

**Parasitic passives of intransitives in English**

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# Parasitic passives of intransitives in English

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## ABSTRACT

There is an unusual construction in English involving the passive of a normally agentive intransitive verb, such as *attempt*. The viability of such a passive depends on its being complemented by a normal passive of a transitive. The intransitive passive can be said to be parasitic upon the transitive. Thus, the overall construction takes the form of *They were attempted to be dismissed*. The present essay, starting from a couple of attested examples, explores the structure of such sentences and attempts to account for the parasitic requirement that ensures the acceptability of the intransitive passive concerned. Within a framework based on recent developments in notional grammar, it offers analyses of passives of various types in English as a background to establishing an understanding of the nature of such parasitic passives.

## 1. Introduction

The examples in (1) illustrate the unusual construction I am concerned with here:

- (1) a. ... we have often relieved them, both with Victuals and Cloaths too, even while they were pretended to be kept by their barbarous Aunt. (from *Roxana* by Daniel Defoe, p.186 in the Folio Society edition)
- b. ... most of their carriages were so decayed that that they could not be attempted to be fired. (from *The Ionian Mission* by Patrick O'Brian, p.161 in the Folio Society edition)

The subordinate clauses in these both exhibit the passive of an intransitive that takes a passive transitive as complement; the complement cannot be active. The subject of the passive intransitive is semantically a complement of the subordinate transitive –

specifically the complement traditionally labelled as ‘object’. The intransitive of course has no ‘object’ of its own, as illustrated in (2), where the verb is complemented by a subject and an infinitive phrase:

- (2) a. Their aunt pretended to keep them.  
 b. They could not attempt to fire them.

The complement that is ‘raised’ in (1) to occupy the subject position in the relevant passive clauses is ‘borrowed’ from the subordinate transitive. It is for this reason that I refer to these examples as involving a ‘parasitic passive’. Even when such verbs have transitive argument structure, with an ‘object’ nominal rather than an infinitive, as in (3), their ‘objects’ are not normally prototypical, discrete, concrete nominals, but ones associated semantically with ‘verbal’ notions such as ‘action’ or ‘mental state’:

- (3) a. Bobby pretended sleep/indifference.  
 b. Frodo attempted a dive/persuasion/prevarication.

Indeed, as illustrated here, in many cases the ‘object’ is patently deverbal. And constructions involving both verbs often rely on a lexical periphrasis to spell out the verbality, as in (4):

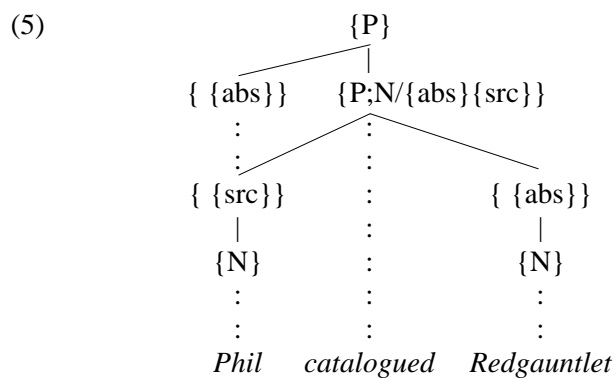
- (4) a. Bobby pretended to have a sleep.  
 b. Frodo attempted to do a dive.

To that extent the verbs are already parasitic in taking the ‘objects’ in (3) and (4); as transitives they depend on the presence of ‘verbality’ in their ‘objects’. They are reluctant transitives. But the expressions in (1) illustrate a more serious incidence of parasitism in achieving transitivity.

Let us look more carefully at the structure of the sentences in (1), in the context of the account of ‘raising’ and passive offered in recent presentations of notional grammar (particularly in Anderson 1992: §4.1, 1997: 202-6, 248-9, 2006: §§9.2.2, 12.2.2, 2011: I, §5.4; II, §§3.3.4, 3.5; III, §7.1, Böhm 1993: §§3-4). The analysis of passive that is appropriate within the assumptions of this context is spelled out in the section that now follows.

