

On the Lexical Distribution of Indirect Passives in English and Greek

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Indirect passives, in which the indirect object of an active construction is expressed as the subject of a corresponding passive construction, are relatively infrequent cross-linguistically. Ancient Greek and Modern English are among the few Indo-European languages in which such constructions enjoy widespread productivity as seen in the examples below:

1. a. *tēn nomēn* *tōn kreōn enkheiristheis* *Ancient Greek – Passive*
the distribution.acc the meat.get entrust.prtcpl.pass.masc

‘He is entrusted with the distribution of meat’ (Lucian, *Prometheus* 3, A.D. 2)
- b. *enkheirisas* *tēn nomēn tōn kreōn autōi* *Ancient Greek – Active*
entrust.prtcpl.act.masc the distribution.acc the meat.get him.dat

‘Someone entrusted him with the distribution of meat’
2. a. John is assigned this task *Modern English - Passive*
- b. Mary assigned this task to John *Modern English - Active*

An initial observation is that diachronically the two languages exhibit the opposite path: Ancient Greek had indirect passives and lost them, while Old English lacked them initially and Modern English has acquired them. The rise of the indirect passive in English has generally been ascribed to the loss of previously existing morphological case distinctions in Middle English; for example, Jespersen (1927) suggested that preverbal datives came to be reinterpreted as nominatives, while Allen (1995) proposed that the trigger was the reinterpretation of postverbal datives as accusatives. However, such explanations are obviously inapplicable to the synchronic analysis of Ancient Greek, which possessed a rich system of case morphology and in which objects explicitly marked as dative could become nominative subjects of passive constructions (e.g. Anagnostopoulou & Sevdali 2015). If no morphological factors can be identified as common to both languages, the question arises of what other factors may be involved in their use of indirect passives.

Recent research on the passive in Greek (Anagnostopoulou, Mertyris & Sevdali 2018) has revealed a considerable degree of lexical restriction and idiosyncrasy in the use of the indirect passive with superficially comparable verbs (e.g. *parēinéthēn* ‘I was advised’ but **ekoinóthēn* ‘I was notified’, *epetákthēn ti* ‘I was ordered something’, but **epōléthēn ti* ‘I was sold something’) especially with the superclass of three-place predicates that take accusative and dative objects, leaving aside the accusative – genitive classes. It has also been suggested that the availability of the indirect passive in English was subject to lexical variation. For example, Stein et al. (2019) found that the indirect passive was **originally most frequent with loanwords from French (e.g. appearing earlier with *assign* than with *give*)**; likewise, Denison (1993) cites changing judgments on the acceptability of sentences such as *He was written a letter* as evidence that even in the early twentieth century the indirect passive may have shown greater lexical restriction than at the present day. However, previous work on the English indirect passive provides no clear explanation of how lexical gaps could have persisted for so long a time after the indirect passive entered general use, nor of the variables other than lexical stratum that may have favoured its use.

This presentation will compare the diachronic lexical distribution of indirect passives in Ancient Greek and Middle/Early Modern English. It will present the relative frequencies of active constructions, direct passives, and indirect passives, not only for verbs for which indirect passives are attested but for syntactically and semantically comparable verbs for which indirect passives seem nevertheless to be absent. Other morphosyntactic variables will also be considered, including the presence or absence of verbal prefixes and particles, something that has been argued to play an important role in the Greek paradigm (Anagnostopoulou & Sevdali 2015). It will be seen that the degree of lexical variation in both English and Greek suggests that the availability of indirect passives depends

not only on the syntax of the language in general, but on the syntactic and/or semantic properties of individual verbs, and that this provides a potential pathway for both the gradual growth of indirect passives in English and the corresponding decrease that took place in Greek.

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