The 'Passive' in an Active Language

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Central Pomo contains a construction that is often rendered with a passive when translated into English. The existence of a passive in Central Pomo is surprising, however, given the functions usually attributed to passive constructions, and certain structural features of Central Pomo grammar.

The Central Pomo construction can be seen in the sentences below, taken from the speech of Mrs. Frances Jack of Hopland, California. It is marked with a verbal suffix -\((y)a\)-. The first sentence comes from a discussion of redbud, a basketry material, and the second from a childhood reminiscence. When Mrs. Jack repeated the discussions in English, she used the passives provided here as translations.

1) *bâč-ka-ya-w*  
   *hințil*  
   *yačök̕e.*  
   **grow-CAUSATIVE-X-ASPECT**  
   **Indian**  
   *them-for*  
   'It was planted for the Indians.'

2) *Muu*  
   *fo*  
   *dliy-g-w*  
   **that me**  
   **order-X-ASPECT**  
   'I was told to do it.'

Verbs without the -\((y)a\)- suffix are usually translated into English actives.

2) *Muu*  
   *bâčkw*  
   **he**  
   **grow-CAUS-ASP**  
   'He/she planted it'

   *Muu*  
   *fo*  
   *dliy*  
   **me**  
   **order-ASP**  
   'He/she told me to'

   *Muu*  
   *bâčkw*  
   **they**  
   **grow-CAUS-JNT.AGENCY-ASP**  
   'They planted it'

   *Muu*  
   *fo*  
   *dliy*  
   **me**  
   **order-JNT.AGENCY-ASP**  
   'They told me to'

It is sometimes assumed that the primary function of passive constructions is to promote or topicalize direct objects. In English, passivization permits participants that would otherwise appear as direct objects (patients of transitive clauses) to assume the grammatical role of subjects.

3) *A policeman found him.*
   *He was found by a policeman.*

Central Pomo has neither direct objects nor subjects, however. Participants are classified grammatically according to their roles as agents and patients instead. Compare the forms of the pronouns in 4).

4) **Agents**  
   *ʔaʔ ʔač*  
   'I ran away'

   *ʔaʔ ʔaq̕aš*  
   'I won'

**Patients**  
*ʔoʊ yémaq*  
'I am getting old'

*ʔoʊ smá stiič'ka*  
'I fell asleep'
said  dallyčiw  'I waved
( my hand)'

too šûda  'I don’t know
how'

múl čač'  'he ran away'
mútu yónaq'  'he is getting old'
múl čač'q’él  'he won'
mútu smsłițič’ka  'he fell asleep'
múl dallyčiw  'he waved
(his hand)'
mútu šûda  'he doesn’t know
how'

Agents and Patients

?ee mu̍tu lóqay  'I am going to help him'
?ee mu̍tu q’ad diw  'I went and got him'
?ee mu̍tu dás̓a?dúw  'I care for him'

When the -(y)a- suffix is added to Central Pomo verbs, there is no change in case marking on nouns. Nouns referring to patients are still marked as patients, even though their English counterparts are subjects. In 5), for example, the patient pronoun yal 'us' is used in the Central Pomo -(y)a- construction, although the English passive translation shows the subject pronoun we.

5)  ?éey?hé  lóqay  p’ţ’aa  še  yal  béda  qo’di tiyaw
where-from  thing-s  wonder  Q  us-PAT  here  bring-X-ASP
’Where were we brought from?

Compare:  Múl  yal  qo’di tiyaw.
he  us-PAT  bring-ASPECT
’He brought us.’

In 6), the patient pronoun mútu yal 'them' is used in the Central Pomo -(y)a- construction, although the English passive translation shows the subject pronoun they.

6)  mútu yal  mil  šmáahč’íw  čów.
them-PAT  there  care-X-ASPECT  not
’They were also ignored.

Compare:  Mútu yal  q’ó?ti  mil  šmáahč’íw  čów.
they  not.even  there  care-ASPECT
’They are not concerned about it.’

There is another reason why the principal function of the -(y)a- cannot be to topicalize direct objects: it can be added to intransitive verbs.

