

# Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 2756-1224

---

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*,  
vol 18. Editors: Candide Simard, Sarah M. Dopierala & E. Marie Thaut

## **A descriptive account of agentless constructions in Sylheti: passive, impersonal, and anticausative**

E. MARIE THAUT, ANDRIANA KOUMBAROU & ZURAB  
BARATASHVILI

Cite this article: Thaut, E. Marie, Andriana Koumbarou & Zurab Baratashvili. 2020. A descriptive account of agentless constructions in Sylheti: passive, impersonal, and anticausative. In Candide Simard, Sarah M. Dopierala & E. Marie Thaut (eds.) *Language Documentation and Description* 18, 112-134. London: EL Publishing.

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/202>

This electronic version first published: August 2020



This article is published under a Creative Commons License CC-BY-NC (Attribution-NonCommercial). The licence permits users to use, reproduce, disseminate or display the article provided that the author is attributed as the original creator and that the reuse is restricted to non-commercial purposes i.e. research or educational use. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

---

## **EL Publishing**

For more EL Publishing articles and services:

Website: <http://www.elpublishing.org>  
Submissions: <http://www.elpublishing.org/submissions>

# A descriptive account of agentless constructions in Sylheti: passive, impersonal, and anticausative

E. Marie Thaut & Andriana Koumbarou  
*SOAS University of London*

Zurab Baratashvili  
*Georgian National Academy of Sciences,  
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University*

## Abstract

We identify three constructions in Sylheti which license the non-mention of an agent argument or do not allow the realisation of one. We describe a passive construction, which allows the realisation of an agent followed by the converbial instrumental *dia* ‘by’, formed with the addition of a nominalizing suffix *-a* to the verbal root and the tensed passive auxiliary *o-* ‘become’. The second construction is an impersonal passive with the passive auxiliary *za-* ‘go’, which does not allow the realisation of an agent argument and gives rise to possibilitative readings. Further, *za-* also acts as a light verb realised with verbal stems which can take a single argument interpreted as the ‘undergoer’ of the action, achieving an anticausative reading; this construction does not allow the realisation of an agent but does allow the realisation of the cause of the event such as a natural force marked with the agentive/instrumental *-e*. To describe these three constructions, this paper also provides a brief sketch of the distributional patterns of two Sylheti case markers, namely *-e*, which surfaces on both agents and instruments, and *-re*, which attaches to themes/patients, as well as recipients.

## 1. Introduction

This paper gives a descriptive account of three constructions in Sylheti which license the non-mention of an agent or restrict its realisation, illustrated in (2)-(4).<sup>1</sup> Example (2) is the passive variant of (1) formed with the addition of a nominalizing suffix *-a* to the verbal root, followed by the tensed passive auxiliary *o-* ‘become’. Example (2) also shows that this construction allows the optional realisation of an agent that is followed by the converbial instrumental *dia* ‘by’ in the passive. Example (3) shows an impersonal passive construction formed with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’ (with irregular root *ge-*) which does not allow the realisation of an agent argument and gives rise to possibilitive readings. Example (4) illustrates an anticausative construction where *za-* ‘go’ is analysed as the light verb part of a compound verb construction (Butt 2010). In the anticausative, the single unmarked argument of the clause is read as the ‘undergoer’ of the action; it does not allow the realisation of an agent but does allow the realisation of an instrument or the cause of the event<sup>2</sup>.

- (1) *faruk-e      zanala      bang-s-e*  
 Faruk-A      window      break-PRF-3  
 ‘Faruk broke the window.’
- (2) (*faruk-re dia*)      *zanala      bang-a      o-i-s-e*  
 (Faruk-NA by)      window      break-NMLZ      become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The window was broken (by Faruk).’
- (3) *zanala      (\*faruk-re dia)      bang-a      ge-s-e*  
 window      (Faruk-NA by)      break-NMLZ      go-PRF-3  
 ‘The window was/could be broken (\*by Faruk).’
- (4) *zanala      bang-i      ge-s-e*  
 window      break-CONJ      go-PRF-3  
 ‘The window broke.’

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our consultants Faruk, Farhana, and Nadia, without whose patience and readiness to provide their insights on Sylheti, writing this paper would not have been possible. Any mistakes remain ours.

