# THEME-RHEME ORGANIZATION IN TURKISH
# A FUNCTIONAL-PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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**Abstract**

Turkish does not tend to use passive sentences much less than English and some other European Languages.  Passive is used when the doer of the action is not present in the sentence for any reason. On the other hand, in Turkish, unlike English and many other European languages, case is assigned to noun phrases (NPs) overtly and by affixation. This article aims to find the correlation between case assignment type and passive formation, to explain why Turkish does not tend to form agentive passive sentences, and to introduce a non-passive alternative for agentive passive sentences, within the framework of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP).

**Introduction**

While agentive passive sentences are formed naturally and frequently in English, they are not frequently formed in Turkish. The passive voice is usually used when the doer of the action is not mentioned for any reason. On the other hand, while in English and some European languages, case is determined syntactically, in Turkish, it is assigned morphologically. Analyzing the markedness process of passivization within the Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) approach, and elaborating the above-named two different ways of case assignment, this article intends to discover the correlation between overt case assignment and passive in Turkish.

**Objectives of the Study:** As was mentioned before, Turkish does not tend to form agentive passives sentences. Introducing such concepts as case assignment, markedness, etc., this study aims to discover and explain the reason(s) why Turkish does not tend to form agentive passive sentences.

**Background and Research rationale**

**Case Theory:** Case is an "inflectional category, basically of nouns, which typically marks their role in relation to other parts of the sentence" Matthews (2007, p.48). In other words, case is "a grammatical category that shows the function of the noun or noun phrase in a sentence" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002, p.63).

The most frequently distinguished cases are nominative, accusative and dative, respectively assigned to the subject, the direct object and the indirect object or object of preposition. Case assignment in sentences with different numbers of NP arguments is illustrated in the following examples:

Example 1:

|   | **Subject** | **verb** | **DO** | **IO/OP** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|   | **NOMINATIVE** |   | **ACCUSATIVE** | **DATIVE** |
| a | **John** | went | -- | -- |
| b | Mary | invited | **John** | -- |
| c | Bob | gave | the flowers | to **John** |

*John* in (1a), (1b) and (1c) has nominative, accusative and dative case respectively, while they, lacking case endings, are equal in form. The fact that *John* lacks any visible case ending in the above examples does not mean that it lacks case. Chomsky (1986a, p.74) maintains that "every phonetically realized NP must be assigned (abstract) case." Case Theory goes far beyond case endings of nouns. "It deals not just with case forms visible in the surface sentence but with 'abstract' Case."(Cook and Newson, 2005, p. 222).  For Cook and Newson (2005), "abstract case is an important element in the syntax even when it does not appear in the surface" (p.223).

While case is a universal concept, case assignment processes is language-specific. Case assignment differences in English and Turkish will be elaborated in due course.

**Voice:** Voice is "the **grammatical category** governing the way the subject of a sentence is related to the action of the verb" Trask (2007 p.319). It is a linguistic category which indicates whether the surface subject of a sentence is the performer of the action or is acted upon. In other

words, voice is "the way in which a language expresses the relationship between a verb and the noun phrases which are associated with it" (Richards & Schmidt 2002, p. 582).

The most familiar voice contrast, in many languages, is between active and passive constructions. "A verb is in the **active voice** when the subject of the verb actually performs the action indicated by the verb… A verb is in the **passive voice** when it expresses an action performed upon its subject" (Shaw, 1986, p. 12). In other words, passive is "a construction in which an intrinsically transitive verb is construed in such a way that its underlying object appears as its surface subject" (Trask, 1993, p. 201).  Two sentences can be different in voice and yet convey the same basic meaning. Consider the two sentences (2) and (3):

(2)  John sold the house.

(3)  The house was sold by John.

Sentence (2) is an active sentence. Sentence (3) is the corresponding passive of the active sentence (2). Passive sentences, which do include the agent or doer of the action, as (3), are referred to as "agentive" or "long" passive sentences. They are equal in the basic meaning with their corresponding active sentences.

If (2) and (3) are equal in the basic meaning, then in what do they differ and why should two semantically identical sentences be formed?  This question will be answered in details in section (3.3).

Agent-less passive sentences like ***The house was sold*** are very common in many languages. They are formed when the agent or the doer of the action is absent in the sentence, because it is unknown, unimportant or predictable, or for any other reason. On the other hand, agentive passive sentences, in which agent is also included, are formed to serve another function. They are formed to change the information structure of the sentence.

**Passive Voice in Turkish:** Passive is formed, in Turkish, with passive suffices. "The passive suffix has the following forms:

-**n**  aran-'be searched (for)', 'be rung up', tıkan-'be blocked', yıkan-'be washed'

-**in**  bilin-'be known', delin-'be punctured/perforated'

-**il**  yapıl-'be done/made/built', görül-'be seen'

-**nis**  attached to stems ending in a vowel" (Göksel & Kerslake, 2005, p. 72).

