

Passivization in Hmar

Marina Laltlinzo Infimate, Ph.D. Scholar

Department of Linguistics, North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong, Meghalaya-22
marinfy89@gmail.com

Dr. Saralin A. Lyngdoh

Assistant Professor
Department of Linguistics, North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong, Meghalaya-22
saralyngdoh@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper is a preliminary analysis of passivization in Hmar, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in North-East India. Passivization as a valence decreasing operation is found in Hmar and is marked periphrastically. In this paper, we show that the promotion of the transitive object to a passive subject is a result of agent defocusing in the language. The basic and non-basic passive constructions have the same underlying function: to defocus the agent argument. However, they are seen to differ in the strategies they employ. The relation of object topicalization and reflexive constructions with the passives is also briefly discussed.

Keywords: Hmar, Passivization, Grammatical relations, Agent defocusing, Valence reducing

Introduction

Hmar belongs to the Kuki-Chin subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman language family (Lewis et.al 2013). The Hmar, with a population of approximately 98,550 speakers (2011 census), are found in the North-Eastern states of Assam, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya, and Tripura although they are considered to be mainly concentrated in the Churachandpur, Tipaimukh and Jiribam sub-divisions of Manipur (Dena, 2008). Hmar is recognized as a Scheduled Tribe by the Government of India in 1956 (Thiek, 2013).

Morphologically, Hmar is mostly agglutinating and partly isolating in nature. It is a tonal language and identifies three lexical tones: level, rising and falling. Hmar is a verb final language having SOV as its basic word order. Hmar is also characterized by its rich agreement system and its ability to drop NP arguments. It is an ergative language with an accusative pattern in its verbal agreement.

Relevant Literature

Passivization as a syntactic process is characterized by the change in its argument structure and is generally described as involving defining features such as object promotion, agent suppression or deletion, detransitivization of verbs, as well as the syntactic and morphological modification of the verb forms (Shibatani, 1985; Tallerman, 1998; Givón, 2001; Keenan and Dryer, 2007). It functions as a means to foreground and background elements (Keenan and Dryer, 2007). While some scholars believe that the major function of the passive construction is to foreground the object argument (Aikhenvald, 2015), others claim that the demotion or defocusing of the agent phrase is the primary function of passivization (Shibatani, 1985; Givón, 2001; Blevin, 2003). Passive construction in languages may be classified into morphological and periphrastic types (Keenan and Dryer, 2007). It is also characterized on the basis of its morphosyntactic and discourse function (Payne, 1997). The prototypical passives are seen to involve properties such as derived intransitives, the promotion of the transitive object to the passive subject, the demotion of an agent argument to peripheral function or its omission and the presence of a formal marking of passivization (Tallerman, 1998; Aikhenvald, 2015).

The Nature of Passives in Hmar

Hmar has periphrastic passives expressed by a copular verb and a non-finite form of the active transitive verb. The derived passive subject in Hmar lacks the case marking of its corresponding actives and remains absolutive. This is because the ergative case of a subject is reserved for the agent argument of the transitive verb (Tallerman, 1998). In Hmar passives, it is the copula verb that marks agreement with the derived subject.

The language allows two types of periphrastic passives: i) passives involving the copula *ni?* with a bare non-finite form of the main verb and ii) passives involving the copula *um* with a participial postpositional *-in* suffixed to the main verb. This is illustrated in the following examples.

1. (a) *ethel-in lek^habu a-la:k* (Active)
 Ethel-ERG book 3Sg-take
 ‘Ethel took the book’
- (b) *lek^habu t^hu (ethel) la:k a-ni?* (Passive)

Book DEF ethel take 3Sg-COP
'The book was taken (by Ethel)

- (c) *lek^habu tʃu (ethel) la:k-in a-um* (Passive)
book DEF ethel take-PASS 3Sg-COP
'The book was taken (by Ethel)'

Baruah and Bapui (1996) claim that the passive constructions in Hmar do not show typical verbal markings of a passive and thus lacks "passive proper" (pp.140). They provide two passive alternations as given below.

2. *màzù cú mè:ɲé that á ni?*
rat is cat kill it is
'the rat is killed by the cat'

3. *màzù that-tu cù mè:ɲé á ni?*
Rat (killer) is cat it is
'the killer of the rat is the cat'
(the rat is killed by the cat)

(Baruah and Bapui, 1996, pp. 141)

While (2) is a passive, (3) is an example of agentive nominalization and cannot be characterized as a passive. Moreover, the distinction between the two structures can be made in terms of their occurrence as a topic and their agreement marking. It may be noted that *á* which occurs with the copula *ni?* is glossed as 'it'. However, it is a subject agreement marker since it agrees with the subject in terms of person and number. Contrary to the claim that the verbal forms in Hmar do not change for active or passive realisations (Baruah and Bapui, 1996), the language can be seen to use non-finite verbal forms in passive constructions.