7)  mii  baši-yaʔle
there  PLURAL.lie-X-CONDITIONAL
’There they would sleep’

Compare:  Mútu yal  mii  bašiw
they  there  PLURAL.lie-ASPECT
’They slept there.’

Sentences like these never had objects to topicalize.
Passive intransitives do appear in many languages. Sentences like that in 8) are frequently cited from German.

8)  *Es wurde getanzt*  'it was danced' > 'there was dancing'

The existence of such constructions suggests that the primary function of passivization is actually to demote or detopicalize agents. Participants that would normally serve as subjects (agents) either appear in an oblique case, like the policeman in 3) ('by a policeman') or they do not appear at all, like the dancers in 8).

The Central Pomo *(y)a-* suffix does appear when the identity of an agent is vague.

9)  *Miši  ῥeemi ῥtow méen, maţuumaţûuyaw.*

There-from long.ago from so Storytold-ŋ-Aspect

'This is how it has been told over there, from way back.'

It also appears when the identity of the agent is unknown.

10)  *Méen ʔin mútu ḳeçeeeyaw.*

So is her tell-ŋ-Aspect

'Then a voice spoke to her.'

In this way, it resembles the indefinite pronouns of many languages, such as English *one*, German *man*, and French *on*. But it is not a pronoun; all pronouns in Central Pomo are free. Furthermore, it often appears when the identity of the agent is quite clear. The first lines in 11) explicitly state who took away the mother, yet the *(y)a-* suffix appears with the verb 'take' in the fourth line.

11)  *čiyaa ʔélya gopʰdilhuwan.*

Hawk the-TOP swooping down

'The hawk is the one that swooped down,

*ʔe múatu *mútu pʰiheč’imač’ *ʔéey déč’iw*

The woman her picked up away take

picked her up, and took her away,

lálil déenʔkʰe ʔtʰin.

Back bring-will not

Never to return.

*Násamač’ násamač’ *čiyaw ʔe mṭʰel.*

Forever forever take-ŋ-Aspect the your-mother-PAT

Your mother has been taken away forever.'

In fact, a special suffix to permit the omission of agents seems superfluous in Central Pomo. Agents need not be specified in every Central Pomo clause anyway, whether the *(y)a-* is present or not. The passage in 12) comes from a legend about an owl who married a beautiful oriole. The owl is not mentioned overtly in that sentence, even though no *(y)a-* suffix is present.
12) ṭiːʒo məŋaŋa ?el ṭiːŋiŋwʔkeŋ?e ?el ūŋač’iŋ, his woman NOM take-X-ASPECT-wil NOM scared-SS
'Afraid that his woman will be taken away from him,
čaaŋ’ ?iːŋw ’e ḥląʔk’iʔk’i’w məŋiʔyəlaq qaləmman.
people night-at walk.PL-around-MULT.ACT them-PAT stingy.
(he) is stingy toward night prowlers.'

Noun phrases are frequently omitted from Central Pomo clauses, but not necessarily because the identity of their referents is vague or unknown. Central Pomo speakers, like others, normally speak coherently. They select a topic as a point of departure from which to present information, and retain this orientation over a certain stretch of discourse. In Central Pomo, as in many languages, this topic need not be reidentified in every clause. Hearers assume that it remains constant until it is overtly shifted. The sentence in 12) above followed a sentence translated 'Now today, the owl is always hooting at night.'

The choice of topic for a section of discourse is not random. Speakers are more likely to present events from the viewpoint of some kinds of participants than others. Agents, if present, are most likely to function as topics: instigators of events usually occupy center stage. On occasion, however, speakers select the vantage point of a participant other than the agent as a point of departure. It is just in these situations that the -(y)a- construction appears. The -(y)a suffix signal that, contrary to expectation, the agent of a clause is not the topic.

Speakers may bypass agents in their choice of topic for several reasons. One is a result of the natural tendency toward coherence or topic continuity described above. Narratives are usually presented from the point of view of the main character, the protagonist. The protagonist may be the instigator of the action in most of the events recounted, but occasionally he or she may be affected by an event instigated by another agent. When this happens, the speaker may shift the vantage point to that of the new agent, or may choose to retain the point of view of the protagonist. When the second option is chosen, and the agent is not the topic, the -(y)a- suffix appears. The sentence in 13), for example, comes from an account of a war between the bats and the screech owls. Since bats are nocturnal, the screech owls planned to attack them during the day. The plan was not successful, however.

