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NEPALI PASSIVES

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The Structure of Nepali Passives*

The passive in Nepali is a member of the trio: Basic, Causative and Passive, both morphologically and structurally. In relation to a basic verbal structure the causative and the passive stand at opposite ends. A causative adds a noun to a basic structure, whereas a passive takes one away.

The traditional treatment of the passive has been quite unrevealing and misleading. Passive sentences like (a) and (b) which are seen in some grammar books,

- | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------|---------------|
| (a) | (rambatə) | syamko | mrityu roiyo | |
| | (Ram-from) | Shyam's death | cry | Pass III Sing |
| | | Shyam's death was mourned (by Ram). | | |
| | | | | |
| (b) | syamle | pokharəma | b sinch | |
| | Shyam-by | pokhara-in | live | Pass III Sing |
| | Pokhara is lived in by Shyam. | | | |

are neither heard nor written.

The passive has a very general distribution but there is a severe restriction on the by him and by me. The restriction is explained naturally by the meaning of the passive given here. Some passives are shown to have taken a general meaning, and to have lost association with their active counterparts, viz: /dekhnu vs dekhinu/ 'see vs be seen', /paunu vs painu/ 'obtain vs be obtained', etc. This analysis shows that there is also a strong condition on the subject of an active verb, which prohibits the use of passives corresponding to many actives. Finally, a class of passives is defined as impersonal passives in which objects remain objects.

Passive verbs are formed by adding the passive morpheme -i- to a verb stem. The passive formation in Nepali has a very general distribution and has no influence on the basic order. That is, there is no difference in the order of arguments and adjuncts in corresponding actives and passives. There are passives of not only transitive verbs, but also of intransitive ones.

Intr.	Active		Passive
Tr.	sut-nu	'sleep'	sut-i-nu
	lekh-nu	'write'	lekh-i-nu

* Abbreviations:

Agm.	Agent Marker	I First Person
Caus.	Causative	II 2nd Person
Intr.	Intransitive	III 3rd Person
Obj.	Object	
Objm.	Object Marker	
Pass.	Passive	
Pl.	Plural	
pppl.	Pastparticiple	
Sing.	Singular	
Subj.	Subject	

The passive morpheme in a causative follows the causative morpheme.

Caus.	sut-au-nu	sut-a-i-nu
Caus.	lekh-au-nu	lekh-a-i-nu

The passive verbs have one less valency than their active counterparts. Compare (a) sentences with (b) sentences in the following.

- (1)
- a. hami bəsyəu (Valency : 1)
 we sat I Pl.
 We sat down.
- b. bəsiyo (Valency : 0)
 sat III Sing
 Sitting was done (by us)
- (2)
- a. (Valency : 2)
 aṭhpəhəriyah ru ghusyaha-lai səmatchən
 secret agents bribe taker Objm catch III Pl.
 Secret agents arrest bribe takers.
- b. (Valency : 2)
 (aṭhpəhəriyah rubat) ghusyaha səmatinchə
 secret agents from bribe taker catch III Sing
 Bribe takers are arrested (by secret agents)
- (4)
- a. (Valency : 3)
 tyo səjjən-le magne-lai pəisa diyo
 that good-person Agm beggar Objm money gave III Sing
 That gentleman gave some money to the beggar.
- b. (Valency : 2)
 (tyo səjjənbaṭə) magne-lai pəisa diiyo
 that good-person from beggar Objm money gave Pass III Sing
 Some money was given to the beggar (by that gentleman).
- (5)
- a. (Valency : 1)
 ram-le bali-lai mare
 Ram Agm Bali Objm killed III Sing
 Ram killed Bali.
- b. (Valency : 2)
 rambaṭə bali mariyo
 Ram from Bali killed-Pass III Sing
 Bali was killed by Ram.

The decrease in valency in passive sentences is caused by either the despecification of the subject of the active correlative, or its demotion to an adjunct.

Although the specification of the adjunctive agent is a possibility grammatically, it is seen mainly in newspapers and journals, and is hardly used in everyday communication. This is why the adjunctive agents in (2) (b) and (3) (b) have been parenthesized. the reason why /rambaṭə/ in (4) (b) is not parenthesized is that the sentence can pass as a part of a story or a news report, much more so than either of (2) (b) or (3) (b) can.

In passives, the prominence or focus is laid on the predicate of the active correlatives and the center of attention is removed from the agent to the point that the agent is usually not specified at all. Passive is used to 'foreground' (focus) the events where the action itself is considered more important than the agent. For the user of passive, the agent is marginal. By using passive, the speaker shows he is not concerned with supplying who the doer is, but wants to present the state of affairs without giving any prominence to the agent. In a sense, passive does not contain an agent as part of its message. If the speaker were to make the agent part of the message or assign prominence to it, he would use active rather than passive.

The backgrounding, i.e., being taken out of focus, or removal of the agent altogether, is possible for two reasons. Either the agent can be recovered from the context, or it may be just irrelevant. Example (5) illustrates the first case and example (6) the second.

