

Passive Morphemes in a Passive-less Language?

Yuko Otsuka

Introduction

In his comprehensive and succinct overview of passives in the world's languages, Edward Keenan (1985) makes the following typological observations. First, not all languages have passives; and second, such passive-less languages commonly use one of the following grammaticized means to express functional equivalents of passive: (a) to use the "impersonal" third person plural subject; or (b) to eliminate the subject of an active construction. Tongan is cited as an example of the latter, but with a disclaimer that "[i]t is not clear whether we want to consider such cases [as (1b)] ... as a 'truncated' active, with perhaps a third person plural or indefinite pronoun understood or as some kind of morphologically degenerate passive in which the verb form is not distinctively marked" (Keenan and Dryer 2006: 330).¹

- (1) a. Na'e tāmāte'i 'e Tevita 'a Koliāte
PST killed ERG David ABS Goliath
'David killed Goliath.'
b. Na'e tāmāte'i 'a Koliāte
PST killed ABS Goliath
'Goliath was killed.'

This question arises because case marking in Tongan shows an ergative-absolutive pattern. In a language with a nominative-accusative case system, whether the relevant construction is a truncated active or morphologically degenerate passive can be determined based on the Case of the theme NP, which should be marked as accusative in active transitive constructions, but as nominative in passive (intransitive) constructions. This is illustrated in the Supyire (Gur) example below (Carlson 1994 cited in Keenan and Dryer 2006: 330).

- (2) a. nàŋa à sikàŋi bò
man.DEF PERF goat.DEF kill
'The man killed the goat'
b. sikāŋa a bò
goat.DEF PERF kill
'The goat has been killed'

¹ Abbreviations used in this paper are as follows: ABS = absolutive, AGT = agent, DEF = definite, DO= direct object, ERG = ergative, EXCL = exclusive, INC= inceptive, PERF = perfective, PL = plural, POSS = possessive, PRS = present, PST = past, PTCPL = participle, REF = referential, S = singular, SBJV = subjunctive, SUBJ = subject, 1 = first person, 3 = third person.

In Supyire, subjects and direct objects occur in fixed positions, the sentence-initial position and between the aspect marker and the main verb, respectively. Thus, given the position of the ‘goat’, we can safely assume that (2b) is intransitive, hence an instance of morphologically degenerate passive. In contrast, the difference between the two Tongan sentences in (1) is simply the presence or absence of the ERG-marked NP. Since the subject of the intransitive verb and the direct object receive identical case morphology (the ABS marker, ‘a), one cannot tell if the theme *Koliate* in (1b) is the subject of a passive verb or the direct object of an active verb.

In this squib, I demonstrate that (1b) is a transitive construction, and not a passive without morphological marking. I will also discuss two affixes, *ma-* and *-Cia*, that appear to be passive morphemes in Tongan. I will show that despite the passive meaning associated with them, these affixes cannot be regarded as a morphological marker of passivization.

1 Evidence against Morphologically Degenerate Passive

While intransitive subjects and direct objects in Tongan are indistinguishable in terms of case morphology, the two are nonetheless treated differently in some syntactic operations such as (a) pronominalization, (b) coordination reduction, and (c) control. Using these as diagnostic tests, I will show below that the theme NP of the agentless construction (1b) is the direct object, not the subject.

1.1 Pronominalization

Tongan has a set of clitic pronouns, which occur in the position between the tense marker and the verb. The use of clitic pronouns is restricted to subjects, ERG or ABS, as shown in (3a-b). Pronominal objects may not take a clitic form, but must occur as an independent pronoun, as shown in (3c-d). In other words, the distribution of clitic pronouns is governed by the grammatical relation of the relevant NP rather than Case.