The most productive pattern of the passive constructions found in Turkish is formed with the passive suffix (/-il/), The short passive sentence (11) from the active sentence (10) with the passive affix ( -il):

(4)      Kristof Kolomb Amerika-yt      keşf -et -ti

Christopher Columbus    America-Acc. discovery -do -Past

Christopher Columbus discovered America.

(5)    Amerika keşf -ed -**il** -di

America discovery -do -Pass. -Past

America was discovered .

To compare passive in Turkish and English, a translation of sentence (2) into Turkish, can be of help:

(6)    John ev-i sat-tı.

John house-ACC sell-Past

John sold the house.

Turkish, Unlike English, does not tend to form agentive passive  sentences. They are " not used as much as its English equivalent for the sake of elegant variation; e.g. a Turk is more likely to say *His father rebuked him*  instead of *He was rebuked by his father*"(Geoffrey, 2000,p.152, emphasis added). By the same token, a sentence like (13) though not totally ruled out, is not tended to form  in Turkish:

(7)   Ev   John tarafindan sat-il-di[13]

the house   John              by       sell-pass-Past

The house was sold by John.

What is aimed here is to answer two questions (i) why Turkish does not tend to form agentive (long), and (ii) what is the natural well-formed alternative for a Turkish agentive passive sentence?

**Functional Sentence Perspective:**  Associated with the Prague School of linguistics, Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) is a type of analysis which studies the sentence in terms of the role its elements play in communication. According to FSP "the structure of utterances is determined by the use to which they are put and the communicative context in which they occur" (Lyons, 1981, p. 227).

From this viewpoint, an active sentence and its corresponding passive one, though identical in the basic meaning, are uttered in two different situations and cannot be interchangeably used. In other words, they are suitable answers to two different questions. For example, senetence 2 repeated as 8b) is a suitable answer to (8a):

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[13]- Sentences like (13), if any, seem to be formed via word-for- word translation from European languages. In colloquial varieties of Turkish e.g. the variety spoken by the Qashqa'i  in southern Iran,  into which translation from European languages is not practiced and are not consequently inspired by European languages, agentive passive  sentences are not formed at all

(8)  a.  What did John sell?          b.  John sold the house.
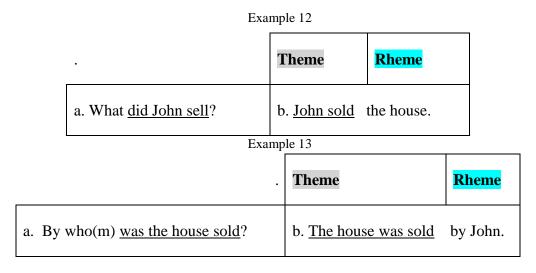
Sentence 3, rewritten as 9b) is, however, a felicitous answer to the totally different question (9a):

(9) a. By who(m) was the house sold?          b. The house was sold by John.

Sentences (8b) and (9b), are grammatical, acceptable and semantically equal. They, nevertheless,  are not felicitous answers to (10a) and (11a) respectively:

(10)   a.   What did John sell?          b.  ? The house was sold by John.

(11)  a.    By who(m) was the house sold?          b.   ? John sold the house.

FSP describes how information is distributed in sentences: a sentence coveys two types of information, namely old (given) and new information. The old information, referred to as **theme**, is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to share with the addressee. Theme is "the starting point of utterance" (Mathesius, 1942), or it is "the point of departure for what the speaker is going to say" (Halliday,1985, p.36). The new information, referred to as **rheme**, is what the speaker states about, or in regard to, the theme. In other words, rheme is "everything else that follows in the sentence" (Brown and Yule, 1989, p.126).  In still other words, rheme is the information that the speaker assumes not to be inferable by the addressee from the text. Theme is the information repeated in both the question and the answer, and what appears only in the answer is rheme.

Example 12

| | Theme | Rheme |
|---|---|---|
| a. What <u>did John sell</u>? | b. <u>John sold</u>   the house. | |

Example 13

| | Theme | Rheme |
|---|---|---|
| a.  By who(m) <u>was the house sold</u>? | b. <u>The house was sold</u>   by John. | |

In (12b), *John sold*, repeated in both the question and the answer, is the theme and *the house,* which appears only in the answer, is the rheme. It can be concluded that, the short answer to a wh-question is the rheme but the complete answer contains both theme and rheme.  By the same token, in (13b), *The house was sold* is the theme and *(by)John* is the rheme. Thus, according to FSP, an active sentence and its corresponding passive sentence differ with regard to

the theme-rheme distribution: what is the theme in an active sentence can be (totally or partially) the rheme in the corresponding passive sentence and vice-versa.

