Deconstructing the English Passive

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by

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Acknowledgments

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Chapter 1
Introduction

The passive is a construction that is right at the intersection of different approaches to the study of language: It addresses the issues of how semantic information is mapped onto syntax, how morphology affects syntactic structure, and how speakers employ syntactic options to organize information within a clause. As a construction that is found in many languages of the world and that comes with specific affixes in the classical languages, it firmly holds its place in traditional grammars of English as well as in comparative studies. As a sentence pattern that motivates the use of transformational rules, it has been one of the main subjects of inquiry in early generative grammar. As a stylistic device that rearranges the major constituents in a sentence, it is of great interest to functionalists and discourse analysts, who examine how speakers make use of the options that grammar gives them and how a construction is shaped by its communicative function. Also, no style manual would be complete without giving advice about the (non-)appropriateness of the passive, and the passive construction "Mistakes were made" is probably one of the most recognizable (and most ridiculed) sentences in political commentary.[1]

The syntax of the passive in English has been examined from many different angles. Every reference grammar has a section on the passive (e. g., Jespersen 1927; Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1985; Huddleston and Pullum 2002), often with an emphasis on the relationship between the syntactic class of the underlying verb and the grammaticality of passivization. There are specialized studies on impersonal passives (Perlmutter 1978), prepositional passives (Couper-Kuhlen 1979), the *get*-passive (Haegeman 1985; Herold 1986; Gívon and Yang 1994; Collins 1996), passives in first language acquisition (Maratsos, Fox, Becker and Chalkley 1985; Pinker, Lebeaux and Frost 1987; Budwig 1990; Verrips 2000; Meints 2003), passives in second language acquisition (Zobl 1989; Ju 2000; Oshita 2000), passives and Case Theory (Jaeggli 1986; Baker, Johnson and Roberts 1989; Goodall 1993), passives as an instantiation of voice (Svartvik 1966; Shibatani 1985a; Comrie 1988), and comparative aspects of the passive (Azvedo 1980; Åfarli 1989; Cornelis 1996; Xiao, McEnery and Qian 2006).

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1. It even has its own Wikipedia entry: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mistakes_were_made (last visited on July 29, 2008).

The functions of the passive have also been discussed extensively. The passive may be used because the agent of an action is not known or should not be mentioned. There are passives whose main function is to allow for the expression of a non-agentive sentence topic, passives that are employed to create cohesion in a text, and passives that are chosen for politeness reasons, to name just a few of those functions (Stein 1979; Thompson 1987; Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan 1999).

Without a doubt, the English passive is a well-known construction with a long history of analysis in almost any linguistic framework. What could possibly be added to an already substantial body of research? This study sets out to bridge the gap between *formalist*[2] and *functionalist* approaches in the spirit of Newmeyer (1998), who argues that the grammar of a language can have an autonomous syntax and can yet be motivated by grammar-external factors, such as the communicative function of language: "There is nothing in the program of external explanation of typological facts that is incompatible with the existence of an autonomous structural system. And there is nothing in the generative program that demands that all typological facts be attributed to the setting of innately specified parameters" (Newmeyer 1998: 364). Generative linguists are concerned with making the grammar that underlies the competence of the native speaker visible (Chomsky 1986). The maximal unit of analysis is the sentence – there are no principles of Universal Grammar that go beyond the sentence boundary. *Why* a language affords something like a passive is not something in which most generative linguists are particularly interested, nor is the question of how it is used and which constructions it competes with in a specific discourse environment. This is not to say that generative grammar does not recognize the relevance of pragmatics and its effect on word order and grammaticality. For example, it is now textbook material to integrate Focus Phrases and Topic Phrases into the X-bar format (Zubizaretta 1998; Haegeman and Guéron 1999). However, there is still a focus on the sentence as the unit of linguistic research. In discourse-based functionalist approaches, on the other hand, the point of studying the structure of sentences is to learn about the ways speakers employ language to convey meaning in interaction. While both approaches are not compatible on the level of technical analysis (generative grammar postulates abstract levels of representation, movement operations,

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2. Newmeyer (1998: 8) points out that the term "formal" is ambiguous – it can mean "'pertaining to (grammatical) form,' as opposed to meanings and uses" or "stated in a mathematically precise vocabulary." To avoid this ambiguity I will follow him in referring to formalist approaches as "generative grammar."

and invisible elements like traces or empty categories), their insights are not incompatible, and this book attempts to make them visible to each other.