- (3) a. Na‘a ku ‘alu ki ai.
 PST 1.S go to there
 ‘I went there.’
 b. Na‘a ku ‘ave ‘a e tamasi‘i ki ai.
 PST 1. S take ABS REF boy to there
 ‘I took a boy there.’
 c. *Na‘a ku ‘ave ‘e he faiakó ki ai.
 PST 1. S take ERG REF teacher.DEF to there
 Intended: ‘The teacher took me there.’
 d. Na‘e ‘ave au ‘e he faiakó ki ai
 PST take 1.S ERG REF teacher.DEF to there
 ‘The teacher took me there.’

If the construction in (1b) is passive, the ABS-marked theme is a subject and therefore, should be able to occur as a clitic pronoun. As shown in (4), however, this prediction is not borne out. The sentence is grammatical only if the clitic pronoun is understood as the agent of ‘ave ‘take’ and the theme, as a phonetically null third person singular pronoun. (The latter is permitted in Tongan when the referent is identifiable in context.) Thus the pronominalization test suggests that the relevant construction is transitive, not passive.

- (4) Na'a ne 'ave ki he fale mahaki.
 PST 3.S take to DEF house sick
 *'He was taken to the hospital.' (OK 'He took (him/her) to the hospital.')

1.2 Coordination Reduction

The second test involves a type of coordination reduction. One of the coordinating conjunctions in Tongan, *mo* 'and also', requires the subject of the first conjunct and that of the second conjunct to be coreferential (5).² This condition is useful in determining the syntactic status of the ABS-marked NP in (1b) above. If (1b) is passive, then, the relevant NP should be able to participate in *mo*-coordination. This prediction is not supported, as shown in (6). This suggests that the ABS-NP in (1b) is the direct object, not the subject.

- (5) a. *Na'e tangi 'a Hina_i mo taa'i 'e Mele Ø_i.
 PST cry ABS Hina and hit ERG Mary
 'Hina was crying and Mary was hitting (her).'
- b. Na'e tangi 'a Hina_i mo taa'i Ø_i 'a Mele.
 PST cry ABS Hina and hit ABS Mary
 'Hina was crying and (she) was hitting Mary.'
- c. Na'e taa'i 'e Hina_i 'a Mele_j mo kata Ø_{i/*j}.
 PST hit ERG Hina ABS Mary and laugh
 'Hina was hitting Mary and (Hina/*Mary) was laughing.'
- (6) a. Na'e taa'i 'a Mele_i mo tangi Ø_{*i/j}.
 PST hit ABS Mary and cry
 'Mary was being hit and (she_{*i/j}) was crying.'
- b. *Na'e tangi 'a Mele mo taa'i Ø.
 PST cry ABS Mary and hit
 Intended meaning: 'Mary was crying and was being hit.'

1.3 Control

The third test concerns the distribution of PRO. What I call PRO here is the empty category that occurs, among other things, in clausal complements of verbs of volition or effort such as *feinga* 'to try' and *loto* 'to want'. This element exhibits syntactic behaviors that are distinct from those of other types of empty categories found in Tongan (Otsuka 2011a). Its distribution does not exactly match what is generally expected of PRO, however. First, it can apparently occur in a Case-marked position, or at least can alternate with an overt NP, as shown in (7). Second, it can only occur in the subject position of transitive clauses. When the embedded verb is intransitive, an overt pronoun must occur instead of a PRO (8).³ Despite these anomalies, and although the notion of PRO has been

² The other conjunction *pea* 'and (then)' requires the gap and the antecedent to bear the same Case.

(i) Na'e tangi 'a Hina_i pea taa'i 'e Mele Ø_i.
 PST cry ABS Hina and hit ERG Mary
 'Hina was crying and Mary hit (her).'

³ There are two exceptions to this generalization. One is PROarb in the complement of one place predicates. The other is purpose clauses containing a stative verb. I do not discuss these exceptions

questioned and/or disputed in the literature (Hornstein 1999, 2000; Manzini and Roussou 2000 among others), I refer to this empty category as PRO for the lack of better term. As expected of PRO in general, it cannot occur as direct objects (9).