<sup>2</sup> The abbreviations used in this paper are: 1 = first-person, 2 = second-person, 3 = third-person, A = agent, CAUS = causative, CLF = classifier, CNFT = counterfactual, CONJ = conjunctive particle, COP = copula, F = feminine, FUT = future, GEN = genitive, HON = honorific, INS = instrumental, IPFV = imperfective aspect, LOC = locative, NA = non-agent, NEG = negation, NMLZ = nominalizer, NP = noun phrase, PL = plural, PRF = perfect aspect, PST = past tense, SG = singular

This paper is a preliminary study of these three constructions and offers a descriptive sketch which, we hope, offers plenty of directions for further research. We have grouped these three constructions together as they ‘affect’ the possibility for realisation of an agent, albeit in different ways. In what follows, section 2 discusses the criteria we have followed for identifying passive and other agentless constructions in Sylheti, as well as the challenges we faced. Section 3 discusses case-marking patterns in Sylheti, and more specifically the dual function of *-e* as an agentive and instrumental marker (section 3.1) and the dual function of *-re* attaching to both themes/patients as well as recipients (section 3.2). Section 4 discusses the two types of passive constructions, and section 5 presents the anticausative construction. Finally, section 6 concludes the paper.

## 2. Data collection

The topic of this study came up during the lessons with the SOAS Sylheti Language Society, when we encountered various constructions identified by the Sylheti-speaking teachers as ‘passive’. We then gathered additional data for this paper in elicitation sessions with three native Sylheti speakers living in London. We also consulted the data from recordings collected by students in the Field Methods class in the academic years 2013-2014 and 2015-2016 at SOAS, University of London. This paper is intended as a preliminary study of three constructions in Sylheti, offering only a glimpse into their properties. The discussion is also restricted to findings from elicited data.

The discussion of passive constructions (and other agent-affecting constructions) traditionally involves an investigation into the (re)mapping between grammatical functions such as subject and object and semantic roles, as well as (syntactic) transitivity. Traditionally, the active-passive opposition is analysed as the remapping of agent and patient roles onto syntactic functions (Klaiman 1991; Palmer 1994; Mel’čuk 2006; Kulikov 2011). Broadly speaking, the passive involves demotion of the agent in terms of its syntactic functions (prototypically a subject in the active) which results in its optionality and promotion of the patient argument into a subject. Semantic roles in the passive voice remain the same and changes are observed only when it comes to syntactic functions (Palmer 1994).

We do not discuss the subject status of arguments in the constructions we describe because case markers in Sylheti seem to be distributed on the basis of semantic factors and are not a clear indicator of changes in grammatical function. This is similar to what we know about Hindi, where patients can optionally retain the accusative marker in the passive. Bhatt (2007) explains that we observe a promotional passive in the absence of the accusative marker, and a non-promotional passive when the patient is

marked. Unlike Hindi, Sylheti obligatorily retains case-marking in constructions with the passive auxiliaries *o-* ‘become’ (see section 4.1) and *za-* ‘go’ (see section 4.2). Marking the theme/patient and recipient follows the same patterns in both active and passive voice. With limited data it is not clear to us whether this construction involves promotion in terms of grammatical functions.

Case markers are, however, a good indicator of semantic roles (as argued for languages with semantic alignment (Klimov 1974)). As we will see in section 3, non-agent arguments are marked only in transitive clauses. We thus discuss constructions that ‘affect’ the possibility for realisation of an agent, whether describing an agentless event or licensing the non-mention of an agent. (i.e. a more ‘agent-oriented’ approach). A further complication is that Sylheti is heavily pro-drop and the identification of passive constructions, or agentless constructions more generally, on the basis of non-realisation of the agent alone is not feasible; it has to coincide with changes in verb morphology and, if an agent is realised, changes in case morphology.

Generally, we follow two basic criteria in identifying passive and other agentless constructions in Sylheti: (1) optional or restricted realisation of an agent and changes in case-marking if an agent is realised, and (2) changes in verbal morphology compared to an active clause. Following these criteria we see three relevant constructions emerge. Sylheti shows a ‘prototypical’ passive construction formed with the auxiliary *o-* ‘become’, which allows the optional realisation of an agent and for which a clear active counterpart can be elicited. Sylheti also has an impersonal passive which does not allow the realisation of an agent formed with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’, for which an active counterpart cannot be indicated. The third construction is an agentless anticausative formed with intransitive verbs (or ambitransitive verbs) in which the single argument is interpreted as an ‘undergoer’. This anticausative construction does not allow the realisation of an agent but does allow the realisation of inanimate instruments or the cause of the event such as a natural force. We discuss these three constructions in detail in section 4.