In this study, I will not attempt a full-scale analysis of the form and function of the passive in English. Rather, I will focus on a specific element that is an integral component in all passives: the implicit argument (most often an implicit agent). Generative grammar, with its repertoire of non-overt categories, provides the tools to detect the implicit argument and to categorize it as a structural component of the passive. It will be shown that the implicit argument is not just a conceptually evoked event participant, rather, it is built into the structure – and thus the interpretation – of the passive construction. Building on this theoretical foundation, I will then look at uses of the passive and semantically related constructions, particularly with regard to the expression of agenthood.

Throughout this monograph, I will assume that there is something like a formal core of the passive, but it cannot be described in terms of a specific syntactic configuration (like NP-be-Ven-by NP) because, depending on the syntactic features of the passivized verb, there are many different surface forms the passive in English can take. This means that I will not use the term *construction* in the holistic sense of Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995; Croft 2001), as a pairing of meaning and form that does not depend on syntactic relations, but rather as a reminder of the compositional nature of the form and meaning of a sentence. As a syntactic reference model I will use the Principles & Parameters approach (Chomsky 1981; Chomsky and Lasnik 1993), which is centered around universal principles with language-specific, but not construction-specific, settings.

To outline the book: In chapter 2 I will give an overview of the status of the passive in linguistic theory, combining findings from formal and functional approaches. I will argue that there is reason to use the label *passive* for sentences with very different surface structures and will settle on a definition of the passive that depends on the presence of the passive morpheme and the implicit argument reading.

Deconstructing the passive means taking a construction apart and looking at its components and their contribution to the syntax and the semantics of the construction as a whole. Chapter 3 is concerned with showing that the various surface forms of the passive are a result of the interaction of the verb and the passive morpheme with general principles of structure, such as the Theta Criterion and the Case Filter. One normally thinks of the passive as a construction that involves a subject that is semantically the object of the verb, a form of auxiliary *be* (or, alternatively, of *get*), a passive participle and, optionally, an agentive *by*-phrase. However, the passive

has many different surface forms in English. Not only are there passives with and without *by*-phrases, there are passives with and without thematic subjects, with and without auxiliaries, and with and without postverbal objects. What they all have in common is the passive participle and the implicit agent reading.[3] Chapter 3 also includes a corpus-based study of a specific type of passive: The *get*-passive illustrates that the passive as such does not have a ring of formality about it. When combined with *get,* a verb that is characteristic of colloquial English, the result is characteristic of spoken language and the verbs that are passivized are verbs not associated with formal registers (such as *get knocked over*). To further explore the compositional character of the passive, I will analyze the *get*-passive in the context of other constructions that are used as complements of *get*. I will show that characteristics often associated with the *get*-passive, such as dynamicity, responsibility of the non-agent subject for the occurrence of the event, and a tendency for expressing events that are of an adversarial nature, can either be derived from the syntactic characteristics of *get,* or are simply tendencies arising from the characteristics of spoken discourse. There is no indication that they are built into the construction, and the *get*-passive thus provides further evidence against an account that emphasizes the construction over its components.

In chapter 4 I will review research on the syntactic reality and representation of the implicit argument in the passive construction. Based on data from syntax, semantics, and psycholinguistics, I will argue that the implicit argument status is directly related to the process of passivization itself and that a number of characteristics of the passive can be derived from satisfying an open argument position at the level of argument structure.

Finally, in chapter 5 I will turn towards the use of the passive in what some would consider its natural habitat, the language of academia. I will first discuss rhetorical changes that led to a strong movement against the use of the passive in academic writing, particularly in the United States, and towards forms that express agenthood more overtly. I will analyze whether recommendations found in style sheets and writing manuals have any effect on the use of the passive. In particular, I will discuss which constructions the passive competes with and how they compare with regard to the expression of agenthood. The chapter is based on data from the FROWN corpus of American English, a small-sized corpus of abstracts from peer-reviewed re-

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3. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the term "implicit agent", even though there are passives in which the implicit agent does not have an agent role (for example, passives formed on the basis of psych verbs, such as *fear*).

search journals, as well as on findings from the historical ARCHER corpus. Overall, the goal is to contribute to the understanding of the passive as a construction whose syntax and semantics are compositional and whose use cannot not be fully explained without reference to the notion of an implicit argument.