- (5)
- | | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-----|---------|
| nĩmtaluhərulai | suntəla | rə | nəriwəl |
| invitees objm | tangerine | and | coconut |
| diieko | thiyo | | |
| give pppl. | was | | |
- A tangerine and (pieces of) coconut were given to each of the invitees.

This is a concluding line of a news report of a wedding. Although the host is not mentioned in this line, it is he or his associates who distributed the fruit.

- (6)
- | | | | | |
|------|---------------|---------|----------|---------------|
| sun | utpadənma | dəkchin | əphrika | |
| gold | production in | South | Africa | |
| ek | nəmbər | muluk | maninchə | |
| one | number | country | consider | Pass III Sing |
- In gold production, South Africa is considered the number one country.
(Gorakhapatra, the daily newspaper: February 21, 1981)

The meaning of the passive as we have defined it would be confirmed if we find situations where prominence or focus assigned to some event or state is so encompassing that it makes the use of the passive obligatory and, at the same time makes the use of the active inappropriate. In fact, there are situations where this is so. Examine the following:

- (7)
- | | | | |
|------|----------|--------------|-------------------|
| tyo | pəsəlma | khanekura | painchə |
| that | store in | eating thing | get Pass III Sing |
- Food can be obtained/gotten in that store, i.e.,
You can get get food in that store.

- (8)
- | | | |
|---------------|-----------|-------------------|
| bəndipurbatə | himal | dekhinchə |
| Bandipur from | Himalayas | see Pass III Sing |
- From Bandipur the Himalayas can be seen, i.e.,
You can see the Himalayas from Bandipur.

Both (7) and (8) represent some general state of affairs which is the center of attention. Here, the question of agent does not come up at all, i.e., who gets or buys food or who sees the Himalayas is unimportant. The addition of the adjunctive agents would make the sentences rather odd. These passive forms have lost their association with their active counterparts. This loss is extreme with /cahinu / 'need' — the passive of /cahənu / 'want.' The subject of /cahənu / appears as a beneficiary, not as an adjunctive agent, in the passive with /cahinu /.

- (9)
- | | | |
|------------|-------|--------------------|
| lekhək-lai | kələm | cahinchə |
| writer-for | pen | want Pass III Sing |
- A writer needs a pen.

Example (9) does not mean, "A pen is wanted by a writer."

More support could be gained for the meaning of passive proposed here, if we could show a reverse situation — where some prominent state or process can be described by the active alone. In that case, we should expect the passive counterpart not to be allowed, since the function of expressing its meaning is taken over by the basic form itself. This is what we find with intransitive actives which have the third person as their subject. (This observation was made two years ago. At this point, I am inclined to think that the condition may apply to singular subjects of transitive actives also.)

(10)
phul phulyo / * phulyo
flower bloomed III Sing
The flower bloomed.

(11)
daura sukyo / * sukiyo
wood dried III Sing
The wood dried out.

(12)
yoges pəralma lukyo / * bheiyo
Yogesh hay in hid III sing
Yogesh hid himself in the pile of hay.

(13)
kisanhəru gərib bhəe / * bhəiyo
farmers poor became III sing
The farmers became poor.

At this point we must analyse the relationship between the verb endings and the passive forms and their implications. A passive verb takes all the aspectual and tense endings. However, the personal endings are overwhelmingly third singular. There are several reasons for this.

All the passives of intransitive verbs take the third singular ending (see Example 1b).

In the passives of transitive verbs, the object of the corresponding active may be promoted to the subject or left as object. An indirect object cannot be promoted to a subject in Nepali. When it is promoted to the subject, the passive verb agrees with it, and when it is left as the object, the passive verb always appears in the third singular. The latter case gives us impersonal passives. The verb in an impersonal passive has no subject to agree with. The passives of intransitives also are impersonal in this sense, because the verb form does not agree with any argument. In fact, there is no argument for the verb to agree with.

In impersonal passive statements, the unspecified agent is 'we' except when the speaker himself or 'we' is the object. And, how exclusive or inclusive is 'we' would be clear from the context only. It may include just the speaker or the speaker and his family or friends or community or all of them.

(14)
a. dui bərsəma tɪŋtə ghər bənaie
two year in three house Subj built Pass III Pl
In two years, three houses were built.

b. dui bərsəma tɪŋtə ghər bənaiyo
two year in three house Obj built Pass III Sing
In two years, three houses were built (by us).

(15)
a. sətruhəru marie
enemies Subj killed Pass III PL
The enemies were killed.

b. sətruhəru lai mariyo
enemies Obj killed Pass III Sing
The enemies were killed (by us).

In Examples (14) (a) and (15) (a), the active objects /ghər/ and /sətruhəru/ have been promoted to subjects, and the verbs agree with them, whereas in Examples (14) (b) and (15) (b), they remain as objects, and the verbs are in the third singular. They all describe some state of affairs. However, Examples (11-15) (b)s are impersonal and they imply 'we' as their unspecified agents.

The passives are also in the third singular, when the active object is singular, whether it is promoted to the subject or not in the passive.

(16)
garib luṭiyo
poor Subj rob Pass III Sing
The poor were robbed.