In a passive construction in Hmar, the erstwhile agent is either deleted or demoted to an oblique or secondary argument. The demotion to the agent argument is indicated by the lack of its ergative marking. Moreover, the demoted agent strictly occurs in the clause medial position. In the active counterpart, the ergative case marked agent can occur either in the clause initial or clause medial position. The omission or demotion of the agent argument results in the intransitivity of the clause and the remaining core argument, the patient/theme object, becomes the subject of the passive structure. The derived subject occurs with an obligatory definite marker *tʃu* marking it as a topic argument. The case of the patient/theme object does not change and remains in the absolutive case. In Palmer (1994), the presence of passives in ergative languages is debated since the absolutive S=P is the primary grammatical relation and there is no subject promotion involved. However, the promotion of the patient/theme object to the subject

in Hmar can be indicated in terms of agreement in which it is the derived subject, not the agent, which agrees with the copula. Palmer (1994) attributes this feature to the accusative verbal agreement in ergative languages. In the following examples it may be seen that first person and second person object agreement markers in the active constructions (4a) and (5a) is *mi* and *ʈe* respectively. When the active structure is passivized, the patient/theme object agreement occurs in the nominative, as exemplified in (4b) and (5b), indicating the promotion of the patient/theme object as the passive subject. It may be noted that the pronouns in both examples are put in parenthesis as they are optional and can be dropped.

4. (a) *nunu-in (kei) a-mi-hal*
 Mother-ERG me 3Sg-1Sg-scold
 ‘Mom scolded me’
- (b) *(kei ʈu) nunu hal-in ka-um*
 I DEF mother scold-PASS 1Sg-COP
 ‘I was scolded by mom’
5. (a) *t^haŋa-in (naŋ) a-ŋu ʈe*
 Thanga-ERG you 3Sg-see 2Sg
 ‘Thanga saw you’
- (b) *(naŋ ʈu) ŋu i-ni?*
 You DEF see 2Sg-COP
 ‘You were seen’

From the above examples, it may be observed that the promotion of an object argument to a subject status occurs as a result of the agent demotion or omission in the language. This demonstrates the agent defocusing function of a passive structure in Hmar. In Shibatani (1985), the function of passive constructions is considered to be primarily that of agent defocusing.

Basic Passives

Passive constructions are most commonly and productively derived from transitive verbs in Hmar. The passives in Hmar do not generally involve the overt expression of the agent NP although semantically the involvement of some agent is implied. Agentless passives are typically employed when the agent is unknown, irrelevant, indefinite or is recoverable from the context (Shibatani, 1985). In Hmar, the agent is often omitted when an active is transformed into passive as it is irrelevant or can be recovered from the context. The omission of the agent argument reduces the valence of the predicate, thereby making it syntactically intransitive.

6. (a) *biekin tuola? meeting an-nei*
church outside meeting 3Pl-have
'They held a meeting outside the church'
- (b) *biekin tuola? meeting nei a-ni?*
church outside meeting have 3Sg-COP
'A meeting was held outside the church'
7. (a) *a bat a-t^huŋ t^hei nɔ leiin, in a-zɔr*
3Sg.GEN debt 3Sg-repay able NEG because, house 3Sg-sell
'Since he could not clear his debts, he sold the house'
- (b) *a bat a-t^huŋ t^hei nɔ leiin, in t^hu zɔr a-ni?*
3Sg.GEN debt 3Sg-repay able NEG because, house DEF sell 3Sg-COP
'Since he could not clear his debts, the house was sold'
8. (a) *suoka-in (kei) a-mi-ŋɔl*
Suoka-ERG me 3Sg-1Sg-reject
'Suoka rejected me'
- (b) *(kei t^hu) ŋɔl-in ka-um*
I DEF reject-PASS 3Sg-COP
'I was rejected'
9. (a) *madam eli-in vala a-rem*
Madam eli-ERG vala 3Sg-punish
'Madam Eli punished Vala'
- (b) *vala t^hu rem-in a-um*
Vala DEF punish-PASS 3Sg-COP
'Vala was punished'

Owing to the fact that the intransitive subject and the transitive objects are both in the absolutive case, the passive constructions in Hmar can function as derived intransitives in which the event or state may be said to occur spontaneously without any involvement of an agent being implied. They may also be categorized as “passives without object promotion” (Shibatani, 1985, pp.834) since the passive structure can be treated as a basic intransitive clause with the theme/patient NP being the original intransitive subject. The following examples are illustrative.

