

## Pseudopassives as complex predicates: A Scandinavian perspective

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Passives in which the subject corresponds to the object of a preposition in the active are usually called pseudopassives or prepositional passives. An example is *John was **talked about***. The pseudopassive is a rare and marked phenomenon, which represents a problem for all approaches to grammar. This paper puts aside the marginal option for pseudopassives with retained objects (*I don't like to be **told lies about***), which must await a better understanding of "abstract" incorporation of non-specific objects into verbs (Asudeh and Mikkelsen 2000, Mills 2008, Kiparsky 2013).

Both in traditional and modern grammar, the standard opinion on the English pseudopassive is that the preposition in some way goes with the verb to form one complex verb (e.g. Jespersen 1969:138-39, Hornstein and Weinberg 1981, Bresnan 1982). This is often called reanalysis. These complex verbs can passivize in the same way as regular transitive verbs. Reanalysis must be an optional process. The state of the art for English pseudopassives is peculiar: On the one hand, a number of problems with reanalysis have been pointed out, see e.g. Postal (1986) and Baltin and Postal (1996). The recurring point is that various phenomena show that the verb + the preposition do not constitute one word. On the other hand, there does not seem to be any accepted alternative. Alternative analyses have been proposed (Lødrup 1991, Abels 2003, Alsina 2009, Drummond and Kush 2015, Findlay 2015, 2016, Dyvik et al. 2019:82-83). However, there does not seem to be any analysis that is taking over as a new standard. The strategy in this paper is to keep the traditional reanalysis, but move it from c-structure to f-structure. The verb + preposition is then a complex predicate. The option of a complex predicate analysis is mentioned briefly in Richards (2017) and the unpublished Lødrup (2022).

There has been some discussion and confusion about the distribution of the pseudopassive in Scandinavian, but it is clear that Norwegian and Swedish and Danish have pseudopassives (Engdahl and Laanemets 2015). Pseudopassives in Norwegian and Swedish and Danish are "remarkably similar" (Engdahl and Laanemets 2015:326). A difference is that they are more frequent in Norwegian. Example (1) is Norwegian, like all non-English examples to follow.

- (1) Slik **snakkes** han **om** av andre  
this.way talk.PRES.PASS. he about by others 'He is talked about this way by others'

Some traditional Scandinavian grammarians assume reanalysis (e.g. Western 1921:133-137, Knudsen 1967:83-85). Their motivation is semantically oriented. The state of the art is different in modern Scandinavian grammar, understood as grammar in the generative tradition from the eighties. Arguments against reanalysis are given in Lødrup (1985, 1991), Christensen (1986), Hestvik (1986), Åfarli (1989, 1992:86-88). I am not aware of modern work that argues for reanalysis, except a short discussion in Holmberg and Platzack (1995:221-22).

Scandinavian is different from English on a couple of points. English, unlike Scandinavian, has adjectives that are derived from a passive participle + a preposition, as in (2). More important is the fact that English has a requirement for adjacency between the verb and the preposition, cf. (3).

- (2) Each **unpaid for** item will be returned (Bresnan 1982:53)  
(3) \*Everything was **paid twice for** (Bresnan 1982:53)

Scandinavian allows sentences without verb-preposition adjacency. When the passive verb is finite, pseudopassivization does not affect V2 (cf. (1) above). One might suspect that the positioning of the finite verb in C and I is special in some way that prevents incorporation of a preposition. This does not seem to be the case, however. Young children in Oslo incorporate particles in verbs. When the resulting complex verb is finite, it appears in C and I. For example, the preposition *på* 'on' can be used as a regular transitive preposition or as an intransitive particle. In the latter case, children can have it as a part of a complex finite verb in C or I, as in *Har-på du sokker?* 'have on you socks' (Do you have socks on?).

Scandinavian also allows sentences with non-finite passive verbs without verb-preposition adjacency. Example (4) has the infinitive of the inflectional passive, (5) has the passive participle in a periphrastic passive.

- (4) Elevene bør **snakkes** mye **med**  
pupils.DEF should talk.INF.PASS much with 'The pupils should be talked to a lot'  
(5) Jentene ble **glodd** intenst **på** (Hestvik 1986:191)  
girls.DEF became stared intensely at 'The girls were stared at intensely'

Bresnan (1982) gave an influential LFG analysis of the English pseudopassive. She proposed a lexical rule which incorporates a preposition into a verb, making it a unit in the lexicon and in c-structure. This analysis predicts that the verb and the preposition behave as a unit in English pseudopassives.

The analysis in this paper keeps the idea of the verb and the preposition being one unit, but this unit is a complex predicate, and not a constituent in c-structure. LFG's levels of representation make it ideal to implement a complex predicate analysis of pseudopassives. The c-structure assumed for *Vi tenker på Ola* 'we think of Ola' (independently of +/-reanalysis) is shown below, with the f-structure for the reanalyzed sentence.



Dyvik et al. (2019:82-83) give an analysis with the same kind of mismatch between levels, which is based upon the assumption that prepositions in pseudopassives have no PRED. However, both Scandinavian and English has pseudopassives with a preposition that seem to take a PRED (*The house has never been lived in*). I assume that prepositions always have a PRED and that they can assign a thematic role [with exceptions that are not relevant in this context].

