

Topic Shift and Other Discourse Functions of Passives in Latin Narratives

By DIRK PANHUIS, Leuven

1. Introduction

The study of the passive voice in Latin has mainly dealt with morphology and syntax. It has been much less concerned with the question why the passive is used at all. One Latinist even claims that the passive construction is simply an inversion of the active one, generally without any special reason (Bassols de Climent 1971: I, 272)! It has also been called a luxury in language (cf. Wackernagel 1926: 135). It is the purpose of this article to investigate a morphological and syntactic phenomenon from the viewpoint of its functioning in discourse structures.

Several discourse functions have since long been detected (e.g., Jespersen 1924: 167–8; Wackernagel 1926: 143 ff.; Givón 1981: 168) and will be summarized very briefly below. More recently, Givón (1983: 23) has connected the passive with topic discontinuity. In the present article I will concentrate on this last phenomenon and, to a lesser degree, assess the relative importance of the various discourse functions of the Latin passive.

Traditionally recognized discourse functions are the following:

A) Suppression of the agent for various reasons:

1. The agent is unknown or cannot easily be stated (Jespersen 1924: 167; Wackernagel 1926: 143; Schwerer 1975: 59).

2. The agent is self-evident from the context (Jespersen 1924: 167).

3. There may be a special reason (tact or delicacy of sentiment) for not mentioning the agent, particularly if it is the first person (Jespersen 1924: 167; Hofmann-Szantyr 1972: 288).

B) Even if the agent is mentioned (in the *by*-phrase), the passive voice is preferred when the noun phrase which is normally the object of the active sentence is the theme or topic about which something is said (rheme or comment) (Jespersen 1924: 168: “greater interest in the passive . . . subject”; Wackernagel 1926: 143: “der Hauptbegriff . . . um den sich die Gedanken drehen”; Scherer 1975: 59: “daß der Gegenstand, der von der Handlung betroffen wird, als grammatisches Subjekt im Zentrum des Interesses steht”).

C) The passive voice presents the event itself more clearly and decreases the transitivity of the verb. The verb becomes more stative (Wackernagel 1924: 144: *amatur atque egetur* for *amo atque egeo*; Scherer 1975: 60–62).

D) The passive voice may facilitate the connection of one sentence with another: *he rose to speak and was listened to* (Jespersen 1924: 168; Kühner-Stegmann 1912: II, 1: 104).

With respect to Latin, discourse function B raises a question. In many languages the subject tends to be also the theme or topic; therefore, the passive voice promotes the object noun phrase, which otherwise would occur only later in the active sentence, to the front in subject position making it thereby the theme or topic. In Latin, however, such a frontshifting can occur without passivization: there is virtually no syntactic constraint on the place of the object. In a normal sentence the theme(s) or topic(s) occur first in the sentence, the rheme(s) or comment next, as shown in Panhuis (1982). The question is thus: Why would a passive sentence like (1) exist in Latin if the active sentence (2) would equally put “reputation and life” in first position?

(1) *Fama et vita ab hospitibus amicisque defenditur* (Cic., *Rosc. Am.* 15).

(2) *Famam et vitam hospites amicique defendunt.*

Both sentences (1) and (2) differ from the active sentence (3) in the order of their constituents.

(3) *Hospites amicique famam et vitam defendunt.*¹⁾

The order of the constituents in (1) and (2) is the same, but the passive (1) is not a “luxury of language”, but has a discourse function, as will be shown.

While discourse function B in the above list explains the occurrence of sentence (1) as against (3), it does not take into account that (2) fulfills the same purpose and it does not explain the different functions of (1) and (2). Actually, none of the discourse functions A to D listed above applies to sentence (1). An explanation, though, is found in the notion of topic discontinuity (Givón 1983: 23), which turns out to be a major reason for the passive to occur in Latin narrative discourse.

¹⁾ The pragmatic difference between active sentences like (2) and (3) has been explained in my earlier work within the framework of Functional Sentence Perspective (Panhuis 1981, 1982, 1984).

