
GIVEN TO UNDERSTAND AS A MODEL FOR THE INDIRECT~RECIPIENT PASSIVE IN ENGLISH?*

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ABSTRACT The advent in English of passives like *he was given a book* has long been a source of interest. Such passives, in which what is traditionally analysed as an indirect object is passivized, are not found in Old English. Macleod, Anagnostopoulou, Mertyris & Sevdali (2023) suggest that they may have developed as an extension of sentences like *he was given to understand*, with what was originally an indirect object being reanalysed as a direct object because of the rather opaque nature of *given to understand*. A corpus-based study rules this construction out as a model for the new passive, which is found two hundred years earlier than *given to understand*.

Passives like (1), in which the recipient of a ditransitive verb, rather than the theme, is the nominative subject, are an innovation of the Late Middle English period:

- (1) He was given a book.

In Old English (OE), it was the theme that was in the nominative case in passive sentences of ditransitive verbs, although the dative-marked recipient might precede it, as in (2b):

- (2) a *ac þæt ece lif him bið forgyfen on*
but that:NOM eternal:NOM life:NOM him:DAT is given in
heofonan rice
heaven's kingdom
'but that eternal life will be given to him in the kingdom of
heaven'

(coaelhom,ÆHom_5:148.778)

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b *and him wearð geseald an snæd flæsces,*
 and him:DAT was given a:NOM piece:NOM flesh:GEN.SG
 ‘and a piece of flesh was given to him’
 (coelive,ÆLS_[Basil]:158.555)

The development of the new passive in English has long been a source of interest. Different terminology has been used to refer to passives like (1) and (2a,b). Traditionally, (1) is called an ‘indirect’ passive, the idea being that the subject of the passive corresponds to an indirect object in an active counterpart, in contrast with the ‘direct’ passive, where it is the direct object that becomes the subject, as in the modern translations given for the examples of (2). However, this analysis is discarded in some theoretical frameworks, such as Lexical-Functional Grammar (as set out in [Bresnan, Asudeh, Toivonen & Wechsler 2016](#)), in which the recipient in *I gave him a book* is analysed simply as an object (OBJ), ‘direct object’ in traditional terms. From this point of view, the advent of the new passive represents a shift in grammatical relations of the recipient in ditransitive sentences: in the earlier period, only the theme could play the role of OBJ and the recipient was restricted object (indirect object), but the new passive became possible when the recipient was reanalysed as the OBJ and therefore subject to passivisation. This note will use the more theory-neutral term *recipient passive* for these new passives, a term introduced by [Allen \(1995\)](#) and adopted by [Stein, Ingham & Trips \(2019\)](#), but the choice of terminology and theoretical analysis does not bear on the empirical findings to be presented.¹ My purpose here is not to suggest a new origin for or analysis of the recipient passive, but to provide evidence against a recent suggestion.

In an exploration of the history of ‘indirect’ passives in Greek and English, [Macleod et al. \(2023\)](#) hypothesize that *x was given to understand* played an important role in the introduction of the recipient passive; they use this expression in their Figure 2 to illustrate the stages that they assume led to recipient passives. A key assumption of [Macleod et al.](#)’s proposal is that in *give x to understand*, *x* was at first analysed as an indirect object, then reanalysed as a direct object. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* entry [give, v VII.29.c](#) explains the expression as imparting information to someone to believe or understand something, a statement which suggests that the recipient of the information was the indirect object, although it does not give any evidence that a direct object (referring to the information) was ever expressed. [Macleod et al.](#) suggest that the lack of an overt direct object rendered the expression

¹ Of course, the dative-marked argument of a ditransitive verb is not always a recipient, but may be a beneficiary, maleficiary, etc.

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rather opaque, facilitating the reanalysis of the expression as a causative construction.

It is a basic principle of historical syntax that if construction A is a possible trigger for reanalysis resulting in the advent of construction B, then construction A must have existed before construction B. In this instance, however, as far as we can tell, construction B (the recipient passive) entered the language before construction A (*given to understand*) did. [Macleod et al. \(2023\)](#) do not discuss the relative timing of the constructions, noting only that all twelve of the putative recipient passives found with the verb *give* by [Stein et al. \(2019\)](#) in their investigation of recipient passives in the *Parsed Corpus of Early English Correspondence* (PCEEC) are examples of this construction. My own searches (using [Randall's \(2000\) CorpusSearch](#)) for recipient passives in a newer, lemmatized, release of this corpus ([Taylor, Nurmi, Warner, Pintzuk & Nevalainen 2022](#)) confirm this.

