

On the Development of Indirect Passives in English and Greek

Indirect passives, in which the indirect object of an active construction becomes the nominative subject of a corresponding passive construction, are relatively rare cross-linguistically. Ancient Greek and Modern English are among the few Indo-European languages that exhibit them:

1. a. **enkheirisas** **tēn nomēn** tōn kreōn **autōi**
entrust.PTCP.ACT the distribution.ACC the meat.GEN.PL him.DAT
‘Having entrusted the distribution of the meat to him...’ (Ancient Greek, active)
- b. **tēn nomēn** tōn kreōn **enkheiristheis** (Lucian, *Prometheus* 3)
the distribution.ACC the meat.GEN.PL entrust.PTCP.PASS
‘Having been entrusted with the distribution of meat’ (Ancient Greek (2nd AD), passive)
2. a. Mary assigned **this task** to **John** (Modern English, active)
- b. **John** was assigned **this task** (Modern English, passive)

The rise of the indirect passive in English has generally been ascribed to changes in the English case system. For example, Jespersen (1927) suggested that these constructions arose through the reinterpretation of preverbal datives as nominatives, while Allen (1995, 2001) proposed a similar origin from the reinterpretation of postverbal datives as accusatives; likewise, Stein et al. (2019) link the origin of indirect passives to the more general replacement of lexical case by structural case. However, explanations of this sort are obviously inapplicable to Ancient Greek, in which indirect passives coexisted with a rich system of case morphology and clear examples of lexical case assignment as dative and genitive nominals are clearly associated with specific theta-roles (sources and possessors are genitive, goals are dative etc.) and they are also assigned by specific verbs and prepositions (see e.g. Anagnostopoulou & Sevdali 2015). If the morphological systems of these languages differ so substantially, the question arises of *what common factors may have existed to promote the development of indirect passive constructions*. In English the earliest examples are found in the 14th century (Allen 1995), while in Greek these constructions are not found in Homer and only in a fairly restricted way in Classical Greek (Conti Jiménez 1998); but as we have found, they increased in Hellenistic Greek before the final decline of this phenomenon in Medieval Greek.

However, it has long been recognized that indirect passives in English were not immediately available for all potentially eligible lexemes. Allen (1995) observes that many of the earliest indirect passives occurred with French loanwords such as *allow*, while Stein et al. (2019) describe their gradual diffusion to a greater number of lexemes over the course of several centuries. Denison (1993) suggests that even at the start of the twentieth century this process may not have been complete, and that the widespread availability of these constructions at the present day may be a relatively recent phenomenon, citing changing judgements on the acceptability of sentences such as *He was written a letter*. Our research has found that a considerable degree of lexical restriction and idiosyncrasy also existed in Greek in the use of indirect passives with superficially comparable verbs (e.g. *parēinéthēn* ‘I was advised’ but **ekoinóthēn* ‘I was notified’, *epetákhthēn ti* ‘I was ordered something’, but **epōléthēn ti* ‘I was sold something’). These phenomena are problematic for most current accounts of the indirect passive, which seem to predict that these constructions should be equally possible for all three-place predicates, or at least all such predicates from a given stratum, if we assume a comparable analysis for *order*-type verbs and *notify*-type verbs. Our goal then is to address the following two questions:

- (i) what factors led to the rise of indirect passives in Greek and English, and
- (ii) why lexical restrictions have been such a salient and persistent factor in both cases.

The comparison of two languages whose morphosyntax differs so greatly facilitates the identification of relevant factors, since Greek permits indirect passives with indirect objects that are morphologically marked for genitive and dative, while English developed this phenomenon *after* morphological case had been lost for almost a century, according to Allen (1995). In order to model the development and

distribution of indirect passives, we have undertaken a corpus-based study of Greek and English. For English the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (Taylor et al. 2006) was used, while data for Greek have been derived primarily from the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* corpus (TLG 2019); we have also used the Greek data in the compilation of our own corpus, featuring more detailed morphosyntactic and semantic annotation. In both cases we have searched for all occurrences of selected lexemes, in order to determine their total frequency and the ratio of active constructions, direct passives, and indirect passives. This has enabled us to determine whether the appearance of indirect passives (or not) is simply an epiphenomenon of the frequency of the verb. We have then analysed the results to attempt to identify the factors favouring the use of indirect passives with specific lexemes.

A factor that seems to arise as favouring the development of indirect passives is *ambiguity of argument structure*. Indirect passives tended to occur earliest and most frequently with verbs having (a) multiple argument structures, and (b) variable placement of animate participants (e.g. *assign a person to a task / assign a task to a person*), or (c) ambiguity as to whether frequently omitted components are arguments or adjuncts (e.g. *They fined him £100 / They fined him*). In contrast, prototypical verbs such as *give*, with clearly defined syntactic and semantic roles for all participants, are the most resistant to indirect passives, and indeed in Greek no indirect passives of *didōmi* ‘give’ or in English of *grant* were found at all, while *give* occurred only as part of the fixed collocation *given to understand*. Our proposal is that the earliest examples of indirect passives may thus have been originally intended as direct passives. If argument structure had a role to play in the development of indirect passives, this may explain their lexical variability, as being simply a form of the argument structure variability commonly observed among verbs. Our theory predicts that the development of indirect passives would be facilitated by the frequency of constructions with only one explicit argument present, and therefore more subject to reanalysis. This is supported by evidence from Greek, where genitive and dative objects were passivized earlier with monotransitives than with ditransitives (Conti Jiménez 1998); we discuss the extent to which the more complex picture in English also bears out this prediction. We also discuss the eventual divergence of these languages: English ultimately proceeded to a state in which the indirect passive was fully productive with almost all verbs, while in Greek these constructions retained a greater degree of lexical restriction, and ultimately fell out of use. We argue that a number of factors contributed to the ultimate decline of this phenomenon from Greek, such as the observed lexical restriction, but also changes in the prepositional system of the language.

References

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