## 2. Canonical passives in English

The canonical passive verb is a form of a verb that takes an argument that is the **source** of the event or state being represented – roughly, an ‘agentive’ or an ‘experiencer’, as these latter terms have been used of late – and a distinct **absolutive**, or ‘neutral’, argument. In the active the former is subject and the latter ‘object’. This is illustrated as part of the dependency structure in (5):



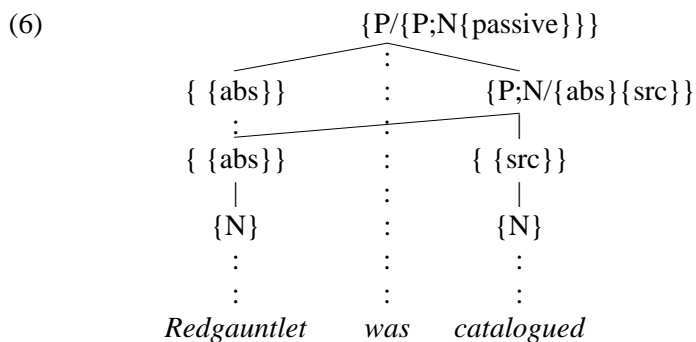
The syntactic tree in (5) is a dependency tree with root {P}, the finiteness primary category. {P;N} is the categorization for lexical verbs, in which the predicative feature **P** governs the argumental feature **N**, as indicated by the semi-colon. In (5) this verb is shown as having been **converted** to a finite in the lexicon, to which it is joined by a dependency arc that is not associated with linear difference between the head and the dependent; the latter is said to be **subjoined** to the former. Similarly, the two {N} categories, introducing arguments, have each been converted, lexically subjoined, to a **functor**. Functor is the primary category that is unspecified but bears semantic relations as secondary categories, in this case source ({src}) – agentives in this instance – and absolutive ({abs}). Functors can appear independently as prepositions in English, just as the finiteness category {P} can appear as functional verb forms like *may* or *is*.

The non-vertical solid lines represent dependency arcs introduced in the syntax in building the syntactic structure that satisfies the demands of the individual words. In this case the head and the dependent occupy distinct positions; the dependent is **adjoined**. The source and the absolutive satisfy the valency of the lexical verb, shown to the right of the slash, ‘/’, in its representation; this satisfying permits the introduction of the syntactic dependency arcs. The absolutive that bears a dependency relation to the {P} in (5) is not specified as part of the valency of {P}, however; it is a **free absolutive**. It is present in response to a requirement that any verb, functional or lexical, must have a syntactically dependent absolutive, whether or not this is part of its valency. As a functor, this absolutive needs a dependent; this is true of all functional categories, such as {P}, {N}, and { } (functor). To satisfy this requirement, the free absolutive in this instance shares

the argument of the source, which is ‘raised’ to be associated with it; this is shown by the (discontinuous) association line linking them. The free absolutive shares that argument of the {P;N} whose semantic relation is highest on the **subject-selection hierarchy**; this is the designated subject. The present case illustrates that the source outranks the absolutive. This argument thereby comes to occupy a position in front of its verb, which is that assigned to free absolutives, whereas normally in English the arguments of a verb come after. The position of the shared argument is determined by the norm for the uppermost functor, here the free absolutive of {P}, which precedes its head.

I have said that {N}, determiner, in common with other functional categories, takes a complement, which may be either lexical or syntactic. Typical complements are nouns (*the book*), and names and pronouns, with in English the latter being converted to determiners in the lexicon. I have, however, left the structure of the {N}-phrases unexpressed in (5), since this is not relevant to our concerns here. Clearly much else is omitted, for similar reasons, from the representation in (5). For a fuller picture I refer the reader again to the works cited in the introduction.

But let us now turn to the representation of the passive ‘equivalent’ of (5). Firstly I give the structure for the ‘short passive’, as in (6):



Here there is an unspecified source argument that has been lexically subjoined to {P;N}, in satisfaction of that part of the valency of the latter. It has been lexically incorporated, as part of the formation of this form of the verb. As a result, the absolutive argument of *catalogued* is highest on the subject-selection hierarchy, and thus is shared with the free absolutive of the independent {P}. The latter lacks an absolutive from its valency, as with the {P} in (5).

Both subject-formation in (5) and passivization in (6) can be said to involve so-called ‘subject-raising’, i.e., in present terms, sharing with the free absolutive of {P}. The *catalogued* in (6) is a form of the verb that cannot be converted lexically to a finite. To achieve finiteness it serves as the complement of an independent functional finite, *was*, that is dedicated to the introduction of passives. ‘Passive’ in (6) is a simplifying shorthand

