Passive Construction in St. Lawrence Island Yupik

St. Lawrence Island Yupik (SLIY) is morphologically ergative, a feature similar to other Eskimo languages as well. Passive, a feature which typically occurs in accusative languages, has not been extensively described in previous studies of SLIY. This paper shows that SLIY productively uses passive construction in detransitivizing verbs in subordinate clauses to meet a certain morpho-syntactic requirement.

Ambitransitive stems (that inflect as intransitives or transitives) in SLIY show split ergativity at the lexical level, that is, they are classified as “AGENTIVE” and “NON-AGENTIVE.” The subject of the intransitive form corresponds to the agent of the transitive with agentive stems while the subject of the intransitive form corresponds to the object of the transitive with non-agentive stems. Passive is observed when an agentive verb is followed by the suffix -uma, considered as a perfect marker.

(1) iqaluk nəə-aa
    fish.ABSOLUTIVE.sg. eat(AGENTIVE)-INDICATIVE.3sg.3sg. ‘He/she ate the fish.’

(2) iqaluk nəə-uma-aq
    fish.ABSOLUTIVE.sg. eat(AGENTIVE)-uma-INDICATIVE.3sg. ‘The fish has been eaten.’

Since SLIY is morphologically ergative, promotion of an object to a subject by passivization does not lead to a change in case marking, i.e., the promoted object remains in the absolutive. It should be noted that in simplex sentences, the passive is limited in distribution, in that, not all agentive stems allow passivization and the demoted agent cannot appear overtly.

However, the use of -uma as a passive marker is highly productive when used in subordinate clauses with verbs in the ‘subordinative mood,’ which is one of the inflectional moods in SLIY. A Verb in the subordinative mood indexes only one argument, namely, the absolutive argument. If a transitive verb in the subordinative mood has the same agent as the subject/agent of the matrix clause, the agent of the subordinative clause need not be present overtly. However, if a transitive in the subordinative mood has a different agent from the subject/agent of the matrix clause, the transitive verb in the subordinative clause needs to be detransitivized since only one core argument can appear in a subordinate clause with a verb in subordinative mood. Previous works ignore the differences between intransitives and transitives, and claim that the subject of a verb in the subordinative mood must be the same as that of the matrix clause. However, Nagai (2004) has clearly shown that an intransitive verb in the subordinative mood expressing state or on-going activity can have a subject different from the one in the matrix clause. In this case, the passive marker -uma is frequently attached to agentive stems. When this marker is used with a verb in the subordinative mood, it expresses progressive meaning rather than perfect. Moreover, the suffix can form a full-fledged passive with a demoted agent in oblique case as in (3). Unlike passives in simplex sentences, the demoted agent must be overtly present in the allative case.

(3) yuy-əm aŋyə-aa ərna-mun nəə-uma-luku
    man-ERGATIVE.sg. see-INDICATIVE.3sg.3sg. woman-ALLATIVE.sg. eat-uma-SUBORDINATIVE.3sg.
    iqaluk
    fish.ABSOLUTIVE.sg.

‘The man saw the fish while it was being eaten by a woman.’

The differences in the behavior of passives in simplex and complex sentences can be explained in terms of morphological ergativity. The passive function generally has several features such as making the object salient by subjectivizing it, raising the object in the empathy hierarchy, and so on. Due to morphological ergativity, the object of a transitive verb has the same case as the intransitive subject. Additionally, the object is already salient, and thus it needs not undergo passivization. This explains the limited distribution of passives in simplex sentences.

In conclusion, this paper has shown that SLIY has a fully productive passive feature with an overt demoted agent in a subordinate clause which has a different subject from the matrix clause.
References