

## BRIEF BRIEFING ON PASSIVISED PASSIVE IN GERMAN

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**Abstract**

Contrary to recently renewed claims that no language allows “double passive”, such languages actually exist. German is one such language. Both, the German *get*-passive as well as the *let*-passive can be passivised again by applying the standard passivisation, either by using the passive auxiliary verb *werden* (become) in conjunction with the participle of the verb to be passivised, or in conjunction with *sein* and the infinitive form of the verb plus the infinitive particle *zu* (to). The German data invalidate objections to the existence of double passivation since these objections were directed to previous analyses of other languages with allegedly misinterpreted data.

**1. Background**

It is quite a long time since Perlmutter and Postal (1977, 1984) claimed that passivised verbs cannot be passivised again. More recently, Kiparsky (2013) and Murphy (2014) discuss “double passive” and propose that grammatical mechanisms that eliminate the subject argument of a passivised verb are also capable of morpho-syntactically eliminating the *derived* subject of passives. Legate et al. (2020) dispute the empirical basis of the claims of the researchers cited above, namely data from Classical Sanskrit, Lithuanian and Turkish. The facts to be discussed below, however, support the idea that “double passive” is a grammatical reality. At least, it is instantiated by the grammar of German.

*Passive voice* is any *systematically* applicable morpho-syntactic grammatical device to block the subject argument, with two collateral effects. First, if another argument (with structural case) is available, it must be instantiated as (derived) subject. Secondly, the blocked argument may optionally be re-instantiated by a specially marked phrase (‘by-phrase’).

Please note that this definition covers *anti-passive* as well, once it is acknowledged that absolutive is the case of the subject in abs-erg-languages; see Haider (2021) for the empirically based argumentation to this effect. Silverstein (1976: 140), the namesake noted this right from the start: “*Ergative systems have an analogous construction, here termed as antipassive, which has all the properties of the passive, as Kuryłowicz, again saw.*”

In German, four constructions are covered by the above definition. *First*, the prototypical case is the combination of a past participle with the passive auxiliary *werden* (1a). This auxiliary must not be confused with the copular auxiliary *werden* (become). They differ in their participial forms.<sup>1</sup> *Secondly*, the combination of the auxiliary verb *sein* (be) with an infinitive verb preceded by the verb particle *zu* (to) produces a passive effect (with a modal reading), as in (1b). *Third*, the combination of an infinitive verb with the causative quasi-auxiliary *lassen* (let) has a passive reading (1c). *Fourth*, German has a construction that resembles the English *get*-

<sup>1</sup> i. Er ist bewundert worden – He has *been* admired.  
 ii. Er ist alt geworden – He has *become* old

Passive auxiliary ‘werden’  
 Copular auxiliary ‘werden’

passive (1d). In all four cases, an object argument of the verb in a finite clause obligatorily switches to the nominative, and there is an optional *by*-phrase.

- (1) a. Der Fall *wurde* (von einer Kommission) untersucht.  
the case *was* (by a committee) investigated  
b. Der Fall *ist* (von einer Kommission) zu untersuchen.  
the case *is* (by a committee) to investigate  
'The case must be investigated (by a committee)'  
c. Der Dekan *lässt* den Fall (von einer Kommission) untersuchen.  
the dean lets the case (by a committee) investigate  
'The dean has the case investigated (by a committee)'  
d. Der Dekan<sub>Nom</sub> *bekam* (von der Kommission) einen Bericht<sub>Akk</sub> überreicht.  
the dean *got* (by the commission) a report presented  
'The dean got presented a report (by the committee)'

The German 'get'-passive is restricted to ditransitive verbs since it 'promotes' a dative object to a nominative subject,<sup>2</sup> although dative is an inherent case in German otherwise. This is an effect of *function composition* of the argument structures in the verbal cluster and not of the grammatical nature of dative case in German; see Haider (2002, 2024). After application of the *get*-passive, the construction still remains transitive (1d), since what is promoted to subject is the indirect object while the direct object remains unaffected (1d). In the unrestricted passive with 'werden' (become), dative functions, as expected, as an invariant case (2a).