Chapter 2
The English passive and linguistic theory

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will give an overview of research on the English passive, with an emphasis on questions that center around the form of the passive, particularly in the generative framework (section 2), and on placing the passive within a larger context of constructions that have no agent subjects (section 3). Section 4 is a sketch of two of the main functions of the passive, and section 5 presents data from language acquisition that show that children as young as three easily form and understand passives, even those based on non-existing verbs, suggesting that whatever constitutes the process of passivization, it is acquired well before the age of five.

2. The status of the passive in linguistic theory

> Perhaps no single construction has received more attention throughout the history of generative linguistics. (Baker 1988a: 305)

Baker's statement is certainly true for early generative grammar, which had a strong focus on transformation rules. Which construction would lend itself more readily to a theory that was all about rearranging syntactic constituents? In order for a transformation rule to be applicable, the string on which it operates had to be described. In the case of the passive, that string seems to be an ordinary transitive sentence NP – V – NP, and all the specific information about what happens in a passive – word order change, insertion of an auxiliary, adding a suffix to the verb stem, inserting a *by*-phrase – had to be put into the passive transformation rule: "Thus, the passive transformation applies to strings of the form NP – Aux – V – NP and has the effect of interchanging the two noun phrases, adding *by* before the final noun phrase, and adding *be* + *en* to *Aux*" (Chomsky 1957: 61). The Principles and Parameters approach (Chomsky 1981; Chomsky and Lasnik 1993), however, more or less eliminated construction-specific rules. It is characterized by "the effort to decompose such processes as 'passive,' 'relativization,' etc., into more fundamental 'abstract features': the Case Filter, the binding principles, Move-α and the principles of bounding etc." (Chom-

sky 1981: 121). The idea is that the grammaticality status of a sentence is negotiated on the basis of principles of Universal Grammar and their parameter settings in a given language. Movement in the passive, for instance, is motivated by a principle called the "Case Filter." Every NP[4] needs to be in a specific structural relationship with a Case-assigner, and passive participles, unlike verbs, cannot assign Case.[5] Therefore, they cannot be followed by a direct object and the original object has to move out of this position to a position in which it is assigned Case. This kind of movement is referred to as "A-movement," "NP-Movement," or "DP-Movement," and it is at work in a variety of constructions in English, not just in the passive (Haegeman and Guéron 1999; Carnie 2007).

The next step in the analysis of the passive was an answer to the question of why exactly the passive participle is not able to assign accusative Case to an NP (Jaeggli 1986; Roberts 1987; Åfarli 1989; Baker, Johnson and Roberts 1989). The context for this kind of research was a new focus on the grammatical properties of affixes, exemplified by the application of X-bar Theory to the level of words (Selkirk 1982) and by Baker's (1988a) incorporation theory, according to which affixes are syntactically active elements that attach to stems via movement. In his seminal paper on the passive, Jaeggli (1986) argued that the syntax of the passive can, to a large extent, be explained as a response to the lexical features of the passive morpheme. Attachment of the affix to the verb stem is like the first domino in a chain that can take very different shapes but that is still predictable. The core of Jaeggli's analysis – affixes can behave like arguments – has been absorbed into more recent developments of generative grammar, such as the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), even though the whole mechanism of Case assignment underwent a major revision, going from an asymmetrical relationship between assigner (e. g., the verb) and assignee (the NP) to a symmetrical relationship of checking off Case features shared by the verb or a functional category and a nominal argument.

