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Early stages of periphrastic passive formation in Old Swedish

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Abstract

This article discusses the construction [SBJ *varda* PTCP], which is considered an early example of a periphrastic passive, in the extant Old Swedish legal texts. It has been argued that it is a nascent passive construction, different from the fully-fledged passive in Present Day Swedish. Based on a corpus study of all occurrences of the construction across Swedish provincial laws I argue that it bears all the hallmarks of a grammaticalized passive construction, with two exceptions. Firstly, it allows a wider choice of thematic roles of the subject, secondly, its main pragmatic function is inactivization in the sense of Haspelmath (1990). The study is grounded in Diachronic Construction Grammar and utilizes the typology of thematic roles proposed by Van Valin and LaPolla (1997).

Keywords: periphrastic passive, thematic roles, Old Swedish, language change



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1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I discuss aspects of the diachronic study of the passive voice in Old Swedish (OSv) and consider the criteria for classifying the incipient passive constructions. The study is grounded in Diachronic Construction Grammar (DCxG) in the spirit of Traugott and Trousdale (2013), Traugott (2014) and Fried (2013) and utilizes the typology of thematic roles proposed by Van Valin and LaPolla (1997).

The aim of the paper is to present and discuss the properties of the periphrastic construction [SBJ *varda* PTCP] found in the oldest extant Swedish texts, addressing the question whether it is a fully-formed passive or not. This has for a long time been the subject of controversy in the literature on the history of the passive voice in Swedish (Falk & Torp 1900; Nygaard 1906; Öhlin 1918; Heusler 1950:136; Toyota 2008, 2009; Propst 2001:224), where it has been contrasted with a mutative construction (see section 2).

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2 I present the passive constructions in Present Day Swedish (PDSv), with comments regarding their origin and distribution in PDSv. In Section 3 the theoretical foundations of the study are discussed, i.e., the key concepts in DCxG as well as the model of thematic roles as proposed by Van Valin and La Polla (1997), which is integrated into the constructional representation. Section 4 presents the corpus and some general results together with representative examples. In Section 5 the status of the construction is discussed with outlook for further research.

2 PASSIVE VOICE IN PRESENT-DAY SWEDISH

There are two passive constructions in Present Day Swedish (PDSv, 1900–): the morphological passive (glossed as S, example (1)) and the periphrastic passive (glossed as *become*, example (2)).¹

(1)	Kandidaten candidate.DEF	valdes choose.PST.S	för for	en INDEF	ny mandatperiod. new term
(2)	Kandidaten candidate.DEF	blev become.PST	vald chosen	för for	en INDEF
	ny mandatperiod. new term 'The candidate was elected for a new term of office.'				

The structures are largely regarded as synonymous, but are not fully interchangeable. The periphrastic passive is more likely to appear with animate subjects, the morphological passive with modal verbs; there are also a number of lexical differences, with some lexemes appearing in one, but not the other passive construction (Engdahl 1999, 2006; Laanemets 2012, 2013). Nevertheless, there are a number of contexts where the choice between the two constructions is arbitrary.²

The periphrastic *bli*-passive construction consists of an auxiliary *bli* 'become' and the past participle, which agrees with the subject of the passive clause with respect to number (SG or PL) and gender (C = common gender or N = neuter gender).

¹ I choose to gloss the examples non-committally with respect to whether they are or are not instances of the passive voice both with respect to the PDSv and OSv material.

² It is impossible to summarize the entire discussion of the passive constructions in PDSv here, the reader is therefore directed to the in-depth studies by Elisabet Engdahl (1999, 2006) and Anu Laanemets (2012, 2013).

- | | | | |
|-----|--------------------------|------------|---------------|
| (3) | Huset | blev | målat. |
| | house.N.DEF | become.PST | painted.SG.N |
| | ‘The house was painted.’ | | |
| | | | |
| (4) | Mannen | blev | mördad. |
| | man.C.DEF | become.PST | murdered.SG.C |
| | ‘The man was murdered.’ | | |

The verb *bli* was originally not a passive auxiliary but a lexical loan from Middle Low German (MLG). It first appears in the extant Swedish texts in late 1200s (Skrzypek 2020, 2024; Skrzypek & Engdahl 2025). In OSv texts, and well into the 17th century, the periphrastic construction is formed with a different auxiliary, *varda* ‘become’. Gradually, the verb is suppressed by *bli* in all its functions (Markey 1969; Elmevik 1970; Rosenthal 1984; Skrzypek 2020, 2024), the first instances of the *bli*-passive can be found in early 1500s (Skrzypek & Engdahl 2025). In the material of the present study we find only the native verb *varda* and no instances of *bli*. The original construction is illustrated in example (5) and its PDSv counterpart³ in (6).

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------------|----------------|---------------|------------|
| (5) | Værþer | maþer | i | kyrkiugardhi | dræpin | ællær |
| | become | man.M.NOM | in | churchyard.DAT | killed.M | or |
| | | | | | | |
| | sargheþer | gialde | biscupe | þrer | marcher. | |
| | hurt | pay | bishop.DAT | three | mark.PL | |
| | ‘If a man is killed or hurt in the churchyard, fine of three marks shall be paid to the bishop.’ (AVL) ⁴ | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| (6) | Blir | någon | dräpt | eller | sårad | på |
| | become | someone.C | killed | or | hurt.C | in |
| | | | | | | kyrkogård, |
| | | | | | | churchyard |
| | | | | | | |
| | gälde | åt | biskopen | tre | marker. | |
| | pay | to | bishop | three | mark | |
| | ‘If someone is killed or hurt in the churchyard, three mark fine shall be paid to the bishop.’ | | | | | |

The construction shows the same agreement patterns as the PDSv construction [SBJ *bli* PTCP].

