Mind the gaps: passive morphology revisited

1. Background: While voice (and voice-related) syncretisms (i.e., cases in which the verb appearing in different syntactic frames bears the same voice morphology, as in (1) and (2) for Albanian and German, respectively) have since Perlmutter (1978) been the subject of substantial research, to date there exist no theoretical accounts of what may be referred to as voice(-related) gaps. These are cases in which the expected syncretism with respect to voice-marking does not (or cannot) obtain. For instance, while in Modern Greek (henceforth: MG) the anticausative alternant of an alternating verb usually bears non-active morphology (as shown in (3a) for ‘burn’), this is not the case for every verb (as shown in (3b) for ‘break’). In other words, voice gaps are here defined as cases in which verbs differ with respect to the voice morphology they may bear in a particular syntactic alternation. The basic observation is that within and across languages with morphological voice distinctions (e.g., Albanian, Latin, MG), while passive verbs cannot appear in active voice, or transitives and unergatives in non-active (or passive) voice (depending on the language), both alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives are morphologically either: (i) exclusively non-active for a given verb, e.g. (1) for the anticausative alternant of break yielding passive/anticausative homomorphism; (ii) exclusively active for a given verb, e.g. (3b); (iii) either non-active or active for a given verb, e.g. (4a,b); (iv) mixed paradigms for different tenses for a given verb and/or for different dialects, as in (5) and (6), respectively. Such gaps are also familiar from languages like German (Grewendorf 1989) or Italian (Sorace 2004), which in spite of lack of full voice paradigms, exhibit voice-related marking (e.g. (2)). For instance, while öffnen ‘open’ cannot appear without the reflexive marker sich in its anticausative frame, (7a), zerbrechen ‘break’ in the same frame cannot co-occur with it, (7b). In sum, across languages voice gaps arise only with unaccusatives (but not with passives; cf. also Haspelmath 1990 for the generalization that passives are cross-linguistically marked morphologically). This situation challenges the widely adopted claim that non-active/passive relates to just a [-external argument] feature in the syntax (Embick 1997, 2004): since the absence of an external argument does not entail non-active/passive morphology (see the patterns in (ii) to (iv) above), the correlation between non-active/passive and lack of an external argument is at best an imperfect one. The examples (3) and (4) make it obvious that the feature [-external argument] in Albanian and Greek can be realized both by active and non-active morphology, as stated in (8a), thus yielding a situation similar to English (see (8b)). What then is the feature that non-active/passive morphology relates to and that distinguishes it from active?

2. Proposal: The central claim that I put forward in this paper is that the non-active/passive voice (is being reanalyzed as a morpheme that) relates (i.e., either provides or realizes, depending on core assumptions about the nature and place of morphology in grammar) to a [+act(ivity)] feature (in the sense of Kallulli 2007, i.e., actor-initiated) in the presence of a [-external argument] feature. This means that non-active/passive morphology is (being re-interpreted as) a fundamentally aspectual operation. Beyond the arguments in Kallulli (2007), indirect evidence for this view is constituted by the fact that in English the auxiliary to be is used to build both the passive and the progressive. In fact, throughout the 16th to the 19th century (active) progressives used with a passive meaning, as in (10), have been attested. [Though the period in which this construction seems to have enjoyed its greatest popularity was the 18th century (Jespersen 1931:211), remnants of it are found even in present-day English: e.g. dinner is cooking, the book is printing, something is wanting.] The idea then is that the (active) progressive was used with a passive sense because of the [+act] feature encoded by the passive head occupied by be. Finally, deponent patterns across languages (which are by definition marked morphologically) also witness the correctness of my claim, as they are always actor-initiated. I will also show that deponent patterns speak for a transitivization process (i.e. from ‘deponent’ to causative/transitive). Tying this in with the facts discussed earlier, I contend that anticausatives as in (4a) started out as ‘deponents’; with the re-analysis/re-interpretation of non-active morphology as providing, or realizing, an [+activity] feature in the presence of a [-external argument] feature, anticausatives start dropping non-active marking (as they don’t have a [+activity] feature).

Examples: (1) Albanian: Vazoja *(u) thye.

(i) ‘The vase was broken.’ → passive

(ii) ‘The vase broke.’ → inchoative
(2) German: a. **Ralf rasiert sich.** → reflexive
   Ralf shaves SICH
   ‘Ralf is shaving.’
   b. **Dieser Roman liest sich gut.** → middle
       this novel reads SICH well
       ‘This novel reads well.’
   c. **Die Tür öffnet sich.** → anticausative
       the door opens SICH
       ‘The door opens.’

(3) Greek: a. **To grama kaike / *ekapse.** vs. b. **I porta espase / *espasike.**
   the sheet burned.NACT / burned.ACT
   ‘The sheet burned.’
   the door broke.ACT / broke.NACT
   ‘The door broke.’

(4) Albanian: a. **Dritarja u kris.** vs. b. **Dritarja krisi.**
   window.NOM NACT crack.AOR.3S
   ‘The window cracked.’
   window crack.ACT.AOR.3S
   ‘The window broke.’

(5) a. **Pas pune, Beni erdhi në shtëpi i këputur.** (Standard Albanian)
   after work Beni.NOM came.ACT.AOR.3S at home exhausted
   ‘Ben comes home exhausted after work.’
   b. **Beni u ardh në shtëpi i këputur.** (Korça dialect)
   Beni.NOM-NACT came.AOR.3S at home exhausted
   ‘Ben came home exhausted after work.’

(6) a. **Benit i është thyer dritarja.** (Standard Albanian)
   Beni.DAT DAT.CL be (i.e. NACT) break.PART window.NOM
   ‘The window had broken on Ben.’
   b. **Benit i-u ka thy dritarja.** (Gheg Albanian)
   Beni.DAT DAT.CL-NACT have break.PART window.NOM
   ‘The window had broken on Ben.’

(7) German: a. **Das Fenster öffnete *(sich).** vs. b. **Das Fenster zerbrach *(sich).**
   the window opened SICH
   ‘The door opened.’
   the window broke SICH
   ‘The window broke.’

(8) a. Albanian, Latin and MG:
   [, [-external argument]] → non-active (morpheme)

   b. English:
   [, [+activity], [-external argument]] → passive (morpheme)
   [, [+cause], [-external argument]] → anticausative (morpheme)

(10) The house was building for years. [Meaning: ‘The house was being built for years’]