Quite strikingly, the passive did not get a lot of attention in the discussion of argument alternations in the nineties (Fagan 1992; Jackendoff 1992; Hale and Keyser 1993; Levin 1993; Tenny 1994; Ritter and Rosen 2000). Most of this research was concerned with *linking theory* – the relationship between lexical entries and the grammatical behavior of verbs. The focus was on which verbs allow for a specific alternation and which do not, and

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4. For the discussion at hand, it does not matter if one refers to NP (noun phrase) or DP (determiner phrase).
5. "Case," with a capital C, refers to the abstract notion of Case as developed in Case Theory (Chomsky 1981).

on how an alternation affects the meaning of a sentence. For instance, in the so-called "conative alternation" an event goes from being telic to atelic through the intervention of a preposition between verb and direct object (e. g., *Celia ate the apple*/*Celia ate at the apple*), while the *spray*/*load* alternation (e. g., *She sprayed the paint onto the wall*/*She sprayed the wall with paint*) illustrates that the progression of an event can be "measured out" (to use Tenny's term) through incremental changes in the direct object. The passive, being very productive and not having any influence on the aspectual structure of the event, was apparently not very interesting from this perspective. Nor was it a particular interest in early Construction Grammar. In Goldberg's approach to argument alternations (Goldberg 1995), the passive is more or less omitted as well, while datives, resultatives (e. g., *She sang herself hoarse*), and even the rather specific *way* construction (e. g., *She elbowed her way into the room*) get their own chapters.

The very fact that the passive does not seem to change the verb's meaning makes it a primary candidate for functionalist analyses. Passives mean choice: Speakers may choose the passive over the less marked active, and this change in word order is accompanied by a change of perspective.

> The passive is much more than an order variation with an SVA [Subject Verb Adverbial]. It involves a structural reorganization of the clause, and can be described as a systematic means of choosing a participant other than the agent as the starting point for a message, without departing form the normal subject-initial word order. ... Passive and active constructions are by no means equivalent, and their use varies widely upon the type of text. (Biber et al. 1999: 154)

Active and passive clauses may be equivalent in propositional meaning, but they present an event from different points of view. To put it in terms of Lambrecht (1994), as "pragmatically structured propositions" they are clearly very different. The information structure of the passive and the active clause is not the same: Passives never have agents as their topics, in the sense of "the thing which the proposition expressed by the sentence is ABOUT" (Lambrecht, 1994: 118, his emphasis), while actives usually do, to name just one difference. In English, a subject-oriented language (Li 1976) with grammatical word order (Thompson 1978), subjecthood and topichood often coincide. The mapping of the semantic object onto the position of the subject in the passive can therefore be seen as a side effect of its being positioned according to its informational status as the topic in the clause. Within a syntactic approach to the passive, however, one would argue that the semantic object undergoes a syntactic operation (movement) that is motivated by syntactic principles: The Extended Projection Principle (EPP) re-

quires that the subject position be filled, and the Case Filter requires that the object be assigned Case (for details see chapter 3). Movement to the subject position satisfies both principles: The subject position is filled, and the moved NP receives Case from the inflectional head of the clause (INFL). Support for this approach comes from the fact that once a verb is changed into a passive participle, the object cannot remain in its original position in the passive: it *has* to be moved. Also, passivized verbs that are not followed by NPs (such as verbs with object clauses) do not induce movement – where there is no NP, there is no Case Filter violation. In these cases, the EPP is satisfied by the insertion of a semantically empty subject *(It was expected that they would be late)*.

Regarding the information structure of the sentence, however, it is not so much the structure of the passive clause that has to be explained, but the choice between the active and the passive that has to be motivated. Because English is a language with strict word order and hardly any case markings, constituents cannot be arranged freely according to their information status, they are positioned according to their syntactic function (Hawkins 1986). Since themes are usually realized as internal arguments and are projected as direct objects, and since objects follow the verb in English, themes cannot easily be the topic in a sentence (given that topics tend to occur at the beginning of the clause, i. e. in the subject position). Choosing the passive over the active allows for the theme of the action to be realized in the subject position. Other theme-promoting constructions are the middle construction (e. g., *This shirt irons easily*) and the *tough*-construction (e. g., *John is easy to convince*). Unlike the passive, these two constructions express qualities rather than events and do not allow for the realization of individual agents, a hallmark of the passive construction (see chapter 4).