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|
| (7) | Nu | uarþær | man | i | horsiang | dræpin |
| | now | become | man.M | in | fornication.bed | killed.M |
| | ‘Now a man is killed when committing adultery.’ (OgL) | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| (8) | kan | diur | sarghat | warþa | af spiutum | manz |
| | can | animal.N | hurt.N | become | of spear.DAT | man.GEN |
| | ‘An animal can be hurt by a man’s spear.’ (SdmL) | | | | | |

There is some controversy regarding the status of the construction in OSv. Some authors argue that the construction was used in the same way as in present-day Scandinavian languages, e.g., Falk and Torp (1900), Nygaard (1906), Öhlin (1918). Others have suggested that it is not a fully-formed passive in the 13th and 14th century, but should instead be understood as a mutative construction, signifying change of state (Heusler 1950:136;

³ Translation to PDSv by Holmbäck and Wessén (1979:5). The translation is meant to be as faithful as possible without being grammatically incorrect. Thus, it may be stylistically archaic.

⁴ See Table 1 for the spelling out of the abbreviations.

Toyota 2008, 2009; Propst 2001:224). In Toyota (2008), some examples of a mutative construction are given, though none from the North Germanic material. The term mutative was to my knowledge first introduced by Kern (1912:18), to describe a structure with univalent verbs denoting a change of state and/or verbs of motion. In the context of the construction with *varda* ‘become’, the mutative nature of the construction signifies a change of state, however, not necessarily due to the presence of a volitional activity, i.e., there is no clear implication of an agent. The notion of mutativity seems thus to encompass both such changes of state that are due to the actions of an agent (dynamic passives) and such that are independent of an agent. Furthermore, the mutative construction is focused on the event rather than its participants. The rise of a passive construction is a further step in the development, allowing users to foreground or background one of the participants.

In the present study I focus on the periphrastic construction with *varda* ‘become’ with the aim to establish its status in the oldest extant Swedish texts.

3 PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

In this section I present the definition of passive adopted in this paper, as well as the most important criteria for classifying constructions as passive or active based on the thematic roles expressed by the arguments of the main verb. I also discuss the notion of voice continuum (Shibatani 1985, 2006), as well as the gradient nature of transitivity.

Voice is one of the most extensively studied grammatical categories, both from purely formal and from a typological perspective. A large body of extant publications reveal significant cross-linguistic variation of the passive constructions and their properties (e.g., Croft 1994, 2001:283–319; Givón 1990:563–644; Keenan 1985; Kemmer 1993; Kittilä & Zúñiga 2019; Klaiman 1991; Palmer 1994:142–175; Shibatani 1985, 2006; Siewierska 1984; Wiemer 2011). What these studies have in common is that the passive construction is typically defined through a comparison with its active counterpart (e.g., Dik 1989:219ff.; Payne 1997:204). The association of the passive with its active counterpart follows from the syntactic correspondence between the subject of the passive clause and the object of its active counterpart, as well as the syntactic correspondence between the subject of the active clause and the (usually optional) oblique agent phrase in the passive. Siewierska (1984) is straightforward when she says that we talk about the passive when “the event or action expressed is brought about by some person or thing that is not the passive subject, but the subject of the corresponding active, and that the person or thing if not overt is at least strongly implied” (Siewierska 1984:256). As a result, the active and the passive are seen as each others’ opposites, and the syntactic correspondence is given more prominence than other differences, such as impersonalization (or agent-defocusing; see in particular Shibatani 1985), inactivization (Haspelmath 1990:59–62) or topicality change (Givón 1979:295–303).

Such a formal and syntax-oriented definition of a passive construction is not operational in diachronic studies. When incipient passives are studied, it is not always possible to draw a clear-cut boundary between the active and the passive and we may expect to find ambiguous cases that are difficult to classify as either passive or active (or middle). Furthermore, there is no diachronic connection between the active and the passive clause, as their correspondence is purely synchronic. In other words, the passive construction arises out of an active (or middle) voice construction, which however is not the same as its synchronic active counterpart, i.e., *John kicked a ball* is not the source construction of *A ball was kicked by John*. What we need is a more nuanced tool which enables us to see voice as a gradient rather than an absolute phenomenon (e.g., Toyota 2008), in order to classify the extant forms on a scale rather than place them in two distinct classes.

Such scales are typically presented by applying the notion of hierarchical thematic role assignment (e.g., Lyngfelt 2007). With respect to Swedish, Lyngfelt (2007) uses a similar hierarchy to discuss differences between deponence and middle voice. I will make use of the model proposed by Van Valin and La Polla (1997:146), in which the conventional notions of AGENT and PATIENT are treated as the extreme opposites of a gradient scale (in terms of Aarts 2007), with other thematic roles found in between and forming a fuzzy border between them, as illustrated in Figure 1.

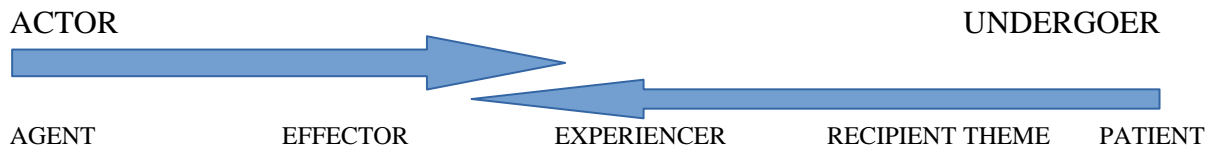


Figure 1. *Hierarchical thematic role assignment of actor–undergoer.*
(Adapted from Van Valin and La Polla 1997:146; see also Toyota 2008:10)

The arrows in Figure 1 show the decreasing likelihood of a thematic role being assigned to the subject of the active clause. It starts from the AGENT (most likely the subject of an active clause) on the left hand side of Figure 1. From the right end side, the figure shows decreasing likelihood of a thematic role given to the direct object starting with the PATIENT (most likely the direct object of an active clause).

In the present study I define the passive construction as a construction which recruits its argument (the subject) at the lowest end of the scale, namely PATIENT, which is affected by the action; it further clearly implies the existence of an AGENT, and is highly transitive⁵ (see below). As such, it has its counterpart in an active construction with two arguments, subject (AGENT) and direct object (PATIENT). Agentivity is in turn strongly connected with animacy (e.g., Sundman 1987:153), as AGENTS are the arguments with most control and volition. A lower level of control and volition is associated with EFFECTORS; consider *malaria* in *Malaria killed Fred* (Van Valin & La Polla 1997:119) or *coal* in *Oil will be replaced by coal* (Svartvik 1966:105). The latter even has an agentive phrase of sorts, of the type which Svartvik calls janus-agents, constituents which permit two different active clause transformations according to whether they are interpreted as agents [i.e. actor] or adjuncts [i.e. non-actor] (Svartvik 1966:105). Such examples are not treated as passive constructions in the present study. An illustration of the passive construction is given in Figure 2.