The time span of the PCEEC2 is 1410 to 1695, meaning that even the earliest letters in it are of too late a date for us to determine whether examples of *given to understand* predate the earliest recipient passives, clear examples of which are found in the late fourteenth century. The earliest unimpeachable example I have seen is from 1375:²

- (3) *Item as for the Parke she is alowyd Every yere a dere*
Also as for the park she is allowed every year a deer
'Also, as for the park, she is allowed a deer every year'
AwardBlount [Cooke \(1925: 205\)](#)

It can be objected that it is possible that earlier examples than the early fifteenth century of *given to understand* could be found in a larger corpus. Before we look at earlier sources, it should be pointed out that the earliest of the twelve of the examples just mentioned is from 1575, two hundred years later than example (3):

- (4) we are given to understand of the staie you have made of thre shippes
'we are given to understand of the interception you have made of
three ships' (BACON,I,220.4982)

It can be added that I also did not find any examples of the active *give x to understand* in the fifteenth-century letters; such examples first appear in a letter of 1573, two years later than the first passive example.

² This example is not found in the parsed corpora, but is taken from one of the lists presented by [Visser \(1973: §1966-1977\)](#) to illustrate the 'indirect' passive.

Turning to other sources, *Visser's* (1973: §1966-1977) lists present a single example of *as I am given to understand*, from 1593, not distinguishing *given to understand* from the *given a book* type. The *OED* entry just mentioned gives the date for the first attestation of the construction (an active example) as ?1566, the same period as our first active and passive examples. This entry presents recipient-type passive type examples from a bit later, the earliest of which is dated 1586:

- (5) So we think mete the counsel of state be geven to understand.
 'So we think it appropriate that the council of state be given to understand'
 Queen Elizabeth I in Corresp. Earl Leicester (Camden Soc. 1844) 210

The information from the *OED*, then, is similar to what we find from the PCEEC. However, earlier relevant examples are presented by the entry **yeven 18.d** in *the Middle English Dictionary* (*MED*, Lewis, Robert E. et al.), which gives this active example from the middle of the fifteenth century:

- (6) *God þoru3 þis word... 3yueþ vs to vndirstonde þat he*
 God through this word gives us to understand that he
wol þat man 3yue his body to penaunce.
 will that one give his body to penance
 'God through this word ... makes us understand that he wills that
 one give his body to penance.'
 a1450 PNoster R.Hermit (Westm-S 3)15/13

The same entry gives fifteenth-century passive examples, but they are not of the recipient type of passive, since the subject is not the person who receives information, but rather a dummy *it*:

- (7) It is youe the Mair and Aldermen to vndirstande þat many fremen of
 þys Cite ...
 'It is given the mayor and aldormen to understand that many
 freemen of this city ...'
 (?1423) Let.Bk.in Bk.Lond.E.(Gldh LetBk I & K)

Examples like (7) might seem to lend support to the idea that the object of *give to understand* was originally an indirect object. However, such examples are best analysed as extraposition with a dummy subject. The dictionaries offer no evidence that the reanalysis of this recipient as a direct object took place any time in the fifteenth century, since they provide no examples of *x*

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was given to understand from that century. A similar example with a dummy *it* is found in the PCEEC2 from 1573, in the same collection of letters providing (4), our first recipient-type passive:

- (8) it hath bene secretly given Momforth to understande that ...
(BACON,I,77.1863)

Another example is found in an early seventeenth-century letter, from the same year when *x is given to understand* is found, illustrating variation with the recipient-type passive.

Because example (6) is evidence that the active construction did exist in the fifteenth century even though it is not to be found in the PCEEC2, I searched for examples of both the active and the passive variants of *give x to understand* in the m4 (1420-1500) texts of the *Penn Parsed Corpus of Middle English 2* (PPCME2), but found no examples. Finally, a search of the *Parsed Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (PLAEME), which covers selected texts 1150-1350 not covered by the PPCME2, turned up no examples of the active or passive construction.³

To sum up, we have no evidence that the *given to understand* passive was used before the second half of the sixteenth century. Unless earlier examples are unearthed, this passive cannot be a candidate for consideration as a model for recipient passives.

It is finally of some interest to note that the construction with *give* seems to have replaced the causative *do x to understand*, active examples of which are found at least as early as the *Ormulum* of c.1190. The last active example I found in the PCEEC2 is from a letter of 1448. My searches yielded four passive examples in the fifteenth-century letters of the lemmatized PCEEC2, but all have a dummy *it* subject:

- (9) jt hath be do vs to vndirstand þat hys Highnes shuld com in-to
Norwich (PASTON,I,65.665)

This passive construction disappears from the letters after 1452.

I finally searched for *do x to understand* and *done to understand* in the texts of the PLAEME, and found only three active examples and no passives. As far as my investigation shows, then, *do x to understand* was never used in the passive with a human rather than a dummy *it* subject, although the active construction is found for about two and a half centuries.

