

Syntactic Ambiguity: Non-Promotional “Passives” in Unangam Tunuu (Aleut)¹

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1 Introduction

- Non-promotional passives are constructions in which the underlying subject becomes suppressed or demoted whereas the object remains in-situ.
- There have been debates across a number of unrelated languages concerning the proper analysis of so-called non-promotional constructions (O’Connor and Maling 2014, Maling and O’Connor 2015), i.e. either passives with a thematically empty null subject or actives with a phonologically null, but syntactically active thematic *pro*:²

Non-promotional constructions	Passive analysis	Active analysis
Irish autonomous construction	Noonan 1994	McCloskey 2007
Icelandic “New Transitive Impersonal”	Eythórsson 2008, Jónsson 2009	Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002
Northern Pomo <i>-ya</i> construction	O’Connor 1992	O’Connor and Maling 2014

Table 1. Debates surrounding non-promotional constructions across three unrelated languages.

- Unangam Tunuu (or Aleut), a language of Alaska, has promotional and non-promotional passives:³
- (1) *Active* (Bergsland and Dirks 1981:8):
Asxinu- \hat{x} hla-s kidu-ku- \hat{x} .
girl-ABS.SG boy-ABS.PL help-IND-3SG
‘The girl is helping the boys.’
 - (2) *Promotional passive* (Berge and Dirks 2016):
Hla-s kidu-*lga*-qa-s.
boy-ABS.PL help-PASS-PART-3PL
‘The boys were helped.’
 - (3) *Non-promotional passive* (Berge and Dirks 2016):
Hla-s kidu-*lga*-qa- \hat{x} .
boy-ABS.PL help-PASS-PART-3SG
‘Someone/We helped the boys.’
- This study focuses on the proper analysis of **non-promotional constructions in Unangam Tunuu** given in (3) in which the object does not promote to subject position and thus does not display person and number agreement with the verb.
 - This study focuses on the debate concerning **the role of syntactic ambiguity in syntactic change** from the perspective of change in the functions of voice morphology observed cross-linguistically (e.g. Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002, and subsequent works; Maling 2006; Maling and O’Connor 2015).

Proposal: This analysis suggests that non-promotional “passives” in Unangam Tunuu are in fact actives. Promotional passives in the language, suggested to have developed from non-promotional constructions via analogy (Bergsland 1997), thus developed from active morphology.

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²In this handout, I use more neutral term *non-promotional constructions* to refer to these kinds of ambiguous constructions.

³The following abbreviations are used: 1: 1st person, 2: 2nd person, 3: 3rd person, ABL: ablative, ABS: absolutive, AN: anaphoric, AUX: auxiliary, CONJ: conjunctive, DAT: dative, ENCL: enclitic, HAB: habitual, IMP: impersonal, INTERR: interrogative, IND: indicative, INTEN: intentional, NEG: negation, OBJ: object, OBL: oblique, OPT: optative, PART: participial, PASS: passive, POS: possessive, PL: plural, PST: past, REFL: reflexive, REL: relative, SG: singular, SUBJ: subject.

2 Unangam Tunuu syntax

2.1 Overview

- Unangam Tunuu (Eskimo-Aleut) is traditionally spoken across the Aleutian islands and has three “main” dialects: Attuan, Atkan, and Eastern.⁴
- The language has SOV word order and a so-called anaphoric system claimed to have developed from an originally ergative system (Bergsland 1997, Berge 2013):

(4) a. *Active construction* (Bergsland and Dirks 1981:9):

Asxinu-s hla- \hat{x} kidu-ku-s
 girl-ABS.PL boy-ABS.SG help-IND-3PL
 ‘The girls are helping the boy.’

b. *Anaphoric marking*⁵ (Bergsland and Dirks 1981:10):

Asxinu-s kidu-ku-u.
 boy-REL.PL help-IND-AN.3SG
 ‘The girls are helping him.’