### **3. Case-marking**

This section gives a short overview of case-marking in Sylheti following Comrie (1978) and his three grammatical relations – S, A, and P, which are based on the idea that there is a universal difference between transitive and intransitive verbs. S is the single argument of an intransitive clause, A is the agent-like argument, and P is the patient-like argument of a transitive clause. In short, our findings when it comes to marking nominals in Sylheti are:

- A arguments typically occur with the *-e* marker but can also be unmarked<sup>3</sup>
- S arguments are sometimes marked like A and sometimes left unmarked
- P arguments carry the *-re* marker or can be left unmarked

Sylheti does not easily fit into the major alignment types identified cross-linguistically when it comes to case-marking (see Comrie 2013) because no single argument seems to receive uniform treatment. Broadly speaking, Sylheti shows a mix of nominative-accusative and ergative-absolutive systems with the added complication of a split-S system. Sylheti shows similarities to nominative-accusative systems in the sense that only the P argument can be marked with the *-re* marker<sup>4</sup>. Sylheti echoes ergative-absolutive systems as both S and P can be unmarked. At the same time, S can be treated like A (section 3.1), showing a split-S system where S is treated sometimes like A (when marked with *-e*) and sometimes like P (when unmarked).

Alignment type generalizations defined along the lines of uniform S, A, and P categories risk missing the precise contribution of case markers and understanding language-specific semantic and pragmatic factors that might be telling when accounting for differential argument coding. What drives the differential marking of argument roles in Sylheti is not the immediate concern of this paper, but we will draw a short sketch in so much as we need it for the discussion on agency-affecting constructions.

### 3.1. The *-e* marker

The *-e* marker surfaces on agents, as well as on instruments, as illustrated in (5), where the agent *faruk* and the instrument *samos* ‘spoon’ are identically marked.

---

<sup>3</sup> It is important to note here that while some speakers consistently mark A arguments with *-e* and would judge the absence of the marker to be ungrammatical, some speakers treat *-e* as optional even in transitive contexts. However, for the purposes of this paper we follow the general consensus among speakers we asked, but point to this variation as something that could be investigated further.

<sup>4</sup> As we will see in Section 3.2, the *-re* marker has a dual function in attaching to patients of two-argument predicates, as well as to themes and recipients of three-argument predicates.

- (5) *faruk-e samos-e bat xa-e*  
 Faruk-A spoon-INS rice eat-3  
 ‘Faruk eats rice with the spoon.’

The agentive *-e* surfaces freely in the third person on nominal A arguments of transitive clauses; it does not manifest with pronouns. Its agentive use is illustrated in (6)-(7):

- (6) *fua-e xola xa-i-s-e*  
 boy-A banana eat-CONJ-PFR-3  
 ‘The boy ate the banana.’
- (7) *beṭi-e gor saf xor-s-e*  
 woman-A house clean do-PRF-3  
 ‘The woman cleaned the house.’

We identified a certain degree of variation among speakers when it comes to the realisation of *-e*. The deletion of the agentive marker *-e* renders a transitive clause ungrammatical for some speakers, as shown in (8)-(9), but others treat it as optional.

- (8) *\*beṭa laṭi dia kutta-ṭa-re mar-s-e*  
 man stick with dog-CLF-NA hit-PRF-3  
 ‘The man hit the dog with a stick.’
- (9) *beṭa-e laṭi dia kutta-ṭa-re mar-s-e*  
 man-A stick with dog-CLF-NA hit-PRF-3  
 ‘The man hit the dog with a stick.’

The marker *-e* also surfaces on agent arguments of intransitive verbs which denote physical activities, as well as verbs denoting body-related functions that occur uncontrollably. These include verbs such as ‘dance’, ‘run’, ‘bark’, ‘laugh’, ‘scream’, ‘tremble’, ‘cough’, and ‘sleep’, which involve a ‘performer’ agent, illustrated in (10). As with transitive agents, some speakers treat the realisation of *-e* in (10) as obligatory, while others treat it as optional.

- (10) *faruk-e nas-e*  
 Faruk-A dance-3  
 ‘Faruk dances.’