- (7) a. 'Oku loto 'a Sione_i [ke fili PRO_i 'a Mele].
 PST want ABS John SBJV choose ABS Mary
 'John wants to choose Mary.'
 b. 'Oku loto 'a Sione [ke fili 'e Mele 'a Pila]
 PST want ABS John SBJV choose ERG Mary ABS Peter
 'John wants Mary to choose Peter.'
- (8) 'Oku loto 'a e tamaikí_i [ke nau/*PRO_i nofo].
 PRS want ABS REF children.DEF SBJV 3.PL stay
 'The children want to stay.'
- (9) *'Oku loto 'a Sione_i [ke fili 'e Mele PRO_i].
 PST want ABS John SBJV choose ERG Mary
 Intended: 'John_i wants Mary to choose (him_i).'

Based on the distribution described above, PRO should be banned in agentless constructions such as (1b) no matter whether it is transitive (because PRO cannot occur as the direct object) or passive (because PRO cannot occur in intransitive clauses). If (1b) is passive, however, we would expect a clitic pronoun, as in the examples in (8) above. This latter prediction is not borne out. The ungrammaticality of (10) suggests that the ABS-marked NP is not the subject of an intransitive (passive) construction, but the direct object of a transitive construction.⁴

- (10) *'Oku ou_i loto [ke PRO/u_i 'ave ki ai].
 PRS 1.S want SBJV 1.S take to there
 Intended: 'I want to be taken there.'

2 The Status of the Unexpressed Agent

The preceding discussion has shown that the agentless construction in Tongan should be treated as an instance of active transitive rather than morphologically degenerate passive. Let us now turn to the second part of the question: is the unexpressed agent in (1b) an instance of "a third person plural or indefinite pronoun understood"?

2.1 Evidence against the Null Pronoun Analysis

Should (1b) be understood as an instance of *pro*-drop of the impersonal third person plural pronoun? The answer seems to be negative. In Tongan, third person plural *nau* is never used as impersonal/non-referential, nor is it omissible. Third person singular pronouns, *ne* (clitic) and *ia* (independent), can be dropped, but only if the prior context provides the referent. That is, the omission of a third person singular pronoun is an instance of topic variable in the sense of Huang (1984) and therefore, referential by definition. This argues against the possibility of (1b) involving a *pro*-drop of a non-

further, as it is irrelevant to the present discussion on passive.

⁴ The sentence is grammatical if the intended meaning is 'I want to take (him/her) there', with PRO being the subject and the direct object being a null third person singular pronoun.

referential/indefinite third person singular pronoun. It should be noted, however, that (1b) could be analyzed as a construction with a null (understood) subject, if the intended meaning is ‘(He/she) killed Goliath.’ This construction, however, does not give rise to a passive interpretation.

The other possibility, *pro*-drop of an indefinite pronoun, is not viable either, as Tongan does not have any indefinite pronoun as such. Although there is an expression *ha taha* ‘indefinite one’, the indefinite article *ha* is usually used only in interrogative or negative contexts in a way analogous to English *any*. Moreover, such an indefinite expression generally cannot be dropped.

2.2 Pragmatically Controlled PRO

The unexpressed agent in constructions like (1b) differs from a discourse topic variable in two more important respects. First, unlike discourse topic variables, when the context makes it possible to identify the referent of the unexpressed agent in agentless transitive constructions, it is not restricted to third person. For example, the unexpressed agent is interpreted as coreferential with the possessor ‘*eku* ‘my’ in (11a) and the subject of the second clause *mau* ‘we’ in (11b) (Dukes 1996: 152).

- (11) a. ‘oku ou mahalo pē kuo ilo ‘e he‘eku
 PRS 1.S maybe just PERF know ERG POSS.1.S
 fa‘ē [na‘e ‘ikai paasi ‘eku sivi].
 mother PST NEG pass POSS.1.S exam
 ‘I think my mother knows that I didn’t pass my exam.’
 b. [Na‘e tāmata‘i ‘a e misini] ka mau folau lā pē.
 PST kill ABS REF engine.DEF and 1.PL.EXCL travel sail only
 ‘(we) turned off the engine and we traveled by sail alone.’

