

## When CAUS+SE=PASS: The morphosyntax, semantics and diachrony of Uralic passives

**The explanandum** This paper aims to explain how causative (CAUS) and reflexive (SE) morphology conspire in the morphosyntax, semantics and diachronic development/demise of passive-like constructions of the type in (1a) (archaic and formal/written Hungarian; Horger 1931) and (1b) (Finnish; Lehtinen 2005, Mahieu 2012), similar to the *se faire* construction of French (1c) (Labelle 2002, 2013).

- (1) a. *A levél megír-at-ik.* (archaic Hungarian)  
the letter write-CAUS-SE ‘The letter is being written.’
- b. *Laskut maks-eta-an pankkiin.* (Finnish)  
bills pay-CAUS-SE bank.ILL ‘Bills are paid at the bank.’
- c. *Il s’est fait écraser.* (French)  
he SE.is CAUS run.over ‘He was run over (by a car).’

**Composition** For Hungarian, the morphological composition of the *-(t)At-ik* passive is transparent: *-(t)At* is a productive causative suffix (*sétal* ‘walk’ ~ *kutyát sétal-tat* ‘dog.ACC walk.CAUS, i.e., walk a dog’); *-ik* is a suffix with a wide distribution which can be assimilated to the Romance clitic *se/si* (henceforth, SE; see Den Dikken 2022), ranging in the verbal domain from (inherent) reflexive (*borotválkoz-ik* ‘shave (oneself)’) via medio-passive (*lát* ‘see’ ~ *látsz-ik* ‘can be seen’) and inchoative (*tör* ‘break<sub>trans</sub>’ ~ *tör-ik* ‘break<sub>incho</sub>’) to activity (*bicikliz-ik* ‘bike, ride a bicycle’). For Finnish, the status and genesis of its ‘passive morphology’ are more contentious. From Lehtinen (2005, *q.v.* for references to the source literature), it emerges that analysts have capitalized on morphology with causative and reflexive functions, but have not converged on an analysis of the composition of the complex verbal form; though there is a broad consensus that *\*-ksen/-hen* (the ancestor of modern *-Vn*) is a reflexive/medializing morpheme, there is disagreement on whether *-(t)tA* is historically a causative or a reflexive. In light of Lehtinen’s (2005) and Mahieu’s (2012) meticulous historical and comparative-Finnic analysis, the conclusion is warranted that the Finnish passive is a reflexive causative construction, with *-(t)tA* as CAUS and *-Vn* as SE. Sámi as well has reflexive causative constructions with a passive interpretation (Korhonen 1981), featuring the suffixes *-t* (cognate of Finnish *-(t)tA*) and *-állâ*, the latter ‘a continuative/iterative affix but which is rather generally used in the reflexive meaning, too’ (Lehtinen 2005:203). The parallel between Finnish *-(t)tA*, Sami *-t* and Hungarian *-(t)At*, the third uncontroversially a causative marker, reinforces a treatment of the other two as CAUS. In this light, the so-called passive in (1b) can be paraphrased as ‘Bills allow themselves to be paid at the bank’, whose dispositional semantic ingredient results from the combination of CAUS and SE (cf. German *die Rechnung lässt<sub>CAUS</sub> sich<sub>SE</sub> in bar zahlen* ‘the bill can be paid in cash’).

**Morphosyntax** SE is the subject of predication (see Kayne 1988) for the lexical verb that is combined with CAUS. Embedding the predication structure formed by SE and the VP directly under the causative matrix head gives rise to the (simplified) syntax in (2), in which CAUS assigns case to SE. Because SE takes the case assigned by CAUS, and because no case-assigning functional head is present in CAUS’s complement, no case is available within CAUS’s complement for the internal argument of the verb root, which therefore remains silent. This empty category (*ec*) turns its container into a predicate (just as in null-operator constructions), predicated of the subject of CAUS, which is interpreted as both the undergoer of the event (thanks to its association to *ec*) and its facilitator, giving rise to the dispositional interpretation typical of the CAUS+SE passive. Unlike in canonical passive constructions, no NP-movement is involved in the syntax in (2). Thus, CAUS+SE passives can affect dative objects in French (*Il s’est fait offrir un livre* ‘he SE is CAUS-PTC offer a book’ (i.e., ‘He was offered a book’) though French dative objects cannot be promoted to subject via NP-movement.

