4)).
(iii) Consequently, pro can never bear nominative.
(iv) In (8-b), dative is not licensed (because of (5-b)), and accusative is not licensed (because of (5-a-i)).
(v) In (8-c), dative is not licensed (because of (5-a-ii)).
(vi) In (8-d), dative is not licensed (because of (5-b)).
4. Further Issues

Further issues no. 1: 'By' phrases:
The assumption here is that "by-phrases bind a subject pro'. Therefore, even though more agents and instruments can be by-phrases in passives as such, they cannot co-occur.

(11) Types of 'by'-phrases:
   a. Die Armee zerstörte das U-Boot
      the army destroyed the submarine
   b. Der(!) Torpedo zerstörte das U-Boot
      the torpedo destroyed the submarine
   c. Das U-Boot wurde von der Armee zerstört
      the submarine was by the army destroyed
   d. Das U-Boot wurde von einem Torpedo zerstört
      the submarine was by a torpedo destroyed
   e. *Das U-Boot wurde von der Armee von einem Torpedo zerstört
      the submarine was by the army by a torpedo destroyed

Further issues no. 2: Impersonal passives:

(12) Impersonal passives:
   dass nicht [Voice pro \[VP t_1 getanzt \] wurde].
   that not danced was

Note:
At first sight, one might think it would suffice to assume that pro can bear nominative in German. However, this would also produce transitive passives (see below).

Conclusion:
"Assume now that impersonal passives arise from the possibility of licensing a pro without Case. For example, German would be characterized as a pro with pro accus, pro dat. and a pro without case." (p. 38)

Further issues no. 3: Languages without overt morphological reflex of passive:

(13) Passivization in Aceh (Austronesian, Malay; Sumatra):
   a. Gopunyan ka gi-com lón
      she PERF kiss I
      'She (already) kissed me.'
   b. Lón ka gi-com le-gopunyan
      I PERF kiss by she
‘I’ve (already) been kissed by her.’

Note:
Here an analysis would seem to be straightforward: Voice remains without overt morphological realization, and there is no special status government of V by Voice.

Further issues, no. 4: Transitive passives in Ukrainian etc.:

(14)  

Transitive passives in Ukrainian

a. Cerkyv-na bul-a zbudova-n-ko v 1640 roc’i
court-NOM/FEM build-PASS-FEM in year 1640
The church was built in 1640.

b. Cerkyv-ko bul-o zbudova-n-ko v 1640 roc’i
court-AKK/FEM build-PASS-NEUT in year 1640
The church was built in 1640.

Assumption:
Languages like Ukrainian permit both proacc and pronom with their passive Voice heads. The remaining internal co-argument DP then either gets nominative (under raising to SpecT) or accusative (in the VP).

Further issues, no. 5: Lexical case:

(15)  

Passivization and lexical case: lexical datives in German:

a. Wir werden der Sache nachgegangen.
weacc get the thingdat pursue
b. *Die Sache wird/bekommt nachgegangen.
the thingnom is/get pursued
c. Der Sache wird nachgegangen.
the thingdat is pursued

Analysis:
Lexical case is tied to the assignment of a thematic role, so it cannot be assigned to pro. Also, if one item is assigned lexical case in a minimal clause, then this case cannot be assigned to any other item. Consequently, (15-c) involves a pro without case, as in (other) impersonal passive constructions.

(16)  

Recipient passive variability with non-ditransitive verbs:

a. ??Der Mann bekommt geholfen.
the man gets helped
b. ??Der Mann bekommt gedankt.
the man gets thanked

Strenfeld’s analysis:
“For some speakers in some dialects […] [(16-a)] is judged grammatical. This calls for a revision of the Case assignment rules, to the effect that structural dative cannot be limited to only ditransitive verbs. Accordingly, one would have to allow for dative case assignment with verbs that do not assign structural accusative.”
(p. 37).

Alternative:
As mentioned before, an alternative might be to assume that there is a hidden clausal object in (16-a) (but not in (16-b)), which then turns the dative case in (16-a) into a structural case. (See Fanselow (1991).)

5. Arguments for the Analysis

Standard arguments:
All standard arguments for syntactic approach to passivization remain valid (in particular those concerning the syntactic activity of the external argument). As in the Baker et al. (1989) approach, unaccusative passives are excluded: Voice, by stipulation, requires a subject theta role in SpecVoice, i.e., an external argument.

An additional argument:
This approach to passivization immediately extends to Agent Topic vs. Theme Topic constructions in Austronesian languages (Toba Batak, Tagalog): Here either the external or the internal argument is moved to SpecVoice.

6. Other Issues

Note:
The analysis relies on movement to specifier positions for case licensing, but the relevant effects could equally well be achieved under an Agree-based approach where all the DPs can remain in situ. This would seem to be more appropriate for free word order languages, and more in line with current minimalist assumptions.

(17)  

Passive without movement in German:

a. dass der Karl der Maria zum Geburtstag wahrscheinlich ein
that the Karlnom the Mariadat for the birthday probably a
Buch schenkte
bookacc gave
b. dass pro der Maria zum Geburtstag wahrscheinlich ein
that proacc the Mariadat for the birthday probably a
Buch geschenkt wurde
book\_nom given was

(18) \textit{Regular passive in German double object constructions}

\begin{center}
\begin{tikzpicture}[level distance=1.5cm, level 1/.style={sibling distance=3cm}, level 2/.style={sibling distance=2cm}, level 3/.style={sibling distance=1.5cm}, every node/.style={align=center}]

\node (root) {\textit{Regular passive in German double object constructions}};
\begin{scope}[every node/.style={fill=white, text=black}]

\node (CP) at (0,0) {CP};
\node (TP) at (2,0) {TP};
\node (T) at (4,0) {T};
\node (VoiceP) at (2,-2) {VoiceP

\node (Voice) at (4,-4) {Voice

\node (VP) at (2,-6) {VP

\node (pro_{acc}) at (-3,-8) {pro_{acc

\node (DP1) at (-3,-10) {DP\_1

\node (DP2) at (1,-10) {DP\_2

\node (Maria_{dat}) at (-3,-12) {der Maria_{dat

\node (DP3) at (1,-12) {DP\_3

\node (DP4) at (3,-12) {DP\_4

\node (V) at (5,-12) {V

\node (V') at (6,-12) {V'

\node (wind_{part}) at (7,-12) {wind_{part

\node (der Film_{nom}) at (-3,-14) {der Film_{nom

\node (geschenkt) at (1,-14) {geschenkt

\path (root) -- (TP)
\path (TP) -- (T)
\path (T) -- (Voice)
\path (Voice) -- (VoiceP)
\path (VoiceP) -- (VP)
\path (VP) -- (pro_{acc})
\path (pro_{acc}) -- (DP1)
\path (DP1) -- (V)
\path (V) -- (DP2)
\path (DP2) -- (V')
\path (V') -- (wind_{part})
\path (wind_{part}) -- (DP3)
\path (DP3) -- (der Film_{nom})
\path (der Film_{nom}) -- (geschenkt)
\end{scope}
\end{tikzpicture}
\end{center}

\textit{Note:}
A minimal modification of the requirements in (4), (5-b) and (5-c) (with Agree under c-command replacing the concept of obligatory specifier) will do the job.

\textit{Side remark:}
Sternfeld systematically ignores German order (in particular, the verb-final/verb-second distinction), presumably in order to make the examples easier to read from an English-based perspective. These issues are completely orthogonal to the approach.

\textit{Central question:}
How good is the evidence for an external argument pro with accusative (or some other) case, especially in non-pro-drop languages?

\textit{References}