

Semantic regularities in the use of the medio-passive construction in Early Modern Danish

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The starting point of the analysis is the well-known fact that continental Scandinavian languages display two passive constructions : a so-called periphrastic passive combining an auxiliary meaning “become” (in Danish: *blive*) and a past participle; and a so-called “morphological passive” marked by a suffix -s, grammaticalized from the reflexive voice and exhibiting several of Kemmer’s (1993) properties of middles (hence, I will call it a mediopassive). See the following pair in Present-Day Danish, from Allan et al. (2000, 102):

- (1) Bilen skal **blive vasket** i dag.
"The car will be washed today." (I promise it will be)
- (2) Bilen skal **vaskes** i dag.
"The car is to be washed today." (It has been arranged.)

The **aim of the talk**, which is embedded in a Constructional framework, is to consider the use of the mediopassive in Early Modern Danish (EMD), using a corpus of narrative prose from the late 16th century. Whereas much of the research has concentrated on the opposition between the two passive constructions (see Heltoft & Falster-Jakobsen 1996 and Engdahl 1999 and 2006, among others), I examine the mediopassive for itself, paying special attention to uses where voice oppositions are partly neutralized, such as specialized or fully lexicalized uses attached to a certain lexical interpretation of polysemic verbs. From a historical point of view, EMD is an early stage of the mediopassive in its current status as one of the three major voices of Danish, together with the periphrastic passive and the active. Before that, there was already a periphrastic passive, but it was built with another auxiliary (*varda*). The restructuring of the periphrastic construction implies some degree of reconfiguration of the paradigmatic status of the mediopassive. Still, a diachronic analysis of the opposition between both passives in the crucial period would exceed the limits of a talk. The **results of the corpus analysis** are divided into three parts:

1. The mediopassive can be used concomitantly with specialized lexical meanings (*kalle*: to call; *kalles*: to be named). A significant case of semantic specialization is the use of the mediopassive to flag unaccusative readings (*begynde*: to start to do something; *begyndes*: to start to happen). The oppositional status of the mediopassive is partly suspended here, since it is not a passive construction of the otherwise active verb: the mediopassive is used to mark the lack of agent control over the action and the neutralization of the agent / patient opposition (*forsvinde* vs *forsvindes*, both meaning “to disappear”).
2. This brings us to a second kind of unaccusative contexts, where the mediopassive is non-oppositional: unaccusative *media tantum*, such as verbs of appearance and of change of state (*obenbares*: to appear; *vederfares*: to happen; *grønnes*: to become green). Some of them were lexicalized from still existing active verbs that otherwise tolerate the periphrastic passive or even the reflexive voice (*obenbare*: to show; *obenbare sig*: to show oneself). This is a place of grammatical bridging, with several strategies competing alongside various criteria. The use of a reflexive construction onto a mediopassive verb is also attested (*obenbares sig*), proving the wide extent of the mediopassive’s lexical conventionalization. A look at the subjects of these verbs shows that the use of reflexive marking is associated with a high degree of agency or control over the action.
3. Mental state predicates display several specific properties. Verbs designating mental states that void of progressivity (akin to Vendler’s *achievements*) can occur either in the periphrastic passive or in the mediopassive, without any clear difference of context (*forfærdes* / *blive forfærd*, “to get afraid”). It is likely that periphrastic constructions display a remnant resultative feature inherited from *blive*’s origin as a verb meaning “to stay”. Further, the verb *synes*, originally a lexicalized mediopassive use of *syne* “to see”, then meaning “to seem”, develops a range of subjective epistemic uses (“to think” in unintentional contexts, as opposed to active *tænke* in intentional contexts) with competing valency frames, and the rise of a non-nominative subject construction.

The **conclusion** is that the s-construction should be taken as a constructional module of its own, not reducible to its paradigmatic opposition to the active and the periphrastic passive, and flagging the de-agentification of the first argument, and paving the way to oblique subject marking in experiential contexts.

Keywords: passive, middle, unaccusativity, mental state predicates

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