

# The Arabic Impersonal Passive in OT\*

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## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Impersonal Passives

- Personal passives: some referential noun phrase (not necessarily referring to a person) occupies subject position

(1) *dummir-at*                      ***il-madi:nat-u***  
destroy.PASS.PAST.3fs the-city-NOM  
'The city was destroyed.'

- Some languages have so-called 'impersonal' passives: no referential NP subject (Siewierska 1984; Postal 1986)
- Includes Classical Arabic (Saad 1982; Mohammad (1999:105-106); Fassi Fehri (1982:12); Fischer (2002:111)) and Lebanese Arabic (Saad 1982)

(2) Classical Arabic  
a. *ni:ma*                      *fi: d-da:r-i*  
sleep.PASS.3ms in the-house-GEN  
'The house (f.) was slept in.' (lit. 'was slept in the house')

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- b. yusa:faru                   ʔila lqaxhira-t-i  
travel.PASS.IMP.3ms to Cairo-GEN  
‘Cairo (f.) is being traveled to.’
- c. ji:ʔa                       bi-hind-in  
come.PASS.3ms with-Hind-GEN.INDEF  
‘Hind (f.) was brought (i.e., come with).’
- d. murra                   bi-zayd-in  
pass.PASS by-Zayd-GEN.INDEF  
‘Zayd was passed by.’
- e. ħukima   ʔala zayd-in                   bi-l-ʔiʔda:m-i  
judge.PASS upon Zayd-GEN.INDEF with-the-execution  
‘Zayd was sentenced (lit., judged upon) to execution.’
- f. duxila   ʔila l-bayt-i  
enter.PASS to the-house-GEN  
‘The house was entered (into).’
- g. suʔida   ʔila l-minbar-i  
ascend.PASS to the-pulpit-GEN  
‘The pulpit (m.) was ascended (to).’

(3) Lebanese Arabic

- a. l-bint   nħaka                   ʔan-a  
the-girl talk.PASS.PAST.3ms about-her  
‘The girl was talked about.’
- b. l-warʔa   nketeb                   ʔaley-a  
the-paper write.PASS.PAST.3ms on-it(f.)  
‘The paper was written on.’
- c. t-taxt   nne:m                   fiy-a  
the-bed sleep.PASS.PAST.3ms in-it(f.)  
‘The bed was slept in.’
- d. beyru:t   nse:fer                   ʔaley-a  
Beirut travel.PASS.PAST.3ms to-it(f.)  
‘Beirut was traveled to.’ (judged pragmatically odd)

- Never any feminine concord on the verb in such constructions, though we might expect it, e.g., in (2b), (3a)
- Subject?: silent *pro*, no referent, hence masculine default agreement

## 1.2 Comparison to pseudopassives

- IPs pattern similarly to pseudopassives: same class of verbs (internal argument either suppressed or non-existent), usually in combination w/ a preposition (which always takes an internal argument)

- (4) a. The child was read to.  
b. The troops were fired upon.  
c. This bed has never been slept in.

- Pseudopassives require reanalysis of verb and preposition as a morphologically complex verb,  $v$ [V P] (sleep in). Undergoes passivization as a unit (PASS(sleep in)). Internal argument of P is promoted to subject (Chomsky 1973; DiSciullo and Williams 1987)
- $v$ [V P] unit arguably constructed in the morphology despite the appearance of being phrasal, because...
- (A) referential expressions and modifiers are prohibited from appearing between the participle and the preposition, whereas there is no such restriction in active clauses (Chomsky 1970)

- (5) a. \*The child was read a book to.  
b. She read a book to the child.  
(6) a. \*This bed has never been slept soundly in.  
b. I've never slept soundly in this bed.

- and (B) past participles of  $v$ [V P] complex can serve as inputs to derivational morphology

- (7) a. The bed remained unslept in.  
b. His father was uncared for all of those years.

- Constituent structures like [un[slept in]] and [un[cared for]], where *un-* takes a detransitivized complex V, are the only bracketings consistent with the semantic and syntactic restrictions placed by the affix on its complement (no unaccusatives, \**undied*; no unergatives, \**untalked*)
- Reanalysis of V and P does not seem to be possible in Arabic: Prepositions cannot be incorporated with the verb, and their internal arguments do not raise to subject position under passivization.