Second, unlike topic variables, which are not subject to any Case-related constraints, unexpressed agents must be ERG. In his corpus study, Dukes (1996) observes that null arguments in Tongan can be coreferential with first and second person arguments only when they are taken to be ERG arguments.

Based on these observations, Otsuka (2010) proposed that agentless constructions such as (1b) in Tongan results from the incorporation of a phonetically null pronominal agent with unspecified phi-features. The incorporated agent is interpreted as coreferential with a particular DP if the context provides a potential antecedent (or “postcedent”, as in (11b) above). If not, its unvalued phi-features yield an indefinite interpretation, “someone”.

Agent incorporation in passive constructions is attested in languages like Quechua, as the following example from Keenan and Dryer (2007: 345) illustrate.

- (12) a. Kuru-Ø manzana-ta miku-rqa-n
 bug-SUBJ apple-DO eat-PST-3
 ‘The bug ate the apple.’
 b. Kuru miku-sqa-mi manzana-Ø ka-rqa-n
 bug eat-PTCPL-comment apple-SUBJ be-PST-3
 ‘The apple was bug eaten.’

Agent incorporation in Quechua is productive and the subject marking on the theme NP suggests that the relevant operation is passivization. The agentless transitive construction in Tongan is also productive, but it differs from the agent incorporation in Quechua in

two respects. First, the construction is not intransitive in that the theme NP is not the grammatical subject, as shown in Section 1. Second, the incorporated agent must be a phonetically null pronoun. These facts cast doubt on the agent incorporation analysis.

I therefore propose an alternative analysis of (1b) that does not require agent incorporation: the unexpressed agent is an instance of PRO.⁵ Recall that the distribution of PRO is also restricted to ERG-marked subjects in Tongan. One may question how PRO could be permitted in the subject position of a tensed clause at all, but as noted above, PRO in Tongan apparently can occur in Case positions, specifically, in ERG positions. The unexpressed agent in constructions like (1b) is then an instance of pragmatically controlled PRO, whose reference may be arbitrary. When PRO is assigned arbitrary reference, the relevant construction serves as a functional equivalent of passive.

3 Passive Morphemes?

Thus, agent suppression is a productive means to achieve the main function of passive, namely, backgrounding of the agent, but it is not the only functional equivalent of passive in Tongan. There is also a handful of verbs that are inherently passive in that they take a theme subject: *'osi* 'to be finished', *ngalo* 'to be forgotten', *'ohovale* 'to be surprised', *lavea* 'to be injured' to list a few. These are monovalent, state-denoting predicates, and the agent cannot be implied. In order to express the agent, these forms must be causativized (e.g., *faka-'osi* 'to finish') or causativized and transitivized (e.g., *faka-'ohovale-i* 'to surprise (someone)', *faka-lavea-i* 'to injure (someone)'). Thus, what we find in Tongan is a number of intransitive-causative pairs rather than active-passive pairs. Inherently passive verbs of this sort are commonly found across Polynesian languages and are treated as a subclass of stative verbs (e.g., *loa'a* stative verbs in Hawaiian).

Many Tongan words that are translated as passive in English contain either a prefix *ma-* or a suffix *-Cia* (where C represents a variable thematic consonant). The prefix *ma-* derives a lexeme denoting a resultative state: e.g., *ma-fao* 'stretched', *ma-fola* 'widespread', *ma-fuli* 'flipped', *ma-hae* 'torn', *ma-hino* 'clear, understood', *ma-hua* 'spilt', *ma-puni* 'closed', *ma-vau* 'scraped'. These *ma*-verbs are monovalent and accordingly, the agent cannot be expressed. This prefix, however, cannot be analyzed as passive morpheme as such for two reasons. First, the base to which *ma-* attaches is not always a transitive verb. In some cases, it is not even a lexeme: *ma-hino* vs. **hino*, but *faka-hinohino* 'to explain', *ma-puni* vs. **puni*, but *tā-puni-i* 'to close (something)', *ma-hua* vs. **hua*, but *hua-i* 'to spill (something)' and so on. Second, not all *ma*-forms have a passive meaning: e.g., *puna* 'to jump' vs. *ma-puna* 'to gush', *lingi* 'to pour out' vs. *ma-lingi* 'to gush', *lava* 'possible' vs. *ma-lava* 'possible'.