A pseudopassive can be compared to a passive of a complex predicate consisting of two verbs, as in (6) - a so-called long passive (see Lødrup 2014 on long passives in Norwegian).

- (6) Hvorfor unngås det å gjøres?  
 why avoid.PRES.PASS it to do.INF.PASS 'Why do they avoid doing it?'

LFG has a long line of work on complex predicates (see Andrews 2021). I assume a traditional LFG analysis of complex predicates, along the lines of Butt (1995), Alsina (1996, 1997), Niño (1997), Sells (2004). There is no requirement for the two elements to be one constituent in c-structure. When the functional structure is built, a process of predicate composition combines the first verb and the second verb, creating a complex predicate. The first verb does not have an internal role, but an open position for the second verb's argument structure. The argument structure of the complex predicate is the result of combining the argument structures of the two verbs, see (7). This kind of analysis could also be applied to verb + preposition, as in (8).

- (7) ACTIVE *unngå* 'avoid' < agent < *gjøre* 'do' < agent theme > > >  
 |-----| |  
 SUBJ OBJ

- (8) ACTIVE *tenke* 'think' < experiencer < *på* 'on' < theme > > >  
 SUBJ OBJ

Both verb-verb and verb-preposition complex predicates typically passivize by realizing the internal argument of their second element as the subject of the passive complex predicate as a whole, see (9)-(10).

- (9) PASSIVE *unngås* 'avoid.PASS' < agent < *gjøre* 'do' < agent theme > > >  
 |-----| |  
 Ø SUBJ

- (10) PASSIVE *tenkes* 'think.PASS' < experiencer < *på* 'on' < theme > > >  
 Ø SUBJ

The first verb of a complex predicate is usually assumed not take an internal argument (Cinque 2004). This accounts for sentences with retained objects like *\*Bordet ble lagt boken på* 'table.DEF was put book.DEF on' (but not the type with "abstract incorporation" like *I don't like to be told lies about*.)

There is a piece of independent evidence for reanalysis that has not been mentioned in the literature, except briefly in the unpublished Lødrup (2022). Long passives in Scandinavian allow - as expected - a preposition with the second verb of a long passive, cf. (11). However, the interesting fact in the present context is that the first verb can also be followed by a preposition, as in (12). This preposition is assumed to head the PP *på å gjøres* 'on to do.INF.PASS' in c-structure. (Scandinavian prepositions take infinitivals as complements as a regular option.)

- (11) Dette forsøkes å satses på  
 this try.PRES.PASS to concentrate.INF.PASS on 'They try to concentrate on this'

- (12) Dette **satses** på å gjøres  
 this concentrate.PRES.PASS on to do.INF.PASS 'They concentrate on doing this'

The preposition in (12) cannot at the same time be the PRED of an oblique and a part of a complex predicate involving the second verb. The long passive requires that the first verb and the preposition are "first" reanalyzed. We then have a unit that can be combined with the second verb to one complex predicate, as in (13)

- (13) PASSIVE *satses* 'concentrate.PASS' < agent < på 'on' <gjøre 'do' <agent theme>>> >  
 | \_\_\_\_\_ | |  
 Ø SUBJ

In a lexicalist theory, there should be no special rule for pseudopassives. Pseudopassives should be the passives of corresponding reanalysed actives (see e.g. Kiparsky 2013). There are phenomena beside the pseudopassive that require a noun phrase following a preposition to be an object at sentence level. Functional control requires the controller to be a subject or an object. In some cases, this is possible with an object that must be the result of reanalysis. An example is (14). This is not as productive as the pseudopassive, however.

- (14) Det er gøy å se på ungene spille  
 EXPL is fun to look at kids.DEF play 'It is fun to look at the kids play'

My analysis of Scandinavian pseudopassives raises the question of how to account for English pseudopassives. The adjacency condition seems to stand in the way of transferring the analysis given here to English. There is, however, evidence that Scandinavian and English are not as different as it might seem with respect to adjacency. Some exceptions are to some extent possible to English speakers (Findley 2016). On the other hand, Scandinavian also has restrictions on what can occur between the non-finite verb and the preposition which are special to pseudopassives. The adjuncts found between the non-finite verb and the preposition in sentences such as (4)-(5) above are adjuncts of manner, degree, etc. They usually precede an oblique - they are often degraded when following one. The interesting case is adjuncts of time, place, etc. They usually follow an oblique, but sometimes precede it. They can be fine preceding an oblique, as in (15), but not in this position in a pseudopassive, cf. (16).

- (15) De har snakket om problemet i mange timer / i mange timer om problemet  
 they have talked about problem.DEF for many hours / for many hours about problem.DEF  
 (16) Problemet ble **snakket om** i mange timer / ?? i mange timer **om**  
 problem.DEF was talked about for many hours / for many hours about

This is a situation that could be handled by optimality theory: The verb and the preposition prefer to be adjacent in pseudopassives (maybe a kind of iconicity for complex predicates). Scandinavian ranks V2 above this preference, and also the preference for some adjuncts to precede obliques, as in (4)-(5) above.

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