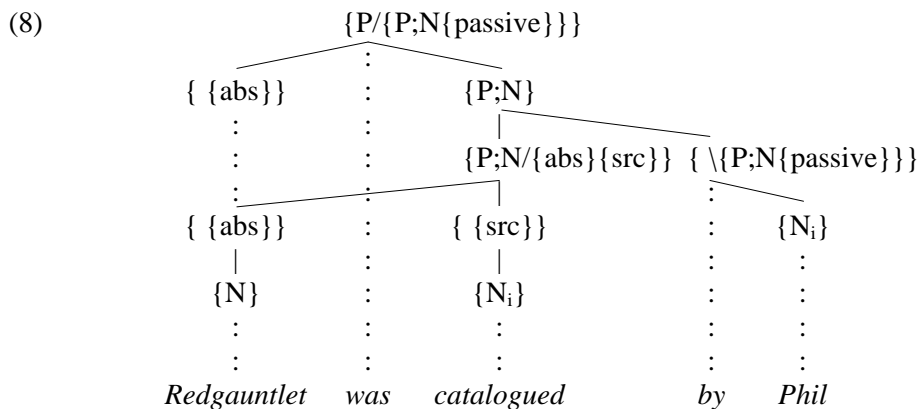
for the form of verb that, associated with the incorporation of the ‘usual’ subject, promotes to subject status the second-highest argument of the verb.

Not all lexical incorporations of the titular subject of a verb are associated with transfer of subject status away from it. Compare e.g. (7), with incorporation of the subject of *keep*, which shows no sign of ‘displacement’ as such:

(7) Mother says to keep it.

The ‘transfer’ of subjecthood is a property of the passive form. The construction in (7) will be of interest subsequently, however.

In the ‘long’ passive in (8) the lexical items in (5) recur, but not quite with simply the same semantic relations:



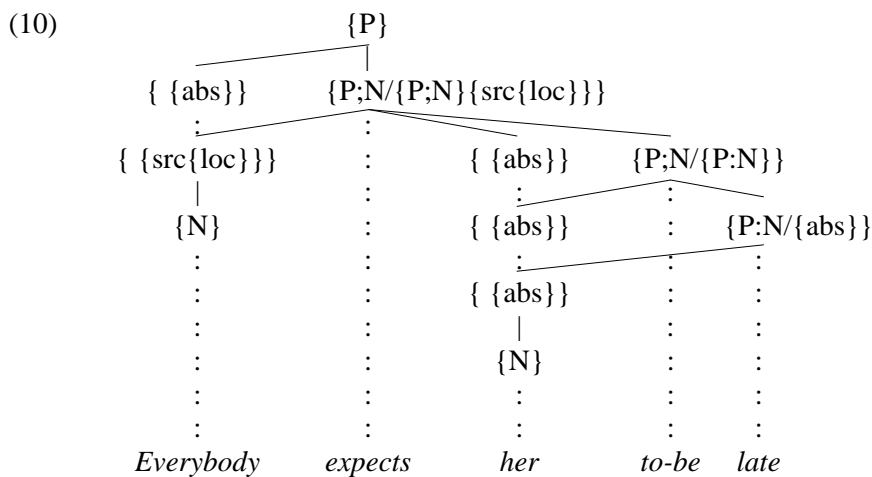
*by Phil* is a functor phrase dedicated to modifying a passive verb: the modification relation is indicated by backward slash, ‘\’, and it has the effect of introducing a replica of the modified category above that category. This creates a more inclusive construction containing the modifier. The duplicate {P;N} is transparent to the valency requirement of {P}. The functor heading the modifying phrase takes as a complement a {N} – in common with other functors – but this {N} is marked as co-referential with the incorporated {N} of *catalogued*. The modifier provides an optional further specification of the incorporated source argument.

### 3. Passive plus infinitive

The passives in (1) involve dependent infinitive constructions. I look now at how the canonical passive interacts with the infinitive. A typical infinitive-taking verb is the familiar *expect* of (9), respectively in the passive and active forms:

- (9) a. She is expected (by everybody) to be late.  
 b. Everybody expects her to be late.