2. *The passive as a device for topic shift*

The investigation of the passive has been restricted here to the main clauses in one particular genre, viz. the narrative in Classical Latin. Among Cicero's speeches the following contain a narratio: *Pro Quinctio*, *Pro Sex. Roscio Amerino*, *Pro M. Tullio*, *Pro Caecina*, *De imperio Cn. Pompei*, *In Catilinam III*, *Pro Archia*, *Pro C. Rabirio Postumo*, *Pro Milone*, *Pro Ligario*. In total 44 pages in the Budé edition.²⁾

In his third speech against Catiline, Cicero narrates the arrest of the ambassadors of the Allobroges, the seizure of important documents, and the arrest of various conspirators. Cicero himself and the praetors are the protagonists in this narrative. The text (*Cat. III*, 5–6), drastically shortened to main verbs, subjects, direct objects, agent phrases with *a(b)*, and a few other constituents, runs as follows.

(4) *Praetores ad me vocavi; rem exposui; ostendi. Illi negotium susceperunt et ad pontem pervenerunt atque ibi fuerunt. Ipsi fortes viros eduxerant et ego delectos adulescentis miseram. Fit in [Allobroges] impetus; DUCUNTUR et ab illis gladii et a nostris. Res praetoribus ERAT NOTA solis, IGNORABATUR a ceteris. Pugna interventu SEDATUR. Litterae TRADUNTUR; ipsi ad me DEDUCUNTUR. Improbissimum machinatorem, Cimbrum Gabinium, ad me vocavi; deinde item ACCERSITUS EST Statilius, et post eum, Cethegus; tardissime Lentulus venit.*

In *Cat. III*, 3, 4, and 5 till *ostendi*, Cicero narrates his actions: all verbs are active: . . . *vocavi*, *exposui*, *ostendi*. The other protagonists, the praetors (*illi*), act as demanded by Cicero: these verbs too are active: *susceperunt*, *pervenerunt*, *fuerunt*. (On *eduxerant* and *miseram*, as well as on *erat nota* and *ignorabatur*, see below.) Then, there is a shift away from Cicero and the praetors to the short skirmish at the bridge and its outcome: all the verbs are

²⁾ Some other speeches contain a narratio (*In Verrem Actio Prima*, *De Provinciis consularibus*, *Pro Balbo*) or almost completely consist of a narratio (*In Pisonem*: "Tout le discours peut être considéré comme une vaste narratio", Grimal, *Introduction* p. 70). But the narrations of these speeches are so intertwined with the argumentation that they have not been retained as data. The narration in *Pro Ligario* is not indicated as such in the Budé edition, but there is a short one.

passive: *fit*,³⁾ *ducuntur*, *sedatur*, *traduntur*, *deducuntur*. Toward the end of this passage protagonist Cicero takes over again: active *vocavi*.

From passage (4) it appears that the use of the passive voice clearly has a discourse function: after a series of actions there is a topic discontinuity or a topic shift. The new topic, the skirmish and its outcome, is developed in a sequence of seven passive main verbs, till the action shifts back to one of the protagonists (Cicero), or, in other texts, to another event or series of events.

Topic shift does not exclude that some of the discourse functions A to D, listed above, may apply. For instance, discourse function A2 (“agent self-evident”) applies to the sentences with the verbs *fit*, *sedatur*, *traduntur*, *deducuntur*, but not the the verbs *ducuntur*, *ignorabatur*, which are accompanied by an agent-phrase. However, the self-evident agent could also be omitted in an active construction with a zero-subject (with verb-agreement: *faciunt impetum*, or without agreement in an historical infinitive). But in case of an ongoing active voice the praetors would continue to be the topic and there would be no shift to the skirmish itself. In sum, for a correct processing of syntactic-semantic information, the omission of the agent in either an active or a passive construction (*faciunt impetum* or *fit impetus*) is acceptable. For the narrative structure of the text, however, the passive is more appropriate: it signals a topic shift. The shift to the skirmish persists in *ducuntur*, which is accompanied by two agent-phrases. The use of the passive as a topic shifting device is thus independent of the absence or presence of an agent-phrase.

Discourse functions A1, A2, and A3 do not apply to the verbs *ducuntur* and *ignorabatur*, since the agents are effectively mentioned in the *a(b)*-phrase. Discourse function D applies to *ignorabatur*. Discourse function C could be invoked for some verbs.