	Passive Construction		
structure	SBJ	VP _{PASS}	(AGENTIVE PHRASE)
	NP	V TRANSITIVE	
	PATIENT		
meaning	[a PATIENT is affected by a potentially unidentified AGENT]		
function	[foregrounding the PATIENT, backgrounding the AGENT]		

Figure 2. *The prototypical passive construction.*

⁵ This is, naturally, a simplification, as there are passive constructions formed out of intransitive verbs, impersonal passive construction, fairly common in Scandinavian languages, see Engdahl and Laanemets (2015). However, they differ from the prototypical passive constructions in many respects.

Apart from the extreme ends of the scale, AGENT and PATIENT, there are other roles included in the hierarchy, with EXPERIENCER and RECIPIENT placed in the middle. EXPERIENCER can be present in the active clause as either the subject, example (9) or the object, example (10).

(9) **The boy** fears the dog.

(10) The dog frightens **the boy**.

The RECIPIENT or GOAL role describes the endpoint of the action, its RECIPIENT (typically animate, see (11)) or DESTINATION (typically inanimate, see (12)). RECIPIENT is the role associated with the indirect object (either a regular NP or a prepositional phrase) in an active clause, while GOAL is typically expressed by a prepositional phrase only, see (13).⁶

(11) The director gave **John** a promotion.

(12) John sent a set of books **to the library**.

(13) John sent a letter **to Baltimore**.

THEME signifies a participant which is neither acting nor experiencing, but rather an object which is located somewhere or is undergoing a change of location (motion), as *a book* in *A book is on the table* or *Carl put a book on the table* (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997:85). Finally, PATIENT is the prototypical object role, what pre-theoretically is called the object of the action (Lyngfelt 2007:90).

As mentioned before, almost any definition of the passive starts with the correspondence between the passive and the active clause. The active clause which corresponds to the passive is transitive, i.e., constructed with two (or more) arguments, so that the direct object of the active clause corresponds to the subject in the passive clause. However, in a more restrictive view, a transitive clause is more than just a verb with two arguments. For example, Hopper and Thompson (1980) view transitivity as a property of the clause as a whole, such that an activity is ‘carried-over’ or ‘transferred’ from an AGENT to a PATIENT (Hopper & Thompson 1980:251; Kittilä 2002). This approach allows for transitivity to be presented as a gradient rather than a discrete category. This gradience is illustrated in the following PDSv examples (after Lyngfelt 2007:90):

(14) Kim åt upp äpplet.
Kim eat.PST up apple.DEF
‘Kim ate the apple up.’

(15) Kim gillar äpplen.
Kim likes apple.PL.DEF
‘Kim likes apples.’

From the point of view of argument structure, the two sentences are identical. If we see transitivity as a transfer of activity from AGENT to PATIENT then sentence (14) is definitely transitive, while (15) is ‘less’ transitive. This is also seen in how easy it is to passivize (14) ‘The apples were eaten’ but not (15) ‘?The apples were liked’. In terms of thematic roles

⁶ Toyota (2009) who uses a similar hierarchy of thematic roles based on VanValin and LaPolla (1997) does not include RECIPIENT (or GOAL). This makes it difficult to classify subjects of the passive clauses which correspond to the indirect objects of the active clauses. I would like to thank Elisabet Engdahl for suggesting that the model should be thus completed.

we may further conclude that the thematic role of ‘apples’ in (14) is different from the thematic role of the same NP in (15). It is perhaps better defined as STIMULUS rather than PATIENT and it remains unaffected by the activity.

In the typological literature on the passive we find a wide array of constructions coding the grammatical voice, that is, the relationship between the participant roles of NP arguments of a verb and the grammatical relations borne by those same NPs (Toyota 2008:136). In a given language these constructions do not exist independently: they are related to each other, whether the relationship is syntactic, semantic or functional. This feature of grammatical voice has been called the voice continuum, among others by Shibatani, who states that passives form a continuum with active sentences (Shibatani 1985:821). In the context of diachronic study, the concept of voice continuum allows us to see how the source constructions gradually move towards (and eventually turn into) the passive voice constructions. However, both in the process and after its completion, we expect to find constructions which cannot be unequivocally categorized as either active or passive voice. If we thus consider the prototypical passive construction to be one in which the subject has the thematic role of PATIENT and the thematic role of AGENT is either overtly realized by an adjunct or, if not overt, is at least strongly implied, we find that the constructions of a similar structure ([SBJ V PTC]), which differ in the thematic roles assigned to the subject, and often in their function as well, are passive-like or incipient passive constructions. These constructions may persist alongside the ‘purely’ passive ones.

I have so far used the term ‘construction’ pre-theoretically. Within Construction Grammar (CxG) constructions are defined as arbitrary form-meaning pairings, which together form a lexicon-syntax continuum, a ‘constructicon’.⁷ The notation used in Figure 2 is a representation of such a construction, symbolising schematic slots that can accommodate more or less narrowly defined elements, e.g., NPs or VPs with transitive V and passive marking. CxG makes a theoretical distinction between the *external* (or ‘constructional’) properties, i.e., a set of constraints on how a given expression fits in and interacts with larger grammatical patterns (and also sometimes described as the function of the construction), and the *internal* (or ‘constituent level’) properties, which are the requirements placed on the construction’s constituents. The two levels are linked via a symbolic correspondence link.

CxG, which originally focused on synchronic description, has of late become an important tool in diachronic research (e.g., Hilpert 2008; Traugott & Trousdale 2013; Fried 2009, 2013), because the theoretical and methodological consequences resulting from the assumptions of CxG make it a suitable instrument for investigating and describing language change (cf. Bergs & Diewald 2008:2). Diachronic CxG approaches partly developed from grammaticalization studies, which have shown that it is not one single element but rather a full construction which undergoes change (cf. Lehmann 1982:406; Himmelmann 2004:31). Constructional approaches to linguistic change treat multiple elements as single units (cf. Bergs and Diewald 2008:4), allowing an inclusion of co- and contextual factors (cf. Goldberg 1995:7; Kay 2002:1). Thus CxG includes both semantics and pragmatics in constructions (cf. Bergs & Diewald 2008:10), allowing for a more context-sensitive study. Furthermore, constructional approaches model gradualness as a step-by-step change in the individual features of a particular construction, unlike the traditional grammatical models.