³This working version is available for download at [GitHub - rtruswell/PLAEME_current](https://github.com/rtruswell/PLAEME_current): *A Parsed Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English*. For a description of this corpus, see Truswell, Alcorn, Donaldson & Wallenberg (2019).

Although the history of *do to understand* does not bear directly on the history of the recipient passive, it is nevertheless relevant. Recall that [Macleod et al. \(2023\)](#) hypothesized that the putative reanalysis of the object of *give x to understand* as the direct object of a causative construction gave rise to *x be given to understand*. Until we see that this suggestion does not fit the facts, it seems plausible enough, but it is striking that the transparently causative nature of *do x to understand* did not result in the passivation of *x*. It is rather surprising that it did not do so; the lack of examples cannot be attributed to the small number of examples of active *do x to understand*, since we do find passives, but only with a dummy *it*, although the human object of the active construction could reasonably be analysed as a direct object. The lack of examples in our texts in which this object is passivized does not prove that such passives were not grammatical with *do x to understand*, since texts can only tell us directly what is grammatical, not what is ungrammatical. It is true that we can often be confident that a given construction was not part of English grammar from the textual record, such as with the recipient passive as a construction in Old and Early Middle English, when examples are completely lacking for such a long period and then appear. However, inferring the ungrammaticality of an entire construction is not the same as inferring the ungrammaticality of a given construction with specific verbs.

There is an important methodological point to be made here. The advent of the wonderful syntactically parsed corpora has revolutionized data gathering in historical data. However, the parsed corpora currently available cannot completely replace old-fashioned reading of texts, since not all of the available texts are covered by these corpora, and the available corpora sometimes contain only a sample of a given text. An example is furnished by this instance of a recipient passive of the verb *give* in the works of Malory:

- (10) *Whan he was gyven the gre*
 When he was given the prize
 ‘When he was awarded the prize’
The works of Sir Thomas Malory ([Field 1990](#): 699.2)

This example is important in the debate about whether the recipient passive was simply ungrammatical with all but a few verbs when it was first introduced, as suggested by [Macleod et al. \(2023\)](#). Only a very large corpus will provide examples of a verb which is possible in a construction, but more often used in alternative constructions, such as *the gre was given to him*.

The paucity (but not total lack) of recipient passives with *give* with two NP arguments for centuries is indeed a puzzle. [Macleod et al. \(2023\)](#) suggest that *give* was not used in such passives because the recipient was so prototyp-

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ical an indirect object. However, this line of reasoning does not explain why recipient passives were so frequent with *pay* even in the fifteenth century, a time when examples of the new construction are not very common; *pay* also has a prototypical indirect object in traditional terms. In fact, writers seemed to go out of their way when they wanted to make the recipient of *give* serve as the subject of a passive. In the PCEEC2, we find several examples of writers using an alternative construction in which the recipient is the subject of the auxiliary verb *have* rather than the main verb *give*:

- (11) at that time they had further day given them till ye 8=th= of May
'at that time they had a further day given them, until the eighth of
May' (ESSEX,55.379) (letter of 1676)

It seems possible that recipient passives with *give* may have been avoided because of the use of *given* in a construction in which the subject was not a recipient. From Late ME we find *be given to x* meaning 'be inclined to x' as in this example from c.1400':

- (12) *for siche ben zyuen to worldly lustys,*
for such are given to worldly pleasures
'For such are given over to worldly pleasures'
(CMWYCSER,386.2880)

This expression appears to be a new one in the period when the first recipient passives occur; the earliest attestation the *Oxford English Dictionary* [Oxford English Dictionary](#) presents of **give**, v. sense IV.13.a. 'To apply exclusively, devote to (an action, pursuit, etc.); to addict, devote (oneself) to' is c1340. The dictionary directs the reader here to the related sense 2 of the headword **given** **adj. & n.** This sense is 'Used predicatively: Inclined, disposed, addicted, prone. Const. *to*,' and the first attestation given is 1487 (a1380). Thus, speakers/writers from the late ME period on had a construction with *be given* in which a human subject was not a recipient, and may have preferred to avoid the recipient passive, which they did not at any rate use very frequently even with verbs with which it is attested, in favour of alternatives. That is, a recipient passive with *give* might have been a sort of deceptive 'garden path' when the hearer would not be expecting *be given* to be a passive. It seems worth considering whether *given to understand* might have been another garden path construction with *be given* in which *give* did not have its usual meaning of transfer of a thing to a person. This suggestion of 'garden path' blocking of passives with *give* is highly speculative and would be difficult to test. Perhaps a more likely explanation is that because *give* was such a common verb, including in passives, speakers were inclined to prefer the common theme

passive construction, whereas they had no model for passives with French imports like *pay*.

Whatever the explanation for the paucity of early examples with *give*, we can expect further research into the origins and possible lexical diffusion of the recipient passive.

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