Thus, one motivation for using the passive is to map a non-agent argument to the position of a topic (taking the route of changing its grammatical function from object to subject). Another way to look at it is that the association of agent and subject is broken up so that the agent is not in the position of the topic anymore. This may be desirable, for example, if the agent is introduced as new information, or if the agent is simply considered to be not relevant or topic worthy, or if its identity is not to be revealed. Another factor to take into account is the *principle of end-weight*, "the tendency for long and complex elements to be placed towards the end of a clause" (Biber et al. 1999: 898). It is difficult to say when exactly a phrase becomes "heavy," but there is a correlation between weight and information status: "heavy constituents are more likely to be new than old" (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1371). Functionalists have been exploring these dimen-

sions of the passive within the domain of the clause (Gívon 1993) as well as larger chunks of discourse (Thompson 1987). One question addressed in functional analyses is that of whether the passive is more about backgrounding the agent or about promoting the theme. One possible answer is given by Thompson (1987), who argues that passives with and without *by*-phrases have to be looked at separately. The passive without a *by*-phrase, commonly referred to as the "short passive," is used to minimize reference to the agent, and the long passive is used in order to create more cohesion between sentences (because a non-agent argument has "higher thematicity" than the agent, for example).

Functionalist approaches are also often guided by frequency analyses. The underlying assumption is that "'Grammar' itself and associated theoretical postulates like 'syntax' and 'phonology' have no autonomous existence beyond local storage and real-time processing" (Bybee and Hopper 2001: 2–3) and that the structure of language is driven by the communicative needs of its speakers. Corpus studies tell us, for instance, that in English the overwhelming majority of passives are used without a *by*-phrase (Stein 1979; Biber et al. 1999). This means that if there is anything like a unifying function of the passive, it will not be that of bringing the agent into a focus position at the end of the clause, as this is the case only in a minority of passives. It does not mean, however, that the *by*-phrase, or rather the possibility to express the agent in a *by*-phrase, is not an integral part of the passive construction.

If frequency matters, one needs material to count and one will often turn to linguistic corpora.[6] Developments in corpus linguistics, like standardized systems of annotations and tagging, have led to fine-tuned methods of collecting and analyzing data, enabling linguists to contextualize their analyses and to address questions like why a construction may be more common in a specific genre or register and how it evolved over time. The BROWN Corpus, compiled at Brown University, dating from the 1960s, for instance, has 2000-word samples from different types of written American English; the HELSINKI Corpus has samples from early periods of English; and the FROWN (Freiburg, Brown) Corpus follows the structure of the BROWN

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6. Meyer (2002:1) notes that "many generative grammarians have shown an increasing concern for the data upon which their theories are based," but at the same time he claims that data collection "remains at best a marginal concern in modern generative theory." This is, of course, unfair: Generative linguists are mainly interested in describing the language system, and the fact that a construction does not occur in a given corpus does not allow any conclusions about whether or not it is part of the grammar of a language.

Corpus for American English, but with more recent data (Meyer 2002). It is well known that the passive is a construction that is much more prominent in written than in spoken English. For example, Biber et al. (1999: 476) report for the LSWE corpus of spoken and written English (about 40 million words of British and American English) that the percentage of finite verbs in the passive is 2% in conversations, 15% in news articles, and 25% in academic prose. Therefore, I will concentrate on written English here.

Another strand of research focuses on the formal description of information structure. Lambrecht (1994), for instance, recognizes that to a certain extent grammatical structures are autonomous and are not driven by communicative requirements of discourse: "There can only be a mapping from types of situations to preestablished formal types. Speakers do not create new structures to express new meanings. They make creative use of existing structures in accordance with their communicative intentions" (Lambrecht 1994: 26). A case in point is the passivization of intransitive verbs: English does not have impersonal passives of intransitive verbs, but German and Dutch do (see chapter 3). This does not necessarily mean that in German or Dutch the passive has a function that it does not have in English, as claimed by Cornelis (1996). It could simply mean that in German and Dutch there are different requirements for filling an empty subject position than in English.[7]

3.   What is a passive?

In her crosslinguistic study of the passive Siewierska (1984) gives a very good reason for reexamining the tacit understanding that everybody has of what constitutes a passive: "The analysis of the various constructions referred to in the literature as *passive* leads to the conclusion that there is not even one single property which all these constructions have in common" (Siewierska 1984: 1). Any analysis of the syntax and the function of the passive will have to define what exactly is regarded as a passive and what is not. Most definitions of the passive are based on the relationship between the active and the passive and compare the two with respect to morphology (passives are usually marked with affixes), syntax (passivization leads to

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7. Impersonal passives require dummy subjects to fill the empty subject position (since there is no object that could be moved to fill the position). English does have dummy subjects, but they seem to be limited to rather specific syntactic and semantic configurations, see the discussion in chapter 3.

changes in word order), and semantics (the propositional content of the active and the passive is the same).[8] These characteristics, however, do not always coincide, as Chomsky reminds us: "Even within a single language that has syntactic passives with movement and passive morphology, we may find passive morphology without movement, movement with the sense of passive but without passive morphology and the passive sense with neither passive morphology nor movement" (Chomsky 1981: 122).