³⁾ Following Wackernagel (1926: 140) I include *fit* with the passive verbs. In spite of its active endings, it serves as a passive for *facit* and a present for *factus est*. In three other passages in the data, *fit* also occurs in a context of topic shifting (*Rosc. Am.* 21 and 25; *Quinct.* 12). In *Caecina* 20 (passage 11, below) *certior fit* + agent phrase is certainly passive in meaning; it follows an active verb with the same subject, in line with discourse function D (“easier connection”). Only *fit dominus* (*Rosc. Am.* 23) at the end of a series of active verbs does not have anything to do with topic shift. In this study *infesta* (*Rosc. Am.* 30) and two verbal adjectives in *-ndus* are counted as passives. Deponent verbs, of course, go with active ones.

Four verbs in passage (4) are not part of the “event-line” or “backbone” of the narrative, but constitute background information and occur in the imperfect or pluperfect tense. The sentences with *eduxerant* and *miseram* constitute background information to the actions of the praetors and Cicero, respectively, thus to the active event-line; those with *erat nota* and *ignorabatur* explain the activity of the Roman soldiers (*a nostris*) in the passive event-line. The tense shift from the narrative historical tenses (perfect, historical present) to the descriptive background tenses (imperfect, pluperfect) cuts through, and is thus independent of, the voices used. (On descriptive background layer and descriptive-preparatory tenses, see Hannah Rosén 1980: 34, *passim*; Scherer 1975: 111; Panhuis 1982: 146–147.)

At the end of passage (4) the attention shifts back to Cicero (*vocavi*). Then there is a shift to Statilius and Cethegus through the passive verb *accersitus est*.⁴) Finally, Lentulus appears on the scene (active *venit*): he too is arrested by order of Cicero. Although the passive verb *accersitus est* signals a shift of attention from Cicero to Statilius, and then to Cethegus, it seems to me that the topic shifting device of the passive is used here partly in order to obtain some “*variatio*”. Cicero sends for four conspirators: this action is told by three different verbs (*vocavi*, *accersitus est*, *venit*), the second of which is passive. In this way Cicero avoids mentioning himself too often (cf. discourse function A3).

The use of the passive in a “*variatio*” is even seen more clearly in passage (5), where the topic (the poet Archias: zero-subject) does not shift at all.

(5) *Erat iucundus Metello et eius filio, AUDIEBATUR a M. Aemilio, vivebat cum Q. Catulo et patre et filio, a L. Crasso COLEBATUR, ADFICIEBATUR summo honore (Arch. 6).*

The great number of persons with whom Archias is in close contact is not simply listed in the same active construction throughout, but is presented in a variation of active and passive verbs. Discourse function D (“easier connection”) applies as well. Notice that this passage is descriptive (imperfect tenses) and lies outside the event-line indicated by the perfect tenses in the text preceding

⁴) The verb *accersitus est* is gapped in the second clause: *post eum* Ø *Cethegus*. The gapping pattern adheres to the general rule that non-final verbs gap forward (or to the right), as is the case here, while final verbs gap backward (or to the left). See Panhuis (1980).

this passage (*Romam venit. Nactus est consules. Luculli eum receperunt.*) and the following text (*Venit Heracleam; voluit; impetravit. Data est civitas* [passive verb: shift from Archias to citizenship]). Variatio is also found in *Cat. III*, 14 (*censuerunt ut . . . itemque ut . . . ; idem hoc decretum est in [5×] . . .*), and perhaps in *Milo 29* (*partim occisi sunt* [topic shift to Milo's slaves], *partim fecerunt*).

The topic shift, exemplified in passage (4), concerns a sequence of seven consecutive passive main verbs. But shifts signalled by only one passive main verb do occur as well. Cicero's account of the interrogation of the conspirators offers three examples (*Cat. III*, 10–11; all consecutive main verbs are given in passages 6 to 8).

- (6) *Iussimus. Ostendimus Cethego signum; cognovit. Nos linum incidimus, legimus. ERAT SCRIPTUM ipsius manu . . . Tum Cethegus conticuit.*
- (7) *Statilius cognovit et signum et manum suam. RECITATAE SUNT tabellae. Confessus est.*
- (8) *Tum ostendi tabellas Lentulo et quaesivi cognosceretne signum. Adnuit. Inquam. LEGUNTUR litterae. Feci potestatem. Atque ille negavit.*

The three passive verbs (*erat scriptum*, *recitatae sunt*, and *leguntur*) signal each by themselves a shift from the narrator Cicero and the accused conspirator to the letter. Then Cicero or the accused is again the topic. Notice that in (6) the topic of "to read" (*legimus*) is Cicero and that the shift occurs with *erat scriptum* + A. c. I.⁵⁾, while in (7) and (8) the letters are a new topic, as indicated by the passive verbs of reading (*recitatae sunt* in 7, *leguntur* in 8).