- ◊ When arguments of the predicate are overt, they receive, following the literature on Unangam Tunuu, ABS, and verbal agreement occurs with the subject in person and number.
- ◊ In transitive constructions when the object is unexpressed, (a) subjects are REL, (b) person agreement is with the subject and missing object, and (c) number agreement is with the unexpressed object;⁶ anaphoric marking is used when the object is third person.⁷

2.2 Passives in Unangam Tunuu

- This study focuses on one of six passive markers in Unangam Tunuu (see Table 2), specifically the general passive marker *-lga- / -sxa-*.

Removal of subject: Passives	
<i>-lga- / -sxa-</i>	passive of all sorts of verbs, including intransitive ones
<i>-$\hat{g}a-$</i>	passive of <i>-(\hat{x})ta-</i> ‘continuous state’, ‘to have as’
<i>-ula-</i>	passive of <i>-usa-</i> ‘applicative’
<i>-(a)$\hat{g}i-$</i>	‘to be V-ed, to be in state of having V-ed’
<i>-na$\hat{g}i-$</i>	‘to be V-ed’ (have a V-er)
<i>-qa-</i>	functions also as the anaphoric participial mood marker

Table 2. Passivizing suffixes (Berge and Dirks 2016, adapted).

- The passive morpheme *-lga-* behaves like a promotional passive:

(5) *Promotional passives*

a. 3PL *subject* (Berge and Dirks 2016):

Hla-s kidu-*lga-qa-s*
 boy-ABS.PL help-PASS-PART-3PL
 ‘The boys were helped.’

b. 1SG *subject* (Bergsland 1997:170):

kidu-*lga-qa-q*
 help-PASS-PART-1SG
 ‘I was helped’

- ◊ The agent is demoted, and the object is promoted to subject position and agrees with the verb.

⁴The Attuan dialect is presumed to no longer have any fluent speakers.

⁵This phenomenon has been referred to as the *Aleut Effect* (e.g. Sadock 2000, Boyle 2000, Johns 2010, Merchant 2011).

⁶When the subject is 1st or 2nd person dual or plural, number agreement is only with the subject (Bergsland and Dirks 1981).

⁷With more than one argument missing (including the subject), number agreement occurs with the argument that has the highest number (Leer 1991, Sadock 2000).

- However, the passive morpheme does not necessarily result in object promotion (Bergsland 1997, Berge 2013):⁸

(6) *Non-promotional “passives”*

- a. 3PL *object* (Berge and Dirks 2016):

Hla-s kidu-*lga*-qa- \hat{x}
 boy-ABS.PL help-PASS-PART-3SG
 ‘Someone/We helped the boys.’

- b. 1SG *object* (Bergsland 1997:170):

ting kidu-*lga*-qa- \hat{x}
 1SG.OBJ help-PASS-PART-3SG
 ‘one helped me.’

- ◊ Lack of agreement between the overt argument and the verb; instead, the verb receives default 3SG ending.
- ◊ The unexpressed agent may refer to an impersonal third person singular (‘one’) or plural (‘they’), or first person plural (‘we’).

- **Syntactic ambiguity #1:** Unangam Tunuu non-promotional constructions are ambiguous between a passive (7a) and active (7b) analysis:

(7) a. *Non-promotional passive with thematically empty null subject:*

∅ Hla- \hat{x} kidu-*lga*-qa- \hat{x}
 boy-ABS.PL help-PASS-PART-3SG
 ‘Someone/We helped the boy.’

- b. *Unspecified Subject Construction with phonologically null, syntactically active thematic pro:*

pro Hla- \hat{x} kidu-*lga*-qa- \hat{x}
 boy-ABS.PL help-IMP-PART-3SG
 ‘Someone/We helped the boy.’

3 Diagnosing non-promotional “passives”

- Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) employ four syntactic tests to determine whether non-promotional constructions are actives or passives:

Syntactic Property	Active	Passive
Agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	✗	✓
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	✓	✗
Binding of anaphors	✓	✗
Non-agentive (“unaccusative”) verbs	✓	✗

Table 3. Diagnostics proposed by Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002).