**Markedness:** A linguistic form  is said to be marked if it is " less central or less natural than a competing one (unmarked form) on any of various grounds, such as lower frequency, more limited distribution, more overt morphological marking, greater semantic specificity or greater rarity in languages generally" (Trask 1993, p. 167).  Thus, "a passive sentence like ***Janet was arrested by the police*** is marked with respect to the active ***The police arrested Janet***, since the passive contains more material, has a more complex structure, and is rarer than the active"(Trask, 2007, p. 164, emphasis added).

The markedness of a sentence can be determined by its word order. Richards & Schmidt (2002) introduce the Markedness Theory as:

> in languages of the world certain linguistic elements are more basic,  natural, and frequent (unmarked) than others which are referred to as "marked".  For example, in English, sentences which have the order: Subject-Verb-Object: *I dislike such people.* Are considered to be unmarked, whereas sentences which have the order: Object-Subject-Verb: *Such people I dislike.* Are considered to be marked (P.320).

By the same token, an English sentence like (2), which has the basic Subject-Verb-Object word order, is regarded as "unmarked" and any sentence which violates this basic word order, like (3),  is marked.

For FSP, any process which changes the theme-rheme organization of the sentence is referred to as a "markedness  process" (Andersen 1989). Passivization, though  the most productive markedness process is not  the only one. Some other markedness processes, the elaboration of which falls beyond the scope of this study, are Topicalization, Inversion, Clefting, to name but a few. Within one language, structurally different sentences may undergo different markedness processes. Moreover, different languages may utilize different markedness processes in the same situation. In other words, whereas markedness is a universal concept, markedness processes are language-specific.

**Materials and Methods**

The data for the study are simple sentences of the type of those found in Turkish language textbooks. The data corpus, being very limited in number and simple in nature, represents a standard level of Turkish. Simple examples are deliberately chosen for the convenience of the discussions and argumentations.

**Results and Discussions**

Examples (1)(a,b & c) illustrate that English lacks overt case markers. Case is word-order bound in  English. Pre-verbal and post-verbal NPs have nominative and accusative cases respectively and NPs followed by a preposition are dative.

In Turkish, unlike English, case is assigned markers that do have phonetic manifestation. In other words, Turkish benefits from overt case markers."The suffix of the accusative is -**i**, genitive -**in**, dative -**e**, locative -**de**, and ablative –**den**"( Lewis, 2000, P.26, emphasis added). Turkish can briefly be characterized as "a verb final agglutinative language (exclusively suffixing) with postpositions, a regular case marking system and a modifier-head construction" (Erguvanli, 1984. p. 5). To illustrate this, sentence (14), which is the Turkish translation of the English sentence (2) would be of help. Morpheme boundaries within the NPs, are hyphenated, and case markers are underlined  for more convenience:

(14)  John   ev-**i**      sat-tu

John-NOM house-ACC sell-Past

In (14), the postposition /-**i**/ attached to *ev* (the house), is the accusative marker. What is the nominative marker in Turkish. Any NP, in Turkish, which lacks a case marker is nominative. In linguistics, a morpheme  which does not have any phonetic manifestation, is referred to as a zero morpheme usually illustrated as (/-ø/).[14]  Nominative case marker in Turkish is a  zero morpheme which  is in contrast with the accusative case marker (/-**i**/).

As a consequence of overt case assignment, Turkish NPs, unlike English NPs are not word order bound and can move flexibly within the sentence, as the case marker /-i/ is always attached to accusative NPs and differentiates them from nominative NPs.

In Turkish, word order is variable. "Major constituents can occur in any order in Turkish, but the unmarked order is subject (—object)—predicate(SOV) in verbal sentences and subject— predicate in nominal sentences"(Göksel& Kerslake, 2005, p. 337). Sentence (14), having the word order SOV,  is a typical unmarked sentence in Turkish. "The major constituents of a sentence, however, can appear in any order)" (Göksel& Kerslake, 2005, p. 343)**.**

In Turkish "Word order does not express the syntactic and semantic functions of noun phrases …word order in Turkish is dictated by discourse considerations" Kornfilt, 1997, p. 215). Turkish fits into the pragmatic word order type (Thompson, 1978).

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[14] -In linguists and semiotics lack of a sign can be  regarded as a sign itself. For example ⇧ is used to show a one way street. The absence of this sign is, as a psychological reality in the driver's mind, indicative of a two-way street.