(17)
gəriblai luṭiyo
poor Obj rob Pass III Sing
The poor were robbed (by us).

We see from Example (14) (b) that an inanimate object may not be marked by anything. This makes it hard to tell whether the inanimate argument is the subject or the object in a passive sentence. The question cannot be answered out of context. That this is a legitimate situation can be seen from the ambiguity of sentences like,

(18)
yāuta pul bənaiyo
one bridge built Pass III Sing
(a) A bridge was built.
(b) A bridge was built (by us).

where the argument /pul/ could be either the subject or the object. When /pul/ is the subject, the sentence could be a part of a longer sentence like /pəñchə bərsiyə yojənama yāuta pul bənaiyo/ 'One bridge was built during the Five Year Plan,' and when /pul/ is the object, the sentence is impersonal with 'we' as the implied agent.

In impersonal passive statements, the speaker finds an indirect way of expressing his actions, or the processes he falls into, by removing his agenthood.

(19)
ama sisakələm bhāciyo
mother, pencil broke Pass III Sing
Mother, the pencil broke.

A child using (19) places the prominence on the event itself and removes himself from any participant role. He is not wholly disclaiming his responsibility (assuming he did in fact break the pencil), but implying it was nothing intentional. The agent in (19) may have been some force, in which case the sentence will be a report of the event without the implication of 'we' as the unspecified agent.

The starred examples in (10) - (13) are quite normal as the impersonal passives.

(setəi) phuliyo	'Turning grey has happened
	lit: blooming white...
(kh ə ɳ ə ɳ ə i) sukiyo	'Ultimate drying/thinning has happened
	lit: drying to dehydration...
gərib bhəiyo	'Becoming poor has happened.

The corresponding actives have /hami / or /mə / 'we' or 'I' as the agent, not a third person.

hami/mə setəi phulyəũ/phulē	'We/I have turned grey,'
	i.e., Our/my hair has turned white.
hami/mə kh ə ɳ ə ɳ ə i	sukyyəũ/sukē 'We/I have become
	thin or dehydrated badly.'

haim/mə gərib bhəyəũ /bhəẽ 'We/I have become poor.'

The association of 'we' with the impersonal passives of intransitives is so strong that we find examples like (20) and (21).

(20)
hami j ə ŋgəɭma bəsiyo
we forest in lived Pass III Sing
We lived in the forest.

(21)
hami bəulaha bhəiyo
we crazy became Pass III Sing
We became crazy.

Needless to say these sentences mean the same without /hami/, and are more marked than the corresponding activities. Both the processes of isolation of 'we' from and association with the event force the speaker to utter such sentences.

The use of agentive adjuncts /məbatə/ 'from me' or /mədwara/ 'by me' or /hami-/batə/dwara/ from/by us' is also heard. However, people will feel a sense of conceit in such use. Such use can be heard in Royal speech. This is an accepted norm for the royal family, especially when the addressees are the subjects, because they are above the common and have the privilege of behaving differently. The explanation offered here is from a sociological point of view rather than from a linguistic point of view. Otherwise, one can expect to hear such use only in political campaigns or from a snob.

Interestingly enough, the implied agent in impersonal passive questions is 'You,' i.e. the addressee.

(22)
khetma gəiyo ↑
farm-to went Pass III
Did you go to the farm?

(23)
bhat khaiyo ↑
rice ate Pass III
Have you eaten rice?

The process in the impersonal passive questions above is the same as in impersonal passive statements. Both of them are indirect way of presenting some events or actions by the speaker. The difference is that in the former, the speaker isolates or removes the addressee from the event or action, whereas in the latter he isolates 'we.'

Besides serving the function of foregrounding the event and backgrounding the agent, impersonal passive questions serve an additional function. Nepali has an elaborate system of speech levels. An honorific or a familiar or a lower form is used depending on the relative status of the addressee. However, in a situation, where the speaker needs to use an honorific form, but does not want to, because the relative status of the addressee does not measure up to his standard or because he has disrespect for him, but still has to maintain formality, he could sidestep the use of an honorific form and use a passive question instead. This use of the passive can be heard among rivals, indifferent in-laws and so on. Since the use has disparaging effect, it is seldom heard among upper and upper middle class people, although they may use it on their contemporary or older subordinates. Some refer to this use of passive questions as /pāḍe boli/ 'Pande speech' — a perjorative term. /pāḍe/ is derived from /paṇḍeyə/, and is the family name of a Chetri or a Brahmin group. The origin of the term /pāḍe/ is unknown to me. It might have been coined by a member of a rival group.

Finally, I must mention some verbs which look like passive, but are not real passives. These verbs have -i- in their stem and alternate with the variant forms which have a schwa in their stem.

Compare,
bigrinu bigrənu 'to deform, go bad'
niskinu niskənu 'to go/come out'

Both of them take real nominative subjects.

m	bigriẽ	bigrẽ	'I went bad.'
u	bigriyo	bigryo	'He went bad.'

The real passive is formed by -i- to the first variant only.

yeso gare bigriinchə	'If we do so, we will be ruined.'
barəbəje gherbaṭə niskiinchə	'We come out of the house at 12.'

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