Georgian Passive and the Information Structure of a Sentence

Georgian passive is quite different from the Indo-European one: In Indo-European languages passive constructions are functionally defined; they are conversive ones of the corresponding active constructions where patient is promoted to the subject position, and agent is demoted and transferred to the prepositional phrase. The passive verb forms in Georgian do not always show the conversion of the active construction. That is, they are not simply defined by syntactic transformations and they are mostly governed by semantic peculiarities of a verb. Sometimes ‘passive constructions’ actually represent active semantics: dgeba ‘S/he is standing up’, ekačeba ‘S/he pulls something’, ac’veba ‘S/he pushes something’ and so on. It seems that in Georgian, as in some other languages, e. g. in Japanese [Shibatani, 1985], active-passive opposition forms a continuum where prototypical passive differs from so called middle forms.

A passive verb formally is clearly distinguishable from an active one: In present tense, S.3 has -a ending for passive verb forms (first of all, for prototypical ones) while it has -s ending for active forms (first of all, for prototypical ones) [Shanidze, 1973]. Verbs with medial semantics (such as the verbs with peripheral semantics) choose either active or passive formal models of representation.

We can suggest the main semantic regularity which governs a process of grammaticalization of medial verbs from this point of view: If medial verb semantics allows different directions (or locations) of an action (or state) (that is, it can be directionally or locally oriented), a verb has a passive form; if not, it has an active form; e. g. dgeba:a-dgeba:gada-dgeba:c’ar-dgeba:ča-dgeba ‘S/he stands up : s/he retires : s/he is heading-in : s/he stands in/between’; still, compare with cxovrobs ‘S/he lives’, which doesn’t allow such forms and doesn’t distinguish aspectual differences that are marked in Georgian by Preverbs: a- ‘up’, c’a- ‘away, to’, ča(r)- ‘down’ gada- ‘cross’ and others.

These peculiarities of the Georgian passive define the restrictions of their usage in the process of the structuring of information. On the basis of the semi-spontaneous data which is collected using the Questionnaire on Information Structure (QUIS is being developed within the Sonderforschungsbereich 632 “Information Structure” at the University of Potsdam and the Humboldt University Berlin funded by the German Scientific Society [Skopeteas et all. 2006]), the passive constructions in Georgian are not defined by the invisibility of agent (data n. 42) and they don’t always simply suppose the changes of syntactic functions: When an invisible Agent is presented and the passive constructions are logically the most appropriate, Georgian informants prefer to produce active constructions with uncertain subject which is represented in verb forms either by S.3.PL suffixes (1) or indefinite pronouns viyač/ ra yač ‘somebody/ something’(2):

(1) botl-s k’r-av-en pex-s
    bottle-DAT push-HAB-ACT.PRS.S.3.PL foot-DAT
    ‘(They) are pushing the bottle with foot.’

(2) ma-s vi-ya-c pex-s u-rt’q ’am-s
    ‘Somebody is hitting him with foot.’

Thus, the analysis of the information structure of sentences in Georgian gives one additional strong argument to interpret Georgian passive as a grammatical category mostly governed by semantic (and not only by syntactic) features.
References