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Toward a High Applicative Analysis of Direct Passives: A Preliminary Proposal*

Taika Nagano

1 Introduction

Passivization is one of the original transformational rules proposed in Chomsky (1957). In the Principles and Parameters (P&P) framework (Chomsky 1981), the passive is an instantiation of the interaction between θ -role and Case assignment. According to Keenan and Dryer (1985), its crucial property is to demote an external argument (EA) of a lexical verb, after which the internal argument (IA) is promoted to the subject (i.e., Raising). A number of attempts to analyze passives have been made in the generative tradition, but, despite differences among these approaches, there is a consensus that the passive construction is derived by several syntactic operations, which are contained in Universal Grammar.

There is, however, morphological variation observed across languages as to the surface form of passive constructions. English, for example, has a special verbal form for passives (i.e., *be* + past participle) with an optional agentive *by*-phrase, as in (1a). On the other hand, Chinese lacks such passive verbal morphology. Instead, the agentive *bei*-phrase is obligatory in the language. This is exemplified in (2), whose English counterpart is in (1a). It goes without saying that English never allows the Chinese-type passive pattern, as in (1b).

- (1) a. Lisi **was killed** (by Zhangsan). (2) Lisi *(*bei* Zhangsan) sha-le.
b. *Lisi **killed** by Zhangsan. Lisi by Zhangsan kill-PFV

Japanese passives are more puzzling. A typical passive construction in Japanese is shown in (3a). Japanese is similar to English in that it has a verbal form for passives (i.e., *-(r)are*) and optional *by*-phrases, but it differs from English in two respects. First, Japanese has two *by* phrases: *-ni* and *-niyotte*. Although the two *by* phrases are generally interchangeable, some crucial contrasts are pointed out (Inoue 1976, Kuroda 1979). Second, unlike English and Chinese, Japanese allows adversity or indirect passives. As mentioned above, the defining property of passives is demotion of an external argument, but in Japanese adversity passives, a malfactive experiencer is newly introduced. In (3b), *Jiro* is a non-core argument (NCA) with *musuko* ‘son’ being the sole argument of the lexical verb *sin* ‘die.’

- (3) a. Hanako-ga Taro-ni(yotte) koros-are-ta. b. Jiro-ga musuko-ni sin-are-ta.
Hanako-NOM Taro-by kill-PASS-PST Jiro-NOM SON-DAT die-PASS-PST
‘Hanako was killed by Taro.’ Int. ‘Jiro’s son died on him.’

In order to explain the idiosyncratic properties of Japanese passives and the morphological variation

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observed in passive constructions, this paper explores a new approach to passivization. I argue that *-ni* direct passives and *-niyotte* passives, though seemingly similar, are different syntactic objects. More precisely, the former instantiate a high applicative construction, whereas the latter correspond to English long passives. I follow Bruening (2013) for the analysis of long passives or *-niyotte* passives, but I treat *-ni* direct passives as a control-like high applicative construction, where the NCA introduced by Appl is co-indexed with the IA, which is PRO. When the NCA is not identical with the IA, the high applicative construction is an indirect passive. To sum, there are two passive-related constructions—(4) and (5). The passives in (4) correspond to English passives. Passives without the *by* phrase such as (4a) are called *short passives* whereas ones with the *by*-phrase *-niyotte*, such as (4b), are called *long passives*. On the other hand, passives in (5) are not observed in English because they are high applicative. I dub (5a) and (5b) *direct passives* and *indirect passives*, respectively.

- (4) a. Hanako-ga _____ koros-are-ta. (5) a. Hanako-ga Taro-**ni** koros-are-ta.
 b. Hanako-ga Taro-**niyotte** koros-are-ta. b. Jiro-ga musuko-**ni** sin-are-ta.

