

## The Passive in the History of English

In PdE the subject of a passive construction can be related to:

- a) the direct object                      *The book was selected by the committee.*
- b) the indirect object                    *Nicaragua was given opportunity to protest.*
- c) the prepositional object              *His plans were laughed at.*  
*The library was set fire to by accident.*

in the corresponding active construction.

### Old English

The OE passive was periphrastic, being formed by means of *beon/wesan* or *weorþan* and the past participle, which could be either inflected or uninflected. If it was inflected it agreed with the subject and was declined according to the strong declension of adjectives.

As regards the NP that was the subject of the passive, there existed a clear connection between the verb type and the subject of the passive sentence. A proper treatment of the passive, therefore, requires a typology of OE verbs. The active VP patterns relevant for our discussion are presented in (1) below.

- (1)
- (i) V NP-ACC
- (ii) V NP-ACC NP-GEN/DAT
- (iii) V NP-ACC/GEN/DAT
- (iv) V NP-GEN and/or NP-DAT

As discussed last year, there were two types of passive in OE:

**personal:** ACC NP of the active clause → NOM NP in the passive, verbal concord controlled by NOM-NP (ILLUSTRATED in (2a) →(2b) below);

**impersonal:** based on active clauses with DAT and/or GE NP(s) → no change of cases under passivisation, no verbal concord – the verb is invariably 3sg (ILLUSTRATED in (3a) → (3b) below).

(2)

a.     & se hlaford hit wisse & hine   inne   betynan nolde,  
and the lord it knew and him-ACC inside shut not-wanted  
'And the lord knew it and did not want to shut him inside'  
Alfred's Introduction to Laws 32 (*HCET:COLAW2*<R 21.2>)

b.     ... þonne wæron ealle þa dura       betyneda ...  
then were all the doors-NOM closed  
'Then all the doors were closed'  
Alfred's Orosius 106 (*HCET:COOROSIU* <R 5.106.18>)

(3)

a.     Gif preost oðrum               rihtes   fultumes forwyrne,    gebete þæt.  
if priest other-DAT.SG/PL right-GEN help-GEN deny-PR.SUBJ. atone-for that  
'If a priest denies due help to another, let him atone for that'  
Laws (Eleventh Century) (Northymbra Preosta Lagu) 382 (*HCET:COLAW3*<R 32>)

b.     me    hwilum   biþ forwyrned þurh   wipersteall willan mines,  
me-DAT sometimes is denied through resistance will mine  
hyhtes   æt halgum,  
hope-GEN of saints  
'Sometimes I am denied the hope of saints by the resistance of my will'  
Juliana 125 (*HCET:COCYNEW*<R 438>)



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phrasal verbs like *to give up*, in which the particle may be a preposition or an adverb. They almost completely replace the Old English prefixed verbs. Two types of OE prefixed verbs are important here:

- verbs with an inseparable prefix: *besprecan* 'to speak about'; since most OE prefixes disappeared, this type was presumably simply replaced by a new verb-particle combination;
- verbs with a separable prefix, which could either precede or follow the verb, depending on the clause type. It is likely that in OE the particle is base-generated before the verb and that other possible positions are derived. In ME, when the language changed from SOV to SVO, the particle acquired a new position AFTER the verb. Thus in ME the particle becomes fixed after the verb. This favours reanalysis of V [P NP] → V P [NP], i.e. the link between the particle preposition and the following noun becomes loose and their separation becomes more natural. This is assumed by most linguists and is considered necessary to explain the emergence of prepositional passive. This type of passive is first recorded in 13<sup>th</sup> century texts:

- (8) þer wes sorhe to seon hire leoflic lich faren so reowliche wið  
there was sorrow to see her dear body dealt so cruelly with  
c1225 St. Juliana (Roy) 22.195 (Denison 1993:125)
- (9) þis maiden ... feled also bi her þi þat sche was yleyen bi  
this maiden felt also by her thigh that she had-been lain by  
c1330 (?a1300) Arth.&M. (Auch) 849 (Denison 1993:125)
- (10) and aftyr he was turmentyd, and aftyr he was spyt vpon  
and afterwards he was tormented and afterwars he was spat upon  
a1425 Wycl.Ser. I. 39.26