The other affix *-Cia* occurs in a number of Polynesian languages and in fact, is commonly accepted as a passive morpheme in Eastern Polynesian languages such as Hawaiian and Māori.⁶ In Eastern Polynesian, *-Cia* suffixation is highly productive. The unmarked form and the *Cia* form of a transitive verb correspond to active and passive in English translation, respectively. Consider the Māori examples in (13). Note that case

⁵ Or more accurately, what I refer to as PRO in Section 1.3. The basic nature of this empty category remains the same as formulated in Otsuka 2010: a phonetically null pronoun with unspecified phi-features. It could well be postulated as a type of *pro*, especially if all occurrences of controlled PRO can be shown to be an instance of pragmatic control. I defer further discussion to future work.

⁶ But see Otsuka 2012 for an alternative view.

alignment shows a nominative-accusative pattern in Māori, in which the subject is unmarked and the direct object is marked by *i*.

- (13) a. Ka patu te tangata i te kurī.
 INC kill the man DO the dog
 ‘the man killed the dog.’
 b. Ka patu-a te kurī e te tangata.
 INC kill-PASS the dog AGT the man
 ‘The dog was killed by the man.’

In Tongan, however, the relationship between the unmarked form and the *Cia* form is not a syntactic one. Affixation of *-Cia* is not productive (cf. Chung 1978); nor does it always involve a transitive base. Churchward (1953) aptly observed that a subclass of *Cia* forms consists of “intransitive verbs that may appear to be passive”, noting that in other instances *-Cia* suffixation yields either durative or polite form of the base. Verbs derived by *-Cia* suffixation are typically intransitive (but not always) and the base may be a transitive verb, intransitive verb, adjectival (or stative) verb, or noun. Furthermore, not all *Cia* forms have passive meaning. When they do have passive meaning, the relationship between the base and the *Cia* form is not always the same as that between active and passive. In some cases, the base has passive meaning to begin with: e.g., *malu* ‘to be sheltered’ vs. *malungia* ‘to be shaded, overshadowed’. In other words, *-Cia* does not necessarily de-transitivize a verb. In fact, there are some instances in which the derived form is a transitive verb, including those in which *-Cia* actually transitivizes an intransitive base.⁷ Thus, clearly, *-Cia* cannot be regarded as a passive morpheme in Tongan, whether we take passive to be a productive syntactic operation or a semantic feature (as in the case of inherent passive verbs discussed above).

If *-Cia* is not a passive morpheme, then, why is it that so many of *Cia* verbs correspond to passive forms in English? I argue that it is due to the semantic feature [+affected], which nearly all of the *Cia* forms seem to share: *Cia* forms differ from their base in that their argument is affected in some way. The affected entity is the subject if it is an intransitive verb or adjectival verb, and the object, if it is a transitive verb. Consider the examples in Table 1 below.⁸ Due to this feature [+affected], *Cia* verbs are interpreted as passive when translated into English (or any other language that has passive), as the affectedness of the patient is one of the semantic correlates of passive.

⁷ Including “passive transitive”, which refers to a class of *Cia* verbs that have passive meaning, but permit an ERG-marked agent, as exemplified in (i) below (from Chung 1978: 274).

(i) ‘Oku manakoa ‘a e hiva ko eni ‘e he kakai Tonga.
 PRS to.be.liked ABS DEF song PRED this ERG DEF people Tonga
 ‘This song is popular among the Tongan people.’