In the present study, I incorporate the notion of thematic roles and gradient transitivity into the representations of constructions. Other studies have demonstrated that the origins

⁷ This is a gross simplification of a debate currently taking place in the CxG, where both the notion of construction and constructicon are being revisited, see among others Croft (2024). However, for the purpose of the present study such simple and uncontroversial definitions are sufficient.

of the periphrastic passive such as the PDSv passive are to be found in an adjectival construction (Givón 2006:342; Wiemer 2011). The source construction is visualized in Figure 3 and exemplified from one of the source texts in our corpus, example (16).

- (16) Nu kan man galin warþa.
now can man.M.SG mad.M.SG become
'A man can become mad.' (HL)

Adjectival Construction			
structure	SBJ	AUX	adjective
	NP		
	THEME		
	#j		#j
meaning	[new state created by some outer cause]		
function	[illustrate that a THEME acquires a new property]		

Figure 3. *The adjectival construction.*

Using simplified CxG notations, Figure 3 represents the [SBJ *varda* AdjP] construction in OSv (illustrated by example (16)). #j shows the agreement patterns. The periphrastic passive construction [SBJ *varda* PTCP] is visualized in Figure 4 and exemplified in example (17), also taken from the corpus for the present study.

- (17) Nu warþær kona dræpin i hemsokn.
now become.PRES woman killed in home⁸
'A woman is killed in her home.' (OgL)

<i>varda</i> -construction			
structure	SBJ	AUX	passive participle (AGENTIVE PHRASE)
	NP		V TRANSITIVE AGENT
	PATIENT		
	THEME		
	RECIPIENT		
	#j		#j
meaning	[a PATIENT is affected by a potentially unidentified AGENT]		
function	[foregrounding the PATIENT, backgrounding the AGENT]		

Figure 4. *[SBJ varda PTCP] in OSv.*

The target construction, the periphrastic passive, is different from the source construction in that the subject has the thematic role of a PATIENT, the past participle rather than an adjective is used, and the participle is derived from a highly transitive verb which presupposes the existence of an AGENT. Both the source and the target construction share

⁸ *Hemsokn* is a type of breach of domestic peace, when somebody comes to another's house with the express purpose of hurting or killing them.

the verb *varda* ‘become’, the participle agrees with the subject (in case, gender and number) just as the adjective and the overall word order is retained. Both constructions are mutative, i.e., signify a change of state. In the present paper, I focus on the status of the construction with *varda* in OSv and argue that it is still located between the source and target constructions.

4 CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

The analysis is based on a detailed study of eight OSv Swedish texts, written between 1225 and 1350, which are all provincial laws, representing different parts of the country. With respect to the conventional periodization of Swedish, all texts represent the classical Old Swedish period (1225–1375).

The provincial laws represent the oldest extant texts written in Swedish (disregarding the much shorter and typically formulaic runic inscriptions). They are generally seen as linguistically conservative and relatively free of influence from other languages, although some Latin influence can be traced there (e.g., Ahlberg 1942). Most likely they were originally spoken texts. They also represent different provinces and may thus reflect some dialectal differences. Also, the particular genre is clearly visible in the grammatical structures (e.g., the frequent use of conditional clauses). Notwithstanding these limitations, as they are the oldest extant texts of some substance, in which the *varda*-construction is well-represented, they are well-suited to the present study.

The texts are all subdivided into a number of codices (Sv. *balkar*), which discuss different regulations by first presenting a case (so-called *kasussatser*, case sentences) and then addressing the proper procedure. The *kasussatser* are typically verb-initial (see example (5)) or start with the adverb *nu* ‘now’ (see example (7)), most likely modelled on the Latin *item*. The provincial laws, being the most archaic Swedish texts, are among the most frequently studied extant Swedish texts, also with respect to their structure and syntax (e.g., Ståhle 1958; Jørgensen 1987).

Digitalized versions of the Swedish texts are freely available from *Fornsvenska textbanken* (<https://project2.sol.lu.se/fornsvenska>). In some cases the paper editions of the texts were double-checked to confirm that the digitalized versions do not contain errors.⁹

From each text all instances of *varda* were excerpted using the concordance tool KWIC. There is a considerable variation in spelling found in the material, the infinitive form can be spelled as *varþa*, *warþa*, *uarþa*, *værþa*, *wærþa* and *uærþa* or, in the beginning of a line, as *uwarda* or *uward(p)a*, with similar variation in the finite forms.

text	acronym	year	tokens	<i>varda</i>	Per 1000 words	[<i>varda</i> PTCP]	% all <i>varda</i>
<i>Äldre Västgötalagen</i>	AVL	1225	15026	45	2,99	35	78%
<i>Yngre Västgötalagen</i>	YVL	1280	23614	59	2,49	46	78%
<i>Dalalagen</i>	DL	1280	16260	59	3,63	48	81%
<i>Östgötalagen</i>	OgL	1280	49079	160	3,26	111	69%
<i>Upplandslagen</i>	UL	1297	47163	150	3,18	107	71%
<i>Västmannalagen</i>	VmL	1300	17618	33	1,87	29	88%
<i>Södermannalagen</i>	SdmL	1327	37587	200	5,32	163	81%
<i>Hälsingelagen</i>	HL	1350	16947	39	2,3	31	79%
			223294	745		570	

Table 1. *The OSv corpus.*

⁹ Editions found in Collin, H.S. and Schlyter, C.J.(1827–1877).

Table 1 illustrates the frequency of *varda* in each text (given per 1000 words) and the frequency of the construction with the passive participle (PTCP) among all uses of the verb *varda*. The construction constitutes the majority of its uses in each text.