- Using these tests, Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir (2002) found that the non-promotional constructions in Polish and Ukrainian, two closely related languages, displayed contrasting results:
 - ◊ The Polish construction patterns like an active whereas the Ukrainian construction patterns like a passive:

Syntactic Property	Polish	Ukrainian
Agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	✗	✓
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	✓	✗
Binding of anaphors	✓	✗
Non-agentive (“unaccusative”) verbs	✓	✗

Table 4. Results of the syntactic tests for Polish and Ukrainian (Maling and Sigurjónsdóttir 2002).

⁸At least three other passive morphemes *-ġa-*, *-ula-* and *-qa-* in Unangam Tunuu appear to also participate in non-promotion.

3.1 By-phrase test

- In Unangam Tunuu, the agent may be re-introduced into promotional passive constructions via *ilaan* in the Eastern dialect or *hadagaan* in the Atkan dialect (Bergsland 1997:167):

(8) a. Amaligan Amaya [...] **quga-m** **ilaan** ungaya-*lga*-qa-*â*
 there He devil-REL.SG by tempt-PASS-PART-3SG
 ‘There He was tempted **by the devil** [...]’ (Eastern 1870)

- **The by-phrase test is inconclusive:** no occurrences of *by*-phrases found in non-promotional constructions, consistent with an active analysis.⁹

3.2 Control test

- In Unangam Tunuu, intentional clauses that function as clauses of intent or purpose are subject-oriented adjuncts:
 - ◊ As a subordinate clause, the intentional clause may appear as an adverbial (Berge 2016).
 - ◊ The subject of the intentional clause is coreferential with the subject of the main clause (Bergsland 1997).
- Both the main clause and the intentional clause may appear as non-promotional constructions:

(9) a. ngaan tuman kana \hat{x} (t)-*sxa*-**a \hat{g} an**-aan waa \hat{g} a-*lga*-ku-*â*
 DAT.3SG REFL.1PL bow-PASS-INTEN.3SG=ENCL come-PASS-IND-3SG
 ‘we came to worship (lit. bow ourselves to) Him’ (Bergsland 1997:241)

b. *pro*_i [PRO_i ngaan tuman kana \hat{x} (t)sxaa \hat{g} anaan] waa \hat{g} a-*lga*-ku \hat{x}

(10) a. aniqdu-*â* iqidgu-*lga*-**a \hat{g} an**-aan waa \hat{g} a-*lga*-qa-*â*
 child-ABS.SG cut-PASS-INTEN.3SG=ENCL come-PASS-PART-3SG
 ‘one came to circumcise the child’ (Bergsland 1997:241)

b. *pro*_i [PRO_i aniqdu \hat{x} iqidgul \hat{g} aa \hat{g} anaan] waa \hat{g} a-*lga*-qa \hat{x}

- The intentional clause alone may be a non-promotional construction:

(11) isu \hat{g} i-m ulu-u qa-*lga*-**a \hat{g} an** isu \hat{g} naa \hat{g} -**ii \hat{x} tan**
 seal-REL.SG meat-POS.3SG eat-PASS-INTEN.3SG go.sealing-OPT.1PL
 ‘let us go sealing in order to eat seal meat’ (Bergsland 1997:240)

- ◊ Person and number mismatch between the main predicate and the predicate in the intentional clause.¹⁰

- **The control test passes:** Non-promotional constructions in the main clause with subject-oriented adjuncts (i.e. intentional clauses) permissible; null subject of non-promotional construction able to control into subject-oriented adjuncts.

3.3 Binding test

- Cross-linguistically, reflexive verbs do not passivize (Schäfer 2012) and reflexive verbs behave syntactically like intransitive verbs (Sells et al. 1987); Bergsland (1997:156): “[a] reflexive verb [in Unangam Tunuu] behaves much like an intransitive one”.
- In Unangam Tunuu, non-promotional constructions with reflexive verbs display variation in their syntactic behaviors.
- In the impersonal reading of the non-promotional construction, reflexive pronouns are lost (Bergsland 1997:173):

(12) *Naturally reflexive verb:*

a. *Active construction:*

txidix ha \hat{g} ani-ku-s
 REFL.3PL STOP-IND-3PL
 ‘they stopped’

⁹It is important to note that the current study is based on existing documentation and almost entirely on positive evidence.

