

Turning the world upside down: Deponents at the base

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1. Background and goals. It is well-known that across languages, verbs appearing in different syntactic alternations such as the passive, reflexive, middle, etc., often share identical morphology involving a pronoun, clitic, or (non-active) verbal inflection, as in (1) & (2) for Albanian and German, respectively.

- (1) *Fëmija la-het kollaj.*
child.the_{NOM} wash- NACT,IMP,3S easily
(i) ‘The child washes/is washing itself with ease.’ → reflexive
(ii) ‘The child is being washed with ease.’ → passive
(iii) ‘The child washes easily.’ / ‘The child is easy to wash.’ → middle
- (2) a. *Ralf rasiert *(sich).* b. *Dieser Roman liest *(sich) gut.* c. *Die Tür öffnet *(sich).*
Ralf shaves SICH this novel reads SICH well the door opens SICH
‘Ralf is shaving.’ ‘This novel reads well.’ ‘The door opens.’

While such voice-related syncretisms have ever since Perlmutter (1978) been the subject of substantial research, to date there exist no theoretical accounts of what may be referred to as (voice-related) morphological gaps. These are cases in which the expected (voice-related) syncretism does not (or cannot) obtain. For instance, while in German the anticausative alternant of an alternating verb is often accompanied by a reflexive pronoun (as shown in (2c) above for ‘open’), this is not the case for every verb (as shown in (3) for ‘break’).

- (3) *Das Fenster zerbrach *(sich).*
the window broke SICH
‘The window broke.’

Perhaps even more intriguing is the fact that sometimes both forms (e.g. active and non-active) are attested for the same verb in the same syntactic alternation, as shown in the Albanian examples (4a) and (4b) for the anticausative counterpart of the verb ‘crack’.

- (4) a. *Dritarja u kris.* vs. b. *Dritarja krisi.*
window_{NOM} NACT crack.AOR.3S window crack.ACT.AOR.3S
(i) ‘The window cracked.’ (i) ‘The window cracked.’
(ii) ‘The window was cracked.’ (ii) *‘The window was cracked.’

This situation challenges the widely adopted claim that non-active/passive voice morphology relates to just a [-external argument] feature in the syntax (Embick 1997, 2004): assuming as is widely held that anticausatives lack an external argument, since the absence of the external argument does *not* entail non-active voice, the correlation between non-active/passive voice and lack of an external argument is at best an imperfect one (as witnessed by the pattern in (4b)). In other words, [-external argument] cannot be the relevant feature that triggers non-active morphology; this feature is just a necessary but not sufficient condition for non-active marking. What then is the feature that non-active/passive morphology relates to and that distinguishes it from active? Answering this question is one of the two goals of this paper. The second one is to account for the fact that across languages, voice-related gaps may arise only with anticausatives and/or middles but not with passive, reflexive, or deponent verbs.

2. Core proposal. The central claim that I put forward is that the non-active/passive voice (is being reanalyzed as a morpheme that) realizes a [+act(ivity)] feature (in the sense *actor-initiated*, cf. Kallulli 2007) in the presence of a [-external argument] feature. This means that non-active/passive morphology is (being re-interpreted as) a fundamentally aspectual operation. Beyond the arguments in Kallulli (2007), indirect evidence for this view is constituted by the fact that in English the auxiliary *to be* is used to build both the passive and the progressive. In fact, throughout the 16th to the 19th century (active) progressives used

with a passive meaning, as in (5), have been attested. [Though the period in which this construction seems to have enjoyed its greatest popularity was the 18th century (Jespersen 1931:211), remnants of it are found even in present-day English: e.g. *dinner is cooking*, *the book is printing*, *something is wanting*.] Thus, the idea is that the progressive was used with a passive sense because of the [+act(ivity)] feature encoded by the passive head occupied by *be*.

(5) The house was building for years. [Meaning: ‘The house was being built for years’]

3. The relevance of the deponent patterns. Traditionally, deponents have been defined as verbs that have a morphologically passive or non-active form (depending on the language) but active meaning (see e.g. Bennet 1907). However, deponent verbs *cannot* always combine with agentive or causative PPs (i.e. *by-* and *from-*phrases), as shown in (6) for Albanian (see also Xu, Aronoff & Anshen 2007 for Latin).

- (6) a. *Dielli u duk (*nga Zoti / qielli).*
 sun NACT appeared from/by God / sky
 ‘The sun appeared *(by/from God / the sky).’
- b. *Krenohem (*nga djali) / për / me djalin.*
 am proud.PR,NACT from/by son.the.NOM / for / with son.the.ACC
 ‘I am proud of my son.’

Furthermore, some verbs derived from deponents with no causative semantics (e.g. deponents that cannot combine with a PP identifying a cause) can enter transitive/causative frames, (7).

- (7) a. *Në rregull, po zhdukem atëhere.* (compare with (6a))
 in order PROG disappear.NACT then
 ‘OK, I (go) disappear then’
- b. *I zhduka gjurmët.*
 CL,3PL,ACC disappear traces
 ‘I made the traces / evidence disappear’ (I.e. ‘I destroyed the evidence’.)

Data such as in (7), which are by no means sporadic across languages, speak for a transitivity process (i.e. from ‘deponent’ to causative/transitive), lending in this way support to approaches such as the one advocated in Ramchand (2008). Tying this in with the facts discussed earlier, I contend that (non-actively) marked anticausatives as in (4a) started out as ‘deponents’; with the re-analysis/re-interpretation of non-active morphology as providing, or realizing, an [+activity] feature in the presence of a [-external argument] feature, anticausatives start dropping non-active marking, as they don’t have a [+activity] feature (Kallulli 2007). Note that under the analysis outlined here, the traditional definition of deponents as having a morphologically passive/non-active form but active meaning is derived in a straightforward manner: since deponents are always actor-initiated, they do not present a form-meaning mismatch (contra pre-formal accounts).

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