The excerpted examples with *varda* were then annotated in detail for features such as tense, animacy of the subject (as this is relevant in the distribution of the passive constructions in PDSv) and types of complements (where applicable) of the verb (AdjP, PTCP, present participle, NP, etc.). An overview of the distribution of *varda* across the most frequent constructions is given in Table 2.

text	acronym	year	<i>varda</i>	[<i>varda</i> PTCP]	[<i>varda</i> AdjP]	[<i>varda</i> NP]	other
<i>Äldre Västgötalagen</i>	AVL	1225	45	35	6	1	3
<i>Yngre Västgötalagen</i>	YVL	1280	59	46	9	0	4
<i>Dalalagen</i>	DL	1280	59	48	7	0	4
<i>Östgötalagen</i>	OgL	1280	160	111	38	3	8
<i>Upplandslagen</i>	UL	1297	150	107	34	3	6
<i>Västmannalagen</i>	VmL	1300	33	29	2	0	2
<i>Södermannalagen</i>	SdmL	1327	200	163	27	1	9
<i>Hälsingelagen</i>	HL	1350	39	31	6	0	2
			745	570	129	8	38

Table 2. *The distribution of varda across constructions.*

Under the heading ‘other’ I grouped together low-frequency uses of *varda*, including one with present participle (example (18)), prepositional complement (example (19)) or other types of complements, in constructions where the verb means ‘happen, to come into existence’ (example (20)).

- (18) ok **wærþær** j þy sinni **hawændi** mæþ barni.
and become in this.DAT time having with child.DAT
‘And she falls pregnant in this time.’ (UL)
- (19) Varþær hysæ stolen ok ær eigh i fol.
become mare stolen and is not in foal

uærþær **i** **fol** siþæn annær far at köpæ.
become in foal since other starts to buy
‘If a mare is stolen which is not with foal, but is with foal when another wants to buy it.’
(AVL)
- (20) Nu kan **sua** **uarþa** at kona myrþi
now can so become that woman murders

man sin
man her.REFL
‘It can be so that a woman murders her husband.’ (OgL)

An important note concerns the identification of subjects. OSv was a pro-drop language, with subjects becoming obligatory first in Early Modern Swedish (Falk 1992, 1997). It was also a language with a productive case system (Skrzypek 2005). In the present study, I identify subjects based on the case form and only consider NPs in the nominative as likely candidates for subjects (notwithstanding the fact that oblique subjects were possible in OSv, however, for the *varda*-construction only the nominative subjects are relevant). For the majority

of the nouns the difference between the nominative and other case forms is clearly marked, e.g., the *-r* ending for the masculine strong declension in the singular. For weak nouns, the nominative is also formally distinct from the other (oblique) cases, e.g., *kirkia* ‘church.NOM.F’ vs. *kirkio* ‘church.OBL.F’.

In the following section I present a detailed analysis of the construction with the passive participle.

5 RESULTS

Table 1 shows the number of instances of *varda* in each text as well as the number of occurrences with past participles. I have already noted that the verb is a low frequency verb. It is therefore impossible to state with any certainty whether the frequency of the verb is rising over the time period studied or not (a question which is further complicated by the possible regional variation present in the texts). We can nevertheless note that the frequency of the verb (and its co-occurrence with *passive* participles) is relatively stable in all texts, with SdmL being the text with the highest representation of [SBJ *varda* PTCP], and also the text with the highest frequency of the verb itself, significantly higher than in longer text, such as UL and OgL.

[SBJ *varda* PTCP] is the most common use of *varda* in all texts, see Table 2, and even if the distribution across different texts is not fully identical, it is still the case that we find a rich corpus of examples as early as in the oldest extant text, AVL (1225). The question is now whether these examples are all instances of the passive construction. In this section I analyze them with respect to the thematic role of the subject and establish whether the subject can be considered a patient of an action for which an agent is either explicitly mentioned or at least strongly implied.

Even though [SBJ *varda* PTCP] is the most frequent use of the verb *varda*, there are only a handful of verbs from which the past participles are derived. This is partly an effect of the genre – a legal text is focused very much on actions which are harmful to others – partly it may also be argued that the structures form lexicalized units. Among the most frequent participles are *drepin* ‘killed’ and its synonyms *slagin* ‘slain’, *huggin* ‘cut down’, *wegin* ‘killed’ (typically co-ordinated with *slegin* ‘slain’) and occasionally *myrd* ‘murdered’. Another frequent participle is *takin* ‘taken’ and its synonyms *fangin* ‘captured’ and *gripin* ‘captured’, which are used to describe the arrest of an offender (*takin* is also frequently found as part of a phrase *af dagum takin*, lit. ‘from day taken’, meaning ‘killed’). All participles are derived from transitive verbs denoting actions, with a clear implication of some actor (AGENT), the AGENT is never identified. An overview of the most frequent source verbs (in PDSv spelling) is given in Table 3. Together they constitute 450 instances of the total of the 570 instances of [SBJ *varda* PTCP] construction, i.e., 79%.¹⁰

¹⁰ Because of the spelling variation and homographic forms it is difficult to give frequencies of the source verbs in all forms throughout the texts, but a search for all forms of the most frequent verbs returned 1909 hits for *taga* and 597 hits for *dräpa* ‘kill’, excluding the homographs (e.g., *drap* can be either a past form of *dräpa*, i.e., ‘killed’ or a noun ‘(act of) killing’). The different results for *taga* and *dräpa* are most likely a consequence of the former verb’s wider array of meanings, e.g., ‘to begin’, etc. The participle *takin* ‘taken’ found in [SBJ *varda* PTCP] construction in the material is derived from the meaning ‘to capture’ or ‘to kill’, which is only one of the verb’s possible meanings.

verb	translation	no. of instances
<i>taga</i>	take, capture	145
<i>dräpa</i>	kill	134
<i>fånga</i>	capture	34
<i>hugga</i>	strike	25
<i>såra</i>	hurt	19
<i>vinna</i>	overpower	18
<i>stjåla</i>	steal	17
<i>slå</i>	hit	15
<i>gripa</i>	capture	10
<i>skära</i>	cut	9
<i>väga</i> ¹¹	kill in battle	9
<i>giva</i>	give	8
<i>göra</i>	make	7
Total		450

Table 3. *Sources of the most frequent past participles (PDSv spelling).*

For the majority of the verbs, the subject of the *varda*-construction denotes the PATIENT. The PATIENT in these examples is typically animate (human referents being killed, hurt or captured; the verbs are adversative). Two verbs behave differently: *stjåla* ‘steal’ and *giva* ‘give’. In the active clauses, both verbs can take two objects, direct object denoting a PATIENT (an object being given or stolen) and indirect object denoting the RECIPIENT (here understood broadly as the one that either gains or loses the object). The PATIENT is typically inanimate, the RECIPIENT animate. We find the *varda*-construction with either the PATIENT (direct object in the active clause, ex. (21–22)) or the THEME (indirect object in the active clause), as illustrated in examples (23–24).

