From third plural to passive: incipient, emergent and established passives

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Third person plural constructions in which the third person plural denotes a generalized human subject are frequently cited sources of passives (Givon 1979; Heine & Reh 1984:99; Haspelmath 1990). However whereas the so-called impersonal uses of the third person plural are extremely wide spread (see e.g. Kitagawa & Lehrer 1990; Siewierska 2008), and have even been hypothesized as universal, actual passives originating from third person plural constructions are considerably less common. In fact the major and often only example of the development of a third person plural construction into a passive one provided in the vast typological literature on the passive is that of the South-West Bantu languages, especially Kimbundu and Lunda (see e.g. Fleisch 2005; Kawasha 2007).

While this discrepancy between the extremely common impersonal use of the third person plural and the cited instances of such constructions developing into passives may be simply due to a knowledge gap, or the particular diachronic instability of passives stemming from a third person plural source, there is also the possibility that the above development is subject to some set of specific conditions which are not that frequently met. The present paper sets out to explore what these conditions might be.

I will first consider the properties of the third person plural impersonal construction itself which constitute a prerequisite for a passive reanalysis. Next on the basis of the known instances of passives originating from third person plural constructions, I will try and establish the morpho-syntactic coding properties which are favorable to a passive reanalysis. Then in the light of the controversies surrounding the issue of what constitutes a passive as opposed to an impersonal construction (see e.g. Blevins 2003) and the postulated predictability of the structural features of early passives from their source constructions (Givon 2007), I will try and determine the subsequent stages of the reanalysis of third person constructions as passives. It will be argued that no unique sequencing of patient promotion (to either topic or subject) relative to overt agent expression can be posited. It will also be argued that while the structural features of its source construction are claimed to be discernible only in the early stages of the grammaticalization of the passive, the functional traces of at least the third person plural origins of a passive construction may be discernable even at later stages of grammaticalization.

References