- (8) \*tusa:faru            lqa:hirat-u ?ila(-yha:)  
 travel.PASS.IMP.3fs Cairo-NOM to(-it(f.))  
 Intended: ‘Cairo (f.) is being traveled to.’ (Classical)

- However, in Lebanese the internal argument evidently raises to topic position (still no verb agreement, hence not subject)

- (9) l-bint    nħaka                    řan-a  
 the-girl talk.PASS.PAST.3ms about-her  
 ‘The girl was talked about.’ (Lebanese)

### 1.3 Non-prepositional impersonal passives

- Unlike in English, promotion of an internal argument to subject position does not appear to be an obligatory component of passivization in Arabic
- Even when there is no preposition, an unergative V can still undergo passivization. In such cases, an adjunct can raise to subject, taking nominative case and triggering verb agreement (only for gender, as is usual in VSO order)

- (10) si:rat            sa:řat-a:ni  
 walk.PASS.3fs hour-DU.NOM.INDEF  
 ‘Two hours (f.) were walked.’ (Saad 1982:31)

- The fact that a high adjunct can be promoted to subject is a little surprising, given constraints on parallel constructions in English (Ramchand and Svenonius 2002): \**Two hours were walked (for)*, \**A break was worked without*.
- The verb *S-Y-R* ‘walk’ is unergative: no internal argument to raise to subject
- Lebanese examples: DP is probably in topic rather than subject position, doesn’t agree with the verb (i.e., ‘The girl, *pro* was talked about her’).
- ANALYSIS: suppression of the external argument is necessary for passives in all three languages. Promotion of the highest argument to subject is obligatory in English, but not in Arabic.

(11) Requirement on passivization?	English	Classical Arabic	Lebanese Arabic
Suppress external argument	yes	yes	yes
Promote highest argument to subject	yes	<b>no</b>	<b>no</b>

- The fact that unaccusative verbs have no external argument to suppress (Grimshaw (1990:38), and references cited there) explains why they cannot be passivized in any language

- (12) a. Classical Arabic  
\*mi:ta                      fi: s-sari:r-i  
die.PASS.PAST.3ms in the-bed-GEN
- b. Lebanese Arabic  
\*t-taxt nme:t                      fiy-a  
the-bed die.PASS.PAST.3ms in-it(f.)  
\*‘The bed was died in.’

## 2 Formal analysis

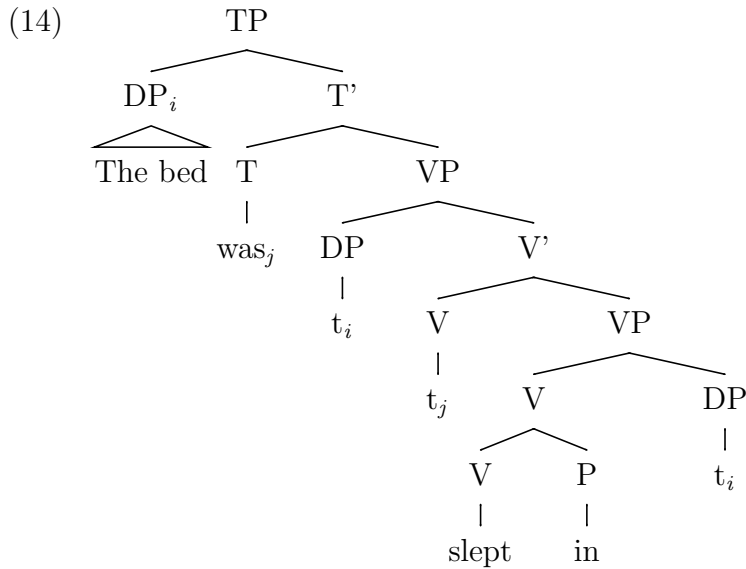
### 2.1 Constraints

- In OT (Prince and Smolensky 1993/2004), grammars are composed of universal sets of constraints, differences in grammar are attributed to language-particular rankings
- Inputs are Lexical-Conceptual Structures (Jackendoff 1983, 1997; Grimshaw 1997). Competing outputs are syntactic structures (abbreviated in what follows).
- The following three constraints can be ranked to partially encode the English pattern, and can be reranked to encode the fact that Arabic does not require an argument of the verb to occupy subject position

- (13) a. ASSIGN-CASE: A transitive V or P assigns case to some DP at Surface Structure.
- b. SUPPRESS-EXTERNAL: Passivization should suppress an external argument.
- c. NO-DUMMY: Every DP should have a referent.

### 2.2 English

- In English, passivization must satisfy both SUPPRESS-EX and NO-DUMMY, even at the expense of ASSIGN-CASE