- (21) **Værþær** maþær **stolen** fæér sins.
become man.M stolen.M cattle his
‘If a man is robbed of his cattle.’ (AVL)
- (22) Nu kan kirkia brinna ælla **stulin** **uarþa** [at]
now can church.F burn or stolen.F become at

ipnum durum.
open.PL.DAT door.PL.DAT
‘Now a church can burn or be robbed while open.’ (OgL)
- (23) Inlaght fæ **warþer** burt **stulit**.
safekept.N cattle.N become away stolen
‘If a cow is stolen, one that was left for safe-keeping’ (YVL)
- (24) **Wardir** **stulit** nokot i by.
become stolen.N something.N in village
‘If something is stolen in a village’ (DL)

¹¹ The verb is no longer used in PDSv. *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok* (The Swedish Academy Dictionary, saob.se) records the most recent use in 1769.

In (21), the subject is *maþær* ‘man.NOM’, which in the corresponding active clause would be the indirect object (‘Somebody stole the cattle from the man.’). The thematic role of the indirect object is RECIPIENT rather than PATIENT. The role of the patient is filled by the direct object *cattle*. Similarly in (22) the subject of the passive construction is *kirkia* ‘church’, which in the corresponding active clause would be the indirect object, again with the thematic role of RECIPIENT. As shown in example (22) the PATIENT (the stolen entity) need not be named, rendering a meaning similar to ‘the church was robbed’. In these clauses, the subject is the entity which was the indirect object in the active counterpart rather than the direct object. Examples of the PATIENT subject of *varda*-construction with verbs meaning ‘steal’ or ‘give’ are very rare, while the examples with the RECIPIENT constitute the majority of all constructions with participles *stulin* ‘stolen’ or *givin* ‘given’. We do, however, find examples with the PATIENT subject, such as (23) and (24), in which the subject corresponds to the direct object of the active clause. The subject can be either animate, as ‘cattle’ in (23), or inanimate, as ‘something’ in (24).

The presence of such examples shows that a very restrictive definition of a passive construction, with the PATIENT subject, is insufficient. For some ditransitive verbs, the subject of the passive clause can correspond to either of the objects, with their different thematic roles. We may therefore conclude that for ditransitive verbs, either PATIENT or RECIPIENT may be the subject of the passive construction.

In her study of object symmetry in passives, i.e., the possibility to promote either object to subject in the passive clause in Swedish, Falk (2022) asserts that the promotion of indirect objects was only introduced in the 1800s. However, she only considers the morphological passive, e.g., *Han erbjöds en lägenhet* ‘He was offered an apartment’. In her analysis, the indirect object occupies a position with inherent case throughout the history of Swedish. Before the change, a passive ditransitive verb had no structural case to assign. Therefore, the direct object had to move to the subject position, whereas the indirect object remained in its case position. After the change, passive ditransitives have the capacity to assign one structural case. If the direct object receives this case, the indirect object can escape its case position and be promoted to subject. It is not clear whether the same analysis could be extended to the periphrastic passive, since apparently the indirect object in the corresponding active construction could be promoted to subject even in the early 1200s.

Occasionally we find examples where the subject is a THEME, as (25). Only 3 similar examples were found in the entire material.

- (25) **Uarther** barn **boret** till kirkyu
become child.N carried.N to church
‘If a child is carried to the church [...]’ (YVL)

On closer scrutiny, even the apparently clear-cut cases of the passive construction, such as *værþer marder dræpin* ‘if a man is killed’, can be nuanced further. Consider example (26) from AVL (1225). I quote a longer passage to illustrate my point.

- (26) **Værþer** marder¹² i kyrkiugardhi **dræpin** ællær **sargheþer.**
become man.NOM in churchyard killed or hurt

gialde biscope þrer marcher þa skal eighi tipir
pay.CONJ bishop.DATthree mark.PL then shall not mass

¹² So in the manuscript, most likely *maþer* ‘man’.

uetæ	fyr æn	hauir	biscups		lof	til	num
celebrate	before	has	bishop.GEN		consent	to	unless

han	hætti	uid	sinum	þrim	marchum.	Biscuper
he	ends	by	his.DAT	three.DAT	marks.DAT	bishop

skal	viþ	sopn	mælæ	æn	þær	viþer	þen
shall	by	parish	charge	but	they	again	he

vihit	uan.
deed	did

‘If a man is killed or hurt in a churchyard, fines of three marks shall be paid to the bishop. The priest shall not celebrate mass before he has the bishop’s approval before he receives the three marks. The bishop shall prosecute the parish and they in their turn the one who did the deed (= the killer).’ (AVL)

Example (26) discusses the process of paying the fines for the deed at length. The first sentence of the passage places the entire focus on the act of killing or causing bodily harm in a consecrated place. The act (and its location) is in focus and not the AGENT committing the crime, nor, in fact, the PATIENT (the victim). What is important is not that the perpetrator be found and possibly punished, but that the order of the consecrated place be restored. Similarly in example (27).

(27) **Uærþær** maþer **dræpin** ok af daghum **takin** þa
 become man killed and of day.DAT taken then

skal	uighi	a	þingi	lysæ	oc	fracfal	aruingiæ
shall	crime	on	ting	announce	and	demise	heir

sigiæ.	ok	a	adru.
say	and	on	others

‘If a man is killed [...] then the crime shall be made known to the ting and the heir and others informed of the death.’ (AVL)

What is in focus in this passage is the correct legal procedure after a man has been killed. This can be contrasted with such cases where it is not so much the restoration of order that is in focus but rather the identification of either AGENT (example (28)) or PATIENT (example (29)). In such cases the active form is used rather than the passive one.