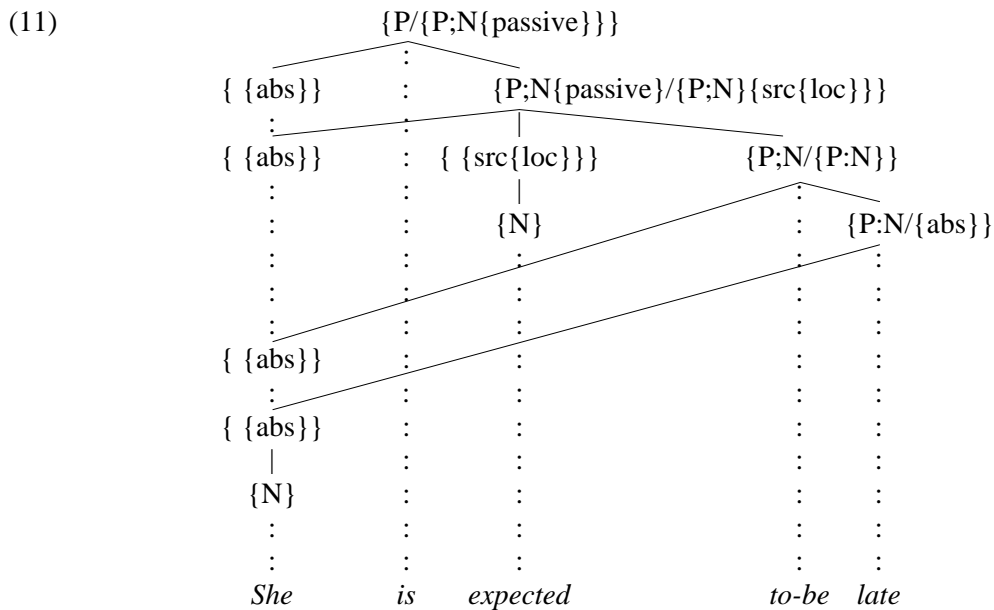
The active in (9b) can be represented as in (10):



{P;N} is an adjective – here *late*. The colon in the representation for an adjective signifies that the two features, **P** and **N** are equipollent; nouns are {N;P}. The adjective in (10) is the complement of the infinitive *to-be* (whose internal structure is not relevant here).

The adjective has absolutive in its valency; but the other two absolutes immediately preceding *to-be* and realized as *her* are free absolutes. *Her* is the subject of *late*, so, as in (6), it undergoes ‘raising’ to share its argument with the free absolutive of the governing predicator, {P;N/{P;N}}. And this in turn shares with the free absolutive of *expects*. This creates the pattern of associations in (10) above *her*. Again the highest sharing functor determines the position of the shared argument. In this case the highest functor is the free absolutive of the {P;N} *expects*, which, as a {P;N} rather than a {P}, takes its free absolutive to the right, as is usual with complements of a verb in English. We have so-called ‘object-raising’. The only other semantic relation in (10) that appears in a valency is the { {src{loc}}}, a secondary source plus a tertiary locative, which is the specific representation for an ‘experiencer’: this characterizes the subject of *expects*, which also shows sharing, with the free absolutive of the root {P}.

Even though the absolutive dependent on the {P;N} of *expects*, realized as *her*, is not part of its valency, it is eligible for being the subject of a passive with *expect* by virtue of the dependency relation between the upper {P;N} (*expects*) and its free absolutive. The verb is derivatively transitive. Thus, we find the viable passive in (9a), the structure of whose ‘short’ version we can represent as in (11):



The pile-up of free absolutives on the left reflects the subsuming of subject-formation, passivization and more traditional ‘raising’ as the uniform sharing with a free absolutive of {P} of the argument designated by subject-selection.

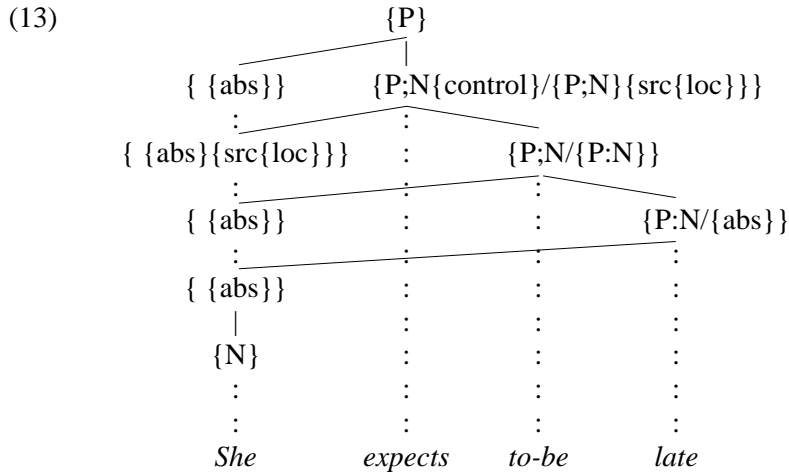
Infinitive-governing *expect* is not always a ‘raising’ verb, as is illustrated by (12), which exhibits instead ‘control’:

(12) She expects to be late.

Here too I shall follow the kind of analysis offered in the works invoked in the Introduction, whereby obligatory ‘control’ is another instance of argument-sharing with a free absolutive. But the ‘control’ option is the marked possibility for introduction of the free absolutive, and is appropriately singled out by presence of the semantic feature {control}. The syntactic effect of {control} is to prevent the free absolutive from being introduced independently, but instead in combination with an argument required by the valency of the verb.