The discussion proceeds as follows. In Section 2, we review the role of PassP, which is proposed by Bruening (2013), and how PassP functions in Japanese (Jo and Seo 2023, Asami 2025). Section 3 introduces several differences between *-ni* and *-niyotte* passives. In Section 4, I propose an analysis of Japanese passives. I categorize the *-ni* direct passive construction as a high applicative while *-niyotte* passives are identical with canonical passives in English. I also touch upon the possibility that my analysis naturally predicts the cross-linguistic variation in passives. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2 PassP (Bruening 2013)

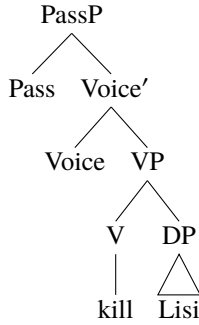
In the P&P framework, passivization is the result of demotion of a canonical subject (EA) and promotion of a canonical object (IA). When an EA is suppressed, it automatically loses the ability to assign Case (i.e., Burzio’s Generalization (Burzio 1986)) and hence the IA undergoes A-movement to the grammatical subject position (i.e., Spec-IP).

What has been controversial is how an EA is suppressed. Bruening (2013) offers a solution to it by arguing that the EA suppression is syntactically triggered. Bruening (2013) is concerned with the functional head Pass(ive)P and its interaction with *by* phrases and nominalizations in English. I will not discuss nominalization in this paper, but the key idea is that it is PassP that suppresses the EA of the lexical verb. PassP has two options depending on the presence or absence of the *by* phrase. In the absence of a *by* phrase, it is semantically active. PassP existentially binds the EA before VoiceP (Kratzer 1996) introduces it, which is formally schematized in (6e). When there is a *by* phrase, PassP makes no semantic contribution and is truth-conditionally equivalent to the active VoiceP. The role of *by*P is to independently introduce an EA and then take unsaturated Voice’ as its input, returning a saturated VoiceP whose syntactic and semantic properties are comparable to those of active VoiceP.

English passives such as in (1a) are analyzed as follows. In (6), the illustration of passives without

a *by* phrase (i.e., short passive) is presented. First, following Kratzer (1996), VP merges with Voice as in normal transitive clauses. They are composed via *Event Identification*, where the combination of functions of type $\langle e, st \rangle$ (typically, Voice) and $\langle s, t \rangle$ (such as VP) is interpreted as a function of type $\langle e, st \rangle$, as in (6c).¹ Under normal circumstances (e.g., transitives), Voice' newly introduces an EA, but in short passives, PassP merges with the unsaturated Voice'. Due to the absence of the EA, PassP existentially quantifies over it.

(6) **Input configuration**

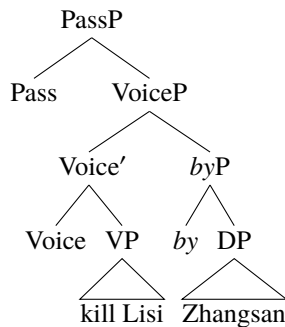


Semantic interpretation

- a. $\llbracket \text{VP} \rrbracket = \lambda e [\text{kill}(e, \text{Lisi})]$
- b. $\llbracket \text{Voice} \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda e [\text{Agent}(e, x)]$
- c. *Event Identification*: $[f_{\langle e, st \rangle} \ \& \ g_{\langle st \rangle}] \rightarrow h_{\langle e, st \rangle}$
- d. $\llbracket \text{Voice}' \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda e [\text{kill}(e, \text{Lisi}) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, x)]$
- e. $\llbracket \text{Pass} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle (e), st \rangle} \lambda e (\exists x) [P(e, (x))]$
- f. $\llbracket \text{PassP} \rrbracket = \lambda e \exists x [\text{kill}(e, \text{Lisi}) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, x)]$

When there is a *by* phrase (i.e., long passive), PassP is semantically vacuous. It loses the role of existential quantification. This is because *by*P introduces an EA, so that VoiceP in long passives is equivalent to saturated active VoiceP in the end. *By*, whose denotation is given in (7b), is a two-place predicate of type $\langle e, \langle \langle e, st \rangle, st \rangle \rangle$: it selects an argument, which is normally an Agent, like ordinary prepositions, and *by*P takes unsaturated VoiceP (i.e., Voice') as the input, eventually returning a function of type $\langle s, t \rangle$ (i.e., VoiceP). This VoiceP is chosen as the input of PassP, working as an identity function (i.e., $\langle st, st \rangle$) and returning an event predicate that is truth-conditionally equivalent to the VoiceP. PassP in this case, being semantically inactive, just contributes to passive morphology. This series of processes is illustrated in (7).