(28) þrel drapér man ættæþen han ma eigh heta
 slave kills man family he may not be.called

þés	bani.
its	bane

‘If a slave kills a man of means he may not be held responsible for the crime.’ (AVL)

(29) Dræpar maþær danskan man allæ noræn
 kills man.NOM danish.ACC man.ACC or norwegian.ACC

man	böte	niv	markum.
man.ACC	pay	nine	mark.PL.DAT

‘If a man kills a Dane or a Norwegian (he) shall pay a fine of nine marks.’ (AVL)

As shown in the examples above, the subject of the *varda*-construction in OSv is in many cases animate, denoting a human. This is unexpected in a passive construction, given that the subject in the prototypical passive clause denotes a PATIENT. Typically it is located low in the Animacy Hierarchy (Silverstein 1976) and there is a good chance it will be inanimate, while an AGENT, whether implied or explicitly expressed, is characterized by high level of intentionality and volition, which is connected with a place high in the Animacy Hierarchy (Silverstein 1976; Dahl 2008). Based on a number of studies, Dahl (2008) claims that animacy plays an important role in the distribution of grammatical roles, so that subjects of active, transitive clauses are almost always animate (93%) while objects in such clauses are almost always inanimate (89%). We would therefore expect the subject of the passive clause to be inanimate or at least, we would expect a high percentage of inanimate subjects.

Contrary to this expectation, our data shows a dominance of animate subjects. Of the 570 examples gleaned from the corpus only 80 contain inanimate subjects (ca. 14%). An example is shown in (30).

- (30) Nu æn iorþ **uarþ** **giuin** hanum: þa
now if land.F become.PST given him then
- taki þæn iorþina sum hana gaf.
take this land.F.ACC.DEF which it.F.ACC gave
- ‘If the land was given to him than he who gave the land should take it (back).’ (OgL)

Otherwise a number of the inanimate subjects of periphrastic passives are the direct objects of ditransitive verbs such as *steal* or *give* (see also examples (21–24)). Finally, there are quite a few examples with body part nouns as subject (the examples are found in OgL and SdmL, which both have detailed regulations regarding specific injuries to the fingers, hands, etc.), as in (31).

- (31) **Warþær** all hand af **huggin** mæþ uapa
become all hand.F of cut.F with intention
- ‘If the whole hand is intentionally cut off.’ (OgL)

Table 4 illustrates the distribution of inanimate subjects in [*varda* PTCP] construction across texts.

text	year	[<i>varda</i> PTCP]	inanim SBJ	impersonal passive
AVL	1225	35	3	2
YVL	1280	46	3	1
DL	1280	48	7	1
OgL	1280	111	15	1
UL	1297	107	12	2
VmL	1300	29	9	2
SdmL	1327	163	26	10
HL	1350–1400	31	5	0
		570	80	19

Table 4. *Inanimate subjects in [SBJ varda PTCP].*

For clarity, I include a column for impersonal passives reported separately from the inanimate subjects. The impersonal passives are constructions shown in (32) in which the AGENT can only be implied and not explicitly named, and it is always animate, most likely human (Siewierska 1984:100). The corresponding active sentence can be intransitive; example (32) corresponds roughly to ‘someone entered’.

- (32) **Værther** in **ganget** at ypnom dorom. þa
 become in gone at open.DAT door.PL.DAT then
 skal præster giælda skatha ater þæn ær
 shall priest.NOM pay damage back this which
 kirkia fek.
 church got
 ‘If someone goes inside the church with the doors open, the priest shall repay the damage made in the church.’ (YVL)

There is a clear implication of some animate, most likely human, but non-specific AGENT (the one that had walked through the door of the church, which was carelessly left open or the one that has marked the land). The passives correspond to active intransitive constructions, where no object is found (cf., e.g., ‘People danced’).

Examples with inanimate subjects which are neither impersonal passives nor constructions with a three-argument verb, nor nouns denoting body parts are found in the corpus only sporadically, see examples (33–35).

- (33) **Warþer** iorþ **farin** siþan hion tu comæ saman.
 become land passed since spouses two come together,
 þa ær hon bægiæ þerræ.
 then is she both their
 ‘If the land has been marked out¹³ after two people married, it belongs to both of them.’ (YVL)

- (34) Nu gangær man eþ. [...] ok dör för æn malit
 now go.PRES man oath [...] and die.PRES before case.DEF
uarþær laghunnit
 become law.win.PTCP
 ‘Now a man gives an oath [...] and dies before the case is legally won.’ (OgL)

- (35) **Warþar** hon ei **gömð** innæn þe þri
 become she not hidden.F within the three
 sunnudagha oc warþer hon ætin eller spilt
 sunday.PL and become she eaten.F or spoilt.F
 böte þen ater tiunð sum þet vlti at
 pay this back tithe which it caused that
 prester scaþa fik.
 priest damage got

¹³ *Varda farin* ‘become passed/travelled’ refers to the custom known as *omfärd* ‘marking out the land’.

‘Is the tithe not properly secured within the three Sundays and becomes eaten or spoilt, the one responsible for the damage caused and the loss of the priest should pay it back.’ (SdmL)

The construction [varda PTCP] is mainly found with animate subjects (which can be a PATIENT, THEME or EXPERIENCER) in our material. However, the affinity between the construction and animate subjects may be spurious, and rather the result of the choice of verbs, from which the participles are derived (see Table 3). Apart from some examples of the participle *takin* ‘taken’ (derived from a whole phrase *af daghum takin* ‘of day taken’), the remaining uses of *takin* ‘captured’ and the other participles all presuppose that the object is animate.

Inanimate subjects constitute no more than 14% of all examples and there does not seem to be any tendency for them to become more frequent with time, but the distribution is proportional to the overall number of the periphrastic passive construction in a given text. As already mentioned, the periphrastic passive in PDSv is also strongly connected with animate subjects (PATIENTS). However, this connection is a (strong) tendency rather than an absolute requirement. Laanemets (2012) reports that ca. 15% of the subjects of periphrastic passive clauses in Swedish have inanimate subjects, while the results for the morphological passive construction show this to be almost 70% (Laanemets 2012:115). Periphrastic passives with inanimate subjects (PATIENTS) are thus acceptable in PDSv (even if they can be restricted lexically). In my data, the results are very similar to Laanemets’, only ca. 14% of all subjects in the *varda*-construction are inanimate.