13) ʔeey məŋuʔya nɐpo’ow,
where they PLURAL.sit-ASPECT
'Where they are,
ʔeey məŋuʔya ʔnänʔəmaw?
where they hide–REFLEXIVE–JOINT.AGENCY–ASPECT NOM
where they're hiding,
maqóyɔw ɛn’ow.
find-X–ASPECT not
(they) can't be found.'
Instead of shifting the topic to the screech owls in the third clause, the speaker remained with the bats and used the -(y)a- construction.

Speakers may bypass agents in their choice of topic for a second reason. When discussing events involving themselves, speakers usually present things from their own point of view, whether they acted as agents or not. The passage in 14) comes from a discussion of how Hopland people used to go down to the Russian river to fish. This is no longer possible, because now the property along the river belongs to ranchers who will not allow them to go there.

14) Ya qa daan, we fish want-IMPERFECTIVE
'we want fish,'

ya q' a ?el pwiman p'k'eelmq'ač', we water NOM look at-IMPRF wish for-JOINT.AGENCY-PL.IMPREF
that's why we look at the water wistfully;

yal mii dòa?q'aw t' in, us there want-PL.IMPREF-X-ASPECT not is-IMPERFECTIVE
we are not wanted there.'

Although she was not an agent, the speaker presented the entire discussion from her own point of view, rather than that of the property owners. This orientation is maintained in the third line by the -(y)a- construction.

The -(y)a- construction can indicate where the sympathies of the speaker lie even if he or she was not personally involved at all. The passage in 15) comes from a description of how early ranchers used to treat the Indians they hired to pick hops. The speaker presented the description from the point of view of the Indian people rather than that of the ranchers, although the ranchers functioned as agents. Accordingly, the verb 'dump' in 15) contains the -(y)a- suffix.

15) T'sbó ?el mii t' dač'aw, dry, grass NOM there dump-X-ASPECT
'(They) dumped grass there

yal mii mi ćagí dòw?kw'é ... us with bed make-CAUSATIVE-to
for us to make beds out of ...

Agents may also be bypassed in topic selection simply because they are peripheral to the point of a discussion. The passage in 16) comes from directions on how to prepare buckeyes. Although an agent is obviously involved in the preparation, the discussion is centered on the buckeyes, not the person preparing them. The English translation with impersonal 'you' was provided by the speaker in a later retelling.

'When gathering buckeyes,
kúyq’aal ?e muul wč’̂ąkawa’yaw.
right.away it.is that heat.cook-CAUS-MULT.ACTIVITY-X-ASPECT
you have to cook them as soon as you get them.

muul basâ wel ?e dōoy batlikyahla ?e
that buckeye NOM it.is long FL.lay-CAUS-X-if it.is
’If you let the buckeye lay too long,

muul bas’ét’aagan.
that bad-INCHOATIVE-IMPERFECTIVE
it turns bad.

Meen ?in ?e muul kúy yhétą’yaw.
so is.IMPRF it.is that quick do-MULT.EV-MULT.ACT-X-ASP
’That is why you have to rush the process.’

In intransitive clauses, the effect of the -(y)a- suffix is
usually to deflect attention from the agent to the activity itself.
The results sometimes correspond to English nominalizations. The
Central Pomo intransitive verbs with -(y)a- in 17) and 18) were
translated with the English nouns 'help' and 'activities'.

17) Lōli’yaw wu dāew?
help-SEMEL.ACTIVE-X-ASPECT Q want-ASPECT
’Do you need help?’

18) Muul ?dōma bāl más yhétą’yaw
that QUOT this place do-MULT.EVENT-MULT.ACTIVITY-X-ASP
’They say he was not paying any attention

mif bāf’sam th’in,
for chalant non
to the activities.’

The Central Pomo -(y)a- suffix thus has much the same function as
passives in languages like English and German. Both signal that the
agent is not the topic, contrary to the usual situation. The Central
Pomo construction differs grammatically from Indo-European passives,
however. In languages like English and German, clause topics are
explicitly grammaticized as subjects. They are formally identified by
case marking and/or word order. They can also control verb agreement.
In active sentences in English and German, number marking on verbs
matches the number of the agent subject: The guards were watching the
prisoner. In passive sentences, number marking matches the number of
the patient subject: The prisoner was being watched by the guards.