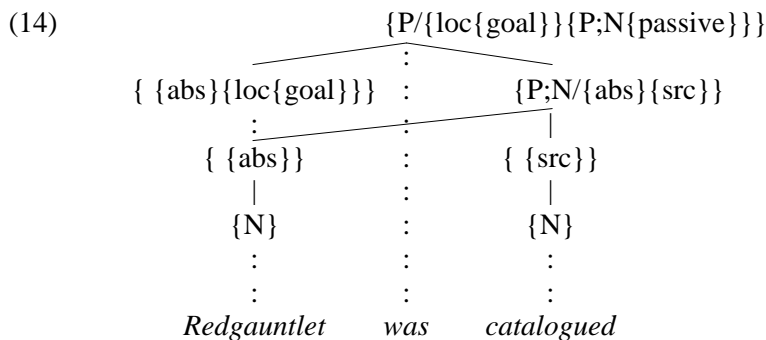
In those terms we can associate with (12) the representation in (13):



Here the free absolutive of *expect* is not introduced as an independent functor, but is associated with the semantic relation that does appear in the valency of *expect*, the ‘experiencer’ we also find in (9), again represented as { {src{loc}}}. But it retains its capacity, as a free absolutive, to host subjects from subordinate {P;N}s, as expressed in (13). ‘Control’ also involves argument sharing. The introduction of ‘control’ leads us on to a so-far-neglected aspect of passive.

#### 4. Passive and ‘control’

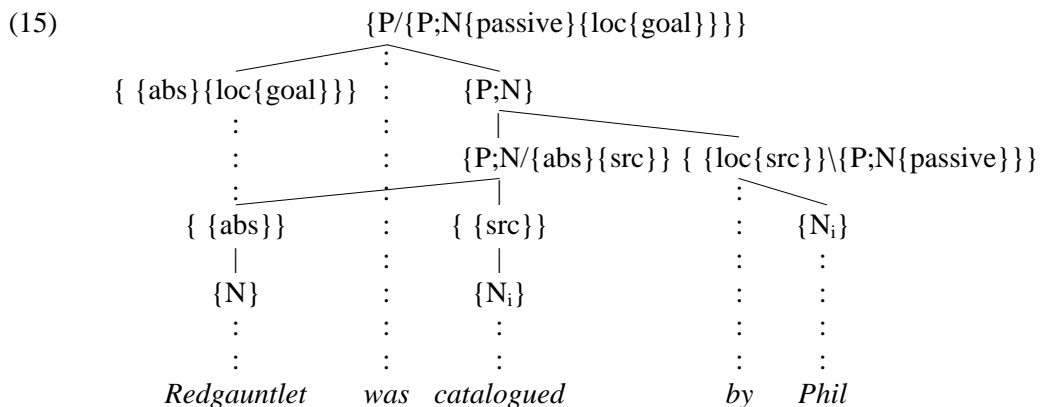
The passive structure I have so far assumed is somewhat simplified. Anderson (2006: §12.2.2) argues that passive is also a ‘control’ construction, analogous to that I have just looked at. A still slightly simplified version of the view described there is embodied in the representation of passive offered in (14).



Here passive *be* is treated as a ‘control’ verbal whose valency contains a goal locative (a ‘receiver’ – a directional specialization of ‘experiencer’), and the free absolutive is associated with it. I assume that the passive auxiliary is redundantly a control word, so I have left out {control} in the representation in (14).

Such a proposal has a long history. Anderson (1972: §2), in defending a precursor of the kind of analysis embodied in (14), points to earlier work illustrating the directionality of passive constructions. In such constructions in other languages – and in the English *get*-passive – the ‘recipient’ character of the passive verbal is more transparent in the form of the verb corresponding to *be* in (14). And compare, on the semantic character of the passive, Gildersleeve and Lodge’s (1867/1968: §112.2) succinct formulation, for example: ‘[t]he Passive Voice denotes that the subject receives the action of the verb’.

Similarly, the optional modifier with passive is arguably a locative source, as embodied in (15):



As Anderson (1972: §2) again points out, in various languages this modifier is headed by a functor that is otherwise a transparent locative source (possibly marked by an inflectional ablative); in others the form is historically an actional source (‘agentive’) or ‘instrumental’ or ‘path’ – the latter two combining goal and source. In (15) the modifier is interpreted as a locative source – though this is not crucial to our present concerns.