10. *inkʰɔm tʃu tʃan a-niʔ*
 Service DEF start 3Sg-COP
 ‘The service was started’
11. *lala tʃu ɱu a-niʔ*
 Lala DEF see 3Sg-COP
 ‘Lala was found’
12. *in tʃu ɾe-in a-um*
 House DEF cleaned-PASS 3Sg-COP
 ‘The house was being cleaned’

Non-Basic Passives

Passives with agent phrases are considered to non-basic as they are not integral to the formation of passive structures (Keenan and Dryer, 2007). Moreover, passives with agent phrases are comparatively less in Hmar. The language permits agent phrases syntactically if the agent is important to the context and needs to be specified. In passive constructions that involve agent phrases, the agent phrase is generally unmarked. As mentioned earlier, the oblique status of the agent phrases can be understood by their position of occurrence and the lack of the ergative case marking. The demoted agent takes the absolutive case and functions as the secondary object.

13. *zakuo tʃu lali tʰui a-niʔ*
 Shirt DEF lali stitch 3Sg-COP
 ‘The shirt was stitched by lali’
14. *mazu kʰa za:ma tʰat a-niʔ*
 Rat DET zama kill 3Sg-COP
 ‘The rat was killed by Zama’

Although the expression of agent arguments in the passive structures is grammatical in the language, it results in a marked structure and is therefore, less preferred by the speakers. In passive constructions that involve an overt agent, the language may employ morpho-syntactic devices to indicate its demotion to a peripheral role. In Hmar, it is quite natural for the passive verb to take a relative prefix *i-* when the agent is syntactically expressed. The passive subject, which is the patient of an otherwise active clause, is given more relevance or prominence as a topic by the relative prefix on the verb when the agent argument is expressed.

15. *lek^hat^hɔn ʈfu lala i-ziek a-ni?*
 Letter DEF lala REL-write 3Sg-COP
 'The letter was written by lala'
16. *adam le evi ʈfu pat^hien i-siem an-ni?*
 adam and eve DEF God REL-make 3Pl-COP
 'Adam and Eve were created by God.'
17. *lala ʈfu ɖɔn i-vuok-in a-um*
 lala DEF john REL-beat-PASS 3Sg-COP
 'Lala was beaten by John'
18. *t^hij hai ʈfu tɿipui i-muttɿuk-in an-um*
 Tree Pl DEF wind REL-blow.fall- PASS 3Pl-COP
 'The trees were uprooted by the wind'

It is seen from the above examples that the agent phrases are usually unmarked when they appear in passive structures. However, there are passive constructions in which the language allows the agent phrase to be optionally marked with a genitive pronominal indicating its demotion to an oblique role. It may be literally translated as the agent argument being the owner of the event described by the passive verb.

19. *lek^hat^hɔn ʈfu ɖɔn-a ziek a-ni?*
 letter DEF john-3Sg.GEN write 3Sg-COP
 'The letter was written by John (Lit: The writing of the letter belongs to John)'
20. *t^hij hai ʈfu tɿipui-a i-muttɿuk-in an-um*
 Tree PL DEF wind-3Sg.GEN REL-3Sg-blow.fall- PASS 3Pl-COP
 'The trees were uprooted by the wind (Lit: The uprooting of the tree belongs to the wind)'

Passives of Ditransitives

Passives in Hmar which generally operate on transitive verbs may also be formed on ditransitive verbs. In passives of ditransitives, deletion of the agent argument is preferred as the presence of the agent phrase results in a marked structure. In Keenan and Dryer (2007), it is found that languages show variation with respect to which of the two ditransitive objects may function as the derived subject. Hmar allows both the recipient and patient/theme object of the ditransitive verb to serve as the derived subject of its passive counterpart.