¹⁰See also example (13b).

b. *Non-promotional construction:*

il(-an) chugi-*lga*-lakan haaġani-*lga*-ku-ġ
 inside(-LOC.3SG) not.silent-PASS-CONJ.NEG stop-PASS-IND-3SG
 ‘when they were (lit. one was) silent in there and stopped’

- In the ‘we’ reading of the non-promotional construction, reflexive pronouns are retained (Bergsland 1997:173):

(13) a. *Active constructions:*i. *Inherently reflexive verb:*

ngaan **txin** iq(y)aġiti-ku-u
 DAT.3SG REFL.3SG paddle-IND-AN.3SG
 ‘he paddles to it’

ii. *Naturally reflexive verb:*

ilaan **txin** ukudigati-ku-u
 ABL.3SG REFL.3SG become.safe-IND-AN.3SG
 ‘he gets safe(ly away) from it’

b. *Non-promotional constructions:*

ngaan **tuman** iqaġi-*sxa*-lix ... ilaan **tuman** ukudiga-*sxa*-da-ġ
 DAT.3SG REFL.1PL paddle-PASS-CONJ ABL.3SG REFL.1PL become.safe-PASS-HAB-3SG
 ‘we paddle to it ... get safely from it’

- Like Irish, reflexive pronouns in Unangam Tunuu require an antecedent with matching person and number features.
 - ◊ Impersonal reading: null subject lacks necessary number and/or person features to bind onto reflexives.
 - ◊ Personal ‘we’ reading: null subject has necessary number and person features to bind onto reflexives.
- **The binding test passes:** binding of anaphors is possible; variation in syntactic behavior between the impersonal/personal readings explained by the availability of person/number features on the null subject.

3.4 Unaccusative test

- According to Bergsland, passives may appear on “all sorts of verbs including intransitive ones”, and citing Golovko (2007), Kiparsky (2013) says, “Aleut reportedly allows both impersonal or personal passives of all intransitives and transitives.”
- Canonical unaccusative verbs are found with passive morphemes in Unangam Tunuu:¹¹

(14) Unaccusative verbs with the passive morpheme:

a. *asġa-* ‘to die’ (Bergsland 1997:295, adapted):

[...] **asġa**-*lga*-qa-gan
 die-PASS-PART-INTEN.3SG
 ‘...people had (previously) died’

b. *aġa-* ‘to arrive’ (Bergsland 1997:168, adapted):

[...] ilan **aġa**-*lga*-aka-qa-ġ-ulux
 inside arrive-PASS-ABLE.TO-PART-3SG=NEG
 ‘...one could not get [to]’

- **The unaccusative test passes:** canonical unaccusative verbs may undergo passivization.

¹¹Bergsland (1997:346) suggests that in Unangam Tunuu, “non-agentive verbs naturally got lost as a category together with the ergative construction”. It is not exactly clear what are the motivations behind this claim and so future research is needed to explore (a) the nature of the loss of ergativity in the language, and (b) diagnostics to distinguish between unaccusative and unergative verbs (Perlmutter 1978).

3.5 Results

- The results of the four syntactic tests suggest that non-promotional constructions in Unangam Tunuu are **actives**:

Syntactic Property	Active	Passive	Unangam Tunuu
Agentive <i>by</i> -phrase	✗	✓	?
Control of subject-oriented adjuncts	✓	✗	✓
Binding of anaphors	✓	✗	✓
Non-agentive ("unaccusative") verbs	✓	✗	✓

Table 5. Results of the syntactic tests for Unangam Tunuu.

4 The role of structural ambiguity in syntactic change

- According to Maling and O'Connor (2015), structural ambiguity can lead to syntactic change (i.e. via reanalysis).
- Syntactic ambiguity #2:** Unangam Tunuu constructions with (a) the passive morpheme, (b) 3SG verbal ending, and (c) an overt argument with ABS.SG become ambiguous between promotional passives and non-promotional constructions:

(15) *(Non-)promotional construction* (Berge and Dirks 2016):

Hla- \hat{x} kidu-*lga-qa- \hat{x}*
 boy-ABS.SG help-PASS-PART-3SG

‘The boy was helped’ / ‘Someone/We helped the boy.’

◊ *Promotional passive*: object promoted to subject position and agrees with the verb.

◊ *Non-promotional construction*: object remains in-situ; verb receives default agreement.

- Bergsland (1997:170, emphasis mine): “the personal passive seems to have developed in Eastern Aleut from the non-promotional use by **analogy** of the anaphoric type and have spread from there to later Atkan”.¹²

(16) *Anaphoric marking* (Bergsland and Dirks 1981:10):

Asxinu-**s** kidu-ku-**u**.
 girl-REL.PL help-IND-AN.3SG

‘The girls are helping him.’

▷ **Person restriction**: In anaphoric marking constructions, agreement cannot occur with unexpressed 1st or 2nd person objects (Merchant 2011).

- In the Atkan dialect, according to Bergsland (1997), there is a preference to use non-promotional constructions with 1st or 2nd person objects (17a) over promotional passives with 1st or 2nd person subjects (17b).

(17) a. Non-promotional constructions (Bergsland 1997:170):

i. **ting** kidu-*lga-qa- \hat{x}*
 1SG.OBJ help-PASS-PART-3SG
 ‘one helped me’

w/ 1SG object

ii. **txin** kidu-*lga-a \hat{g} an* a-*qa- \hat{x}*
 2SG.OBJ help-PASS-INTEN.3SG AUX-PART-3SG
 ‘one will help you’

w/ 2SG object

b. Promotional passives (Bergsland 1997:170):

i. kidu-*lga-qa-**q***
 help-PASS-PART-1SG
 ‘I was helped’

w/ 1SG subject

ii. kidu-*lga-**amis*** a \hat{g} -*na- \hat{x} t*
 help-PASS-INTEN.2SG AUX-PART-2SG
 ‘you will be helped’

w/ 2SG subject

¹²Westward expansion of linguistic innovations from the Eastern dialect to the Atkan dialect has historically been pervasive and particularly well-documented (e.g. Bergsland 1994, 1997; Berge 2010).

- ◊ The use of promotional passives in the Atkan dialect is attested in biblical translations dating as far back as 1909.
 - ▷ In 1860, the sentence ‘if you are not received’ was translated in Atkan with a non-promotional ‘if one does not receive you’, whereas it was translated in the Eastern dialect as a promotional passive ‘if you are not received’ (Bergsland 1997:170).
- Use of promotional passives in the Atkan dialect displays a weaker effect of the person agreement restriction observed in anaphoric marking constructions.
 - ◊ This suggests that person restriction in the anaphoric marking construction extended to the non-promotional construction at one point in the development of the promotional passive.
- Maling and O’Connor (2015:109) comment that “speakers may waver between the two interpretations of their active-passive Rubin vase”.
 - ◊ Directionality of change in function of voice morphology:
 - ▷ Active from passive morphology: Icelandic, Polish, Irish (via reanalysis, Maling and O’Connor 2015).
 - ▷ Passive from active morphology: Kacchikel (via reanalysis, Broadwell and Duncan 2002), Unangam Tunuu (via analogy).
- Garrett (2012:53): “reanalysis *per se* has little explanatory force...reanalysis is moreover incapable on its own of explaining directional asymmetries”.
 - ◊ The structural ambiguity observed in the Unangam Tunuu promotional passives and non-promotional constructions (see Syntactic Ambiguity #2, Ex.15) arose due to analogy; the ambiguous nature of these constructions provide the **illusion** that reanalysis is at play.
 - ◊ The surface ambiguity of the non-promotional construction with the promotional passive is not the cause of change but the result of change.
- Future investigations to explore the underlying factors or conditions that are conducive for these changes to occur: why do some syntactic ambiguities lead to syntactic change, whereas others do not? Why do certain syntactic changes lead to structural ambiguity?

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