- (2) a. Dem<sub>Dat</sub>/\*Der Dekan<sub>Nom</sub> *wurde* der<sub>Nom</sub>/\*den<sub>Akk</sub> Bericht überreicht.  
the dean was the report presented  
b. Der<sub>Nom</sub>/\*Dem Dekan<sub>Dat</sub> *bekam* den<sub>Akk</sub>/\*der<sub>Nom</sub> Bericht überreicht.  
the dean got the report presented

## 2. Double passive in German

Table 1 presents the logically possible combinations. For a first orientation, an example for each of the green boxes in Table 1 is presented in (3), below. The four grammatical devices of passivising cannot be simply iterated but some of them can be applied to each other.

**Table 1** –Passivising devices    [“\*\*\*\*“ = ungrammatical; “- ? - “ = infrequent; „####“ = dialectal]

↓ applied to ⇒	x. P <sub>II</sub> + <i>werden</i>	y. P <sub>II</sub> + <i>bekommen</i>	z. Zu-V + <i>sein</i>	i. V+ <i>lassen</i>
a. P <sub>II</sub> + <i>werden</i>			***	###
b. P <sub>II</sub> + <i>bekommen</i>	***		***	***
c. Zu-V + <i>sein</i>	***			
d. V+ <i>lassen</i> <sub>PASSIV</sub>	***	- ? -	***	

The boxes shaded grey indicate that no device can be applied to itself. This is expected since even in languages with both, affixal and auxiliary passive marking (see Kiparsky 2013:24), the devices are found only in combination. Since German codes passive by means of verbs plus (quasi-) auxiliaries, the verb to be passivised must have an argument structure. This property

<sup>2</sup> Unlike the English *get*-Passive, it cannot be applied to a transitive verb in the absence of a dative object:

i. Many people *got* injured.      ii. \*Viele Menschen *bekamen* verletzt.

eliminates the passivising of auxiliaries. Hence, the boxes in Table 1 headed by an auxiliary (*werden*, *sein*) are empty. The boxes shaded in green belong to columns headed by verbs with an argument structure and are sufficiently attested.

- (3) a. das Trikot, das<sub>Nom</sub> von Dekkers *überreicht bekommen wurde*.<sup>3</sup> (a.y.)  
 The jersey, that by dekkers presented gotten was  
 b. #Carlos ist auf Herz und Nieren *untersuchen lassen worden*.<sup>4</sup> (a.i.)  
 Carlos is on heart and kidneys examine let been  
 ‘Carlos has had his heart and kidneys examined’  
 c. Der ist nicht *geschenkt zu bekommen*.<sup>5</sup> (c.y.)  
 this is not given-as-a-present to get  
 ‘You can't get that for free’  
 d. dass das Wegfahrsperrn-Problem kostenlos *beheben zu lassen wäre*<sup>6</sup> (c.i.)  
 that the immobilizer-problem free-of-charge fix to let would-be  
 ‘that the immobilizer problem could be fixed free of charge’

As far as the dialectal restriction of (3b) is concerned, there are widespread geographical variants of German that are amenable to double passivisation (e.g. Ostmittelbairisch = East Central Bavarian) because they apply IPP (= infinitivus pro participio = infinitive instead of participle) *in-situ* in the verbal complex of IPP verbs. In standard German, however, the auxiliary governing the participial form must be fronted in the verbal complex. The passive auxiliary *werden* (become) as well as *bekommen* (get) govern a participial form but do not partake in IPP-fronting. So, ‘lassen’ would have to be turned into its participial form “gelassen”. However, the participial form for the passivizing *lassen* is strictly avoided and its trigger auxiliary would have to be fronted therefore, which leads into a conflict in our case. So, (a.i) in Table 1 is ruled out, except for variants of the grammar of German in which IPP occurs *in-situ*, i.e. without fronting the triggering auxiliary since this opens the grammatical window for (3b).<sup>7</sup>