(7) **Input configuration**



Semantic interpretation

- a. $\llbracket \text{Voice}' \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda e [\text{kill}(e, \text{Lisi}) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, x)]$
- b. $\llbracket \text{by} \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda P_{\langle e, st \rangle} \lambda e [P(e, x)]$
- c. $\llbracket \text{byP} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle e, st \rangle} \lambda e [P(e, \text{Zhangsan})]$
- d. $\llbracket \text{VoiceP} \rrbracket = \lambda e [\text{kill}(e, \text{Lisi}) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, \text{Zhangsan})]$
- e. $\llbracket \text{Pass} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle (e), st \rangle} \lambda e (\exists x) [P(e, (x))]$
- f. $\llbracket \text{PassP} \rrbracket = \lambda e [\text{kill}(e, \text{Lisi}) \ \& \ \text{Agent}(e, \text{Zhangsan})]$

Based on Bruening (2013), Jo and Seo (2023) and Asami (2025) propose analyses of Japanese passives. As we saw in the previous section, Japanese differs from languages like English in that it has (i) two types of *by* phrases (*-ni* and *-niyotte*) and (ii) allows indirect passives. To capture these

¹Bruening (2013) does not assume *Event Identification*, arguing that Voice is $\langle st, \langle e, st \rangle \rangle$. We will not pursue this point, following the Kratzarian event composition.

typological features of Japanese, Jo and Seo (2023) loosen the restriction on PassP. In Bruening (2013), PassP only selects active VoiceP that is unsaturated or merged with *by*P. However, Jo and Seo (2023) propose that PassP in Japanese can have any VoiceP (e.g., unaccusative) as its complement and *by*P can be introduced after Pass merges with VoiceP. Additionally, they argue that PassP has an EPP feature. Via either Internal Merge or External Merge, the specifier of PassP must be filled with any XP. An IA moves up to Spec-PassP in short passives, while in long passives, *by*P satisfies the EPP in PassP. These weakened properties of PassP account for the wide variety of passive constructions found in Japanese.

Asami (2025) departs from Jo and Seo (2023) by following Bruening’s (2013) idea that PassP only selects active VoiceP. He points out some empirical and methodological problems in Jo and Seo (2023), which I will not pursue in this paper. Nevertheless, his analysis largely follows Jo and Seo’s approach and captures the typologically notable characteristics of Japanese passives. Jo and Seo (2023) and Asami (2025) share the view that Aff(ect)P (Bosse et al. 2012) enables Japanese to have indirect passives. AffP, roughly speaking, is a function that syntactically introduces an Experiencer argument, as in (8). It can appear in various contexts, and indirect passives are one of them. In Japanese indirect passives, Aff selects PassP as its complement and then newly introduces an experiencer affected by the event denoted by its complement (i.e., PassP). This is how a NCA is introduced in indirect passives.

$$(8) \quad \llbracket \text{Aff} \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle st \rangle} \lambda x \lambda e [P(e) \ \& \ \exists e' [Experience(e') \ \& \ Experiencer(e', x)]: \forall e'' [P(e'') \rightarrow Source(e'', e')]]$$

(Bosse et al. 2012:1188)

However, there are two issues that remain unsolved. First, it remains unclear why there is such typological variation in passives, as we saw in the previous section. In other words, why does Japanese allow indirect passives whereas English does not? Asami (2025:237) also notes, “[f]urther research is needed to understand why [indirect passives are] not observed in other languages, such as English.” The other question is why Japanese has two types of *by* phrases— *-ni* and *-niyotte*. Bruening (2013) mentions that relatively little attention has been paid to *by*-phrases in studies of passives. This holds true for Jo and Seo (2023) and Asami (2025). Although relatively few studies have examined the contrasts between *-ni* and *-niyotte* passives, the next section introduces some of the differences between them.

3 Two Types of *by*-Phrases in Japanese

First and foremost, although there are two distinct *by* phrases, the practical difference between the two is very marginal. That is to say, *-ni* and *-niyotte* are basically interchangeable, as in (3a). However, it has been pointed out that there are some differences between them. In this section, we will look at the contexts where the contrast is significant. In Section 3.1, I will present contexts where *-niyotte* can appear but *-ni* cannot, and vice versa. Section 3.2 will introduce the fact that while *-niyotte* passives exhibit a reconstruction effect of an IA, *-ni* direct passives do not.