(2) [IP [bills] [I [CAUS [SC [Subject SE] [Predicate=VP pay *ec*]]]]]

**Case** No case is assigned to the verb's internal argument (*ec* in (2)) within the complement of CAUS. The noun phrase in the matrix subject position gets nominative case. But in the presence of a telicizing AspP outside the projection of CAUS, Finnish makes accusative case available for pronominal 'total objects': (3). Finnish links ACC assignment to telic Asp; in Hungarian ACC is not tied to Asp.

(3) *Hänet leikat-ta-i-in* (> *leikattiin*). (Finnish)  
 he.ACC operate-CAUS-PST-SE 'He was operated on, he had an operation.'

**SE as a clitic** In (3), CAUS (*-tA*) and SE (*-in*) are separated by the past-tense marker (*-i*). This tells us that, just as in French (1c), Finnish SE is a clitic (Mahieu 2012) that attaches outside the verbal complex. While Finnish past tense is wedged between CAUS and SE, in Hungarian the presence of tense morphology (*-(Vt)t*) renders exponence of SE as *-ik* impossible: (4). This is true of all constructions featuring *-ik* (cf. *es-ik* 'it is falling' ~ *es-ett(\*-ik)* 'it fell'). This is reminiscent of the behavior of the reconstructed Proto-Uralic marker *se*, the ancestor of the Hungarian DEF marker *-i/j*, 'originally a pronoun with the value of the Accusative' (Hajdú 1972:44) and analyzed in Den Dikken (2018) as a clitic: throughout its history, this clitic has imposed strict co-occurrence restrictions, including a ban on combination with past-tense *-(Vt)t* (cf. *ront-j-a* 'spoil-DEF-3SG' ~ *ront-ott(\*-j)-a* 'spoil-PST-(\*DEF)-3SG'). That SE=*-ik* and PST do not co-occur is thus part of a broader picture involving clitics.

(4) *A levél megír-at-ott(\*-ik)*. (Hungarian)  
 the letter write-CAUS-PST(\*-SE) 'The letter was written.'

**Productivity** While the French *se faire* passive has firmly established itself as a productive non-canonical passivization strategy, Hungarian *-(t)At-ik* enjoyed popularity in the historical records and can still be attested in spontaneously produced examples in formal written texts but is no longer productive today. Two factors are involved in this: (i) the suffix *-ik* has diversified to such an extent it no longer wears its status as reflexive/medio-passive SE on its sleeve (present-day *-ik* is frequently treated not as a SE clitic but as a 3SG subject agreement suffix; see Halm 2020 and references cited there); and (ii) the *-(t)At-ik* passive has never been able to promote a dative object (the only apparent counterexample found in the Old Hungarian Corpus (Simon & Sass 2012) involves the verb *evangelizál*, which takes a dative object and features this object in subject position in *Szegények evangelizál-tat-nak* 'poor.PL evangelise-CAUS-3PL: The poor have the gospel preached to them'; Munich Codex). While the French *se faire* passive has gained popularity in part because of its ability to promote datives, the fact that *-(t)At-ik* never managed this has given it no distributional advantage.

**Beyond Uralic** The emergence of a passive-like interpretation in constructions with causative morphology manifests itself not just in Uralic, as French (1c) had already shown. *He got himself arrested* is the English counterpart of a (1)-style CAUS+SE reflexive causative, with *get* as exponent of CAUS. That *get* and *se faire* passives are acquired significantly earlier than *be* passives (Borga & Snyder 2018) falls out from the fact that the syntax in (2), unlike that of *be* passives, involves no NP-movement. Shining a comparative light on a construction sometimes referred to as a 'non-canonical passive', this paper shows that its syntax falls out naturally from its component parts, all of them canonical in nature, in a unified analysis in which the syntax of predication plays the leading role.

**Selected references** Borga & Snyder 2018: <https://doi.org/10.3390/languages3020018> • Den Dikken 2018: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90710-9\\_10](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90710-9_10) • Den Dikken 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1075/jul.00010.dik> • Halm 2020: <https://doi.org/10.1075/dia.19008.hal> • Kayne 1988: *GLOW Newsletter* • Labelle 2002: [https://www.labellemarie.uqam.ca/Labelle/Linguistique\\_files/Labelle\\_LP2002.pdf](https://www.labellemarie.uqam.ca/Labelle/Linguistique_files/Labelle_LP2002.pdf) • Labelle 2013: <https://doi.org/10.1075/la.205.11lab> • Lehtinen 2015: Grammaticalization processes in Finnic • Mahieu 2012: [https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/CahiersDetudesHongroises\\_18\\_2012/?pg=48&layout=s](https://adt.arcanum.com/hu/view/CahiersDetudesHongroises_18_2012/?pg=48&layout=s)