The marker *-e* is ungrammatical with intransitive verbs such as ‘fall’, ‘die’, ‘grow’, ‘bloom’, ‘drown/sink’, and ‘grow up’, which do not involve a prototypical agent. Speakers who generally treat the realisation of *-e* as optional also judge its realisation with verbs of this group as ungrammatical. (11) and (12) show that with the verb *for-* ‘fall/read’ the realisation of *-e* indicates a change in meaning. In (11) with the absence of *-e* the only

available reading is one of ‘falling’, whereas in (12) when *-e* is realised the verb translates as ‘reading’.

- (11) *faruk*            *foɽ-e-r*  
 Faruk                fall-3-IPFV  
 (a) ‘Faruk (is/was) falling.’  
 (b) \*‘Faruk (is/was) reading.’

- (12) *faruk-e*        *foɽ-e-r*  
 Faruk-A            read-3-IPFV  
 ‘Faruk (is/was) reading.’  
 \*‘Faruk (is/was) falling.’

Sylheti thus shows a split-S system (also referred to in the literature as active-stative, agent-patient, unergative-unaccusative, split-intransitive: see Perlmutter 1978; Van Valin 1990; Mithun 1991). What is interesting is what determines the split; we adopt a working hypothesis that the split has to do with physical performance/participation which involves verbs that denote involuntary acts of ‘tripping’, as well as physical actions and body-related functions. The ‘performer’ agent of ‘running’, ‘sneezing’, or ‘tripping’ can be marked with *-e* but not arguments of intransitive verbs which are ‘undergoers’ of ‘falling’, ‘growing up’ or ‘sinking’; these are never marked. We leave the precise semantic factors determining the split for future research as it is not the immediate concern of this paper. We follow Dowty (1991) in arguing that the split has to do with distinguishing between more agent-like and patient-like arguments, with agentivity in Sylheti perhaps revolving around identifying a physically active and performing agent (see Pustet 2002 on the difficulty of identifying semantic factors that drive such splits).

The instrumental *-e* attaches only to inanimate arguments and is not subject to the same optionality, as observed with the agentive *-e*:

- (13) *faruk-e*    *samos\*(-e)*    *bat*    *xa-e*  
 Faruk-A    spoon-INS    rice    eat-3  
 ‘Faruk eats rice with the spoon.’

### 3.2. The *-re* marker

Sylheti shows differential marking of the non-agent argument in a transitive clause. Like in other Indo-Aryan languages such as Hindi (Mohanan 1994; Aissen 2003; de Hoop and Narasimhan 2005), non-agent proper names are obligatorily marked with *-re* (e.g., compare (14)–(15)). Furthermore, animates high on the animacy scale also tend to be marked, while inanimates are only optionally marked, as in (16).



- (14) *šubo-e faruk-re ʧela mar-e*  
 Šubo-A Faruk-NA push hit-3  
 ‘Šubo pushes Faruk.’
- (15) \**šubo-e faruk ʧela mar-e*  
 Šubo-A Faruk push hit-3  
 ‘Šubo pushes Faruk.’
- (16) *šubo-e boi(-re) kin-ʧ-e*  
 Šubo-A book(-NA) buy-PRF-3  
 ‘Šubo bought the (specific) book.’

Non-agent pronouns are also obligatorily marked with *-re* following a more prototypical nominative-accusative system. This is illustrated in (17) and (18) with the first-person singular pronoun. In (17) *amare* is the patient argument and in (18) *ami* is the agent. Similarly, (19) shows a sequence of two pronouns for third-person singular, *he* and *tare*,<sup>5</sup> in agent and patient roles, respectively. The obligatory presence of *-re* with pronouns is consistent with the observation that *-re* is obligatorily realised with expressions that require the identification of a unique referent (pronouns, proper names, specific animates, and optionally with specific inanimates).

- (17) *šubo-e amare ʧela mar-e*  
 Šubo-A 1SG.NA push hit-3  
 ‘Šubo pushes me.’
- (18) *ami tare ʧela mar-s-i*  
 1SG 3SG.NA push hit-PRF-1  
 ‘I have pushed him.’
- (19) *he tare ʧela mar-s-e*  
 3SG 3SG.NA push hit-PRF-3  
 ‘He has pushed him.’