3.1 θ -Roles

The most significant and well-known difference between *-ni* and *-niyotte* is that the former generally disallows an abstract or inanimate NP as the subject of a sentence, whereas the latter allows it. This contrast can be seen clearly in examples such as (9). The sentence in (9a) is a passive construction with *Ferumaa-no teiri* ‘Fermat’s theorem’, which is abstract and inanimate, as the grammatical subject. In such a case, *-niyotte* must be chosen as the *by* phrase instead of *-ni*. Interestingly enough, in (9b), both *-ni* and *-niyotte* appear to be grammatical, but they give rise to different readings. While *gityoo-niyotte* is simply regarded as the *by* phrase, *gityoo-ni* must be interpreted as a Goal argument, for the verb *sengen-s* ‘announce’ is generally ditransitive.

- (9) a. *Ferumaa-no teiri-ga John-ni*(yotte) syoomei-s-are-ta.*
 Fermat-GEN theorem-NOM John-by prove-do-PASS-PST
 ‘Fermat’s theorem was proved by John.’ (Kuroda 1979:206)
- b. *Kaikai-ga gityoo {-ni / -niyotte} sengen-s-are-ta.*
 opening-NOM chairman -to -by announce-do-PASS-PST
 ‘The opening of the meeting was announced { to / by } the chairman.’ (Inoue 1976:83)

In principle, ditransitive passives could contain two *-ni* arguments, corresponding to a Goal and an Agent, respectively; however, such configurations are in fact impossible. The predicate verbs in the sentences in (10) are ditransitive. Whether the grammatical subject is animate (10a) or inanimate (10b), two *-ni* phrases cannot co-occur in a single sentence, even when the two arguments are separated by an adjunct such as *kinoo* ‘yesterday’. In ditransitive passives, the *-ni* NP must be interpreted as Goal.²

- (10) a. **Naomi-ga tomodati-ni (kinoo) Ken-ni syookai-s-are-ta.*
 Naomi-NOM friend-NI yesterday Ken-NI introduce-do-PASS-PST
 Int. ‘Naomi was introduced to Ken by her friend (yesterday)’
- b. *Hanataba-ga Ken-ni*(yotte) (kinoo) Naomi-ni watas-are-ta.*
 bouquet-NOM Ken-by yesterday Naomi-DAT hand-PASS-PST
 ‘The flower bouquet was given to Naomi by Ken yesterday.’ (Ishizuka 2012:64)

One might therefore conclude that *-ni* is more restrictive than *-niyotte*, but there is a case where *-niyotte* cannot be used as the *by* phrase. A *-niyotte* phrase is infelicitous with psychological predicates such as *ai-s* ‘love’ (Park and Whitman 2003). In (11), the thematic subject is *ookuno hito* ‘many people’, which is an Experiencer of *ai-s* ‘love’.

- (11) *Haru.no.umi-wa ooku-no hito {#-niyotte / -ni} ai-s-are-tei-ru.*
 spring.GEN.sea-TOP many-GEN person -by -by love-do-PASS-ASP-PRS
 ‘Spring Sea is loved by many people.’ (Park and Whitman 2003:310)

²Ishizuka (2012) dubs this “Double *-ni* Constraint”.

3.2 Reconstruction Effect

(13) a. Sannin-no gakusei-ga Ito.sensei-**niyotte maikai** sas-are-ta.
 three-GEN student-NOM Ito.professor-by everytime call-PASS-PST
 ‘Three students were called on by Prof. Ito every time.’ $\{ 3 > \forall / \forall > 3 \}$

b. Sannin-no gakusei-ga Ito.sensei-**ni maikai** sas-are-ta.
 three-GEN student-NOM Ito.professor-by everytime call-PASS-PST
 ‘Three students were called on by Prof. Ito every time.’ $\{ 3 > \forall / * \forall > 3 \}$

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-ni is preferred in passives with a psycho verb. From a syntactic perspective, only the former exhibits reconstruction effects of an IA.