21. (a) *sendoŋ-in ethel poisa a-pek* (Active)

Sendong-ERG ethel money 3Sg-give
'sendong gave the money to Ethel'

(b) *ethel tfu poisa pek a-ni?* (Recipient Subject Passive)
ethel DEF money give 3Sg-COP
'Ethel was given the money'

(c) *poisa tfu ethel pek a-ni?* (Theme Subject Passive)
money DEF ethel give 3Sg-COP
'The money was given to Ethel'

22. (a) *lalnun-in a nu lek^ha a-t^hon*
lalnun-ERG 3Sg.GEN mother paper 3Sg- send
'Lalnun sent a letter to her mother'

(b) *a nu tfu lek^ha t^hon-in a-um*
3Sg.GEN mother DEF paper send-PASS 3Sg-COP
'Her mother was sent a letter'

(c) *lek^ha tfu a nu (kuoma?) t^hon-in a-um*
paper DEF 3Sg.GEN mother DAT send-PASS 3Sg-COP
'A letter was sent to her mother'

Passives are known to have a detransitivizing effect on transitive verbs as a result of agent suppression. However, in passives of ditransitive verbs seen in (21b,c) and (22b,c), the verb occurs with two syntactic arguments and appear to be transitive. The two arguments are obligatory for the structure to be grammatical. Following Shibatani (1985), the characterization of passives as a detransitivizing process is not entirely correct as the passivization of ditransitive constructions in Hmar remains transitive with the recipient and theme arguments functioning as either syntactic subjects or objects of the passive verb.

Passive-like Constructions

In Hmar, the topicalization of the object argument in active constructions may have a passive interpretation. When the object is topicalized, it moves to the clause initial position and is followed by the definitive marker *tfu* indicating its status as a topic or focus element. The ergative-agent occurs in non-topic position allowing us to focus on the object as a primary argument. Topicalization of the object is one of the functions of the passive and is perhaps why the topicalization of the object argument in the active constructions can have a passive meaning in Hmar despite the lack of any morphosyntactic indication of its passive nature.

23. *lala tʃu kʰɔtlaŋ-in an-enkɔl*
 Lala DEF village-ERG 3Pl-to take care
 ‘The community is taking care of Lala/Lala is being cared for by the community’
24. *tʰiŋ tʃu tʃi-in a-muttʃuk*
 Tree DEF wind-ERG 3Sg-blow.fall
 ‘The wind uprooted the tree/ The tree was uprooted by the wind’
25. *dartʃalaŋ tʃu (kei-in) ka-deŋ.koi*
 Mirror DEF I-ERG 1Sg-throw.break
 ‘I broke the mirror (by throwing)/The mirror was broken by me’

Similarly, reflexive constructions involving an inanimate theme subject can also function as passives in Hmar. The correlation between reflexive and passive structures is discussed in Shibatani (1985) and Palmer (1994). The verb, understood to be in the past or present indicative mood, takes a reflexive prefix and is syntactically and semantically intransitive. The presence of an agent argument is neither expressed nor implied. The reflexive constructions in Hmar may be used in expressing “stative passive” (Palmer, 1994, pp.138) and it may also function as passives indicating spontaneity of events (Shibatani, 1985; Palmer, 1994).

26. *in kʰa kum tam a-n-kal*
 house DET year many 3Sg-VR-lock
 ‘The house was locked for many years’
27. *gate a-n-kʰa:r*
 gate 3Sg-VR-close
 ‘The gate is closed/The gate was closed’
28. *ruɪ a-n-tan*
 rope 3Sg-VR-cut
 ‘The rope is broken/ The rope was broken’
29. *ka zakuo a-n-ek*
 1Sg.GEN shirt 3Sg-VR-tear
 ‘My shirt is torn/My shirt was torn’

Conclusion

In Hmar, passive structures are periphrastic indicated by a copula verb and the non-finite form of the main verb. Agent omission is basic to the passive structures in Hmar, thereby reducing the valence of the predicate. The agent defocusing makes it possible for the erstwhile transitive object to function as a subject, evidenced by the nominative agreement marking on the copula. In passive constructions that involve expressed agents, the demotion of the agent argument does not involve the prototypical oblique marking found in passives. Its oblique status is reflected by the change in its original case and its occurrence in a non-topic clause medial position. The language also employs a relativizing prefix and genitive pronominal as an agent defocusing strategy when the agent is expressed. Ditransitive construction can undergo passivization in Hmar and allows both the patient/theme and the recipient argument to function as the derived subject. The suppression of the agent in the passives of ditransitive verbs in Hmar reduces the valence of the predicate but does not seem to syntactically affect the transitivity the verb. Active constructions with object topicalization and reflexive constructions in Hmar can have a passive function as they seem to share one or more features of a passive construction.

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|------------------|
| 1 | First person |
| 2 | Second person |
| 3 | Third person |
| COP | Copula |
| DAT | Dative |
| DEF | Definitive |
| DET | Determiner |
| ERG | Ergative |
| GEN | Genitive |
| NEG | Negative |
| P | Patient |
| PASS | Passivizer |
| Pl | Plural |
| REL | Relativizer |
| S | Subject |
| Sg | Singular |
| VR | Verbal reflexive |

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 19:5 May 2019

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