So much for the canonical passive of English. It is not my purpose here to investigate the full variety of structures that might be described as ‘non-canonical passives’ in English, including, for instance, a range of locative constructions. Still less shall I attempt to deal with the range of constructions that might be described as ‘passive’ cross-linguistically (some of which is documented by Postal (1986), for example). My stated concern is with the passive construction illustrated in (1). But I shall approach this via a somewhat less divergent variety of non-canonical passive, as will be described in the immediately succeeding section. Part of the interest of this variety of passive is the need not to confuse it with the more specifically parasitic passives in (1).

## 5. Dedicated intransitive passives

What I have in mind here are passives such as that in (16a):

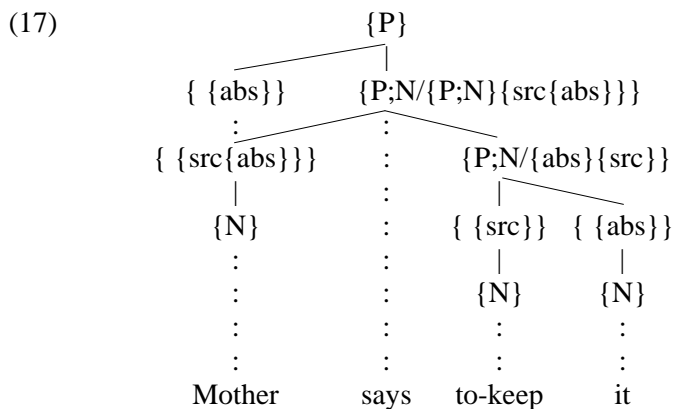
- (16) a. He is said (by everybody) to be depraved.  
 b. \*Everybody says him to be depraved.

As is well-known, the active ‘equivalent’ of such sentences, illustrated in this case by (16b) is unacceptable. At first sight, it looks as if what should be our concern here is what has ‘gone wrong’ with (16b). But closer inspection suggests otherwise.

We have a rather different situation from that illustrated by the infinitive constructions in §3 in the case of the *say* of (16) – and of (7):

- (7) Mother says to keep it.

(16b) gives no evidence, in the form of raising, of the presence of a free absolutive with the active form of that verb. And nor does (7), which is not a ‘control’ structure; the lower verb has an incorporated independent subject. Thus, the *say* verb of (7) is intransitive: the subject of *say* is its only non-verbal argument, and it is { {src{abs}} } in terms of the present notation. So that we might represent (7) as in (17):



*Say* seems to be an agentive intransitive that takes a verbal complement. There is, of course, a related verb *say* that takes ‘cognate objects’, as exemplified in (18a):

- (18) a. She will say a few words/nothing/whatever he suggests.  
 b. She will sing a few stanzas/nothing/whatever he suggests.

Compare the similar behaviour of the basically agentive intransitive *sing* of (18b). Such instances of *say* as (18a) do not seem to be relevant to the phenomena under discussion, except that they, being transitive, have a passive ‘equivalent’. *Say* is ambivalent in transitivity, depending on whether it takes an infinitive or not.

However, (16a), is passive of an intransitive verb, unusual in English. There are other languages, such as Dutch, which in general show passives of agentive intransitives, as illustrated by (19):

- (19) Er wordt hier door de jongelui vaak gedanst.  
[it was here by the young.people often danced]

(Perlmutter 1978). But in this case the free absolutive is filled by an expletive, given that the subject has been absorbed. Such an expletive is lacking in (16a). There is indeed a passive construction of intransitives involving such verbs as *say* that does show an expletive, but again, as in (16a), with only a non-nominal complement, other than the subject. This is exemplified by (20a), with, unlike (16a), a full clausal complement:

- (20) a. It is said (that) he is depraved.  
b. They say (that) he is depraved.  
c. \*(That) he is depraved is said.

The main verb in (20a-b) is not transitive, any more than that in (19). The subordinate clause is not an 'object' so that it doesn't appear in subject position in the passive construction in (20c). Only the expletive *it* in (20a) is available as subject.

*Say*, exceptionally for an agentive intransitive, has a passive form in (21), perhaps under the influence of the related cognate-object verb of (18a). The main verb here shares the agency property with the corresponding argument of the prototypical (transitive) passive in (6). But the *said* verb is deprived of this agentive, its only independent nominal complement, by passive-formation. The valency is satisfied by a lexically-incorporated intransitive agent; and the passive form of the verb is supplied with a free absolutive. There is no complement of the *say* verb available for subject-formation, and the passive subject of *depraved* is accommodated internally to the lower clause, by the lower {P}. The free absolutive of *said* is hosted by the passive goal free-absolutive of the upper clause, but its own valency is unsatisfied. And the whole configuration on the left in (21) is realized by the expletive {N} *it*.