4 Direct Passives as High Applicatives

This paper aims to account for why Japanese allows both indirect passives and two *by*-phrases in passives. I argue that, while *-niyotte* passives are identical to long passives in English, *-ni* direct passives are passives that English does not have. That is, *-niyotte* corresponds to English *by*, and the same mechanism as in Bruening (2013) is in operation. In contrast, the *-ni* direct passive construction belongs to the same syntactic class as indirect passives, which is a high applicative construction. English does not have this type of construction and therefore does not show two *by* phrases.

I first provide some background. Pylkkänen (2008) proposes that a NCA is introduced by a functional head Appl(licative)P, and the location of ApplP is parametric. It can be situated above and/or below VP. When it appears above the VP, it is called high applicative. When it appears in the VP, it is low applicative. The configurations of applicative constructions are roughly schematized in (14).

- (14) a. *High Applicative*: [_{VoiceP} [EA] Voice [_{Appl} [NCA] Appl [_{VP} [IA] V]]]
 b. *Low Applicative*: [_{VoiceP} [EA] Voice [_{VP} V [_{Appl} [NCA] Appl [IA]]]]

English is a low applicative language, so it is generally considered that the language does not show a high applicative construction. The low applicative sentence in (15b) is derived from (15a). Creation verbs like *bake* allow a benefactive NCA to be optionally expressed. In contrast, unergative verbs like *run* are not allowed to introduce a benefactive NCA. If a benefactive is to be expressed, the preposition *for* must be used, as in (15c). In contrast, high applicative languages can form the high applicative configuration like (15c). The example in (16) is Chaga, a Bantu language, cited from Bresnan and Moshi (1993:90-1). In such languages, even unergatives can take a NCA.

- | | | | |
|------|-----------------------------|------|----------------------------------|
| (15) | a. I baked a cake (for him) | (16) | N-a-i-zrìc-í-à mbùyà. |
| | b. I baked him a cake. | | FOC-1SG-PRS-RUN-APPL-FV 9-friend |
| | c. I ran *(for) him. | | ‘He is running for a friend.’ |

Japanese is a high applicative language, and Pylkkänen (2008) treats indirect passives in Japanese as an example of high applicatives. Based on this view, I further pursue the possibility that direct *-ni* passives are also analyzed as high applicatives. I assume the high applicative constructions in (17). Following Aoyagi (2010), high ApplP is situated above VoiceP,⁵ departing from Pylkkänen (2008). The configuration in (17a) is for indirect passives. NP₁, NP₂, and NP₃ correspond to the IA, the EA, and the NCA, respectively. The NP introduced by ApplP (i.e., NP₃ in (17)) undergoes A-movement to Spec-TP, where it is assigned nominative Case. I assume that Appl assigns dative to the closest

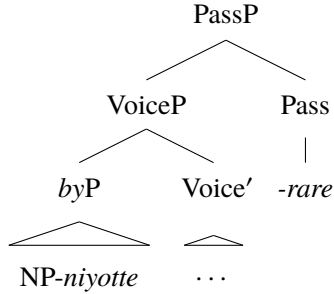
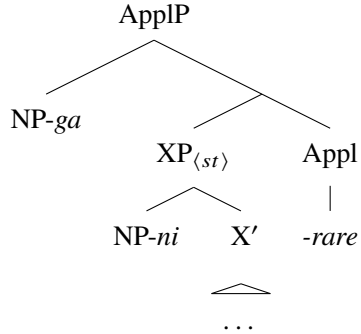
⁵Although there is no VoiceP in (17), XP can be VoiceP. I assume that there is no VoiceP in the absence of an Initiator role.

NP in its c-command domain, which is marked with *-ni*. In the absence of NP₂, the EA, NP₁ can be assigned dative, instead. This is how the indirect passive construction is derived. In the case of direct *-ni* passives, syntactic derivation proceeds as follows. Its syntactic configuration, as in (17b), is equivalent to that of indirect passives except that the IA is PRO co-indexed with the NP in Spec-AppIP.