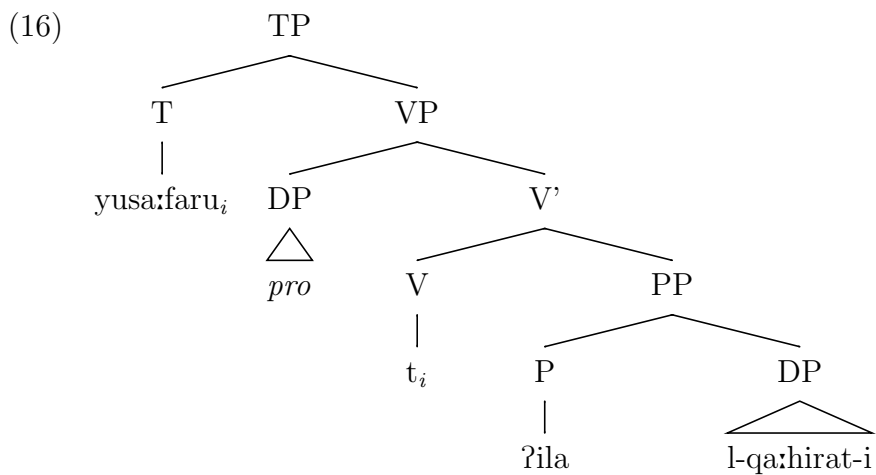


(15) English pseudopassives

	PASS(sleep( $x_{agt}$ ) in( $y_{loc}$ ))	SUPP-EX	NO-DUM	ASSIGN-CASE
☞ a.	The bed was slept in.			*
b.	It was slept in the bed.		*!	
c.	She was slept in the bed	*!		

### 2.3 Classical Arabic

- In Classical Arabic ASSIGN-CASE outranks NO-DUMMY, leading to the availability of impersonal passive structures like (16)



(17) Impersonal passives in Classical Arabic

PASS(travel( $x_{agt}$ ) to( $y_{goal}$ ))	SUPP EXT	ASSN CASE	NO DUMMY
a. yusa:faru <i>pro</i> ?ila lqa:hirat-i travel.PASS.3ms to Cairo-GEN ☞ ‘It is being travelled to Cairo’			*
b. tusa:faru lqa:hirat-u ?ila travel.PASS.3fs Cairo-NOM to ‘Cairo is being travelled to’		*!	
c. yusa:faru r-ri?a:l-u ?ila lqa:hirat-i travel.PASS.3ms the-men-NOM to Cairo-GEN ‘The men are being travelled to Cairo’	*!		

- A further constraint, A-CASE, is needed to account for the ungrammaticality of A-binding of resumptive pronouns (Aoun 1985; Rizzi 1990).

(18) A-CASE: A properly formed A-chain should receive case from only one case assigner.

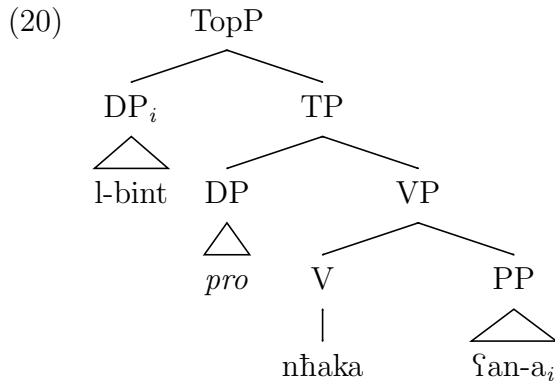
- (19b) is bad because the subject is nominative and binds a resumptive pronoun with genitive case.

(19) Case assignment to an A-chain

PASS(travel( $x_{agt}$ ) to( $y_{goal}$ ))	A-CASE	NO DUM
a. yusa:faru <i>pro</i> ?ila lqa:hirat-i travel.PASS.3ms to Cairo-GEN ☞ ‘It is being travelled to Cairo’		*
b. tusa:faru lqa:hirat-u ?ilay-ha: travel.PASS.3fs Cairo-NOM to-it.GEN.3fs ‘Cairo is being travelled to (it)’	*!	

## 2.4 Lebanese Arabic

- Additional requirement in LA: overt DP must appear in topic position
- Topic requires a resumptive pronoun: ‘The girl, it was talked about **her**’



- OT analysis – which I omit here – requires an additional constraint forcing topic to appear in TopP. The constraint STAY (‘Trace is not allowed’, Grimshaw 1997) can of course outrank this constraint, blocking topicalization

### 3 Conclusion

- Constraint reranking gives some insight into availability of different passivization strategies, without requiring us to posit different rules or constraints for particular languages.
- The crucial difference between languages that allow impersonal passives and those that allow pseudopassives seems to be reflected in the ranking of ASSIGN-CASE and NO-DUMMY

- (21) a. CA and LA: ASSIGN-CASE  $\gg$  NO-DUMMY  
 b. English: NO-DUMMY  $\gg$  ASSIGN-CASE

### 4 Appendix: PP subjects?

- Classical Arabic is generally VSO; not inconceivable that the PP itself occupies subject position in some impersonal passives.
- In fact, there are at least a few words similar to English prepositions which receive nominative case in impersonal passives

- (22) a. julisa ʔama:m-u l-ʔami:r-i  
 sit.PASS in.front.of-NOM the-prince-GEN  
 ‘The prince was sat in front of.’ (Saad 1982:31)

- (23) a. dafaʕtu      ʔila l-ʔama:m-i  
push.PERF1s to the-front-GEN  
'I pushed forward.'

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