In Central Pomo, case is unaffected by the -(y)a- construction,
since case marking is based on semantic roles rather than topicality.
Number marking on verbs is also unaffected by the presence of the
-(y)a- suffix, for more complex reasons.

Central Pomo verbs contain a variety of devices for indicating
number. One involves the alternation of verb roots according to the
number of individuals primarily affected by the event or state. The
verb root used if an individual walks alone, for example, is wə-,
while the root used if a group walks together is hla-. When such verbs appear with the -(y)a- suffix, the root still reflects the number of people involved.

20) Bal ñóma be ñul, hla?wadu?yaw.
   this QUOT here now PL.go-around-INCHOATIVE-X-ASPECT
   'Now (they) started getting around.'

The choice of verb root in sentences like 20) is not equivalent to grammatical agreement. Walking alone and walking in a group are treated as conceptually distinct activities in Central Pomo, much like 'speak' and 'converse' in English. wa- and hla- are separate lexical items. Verb roots are selected according to the situation described, not to match the number of a particular grammatical category.

A second device for indicating number is a verbal suffix -(t)a-. It, too, remains with verbs even when the (y)a- suffix is present.

21) Bal yal yhéts?yaw
   this us do-MULTIPLE.EVENT-MULTIPLE.ACTIVITY-X-ASPECT
   'That's the same thing that (they're) doing
   meen rancheria ?mii.
   so rancheria there
   to our rancheria.'

The -(t)a- suffix actually signals multiple events. It differs subtly from the agreement markers on English and German verbs in that its primary function is to quantify events, not to enumerate participants directly. In 21) it indicates multiple deeds, not mechanical grammatical agreement with the agent ('they').

A third indication of number in Central Pomo verbs also remains when the -(y)a- suffix is added. This is an imperfective aspect marker indicating multiple states or activities. In 22) it signals multiple continual hearings, rather than grammatical agreement with unmentioned 'people'.

22) Múul ñóma bal št'ó, bél mači,
   that QUOT this now this day
   'To this day,
   šdoč-ag'-a-w
   mii mayduu ?élya,
   hear-PLURAL.IMPERFECTIVE-X-ASPECT there dove the-TOPIC
   (people) hear this dove, ...'

The Central Pomo -(y)a- construction thus resembles the passives of many languages in its discourse function, signaling that the agent of a clause is not its topic, contrary to the usual situation. It differs structurally from those passives, however, in that it has no grammatical effect on case organization or agreement. Cases continue to reflect the semantic functions of primary participants, and number marking on verbs continues to quantify aspects of events, rather than the participants themselves.
Occasional Papers On Linguistics

Papers from the 1987 Hokan-Penutian Languages Workshop and Friends of Uto-Aztecan Workshop, Held at University of Utah, Salt Lake City, June 18-21, 1987.

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PREFACE

For the first time, The Hokan-Penutian Languages Workshop and the Friends of Uto-Aztecan Working Conference met together as a single conference, at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, June 18-21, 1987. In the past, the conferences usually met back to back; the Uto-Aztecan meeting usually ended one or two days before the Hokan-Penutian meeting began, which gave people just enough time to travel from one location to the other. Since a number of people attend both meetings, it is hoped that these joint meetings can occur more often.

All the papers except the last one were given in a slightly different form at the meeting in Salt Lake City. The last paper was given at the 1986 Hokan-Penutian meeting, which met as a section the Haas Festival at Santa Cruz. The papers are given in the order they appeared at the meeting at the University of Utah.

The participants of the conference gratefully acknowledge all the work done by Professor Wick R. Miller, other faculty members, and the students at the University of Utah, which made the conference run so smoothly and enjoyably.

The 1988 Hokan-Penutian Languages Workshop will meet at the University of Oregon, Eugene, June 16-18, 1988.

James E. Fedden, Editor
Carbondale, March 1986
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While the conference represented the end of the summer, the project was continuing with a core group who are committed to further research in Yanan in general, and Yahi in particular.