- (17) a. $[_{TP} \text{ NP}_3\text{-NOM} \dots [_{\text{AppIP}} \text{ NP}_3 [_{XP} (\text{NP}_2\text{-DAT}) \dots [_{VP} \dots (\text{NP}_1\text{-ACC/DAT}). \dots]]]]$
 b. $[_{TP} \text{ NP}_1\text{-NOM} \dots [_{\text{AppIP}} \text{ NP}_T [_{XP} \text{ NP}_2\text{-DAT} \dots [_{VP} \dots \text{PRO}_1 \dots]]]]$

Since this is a control configuration, the reconstruction effect we saw in Section 3.2 is not observed in direct *-ni* passives. Additionally, the dative marker *-ni* attaches to the most local NP in Appl's c-command domain. This means that NP with *-ni* can be assigned a theta role other than Initiator in the absence of VoiceP. Only *-ni* is allowed in passives with a psycho verb because *-niyotte* 'by' introduces an Initiator NP.

Put simply, my proposal is that Japanese has two distinct instances of *(r)are*. One is the passive suffix, namely, the phonological realization of Pass, as in (18a). This type of passive is equivalent to English passives, and the denotation in (18a) is identical to (6e,7e). The syntactic structure of long passives is shown in (18b). Since *-niyotte* is an agentive marker, it does not match contexts where VoiceP is absent. This is why *-niyotte* cannot be used with a psycho verb. Also, the IA obligatorily undergoes movement to the grammatical subject position, Spec-TP. This explains why only *-niyotte* passives allow the reconstruction effect in §3.2.

- (18) a. $\llbracket (r)are \rrbracket = \lambda P_{\langle (e),st \rangle} \lambda e (\exists x) [P(e, (x))]$ (19) a. $\llbracket (r)are \rrbracket = \lambda x \lambda e [\text{Experiencer}(e, x)]$
 b. 
 b. 

The other instance of *(r)are* is a high Appl head, which forms indirect passives and direct *-ni* passives. The denotation is in (19a), where an Experiencer is newly introduced. Normally, the Experiencer NP is assigned nominative and moves to Spec-TP. I assume that Appl and XP are combined via Event Identification. That is, XP can be any kind of predicate if it is of type $\langle s, t \rangle$, allowing *-ni* to be assigned to an NP other than an Initiator. This flexibility accounts for why psycho verbs disallow *-niyotte* in passives. Additionally, in direct passives, the NP with *-ga* is identical with the IA, which is PRO. Since this is a control structure, there is no reconstruction effect in direct *-ni* passives.

If this analysis is on the right track, we can straightforwardly explain why Japanese has indirect passives and two forms corresponding to English *by*-phrases. Japanese is a high applicative language,

and therefore allows indirect passives (Pylkkänen 2008). I further proposed that direct *-ni* passives are also high applicatives. Only *-niyotte* is a genuine *by*-phrase, but as the language also has the high applicative construction, Japanese appears to have two *by*-phrases. However, *-ni* is in fact closely related to the dative marker,⁶ and if ApplP introduces an NP identical with the IA, direct *-ni* passives are derived.

5 Concluding Remarks

This paper has offered a preliminary account of the typologically notable idiosyncrasies of Japanese passives. Compared with languages such as English, Japanese differs in two respects. First, it allows indirect passives, in which a NCA is newly introduced despite the construction being passive. Second, the language has two forms corresponding to English *by*-phrases: *-ni* and *-niyotte*. I have argued that these two facts are related. While *-niyotte* passives correspond to canonical English long passives, direct *-ni* passives belong to a type of passive that English lacks. My answer to the question of why Japanese appears to have two *by*-phrases is that the language independently has an indirect passive construction. The direct *-ni* passive construction is syntactically of the same type as indirect passives. The sole difference is that direct *-ni* passives introduce an Experiencer co-indexed with the IA, PRO, whereas indirect passives introduce an Experiencer NP distinct from the IA. This yields the relevant parametric contrast: Japanese allows high applicatives, whereas English allows only low applicatives.

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⁶It has been widely debated whether *-ni* is a case marker or a postposition. Miyagawa (1989) argues that *-ni* in indirect passives is the dative marker while that of direct passives is a postposition. Sadakane and Koizumi (1995) present diagnostics for *-ni*, according to which the view in this paper that *-ni* in direct passives is identical with that of indirect passives is not mainstream. I will discuss this point in future work.

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