

Pseudopassives as complex predicates: A Scandinavian perspective

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Introduction

Pseudopassives, or prepositional passives, have a subject that corresponds to the object of a preposition in the active: *John was thought of*. Both in traditional and modern grammar, the standard opinion on English is that the preposition goes with the verb to form one complex verb. This is often called reanalysis. Reanalysis must be an optional process. A number of problems with reanalysis in English have been pointed out, see e.g. Baltin & Postal (1996). Alternative analyses of pseudopassives have been proposed (Lødrup 1991, Abels 2003, Alsina 2009, Drummond & Kush 2015, Findlay 2015, 2016, Dyvik et al. 2019:82-83), but there does not seem to be any analysis taking over as a new standard. The strategy here is to keep reanalysis, but move it from c-structure to f-structure. The verb + preposition is then a complex predicate (Richards 2017, Lødrup 2022).

Scandinavian

Norwegian, Swedish and Danish have pseudopassives, which are "remarkably similar" (Engdahl and Laanemets 2015). The example sentences here are Norwegian.

(1) Selvfølgelig **satses** de på
obviously concentrate.PRES.PASS they on
'Obviously, we concentrate on them'

(2) Han ble **ledd** mye av
he was laughed much of
'They laughed a lot of him'

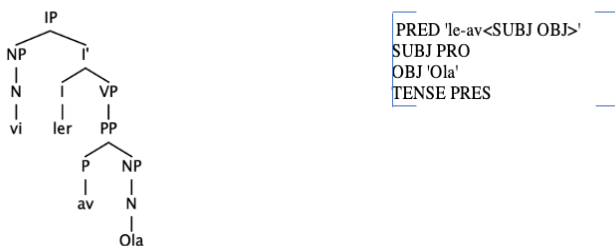
A difference between English and Scandinavian is that English has a requirement that the verb and the preposition should be adjacent (ex (3)), while Scandinavian allows sentences without this adjacency (ex (1)-(2)).

(3) *Everything was **paid** twice **for** (Bresnan 1982:53)

Bresnan (1982) proposed a lexical rule which incorporates a preposition into a verb, making V+P a unit in lexicon and c-structure. This kind of analysis cannot account for sentences without adjacency such as (1)-(2)), and it has been rejected in Scandinavian grammar (Lødrup 1985, 1991, Christensen 1986, Hestvik 1986, Áfari 1989).

Complex predicate analysis

The analysis here keeps the idea that the verb and the preposition are one unit, but this unit is a complex predicate, and not a constituent in c-structure. (A complex predicate analysis is mentioned briefly in Richards (2017) and Lødrup (2022).) There is no special rule for pseudopassives – they are simply passives of corresponding active complex predicates. The c-structure assumed for *Vi ler av Ola* 'we laugh at Ola' is as 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. I assume that prepositions always have a PRED [with exceptions irrelevant here].

A pseudopassive can be compared to a passive of a complex predicate consisting of two verbs, as in (4) - a so-called long passive (Lødrup 2014 on Norwegian).

(4) 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 (Andrews 2021). I assume a traditional LFG analysis of complex predicates, along the lines of Butt (1995), Alsina (1996, 1997), Niño (1997), Sells (2004). A process of predicate composition combines the first verb and the second verb, creating a complex predicate. The argument structure of the complex predicate is the result of combining the argument structures of the two verbs, see (5). This kind of analysis could also be applied to verb + preposition, as in (6).

(5) ACTIVE *unngå* 'avoid' < agent < *gjøre* 'do' < agent theme > > >
SUBJ OBJ

(6) ACTIVE *satse* 'concentrate' < agent < *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 (7)-(8).

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

(8) PASSIVE *satses* 'concentrate.PASS' < agent < *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 sentences with "abstract incorporation" of a non-specific object, such as *I don't like to be told lies about*.)

• A piece of independent evidence for reanalysis is the that the first verb of a long passive can be followed by a preposition, as in (9). 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.)

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

The preposition in (9) 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 (10).

(10) *satses* 'concentrate.PASS' <agent <*på* 'on' <*gjøre* 'do' <agent theme>>>
Ø SUBJ

What about English?

My analysis of Scandinavian pseudopassives raises the question of how to account for English pseudopassives. The adjacency restriction 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 to the adjacency condition are to some extent possible to English speakers (Findley 2016). On the other hand, Scandinavian also has restrictions on what can occur between verb and the preposition in VP, which are special to pseudopassives. The adjuncts found between the non-finite verb and the preposition in sentences such as (2) 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 (11), but not in this position in a pseudopassive, cf. (12).

(11) De har snakket i mange timer om problemet
they have talked for many hours about problem.DEF
'They have talked for many hours about the problem'

(12) ??Problemet ble **snakket** i mange timer **om**
problem.DEF was talked for many hours about
'The problem was talked about for many hours' [intended]

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 (2) above.

References

on hand-out

Helges språk **forskes** grundig på
Helge's language research.PRES.PASS thoroughly on
'Helge's language is researched thoroughly'