Among the 88 passive main verbs counted in 44 Budé pages 27 passive verbs indicating a topic shift occur in isolation,⁶⁾ while 35 passive verbs occur in sequences ranging from 2 to 7 verbs.⁷⁾ Thus

⁵⁾ The pluperfect *erat scriptum* signals background information.

⁶⁾ *Quinct.* 11 (*est existimatus*), 17 (*agebatur*), 24 (*consignantur*), 28 (*detruditur*), 29 (*appellantur*); *Rosc. Am.* 15 (*defenditur*), 21 (*emuntur*), 25 (*fit*), 33 (*est interemptus*), 36 (*est ferendum*); *Caecina* 12 (*vocatae sunt*), 16 (*datur*), 17 (*solvitur*), 20 (*sumitur*), 23 (*facta est*); *Cat. III*, 6 (*accersitus est*), 10 (*erat scriptum*, *recitatae sunt*), 11 (*leguntur*), 13 (*dictae sunt*), 4 (*decretum est*); *Arch.* 4 (*celebrabantur*), 7 (*data est*); *Rab. Post.* 4 (*deductus est*), 7 (*damnetur*, *seiuncta est*); *Milo 29* (*occisi sunt*).

⁷⁾ *Quinct.* 12 (3 verbs); *Rosc. Am.* 20 (3 verbs), 20–21 (4 verbs), 30 (7 verbs), *Caecina* 16 (2 verbs); *Cat. III*, 6 (7 verbs: passage 4), 14 (3 verbs), 15 (2 verbs), 15 (2 verbs); *Arch.* 5 (2 verbs).

in total 62 out of 88 passive main verbs (or 70%) function as a topic shifting device in some representative specimens of narrative discourse in Classical Latin.

Among the remaining passive main verbs 12 are impersonal: the agent is suppressed, either because he is unknown ('someone', 'everybody') as in *Lig. 3* (*concursum est*: discourse function A 1), or because he is self-evident as in *Tull. 20* (*venitur, disceditur*: discourse function A 2), or because the speaker does not want to mention himself (*Rosc. Am. 31*: *deliberatum*: discourse function A 3). The impersonal passive also reflects a lesser degree of transitivity and a greater emphasis on the event itself (discourse function C).

Of the 88 passive main verbs only 13 have an agent-phrase. Suppression of the agent is thus a general characteristic of the passive in Latin narrative discourse, without being obligatory as in some other languages.

A remainder of 14 passive main verbs do not signal a topic shift and do not constitute impersonal constructions. Some seven of them evidently do not shift topic, like *Rosc. Am. 23* (*fit*); *Caecina 10* (*existimatus est*), *20* (*certior fit*); *Arch. 6* (cf. passage 5); but they can be explained through discourse function D ("easier connection") or through *variatio* (cf. footnote 3 and passage 5). Other passives are hard to explain, like *Imp. Pomp. 4* (*bellum a regibus inferunt*;⁸) *adferuntur*). Also hard to explain are *Rab. Post. 6* (*agitur, coniuncta est*), and *Milo 30* (*superatus est, victa, oppressa est*), *31* (*solvamur*). However, these 6 passive verbs occur at the end of the *narratio*, which in fact is already an argumentative piece of discourse. They should thus be investigated in the context of such a type of discourse.

3. Conclusions

Topic shift turns out to be a very important reason for passive verbs to occur in main clauses in Classical Latin narrative discourse: 70% of these passive verbs signal topic shift. While discourse

⁸) Discourse function B could be invoked: the object of the active sentence occurs as the topic/subject of this passive sentence, which starts the narration. In this way the agent phrase—quite appropriately—occurs more to the right in the sentence, since it is a "heavy noun phrase" which is focussed upon as the most rhematic element in the sentence. But still, this explanation does not answer my initial question (with respect to passage 1): Why does this passive sentence occur instead of the active one with the same order of constituents: *bellum reges inferunt*, particularly when the agent is not suppressed?

function B, mentioned in the introduction (“erstwhile object becomes topic/subject”) may constitute a correct and sufficient explanation for languages with a relatively rigid word order, it is correct but not sufficient to explain a passive construction in Latin, where the topic can occur in first position without passivization. Let us return to passage (1), given now in its context as passage (9).