Haspelmath (1990: 27) gives the following definition of the passive: "A construction is called passive if: (i) the active subject corresponds either to a non-obligatory oblique phrase or to nothing; and (ii) the active direct object (if any) corresponds to the subject of the passive; and (iii) the construction is somehow restricted vis-à-vis another unrestricted construction (the active), e. g., less frequent, functionally specialized, not fully productive." These characteristics can all be observed in (1), but what about the sentences in (2) – should (2b) also be considered a passive sentence?

(1)   a.   *The butler murdered the detective.*
       b.   *The detective was murdered (by the butler).* (from Quirk et al. 1985)

(2)   a.   *The butler broke the glass.*
       b.   *The glass broke.*

We can see why the passive in English is best regarded as a category that involves "two grammatical levels" (Quirk et al. 1985): It does not only affect the organization of the verb's arguments in a sentence, but also the morphological form of the lexical verb. In English, the passivized verb takes the form of the past participle and auxiliary *be* is inserted to encode tense and agreement. I will argue that the syntactic structure of a passive clause is a direct consequence of an operation on the verb's argument structure (chapter 4). This will lead us to a morpheme-based definition of the passive.

Throughout this book I will demonstrate that the passive is not a monolithic construction and that it can have many different looks and multiple functions – not only across languages, but also in English. In the tradition of generative grammar, I will assume that restrictions on the English passive

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8. Passivization may also change the semantics of a sentence. This is most evident when the scope of quantifiers is affected. Quirk et al. (1985: 165) give the following example: While the sentence *Every schoolboy knows one joke at least* favors the reading in which each schoolboy knows at least some joke or other, the passive *One joke at least is known by every schoolboy* favors the reading that there is one particular joke that every schoolboy knows.

may be arbitrary and purely syntactic (as a reflection of the autonomy of syntax, see Newmeyer 1998: 25–55) and that grammar provides an array of options from which speakers can choose. In this approach, the distinction between grammatical and ungrammatical sentences is highly relevant. The fact that some verbs do not form a passive does not necessarily indicate that a passive based on these verbs would not serve any of the functions one normally associates with the passive. As mentioned above, the fact that there is no impersonal passive in English *(*It was danced all night)* most likely results from grammar-internal, rather than cognitive or functional, factors (for details see chapter 3).

   In order to better understand the choices that speakers make, we need to understand the options from which they choose. Since the passive does not normally change the propositional content of a sentence, there must be some extra value in expressing an event in a way that is doubly marked: It is more complex morphologically, and the expected linking of semantic role and syntactic position (agents[9] are normally subjects, themes are direct objects) is broken up, which makes the passive more difficult to process than the corresponding active (Pinker 1989). In order to describe the menu that speakers can choose from I will rely on grammaticality judgments rather than corpus data in this section. If a certain type of passive is rare in recorded data, it does not mean that it is a peripheral phenomenon in English grammar (in the Chomskyan sense of periphery as the domain of marked and exceptional elements).

3.1.   Towards a morpheme-based definition

One of the reasons to regard the passive "as first and foremost a verbal morphological category whose meaning implies certain changes in the clause structure" (Haspelmath 1990: 25) is that "in general passive constructions without passive morphology do not exist" (Haspelmath 1990: 27). All the other ingredients of the passive are not essential: There are passives without *theme* subjects *(It was believed that …),* passives without *by*-phrases, passives without *be* or any other auxiliary (in reduced relative clauses, for example, see chapter 3), but there are no passives without the passive mor-

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9. Throughout this chapter I will use the term "agent" in a rather broad way, comprising all three components of agenthood identified by Jackendoff (1990: 129): "doer of action" (the instigator of an event), "volitional Actor," and "extrinsic instigator" (roughly the causer of some sort of change, not necessarily a human being).