Syntax and Semantics of the deontic WANT-passive in Italo-Romance

In some varieties of (Italo-)Romance there are passive constructions using a verb originally meaning 'want' as a passive auxiliary. The main characteristic of these passive constructions is their deontic modality. Consider the following examples from Calabrian, Southern Italian, Sardinian, Friulian, Salentino and Venetan:

(1) Cal.  Tutti i figghjoli *vonnu* amati.  (Informant from Bovalino, R.C.)
All-children[3-pl-m-nom] WANT[3-pl] loved[part-sg-m]
All children should be loved.

(2) South-it.  Questo lavoro *vuole* fatto con molta precisione.  (GGIC,II:152)
This-work[3-sg-m-nom] WANT[3-sg] done[part-sg-m] with a lot of precision.
This work should be done precisely.

(3) Sard.  Cussa dzente *keret* timita.  (Jones 1993:125)
This people must be feared.

(4) Sard.  Deu *bollu* agiudau po fai is iscalas.  (Sa-Limba 1999-02)
I need help to climb up the steps.

(5) Sard.  Custa cicara de caffei *bollit* buffada.  (Blasco-Ferrer 1986:167)
This cup of coffee must be drunk.

(6) Sard.  Tui *bolis* arrestau.  (Sa-Limba 1999-04)
You should be arrested.

(7) Sal.  (pro)  Uliano *cunsulate.*  (Salvioni 1912:379)
They had to be comforted.

(8) Sal.  Lu pesce *ulia* mangiatu stammane.  (Salvioni 1912:379)
The-fish[3-sg-m-nom] WANT[3-sg-past] eaten[part-sg-m] this-morning
The fish should have been eaten this morning.

(9) Friul.  Al *ú* savit.  (Ledgeway 2000:258)
[cl-sg-m-nom] WANT[3-sg] known[part-sg-m].
It should be known.

(10) Ven.  El *vole* magná.  (Ledgeway 2000:258)
[cl-sg-m-nom] WANT[3-sg] eaten[part-sg-m].
It should be eaten.

This passive construction with WANT appears mainly in the 3rd person present tense, but it may also occur in other persons (see example 4 and 6) and in other tenses (see example 7 and 8).³ The construction shows the typical raising of the internal argument to subject position (whereas the agent has been demoted) which results in the assignment of nominative case to the internal argument on the one hand and in its agreement with the WANT-auxiliary on the other.

There are similar constructions, all classified by Ledgeway (2002: 236, particularly chapter 7) as different types of WANT-passives (ECM, control, raising in his terms), such as the sentences from Neapolitan below:

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³ Of course, being an auxiliary, WANT cannot appear in all composed tenses; since it encodes deontic modality, it also cannot be combined with other modals.
(11)Nap. Mario vô mannata chella lettera. (Type 1: ECM)
Mario wants this letter to be sent (to him).

(12)Nap. Mario vô esse mannata chella lettera. (Type 2: control)
Mario wants to be sent this letter.

(13)Nap. Vô mannata chella lettera. (Type 3: raising)
This letter must be sent.

Yet the first type in (11) is not a true passive but a small clause construction (SC): WANT subcategorises a predication phrase (PrP, s. Bowers 1993, 2001), whose subject is assigned accusative by the matrix verb (hence ECM). Since the SC predicate is a participle, the result can be interpreted as a passive. Nonetheless WANT still has a clear volitional θ-marking. Ledgeway’s second type in (12) represents a typical control structure which involves the passivization of an indirect object as known from English dative shift constructions. Here again WANT maintains its volitional semantics. Only type 3 in (13) is a true passive construction, as the ones in (1-10).

The aim of my talk will be to discuss the syntax and semantics of the deontic WANT-passive construction, laying out its relation to the syntax and semantics of other WANT-constructions in Romance. Looking at a general typology of various WANT-constructions with divergent semantic and syntactic subcategorization frames and parallel modal shifts, WANT (here from a Romance perspective) can be shown to be situated on a grammaticalization scale between full verb and auxiliary (s. Heine 1993). In this paper a minimalist approach, based on the operation Merge and the mechanism of (semantic and syntactic) feature checking, shall be applied, in order to show that WANT is a verb which is predestined to undergo grammaticalization processes similar to the deontic passive construction described here.

Salvioni, Carlo (1911): "Note sintattiche II." In: Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie 35, 376-381.