**The semantics and pragmatics of agent demotion vs. ‘passive’**

In this paper, I examine the relationship between the Slavic be-passive and the ‘deagentive’ reflexive, challenging the common assumption that both are simply two different types of ‘passive’. The empirical backbone of the paper is a detailed analysis of the relevant clause types in Czech (exemplified in 1-2), using data from the electronic Czech National Corpus, containing both spoken and written contemporary Czech. The Czech patterns are contrasted with their counterparts in Russian, which are generally better known and usually (but mistakenly) taken to represent Slavic languages in general.

The aim of the paper is two-fold: (i) I present evidence that differentiating between individual agent-demotion patterns goes well beyond issues of promotion/demotion, change in argument structure, relative topicality, or subject affectedness. More specifically, close attention is paid to the semantic and/or pragmatic criteria that play a crucial role in determining what may count as ‘passive’, in distinction to other types of agent-demotion. (ii) I show that we cannot draw any meaningful generalizations – language-specific or typological – without first establishing a clear understanding of the properties (morphosyntactic, semantic, pragmatic) that collectively shape the speakers’ native-like knowledge of each pattern. The analysis leads to the conclusion that what may resemble ‘passive’ on the basis of superficial morphosyntactic features amounts to distinct, albeit partially overlapping, communicative patterns.

The criteria that emerge as relevant include transitivity and lexical meaning of the verb, aspect, constraints on animacy and discourse roles, modal extensions, and overall pragmatic function (distancing vs. patient foregrounding). These criteria serve both to compare the be-passive with the reflexive in each language, and to contrast the status of each type in Czech vs. Russian. The results can be briefly summarized as follows: the be-passive in both languages tends to show roughly the same properties and could be generally classified as ‘promotional’, while the reflexive holds a distinctly different status in each language, both relative to each other and relative to the be-passive. The Russian reflexive is more truly ‘passive’, essentially grammaticized as an imperfective counterpart to the perfective be-passive. The Czech reflexive is a more literally agent-demoting construction (not passive): it casts a human agent as obligatorily anonymous.

Both the be-passive and the agent-demoting reflexive (ADR) in Czech can be seen as instances of diathetic change (understood as a shift in hierarchical arrangement of the same participants). The point of difference between them is the semantic and pragmatic function of each diathesis, attributable to their different origins: the be-passive draws attention to the result of the event denoted by the verb (hence also its unavailability for intransitive verbs, cf. 2b), while ADR highlights the event, rather than its participants (a crystallized version of this function is in the non-agreeing pattern in 1c, where the nominative patient fails to trigger verb agreement and remains outside of the clause). This feature is motivated by the pragmatically grounded function of the semantic reflexive, which I argue is a marker of unexpected referential status of the agent, and is inherently independent of the quintessential passive function of reassigning relative (discourse) prominence between agents and patients.

A close study of the Czech facts helps further clarify the nature of the reflexive-based passive, contradicting Haspelmath’s 1990 proposal of ‘inactivization’ (in the sense of “suffering”) as the original function of ADRs. The inactivization analysis ignores the
fact that the ADR derives from the reflexive pronoun, whose function is not to cast an active verb in a passive situation, but to mark the lack of referential distinctness between the agent and the patient, signaling that the non-explicit identity of the agent goes against the expectation raised by the valence of the verb. I argue that this interpretation of reflexiveness has several explanatory advantages in understanding the status of the ADR as a particular grammaticization of the semantic reflexive: 1. ADR is not actually ‘inactive’ (whether we understand this as ‘passive’ or simply ‘stative’), but merely keeps the agent (trigger of the action/process) obligatorily anonymous; 2. it is consistent with the fact that ADR is by far the most common form of expressing generalizations in Czech, including various modal interpretations (cf. 1b); the passive never serves such a function, nor does the Russian reflexive; 3. we have a plausible explanation for the otherwise puzzling ‘deobjective’ uses (Haspelmath 1990:55), also common in Czech.

Overall, the paper makes a case for a constructional analysis of grammatical patterns, seen in terms of conventionalized pairings between form, meaning, and a particular communicative function of the pattern as a whole. I suggest capturing the relationships between such patterns in the form of ‘constructional maps’ that allow a systematic representation of both the overlaps and the differences, whether within a language (here, be-passive and ADR) or across languages.

(1) a. ‘passive’ reflexive (personal); pozna ACC ‘to identify st.’
(prosim vás pěkně) a jak se to pozná?
and how RF it,NOM,SG,N discern,PRES,3SG
‘(please be so kind) – how does one know it?’ [CNK401;006-ZVBN]

b. ‘impersonal’ reflexive; sedět ‘sit, be sitting’
Na stole se nesedi!
on table,LOC,SG,M RF NEG.sit,PRES,3SG
‘People aren’t supposed to sit on tables!/Don’t sit on the table!’

c. non-agreeing reflexive (nominative-patient); udělat ACC ‘to do st.’
možná by se tam dalo udělat ňáká díra
maybe COND RF there MODAL,PPL,SG,N make,INF some,NOM,SG,F hole,NOM,SG,F
‘maybe one could make some sort of hole there’ [CNK194;088-ZIBN]

(2) a. be-passive (personal); rušit ACC ‘to disturb sb.’
(není zrovna rozumné provádět intenzívní odlov ... protože)
je tím rušena zvěř
be,PRES,3SG that,INSTR,SG,N disturb,PASS,SG,F game[animals],NOM,SG,F
(it isn’t exactly smart to engage in intensive hunting... because) it disturbs the animals’ [lit. ‘by that the ANIMALS:FOCUS are disturbed]

b. be-passive (impersonal); sedět ‘sit, be sitting’
*Na stole nebylo sezeno.
on table,LOC,SG,M NEG.be,PAST,SG,N sit,PASS,SG,N
‘The table wasn’t sat on.’

Reference: