Taking stock of contact-induced changes in passive constructions

Nicole Hober

(Bremen)

In this talk, I am taking stock of the different contact-induced changes in passive constructions found in language contact scenarios around the world. To date, only a few dedicated and detailed studies have been carried out on the influence of language contact on passive constructions, while its effects have been mentioned only in passing in theoretically-oriented work (cf. Heine & Kuteva 2005). Overall, however, passive constructions and their characteristic properties have received much scholarly attention and discussion (cf. Siewierska 1984; Shibatani 1988; Haspelmath 1990). I follow Keenan and Dryer (2007) who distinguish basic and non-basic passive whereby the former is the most common and the most widely distributed type cross-linguistically. Basic passives lack an agent phrase. The main verb in the non-passive form is transitive, and it expresses an action. By contrast, non-basic passives may include an agent phrase. The main verb may be intransitive or ditransitive, and it does not need to express an action. From that, Keenan and Dryer (2007: 329-341) derive several generalisations on the relationship between basic and non-basic passives. This study is set out to evaluate whether the passive systems of language in contact change in the way stipulated by these generalisations.

To categorise how linguistic categories and structures relevant to passive constructions are transferred, I adopt the matter (MAT) and pattern (PAT) borrowing framework originally proposed by Matras and Sakel (2007). Specifically, the comprehensive typology of MAT and PAT borrowing recently devised by Gardani (2020: 270-272) informs the classification. Overall, I distinguish four loci of change: (i) the construction as a whole, (ii) the verb phrase, (iii) the agent phrase, and (iv) the linear sequence of constituents. Within each of these domains, further subtypes of contact-induced change are determined. Claims about the borrowability of categories and structures are reviewed. I present examples from diverse language constellations, both in terms of genealogy and geography. The data is taken from grammars, descriptive sources, corpora, and online databases.

Only 43 % of the world's languages have designated passive constructions, and they are especially frequent in Europe (Siewierska 2013). Given the global spread of e.g. English and Spanish (cf. Blake 2001), we might discover a proliferation of this expression type and witness its emergence in languages that did not dispose of passive prior to contact. All in all, this study hopes to capture the complexity and variety of contact-induced changes in passive constructions by describing both the processes and outcomes involved.

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