We can thus represent the structure of (20a) as in (21), where I ignore the status of the optional *that*:



The passive form again involves incorporation of the argument highest on the subject-selection hierarchy. And again this leaves the *said* form without overt argument. This is associated with the introduction of a free absolutive that in this instance is satisfied by the subject of the subordinate *to be depraved*. This construction thus seems to be a passive form apparently dedicated to offering initial – i.e. unmarked topical – position to the subject of a dependent verb.

We set out in this section with wondering what has ‘gone wrong’ with (16b), given the acceptability of (16a). But the non-acceptability of (16b) is just what we would expect, given that *say* is an intransitive agentive, which normally do not passivize in English. And it is (16a) that is exceptional, in terms of *say* having a passive form. This is not extended to agentive intransitives in general in English, but limited to verbs with appropriate semantics. What we turn to now is a construction that, as a dedicated passive, resembles that in (16a); but it is an even more restricted variety of passive, again involving intransitives, but requiring the presence of a canonical passive as complement. This brings us back to the construction illustrated in (1), containing what I called ‘parasitic passives’.

## 6. Parasitic passives

The constructions that were cited by (1) are similar in showing the passive of an agentive intransitive, but, further, the presence of this seems to be associated with the presence of a dependent passive construction:

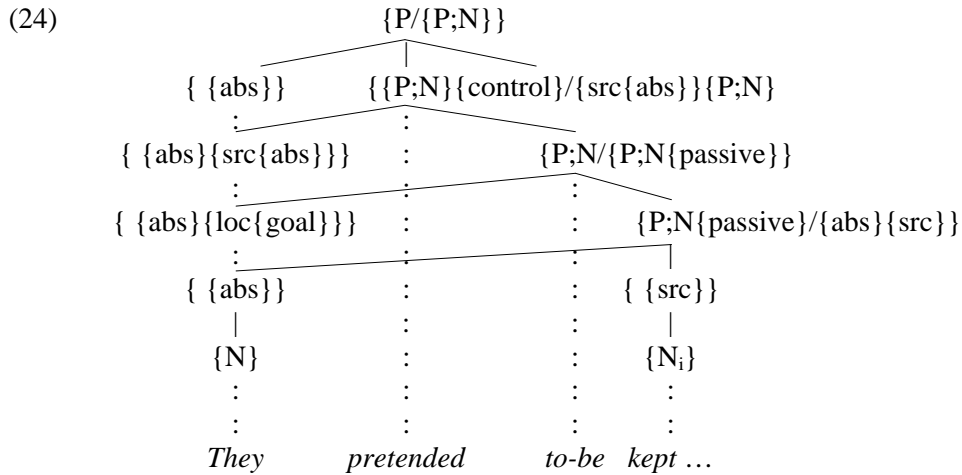
- (1) a. ... we have often relieved them, both with Victuals and Cloaths too, even while they were pretended to be kept by their barbarous Aunt.  
 b. ... most of their carriages were so decayed that that they could not be attempted to be fired.

*Pretend*, unlike *say*, is normally a ‘control’ verb, as in either sentence in

- (23) a. Their barbarous aunt pretended to keep them.  
 b. They pretended to be kept (by their barbarous aunt).

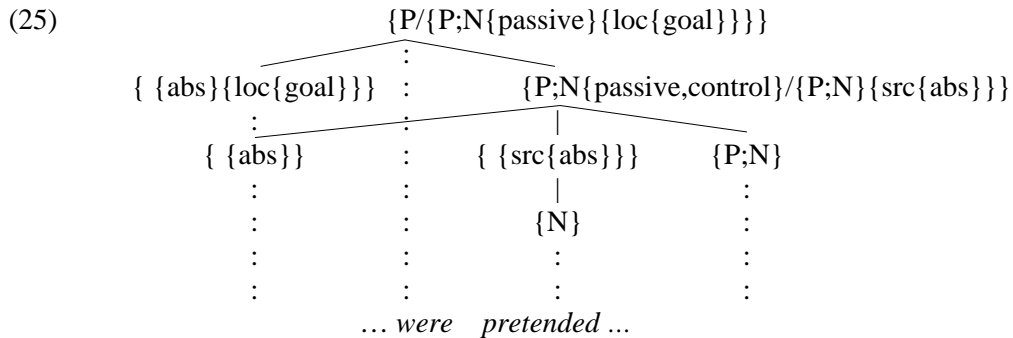
*Attempt* is also such a ‘control’ verb. But I shall, for simplicity, illustrate what follows with reference to (1a).