(3a) is one of the numerous corpus finds in which the quasi-auxiliary “bekommen”, which conserves the argument format of its main-verb usage as a di-transitive *nom-dat-acc* verb, is passivised. Passivisation by means of ‘werden’ cancels the subject argument and triggers the acc-to-nom shift for the direct object. For duly sceptical readers, (4) lists three more corpus finds:

- (4) a. welcher Liefertermin (von wem) wie *zugesagt bekommen wurde*<sup>8</sup>  
 which delivery date (by whom) how promised gotten was  
 ‘how which delivery date has been promised (by whom)’

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.werkself.de/forum/thread/28527-stimmung-support-bayer-04-leverkusen-thread-nr-11/?pageNo=622>

 Working Dog  
<https://ek.working-dog.com> · Carlos · Diese Seite übersetzen  
 Carlos vom Mecklenburger Bolz | Dog profile - information and ...  
 Carlos vom Mecklenburger Bolz. Carlos ist von der Behörde auf Herz und Nieren untersuchen lassen worden. Hüfte, Ellenbogen, Rücken und alle Blutwerte sind ...

<sup>4</sup> see: ↑

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eisenbahnforum.de/viewtopic.php?t=9317&start=540>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.juraforum.de/forum/t/was-ist-wucher.424044/>

<sup>7</sup> There is no scarcity of material in internet corpora since users with a dialectal L1 transfer it to their writing:  
 i. als seien sie (von ihm) *liegen lassen worden*. [R.Bayer, 1985. *Der Betrachter. Ein Loch im Lehm*. p.85]  
 ‘as if they had been abandoned (by him)’  
 ii. Du bist auf dem Trockenen *sitzen lassen worden*. [Stephen King. Glas. Heyne, München 1997]  
 ‘You have been left high and dry.’

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.telefon-treff.de/forum/thread/274041-exklusiver-nokia-6300-vorserien-testbericht/?pageNo=34>

- b. Objekte, die angekauft oder *geschenkt bekommen wurden*<sup>9</sup>  
objects that purchased or received-as-gifts gotten were  
'objects that were purchased or received as gifts'
- c. was in eigene Verantwortung übertragen bekommen wurde<sup>10</sup>  
what in own responsibility transferred gotten was  
'what was transferred to own responsibility'

(3c) is the modal-infinitival passive applied to a *get*-passive. The infinitival passive does not have the agent/causer restriction on the eliminated argument typical for the participial passive with *werden*, illustrated in (5). So it is applicable to the quasi-auxiliary that is used for the German *get*-passive.

- (5) a. \*Dieses Exemplar *wird* nicht mehr *gehabt/bekommen*.  
this copy is no longer *had/received* (= obtained).
- b. Dieses Exemplar *ist* nicht mehr *zu haben/zu bekommen*.  
This copy is no longer to have/to receive (= obtainable).

By the same token, it is suitable for passivising the passivising causative construction, as in (3d). Here are two more excerpts from corpora (6b,d).

- (6) a. Er lässt (von einem Notar) die Schenkung genehmigen *let*-passive  
b. ob die Schenkung (von einem Notar) *genehmigen zu lassen sei*<sup>11</sup>  
whether the gift (by a notary) should *approve to let be*
- c. dass jemand (vom Landrat) Notverordnungen genehmigen lässt *let*-passive  
d. dass Notverordnungen sofort (vom Landrat) *genehmigen zu lassen sind*<sup>12</sup>  
that emergency ordinances immediately (by-the administrator) *approve to let are*

Finally, there remains (y.d) of Table 1, that is, *lassen*-passive applied to *get*-passive. Since the latter requires a dat-acc-verb, this already restricts the pool. Moreover, the dat-to-acc twist of the *get*-passive complicates it significantly. Here is a drawing-board example (7a). Surprisingly, the internet search produced hits even for this strange search object, namely (7b, c). The complex argument-structure manipulation required by the two applications is difficult enough to put off any language user in oral communication, but it is documented in writing, nevertheless.