Finally, I have annotated all instances of [SBJ *varda* PTCP] for tense in the hope of finding some clues as to the development of the construction. This did not yield any interesting results, however, as the examples are overwhelmingly in the present tense, with only a handful of instances in the simple past. Most likely this is an effect of the genre, as most of the texts are in the present tense. Furthermore, the construction itself is mainly used in conditional clauses, an effect which is created by the use of the present tense and inversion.

6 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In the present study, I have looked at a periphrastic construction which may or may not be a passive construction in OSv. The main objective was to propose a workable tool for diachronic analysis of incipient passive constructions and to test it on the oldest extant OSv texts, in order to verify earlier claims that the [SBJ *varda* PTCP] found there is used as its PDSv counterpart, i.e., is a fully-formed passive construction. The model combines the CxG detailed construction model with a hierarchical model of thematic roles.

The material studied suggests that there are no significant differences between [SBJ *varda* PTCP] and the periphrastic passive in PDSv. It allows the use of past participles in the slot originally occupied by AdjP. The participles that occupy that slot are in the majority of cases derived from highly transitive verbs which clearly imply the existence of an (animate) AGENT, even if we note that they are derived from only a handful of (adversative) verbs, which is most likely an effect of the genre. The subject of the construction is not restricted in terms of the thematic roles, signifying PATIENT, but also THEME, RECIPIENT and possibly EXPERIENCER as well. In PDSv these thematic roles are also available in the periphrastic construction. The preference for animate subjects, which is present in PDSv, in OSv is most likely a result of the verbs used in the construction. This is shown in Figure 5 which may be compared with the visualization of the periphrastic passive in PDSv in Figure 4.

<i>varda</i>-construction				
structure	SBJ	AUX	passive participle	(AGENTIVE PHRASE)
	NP		V TRANSITIVE	AGENT
	PATIENT			
	THEME			
	RECIPIENT			
	EXPERIENCER			
	#j		#j	
meaning	[a PATIENT is affected by a potentially unidentified AGENT]			
function	[focusing on the activity, backgrounding the AGENT]			

Figure 5. [*SBJ varda PTCP*] in OSv.

Even though the construction is not much different from the PDSv in terms of the thematic roles of the subject and the agreement between the subject and the participle, I would like to argue that it does differ from the PDSv construction, at least to some extent, in terms of function. As illustrated in examples (26–28), the *varda*-construction is used to focus the activity and while backgrounding the AGENT it does not seem to foreground the PATIENT to the same extent as is the case in PDSv. When the PATIENT is to be foregrounded (or its identity is important in the context), the active construction is used, with non-specific *man* ‘one’ in the subject role (see Skärlund 2017). This observation is in line with the concept of inactivization, as proposed in Haspelmath (1990). He sees inactivization as the main pragmatic function of the passive, and points out that the sources of passive constructions cross-linguistically often express the inactive nature of the situation denoted by the verb stem (Haspelmath 1990:59). Practically all examples in the corpus contain indefinite and non-specific subjects (the most frequent is *maðr* ‘(a) man’) and the construction is hypothetical (‘if a man is killed’). It is difficult to imagine a topicalization of a non-specific referent. As the AGENT is likewise unknown or unspecified, the whole construction is rather about a process as such, without committing to the identity of the participants. As soon as more specific information about either the subject or the object is available, an active construction is used.

Earlier studies into the development of the periphrastic passive voice construction in Swedish focused on the suppression of the original *varda* by *bli* ‘remain’, a lexical loan from MLG and illustrated how the new verb gradually spreads throughout the different constructions, as it also develops a polysemous meaning ‘remain/become’ (Markey 1969; Elmevik 1970; Rosenthal 1984; Skrzypek 2020, 2024; Skrzypek & Engdahl 2025). In these studies the *varda*-construction was recognized as a passive construction, ostensibly originating in an adjectival construction, most likely already constructionalized at the time when *bli* first appears in Swedish in the late 1200s. The present data suggests a more nuanced picture of the construction, in particular its overall function and the wide array of thematic roles associated with its subject. This calls for further in-depth studies in which larger corpora, of different genres, may be represented. Furthermore, a detailed and corpus-based study on the morphological passive construction would add to our knowledge of the passive constructions in OSv, as it is likely that there was some interplay between them. There is a detailed study available of the rise of the *s*-passive (Holm 1952), it is however not corpus-based and disregards the periphrastic passive.

The corpus used for the present study has a number of advantages: it is reasonably homogenous (all texts represent the same genre), spans a period of almost a century and includes texts as free from foreign influence as can ever be hoped for in a diachronic study. A possible disadvantage of the corpus is the regional variation, which cannot be disregarded.

However, the frequencies of [SBJ *varda* PTCP] seem to be comparable across all texts and no significant discrepancies with respect to the use of the construction, which could suggest a regional variation, have been found.

Diachronic development of passive voice construction is a topic seldom pursued, especially in comparison with the synchronic study of the passive. It therefore merits further study, not least because reliable tools of analysis are not yet fully developed. As it is not possible to simply apply the tools used in synchronic studies, the extant material being limited, new ways of establishing the status of a given construction as either passive or not are necessary. The DCxG perspective allowed us to treat voice as a category that can be expressed by a construction as a whole, rather than by just verb morphology. I hope to have demonstrated that a constructional approach to the rise of the passive voice, as well as the application of the concept of thematic roles, is a promising avenue in diachronic studies of passive.

ABBREVIATIONS

ACC = accusative, ADJP = adjective phrase, C = common gender, CONJ = conjunctive, DAT = dative, DEF = definite, F = feminine, GEN = genitive, M = masculine, INDEF = indefinite, N = neutral, NOM = nominative, OBJ = object, PL = plural, PRES = present, PST = past, PTCP = participle, SBJ = subject, SG = singular

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