We can represent the short version of the sentence in (23b), for instance, as in (24):



The agentive ‘controller’ of *pretended* hosts the passive ‘controller’ of *to-be*, which in turn hosts the absolutive of the passive verb *kept*. In (23a) the agentive ‘controller’ hosts the agentive subject of *keep* directly.

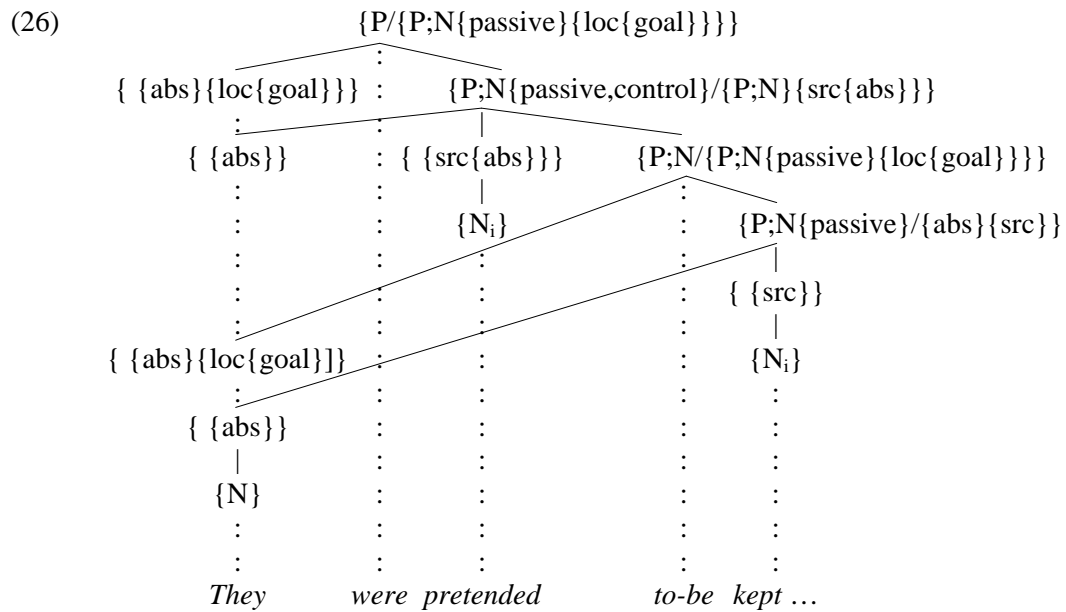
The passive form of *pretend* in the *while*-clause in (1b), however, removes from the valency of that verb the need for an independent ‘controller’, since such has been incorporated into the verb; and there is provided instead an independent free absolutive which is hosted by the free absolutive of the passive {P}, as shown in (25):



Normally, the ‘controller’ would share with the subordinate subject, as in (23). But we now have an incorporated ‘controller’, and apparently a ‘raising’ construction, with a free absolutive of the *pretended* verb looking for a subject to host. But, semantically, as indicated by the presence of {control}, the incorporated ‘controller’ is also still looking for a ‘controllee’. We have an apparent conflict. There is an incorporated ‘controller’ in search of a ‘controllee’, and a free absolutive needing a lower subject to satisfy it. This can be resolved if, as in (25), the clause subordinate to *pretend* is also passive. The subject of the lower passive satisfies the free absolutive of the *pretend* clause and

‘control’ is expressed by marking of the incorporated controller as co-referential with the incorporated argument of the lower passive verb. Only a passive complement can provide for the satisfaction of the demands of the parasitic passive.

The appropriate structure for (1b) is presented in (26), where I have, however, omitted the final modifying phrase, as not pertinent:



In this case all of the arguments that aren’t predicators are on the left, realized as *they*. The lowest absolute, satisfying the absolute valency of *kept*, is linked by a couple of free absolutes to the highest free absolute, that of the parasitic passive; and this is possible only because of the passivization of *kept*. And the co-reference of the ‘pretender’ and the ‘keeper’ is expressed in the incorporated arguments of these passive verbs, thus completing the satisfaction of the demands of the parasitic passive.

A final, obvious observation is that since the construction exemplified in (1) is recursive, as illustrated by (27), the parasitism is in principle indefinitely extensible:

(27) They were pretended to be attempted to be fired.

In the cases of both (1) and (27) the legitimacy of the passive of the agentive intransitives depends on the (ultimate) presence of a normal subordinate passive; their legitimacy is parasitic. And again, a major motivation for this overall construction appears to be the fronting of an argument, in this instance the absolute argument of the lowest verb. However, the parasitic passive construction, both in terms of its manifestation in Present-day English and as concerns its historical evolution, merits much more extensive study.



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