(9) *Nam patrimonium domestici praedones vi ereptum possident, fama et vita innocentis ab hospitibus amicisque paternis DEFENDITUR* (*Rosc. Am.* 15).

The interpretation of these sentences is thus: ‘As for his patrimony, brigands belonging to his family have seized it by force and possess it, WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND the reputation and life of the innocent man are defended by the guests and friends of his father.’ The passive sentence with *defenditur* and the concomitant changes in the case-endings signal a shift to another topic/subject (and other agents as well). This shift would hardly be noticed in an active sentence like (2), above, with the same constituent order as the passive sentence. Two active sentences like in (10) would create a parallelism, which suggests a similarity in content—which is not what the speaker intends to say.

(10) *Patrimonium praedones possident, famam et vitam hospites amicique defendunt.*

While discourse function B is mentioned in a Latin grammar like Scherer (1975: 59)—and regrettably not in others—, an important function has to be added, if a grammar of Latin wants to do justice to the pragmatic level of language and to discourse structures: it is the topic shift which constitutes a prime discourse function of the passive (perhaps in Latin more so than in languages with a more rigid word order, where discourse function B provides sufficient explanation).

Discourse function A (“suppression of the agent”) is a very general feature of the Latin passive (85%), even in narratives, which on the whole are agent oriented. A comparison with expository discourse should be made, also for the ratio of active versus passive sentences.

Discourse function C (“less transitive”/“more stative”) is also an important feature, which however is hard to evaluate numerically.

Discourse function D (“easier connection”), the only function mentioned by Kühner-Stegmann (1912: II, 1: 104), actually is

rather marginal. It could be invoked for passage (4: *res nota est, ignorabatur*), (5), (11), and (12).

(11) *Caecina venit in castellum Axiam. Ibi certior FIT a pluribus . . .*
(*Caecina* 20).

(12) *Studia haec et in Latio COLEBANTUR et Romae non NE-
GLEGEANTUR* (*Arch.* 5).

Even in a sequence of passive verbs (passage 4 and footnote 7) discourse function D often does not apply, since the topics/subjects of the various sentences may not be the same.

Lastly, the passive can also be used in a *variatio* with the active verb. As such its role is rather limited and it has a stylistic rather than a discourse function. (On *variatio*, cf. Hofmann-Szantyr 1972: 816.)

It goes without saying that various functions of the passive can cooccur, while exact correlations are impossible to establish.

References

- Bassols de Climent, Mariano (1971), *Sintaxis latina*. 2 vol. Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas.
- Cicéron, *Discours*. 20 vol. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Givón, Talmy (1981), "Typology and Functional Domains." *Studies in Language* 5, 163–193.
- Givón, Talmy (ed) (1983), *Topic Continuity in Discourse: A Quantitative Cross-Language Study*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Hofmann, J.B. and Szantyr, Anton (1972), *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik*. München: Beck.
- Jespersen, Otto (1924), *The Philosophy of Grammar*. New York: Norton.
- Kühner, Raphael and Stegmann, Carl (1912–1914), *Ausführliche Grammatik der lateinischen Sprache. II: Satzlehre*. 2 vol. Third edition by Andreas Thierfelder. Hannover: Hahn, 1971.
- Panhuis, Dirk (1980), "Gapping in Latin." *The Classical Journal* 75, 229–241.
- Panhuis, Dirk (1981), "Word Order, Genre, Adstratum: The Place of the Verb in Caesar's Topographical Excursus." *Glotta* 59, 295–308.
- Panhuis, Dirk (1982), *The Communicative Perspective in the Sentence: A Study of Latin Word Order*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Panhuis, Dirk (1984), "Prolepsis in Greek as a Discourse Strategy." *Glotta* 62, 26–39.
- Rosén, Hannah (1980), "'Exposition und Mitteilung'—The Imperfect as a Thematic Tense-Form in the Letters of Pliny." in: Rosén, H.B. and H. (1980), *On Moods and Tenses of the Latin Verb*. München: Fink, 27–48.
- Scherer, A. (1975), *Handbuch der lateinischen Syntax*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Wackernagel, Jacob (1926), *Vorlesungen über Syntax mit besonderer Berücksichtigung von Griechisch, Lateinisch und Deutsch. Erste Reihe*. Basel: Birkhäuser.