The term unmarked order refers to the ordering of constituents in the opening sentence of a dialogue or discourse, where no information is presupposed. In other words "Utterances in the unmarked order have no particular part which is more prominent than the others…Changing the order of constituents in a sentence is used as a means of distinguishing new information from background in formation and of making a certain constituent prominent in the discourse" (Erguvanli 1984,p. 337). (15) is an example of a marked alternative of (14) :

> (15)    Ev-i    John   sat-tu
>
> the  house-ACC   John-NOM  sell-Past

In (15) , the direct object ***Ev-i***  ( the house) precedes the subject John. Thus, (15), having the OSV word order, is marked. It is in contrast with (14) which has the unmarked SOV word order. Sentences (14) and (15) have the same basic meaning. However, they are of different information structures, as they are felicitous answers to two different questions:

(16) a. John -ø    ne  sat-tu?               b. John -ø   ev-i  sat-tu .

John-NOM      what sell-past                         John-NOM  cake-ACC  sell-past

(17) a. Ev-i    kim   sat-tu?           b.  Ev-i         John    sat-tu

The house-ACC w ho      sell-past                 the  house-ACC   John-NOM  sell-Past

Sentence (17b), is a well-formed and naturally made sentence in Turkish. It is not passive, yet it is marked. It has the same theme-rheme organization as the English passive sentence *The house was sold by John.*

Example 18

| Theme | Rheme |
|---|---|
| a.   By who(m) <u>was the house sold</u>? | b.  <u>The house was sold</u>     by John. |

Example 19

| Theme | Rheme | Theme[15] |
|---|---|---|
| a.       Ev-i    kim      sat-tu?<br><br>The house-ACC who-NOM  sell-past | b. Ev-i          John         sat-tu<br><br> the      house-ACC        John-NO<br>sell-Past | |

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[15] - If  the Theme is split by the Rheme, for any reason, it is referred to as "Discrete Theme".

Sentence (19b) bears the same basic information and information structure as (18b). Thus, (19b) can be a  natural well-formed Turkish counterpart (i.e. translation) of (18b).

Geoffrey (2000) asserts that in Turkish, passive " is not used as much as its English equivalent for the sake of elegant variation; e.g. a Turk is more likely to say ***His father rebuked him***  instead of ***He was rebuked by his father***"(Geoffrey,2000, p.152, emphasis added). By the same token, Turkish does not tend to form such sentences as (13, rewritten in 20):

(20)            Ev    John taraf-in-dan  sat-il-di

             the house   John      side  -3.sg.  –Abl. sell-pass-Past

The relationship between the existence of overt case markers and lack of agentive passive in Turkish is far from accidental. The linguistic principle of the 'least effort', introduced by Zipf (1949), asserts that "speakers do not exert themselves more than is necessary for successful communication"(Matthews, 1907, p.318). This principle indicates that other things being equal, the simpler and shorter a linguistic form, the more frequently human beings tend to use it (Crystal, 2002, p.87).

Active voice sentences are often more concise than passive voice. Expressing the same idea in passive voice takes 30% to 40% more words:

*The fighter punched Ali and dodged the uppercut*. (Active voice-8 words)

*Ali was punched by the fighter and then an uppercut was dodged by him.*

[16](Passive voice-14 words, about 40% longer) (Passive Voice : 1) [4]

The same calculations can be applied to the afore-said pairs of active and passive sentences (19b and 20). Sentence (19b) includes 5 morphemes and 3 words, while sentence (20) consists of 8 morphemes and 4 words. In other words, the active sentence (19b) is, morphologically 37.5.00% and lexically 25.00%, shorter than (20). Thus according to the 'least effort' principle, the formation of sentences like (20) is blocked by sentences like (19b), as the latter is a "simpler and shorter" linguistic form.

**Concluding Remarks:** It can be inferred from the foregoing that (i) the agentive and agent-less passive sentences serve two different functions. The former is made only when the agent is not mentioned for any reason, but the latter changes the theme-rheme organization. (ii) In English, case is assigned syntactically, i.e. the word order determines the case, whereas in Turkish case is assigned morphologically, i.e. via overt case markers. An unmarked SOV Turkish sentence can be converted to the marked OSV, without any need for passivization, as the ACC

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[16] -4- http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/gram_passive_voice.html

case marker /-i/ is always attached to the object NP, and differentiate it from the subject NP, which is a zero morpheme. Consequently (iii), agentive passives are not tended to be formed in Turkish, as (iv) the theme-rheme organization can be altered via the much simpler markedness process of the word order change.

**Suggestion for Further Studies:** There are a good number of languages which do not form agentive passive, as they benefit  from overt case markers. Modern Persian (see Jabbari, 2003), Old Persian, Avestan, Arabic (see Jabbari & Kafipour, 2011) to name but a few. Other studies may be conducted on testing the hypothesis that in languages with overt case markers agentive passive sentences would not be formed.

There are, usually, exception(s) to any rule. There are languages with overt case markers in which agentive passives are formed. German is a good example. A special research on German is strongly suggested.

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