- (7) a. Der Autor *lässt* (jemanden) (von ihr) im ersten Akt ein Steak *serviert bekommen*.  
the author lets (someone) (by her) in-the first act a steak served get  
'The author has (someone) served a steak (by her) in the first act.'
- b. jemand, der seine Hausaufgaben von S. *erklärt bekommen ließ*<sup>13</sup>  
someone who his homework by S. explained get lets  
'someone who had his homework explained by S.'
- c. <sup>14</sup>... widersprechende Traditionen: die delphische, die ihn von Freunden eines Atheners Timarchos, den er getötet hätte, *umgebracht werden ließ*

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.computerworld.ch/business/digitalisierung/soundspur-web-1267798.html>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.medunigraz.at/fileadmin/studieren/humanmedizin/pdf/KlinischPraktischesJahr/6SJ-Allgemeinfamulatur-Handbuch1.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://rdb.manz.at/\\_api/documents/ris.vwght.JWT\\_1980002678\\_19810120X00/formats/ris.vwght.JWT\\_1980002678\\_19810120X00.rtf](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://rdb.manz.at/_api/documents/ris.vwght.JWT_1980002678_19810120X00/formats/ris.vwght.JWT_1980002678_19810120X00.rtf)

<sup>12</sup> Erich Schneider. 1989. *Der Landtag: Standort und Entwicklungen*. Baden-Baden: Nomos. p. 80

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.wattpad.com/1207876360-22>

<sup>14</sup> [https://books.google.at/books?id=F1VJAQAIAAJ&q=%22umgebracht+werden+lie%C3%9F%22&dq=%22umgebracht+werden+lie%C3%9F%22&hl=de&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwizx6iSj\\_TnAhUMyMQBHeAPB\\_oQ6AEIKDAA](https://books.google.at/books?id=F1VJAQAIAAJ&q=%22umgebracht+werden+lie%C3%9F%22&dq=%22umgebracht+werden+lie%C3%9F%22&hl=de&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwizx6iSj_TnAhUMyMQBHeAPB_oQ6AEIKDAA)

‘... contradictory traditions: the Delphic one, which had him killed by friends of an Athenian Timarchos, whom he would have killed’

The following fact demonstrates just how demanding the processing of German *get*-passive is. *Get*-passive by itself is responsible for one of the very rare and robust syntactic garden-path effects in German, which shows that it necessitates special mental effort in parsing.

- (8) a. dass Karajan einige Orchestermusiker nicht vorgestellt bekamen  
       that Karajan<sub>Acc</sub> some orchestra-musicians<sub>Nom-pl</sub> not introduced became<sub>pl</sub>.  
       b. ‚that Karajan was not introduced to some orchestral musicians’                   DeepL  
       c. ‘that Karajan did not get to introduce some orchestra musicians’ (wrong!) GoogleTr.

It is interesting and expected – due to the algorithms' constant search and comparison of alternatives – that an AI-based translation algorithm easily overcomes these challenges for a human brain, and DeepL actually handles this task in style (8b), while interestingly, Google Translator is completely ‘lost in translation’ (8c).

The unexpected re-analysis of the argument relations by back-tracking triggered by the finite verb with plural agreement is apparently too difficult to disentangle for a human parser. ‘Orchestermusiker’ is the dative object turned into the nominative subject by the *get*-passive (= complication 1), signaled by the inflection information coming from the final item in the utterance. The second complication is the fact that the proper name ‘Karajan’ is not inflected for case and therefore ambiguous at least between nominative and accusative (complication 2). Finally, the direct object precedes the subject in (8a), which is grammatically possible but infrequent. So, the mental parser does not find the way out of the grammatical maze. Speakers ‘instinctively’ avoid grammatical labyrinths in their production efforts.

### 3. Summary

If, in a given grammar, there are several independent tools to achieve a grammatical function, these are equally available parts of the grammatical toolbox, modulo compatibility. It is therefore not surprising at all that language users unconsciously make use of their availability and combine them also with each other if they are *formally* compatible.

German is a particularly suitable terrain for studying the “double passive,” as the four different types of passivation invite recombination. What we see here is that the grammatical functions follow the available forms and not that the forms follow the supposed communicative functions, as too many linguistic Panglossians wrongly would have it.

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