⁸ Forms such as *ifo-‘ia* ‘to find (something) tasty, pleasant’ and *sai’ia* ‘to like (something)’ are intransitive in Tongan although the corresponding English verbs are transitive. These verbs take an experiencer subject and the theme is expressed as an oblique NP.

(i) ‘oku ou sai’ia ‘i he ika.
 PRS 1.S like in REF fish
 ‘I like fish’ (Lit. ‘I am affected by the niceness in the fish’)

BASE		-CIA FORM	
<i>malūlū</i>	‘moist, soft’	<i>malūlū-ngia</i>	‘moistened, softened’
<i>‘ata’atā</i>	‘free, not busy’	<i>‘ata’atā-ina</i>	‘to be freed, cleared’
<i>ifo</i>	‘tasty’	<i>ifo-‘ia</i>	‘to find (something) tasty, pleasant’
<i>sai</i>	‘good, nice’	<i>sai-‘ia</i>	‘to like (something)’
<i>‘uha</i>	‘to rain’	<i>‘uhe-ina</i>	‘to be caught in the rain’
<i>‘anuhi</i>	‘to spit’	<i>‘anu-hia</i>	‘to mess up (smt) by spitting on’

Table 1. Comparison of the base and *Cia* forms

Conclusion

The present study has shown that Tongan mainly has two means to express functional equivalents of passives: (a) agent suppression and (b) inherently passive lexical items. I have shown above that the agentless suppression in Tongan does not alter the transitivity of the relevant construction, and that agent backgrounding is achieved by means of the use of arbitrary PRO. As for inherently passive verbs, I have shown that this class of verbs includes root forms such as *‘osi* ‘to be finished’ as well as forms affixed with *ma-* and *-Cia*. I have argued that the apparent passive meaning of these derived forms arises because their semantic effects happen to coincide with the semantic correlates of passivization: resultative (necessarily backgrounding or removing the agent) for *ma-* and affectedness of the patient (necessarily foregrounding the patient) for *-Cia*.

References

- Carlson, Robert. 1994. *A grammar of Supyire*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Churchward, C. Maxwell. 1953. *Tongan grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Churchward, C. Maxwell. 1959. *Tongan dictionary*. Nuku’alofa: The Government of Tonga Printing Press.
- Dukes, Michael. 1996. On the nonexistence of anaphors and pronominals in Tongan. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California Los Angeles.
- Hornstein, Norbert. 1999. Movement and control. *Linguistic Inquiry* 30:69–96.
- Huang, C.-T. J. 1984. On the distribution and reference of empty pronouns. *Linguistic Inquiry* 15:531–574.
- Keenan, Edward L. 1985. Passive in the world’s languages. In *Language typology and syntactic description*, ed. T. Shopen, volume 1, 243–281.
- Keenan, Edward L. and Matthew S. Dryer. 2007. Passive in the world’s languages. In *Clause structure, language typology and syntactic description*, Vol. 1, ed. Timothy Shopen, 325–361. Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Manzini, M. Rita and Anna Roussou. 2000. A minimalist theory of A-movement and control. *Lingua* 110: 409–447.
- Otsuka, Yuko. 2010. Genitive relative constructions and agent incorporation in Tongan. In *Austronesian and theoretical linguistics*, ed. Raphael Mercado, Eric Potsdam, and Lisa Travis, 117–140. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

- Otsuka, Yuko. 2011a. PRO vs. null SE: Case, tense, and empty categories in Tongan. *Syntax* 14:265–296.
- Otsuka, Yuko. 2011b. Neither accusative nor ergative: An alternative analysis of case in Eastern Polynesian. In *Topics in Oceanic morphosyntax*, ed. laire Moyse-Faurie and Joachim Sabel, 289–318. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Affiliation

Yuko Otsuka
Department of Linguistics
University of Hawai‘i
yotsuka@hawaii.edu