---

<sup>5</sup> The third-person singular masculine pronoun *he* (originally a distal deictic) is a morphological exception in the pronoun paradigm:

(i) Third-person singular pronouns

<i>he</i>	3SG	‘he’	<i>ta-i</i>	3SG-F	‘she’
<i>ta-r</i>	3SG-GEN	‘his’	<i>ta-i-r</i>	3SG-F-GEN	‘her’
<i>ta-re</i>	3SG-NA	‘(to) him’	<i>ta-i-re</i>	3SG-F-NA	‘(to) her’

The *-re* marker also appears obligatorily on recipients in ditransitive constructions where the theme remains unmarked. This is illustrated in (20) where the theme *mona* ‘baby’ is unmarked and appears after the recipient, as well as in (21) where it appears before the recipient. A sequence of two *-re* marked NPs is also judged as grammatical when the theme precedes the recipient (as argued for in Hindi, see Bhatt & Anagnostopoulou 1996). See examples (22) and (23).

- (20) *ami tumare mona di-s-i*  
 1SG 2SG.NA baby give-PRF-1  
 ‘I have given you the baby.’
- (21) *ami mona tumare di-s-i*  
 1SG baby 2SG.NA give-PRF-1  
 ‘I have given you the baby.’
- (22) *faruk-e mona-re fubo-re di-s-e*  
 Faruk-A baby-NA Shubo-NA give-PRF-3  
 ‘Faruk has given Shubo the baby.’
- (23) *#faruk-e fubo-re mona-re di-s-e*  
 Faruk-A Shubo-NA baby-NA give-PRF-3  
 ‘Faruk has given Shubo to the baby.’

To reflect the dual function of *-re* attaching to both themes and patients, as well as to recipients, we treat it as a non-agent marker underspecified with respect to the precise non-agent argument role that it attaches to. This underspecification is resolved with respect to the immediate linguistic context, i.e. the meaning of the verb, the number of NPs present in the clause, as well as their linear order.

This outline in the distributional patterns of two case-markers in Sylheti has shown that *-re* surfaces only in (di)transitive clauses attached to a non-agent argument, as in Comrie’s (1978) P role. We leave unexplained the connection between animacy, specificity, and the obligatory/optional presence of *-re*, but our observations point to a system similar to Hindi (see, e.g., de Hoop & Narasimhan 2005). The marker *-e* attaches to agents in both intransitive and (di)transitive clauses. It is ungrammatical with the single argument of verbs that do not involve a prototypical agent defined along the lines of physical performance, showing no uniform treatment of the S role (this is a promissory note at this point and in need of further research). In addition, we saw that *-e* serves an instrumental use with inanimate common nouns. The arguments that do not take any case markers are the ‘undergoers’ of intransitive clauses.

#### 4. Passives

The passive constructions we describe involve a main verb in a nominalized form (a form that traditional grammars call the ‘verbal noun’), followed by a tense/aspect-carrying auxiliary. In Sylheti the verbal noun has two forms due to two different nominalising suffixes, *-a* and *-ni*. Verbs with monosyllabic roots that end in a consonant take the nominalising suffix *-a*:

- (24) Monosyllabic verb root + *-a*
- |              |              |
|--------------|--------------|
| <i>xor-a</i> | ‘do’         |
| <i>mar-a</i> | ‘hit, kill’  |
| <i>nas-a</i> | ‘dance’      |
| <i>tax-a</i> | ‘stay, live’ |

Verbs with monosyllabic roots that end in a vowel take a variant of the nominalising suffix *-a* formed with a liaison vowel to become *-oa*:

- (25) Monosyllabic verb root ending in a vowel + *-a*
- |              |          |
|--------------|----------|
| <i>xa-oa</i> | ‘eat’    |
| <i>de-oa</i> | ‘give’   |
| <i>za-oa</i> | ‘go’     |
| <i>o-a</i>   | ‘become’ |

Verbs with roots of more than one syllable (all ending in a vowel with no exception yet found) take the nominalising suffix *-ni*:

- (26) Polysyllabic verb root ending in a vowel + *-ni*
- |                 |          |
|-----------------|----------|
| <i>guma-ni</i>  | ‘sleep’  |
| <i>silla-ni</i> | ‘scream’ |
| <i>hatra-ni</i> | ‘swim’   |
| <i>tela-ni</i>  | ‘push’   |

It is important to point out here that Sylheti also shows a valency-increasing morpheme *-a-*, which attaches to the verbal root. The list in (27) shows the addition of the morpheme *-a-* to the verbal stem, in which case the nominalising suffix *-ni* is used like with polysyllabic verbs ending in vowels, as we saw in (26). The effect is the achievement of a causative reading.

- (27)
- | Verb root   |               | Verb root + <i>-a-</i> + <i>-ni</i> |                    |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>xor-</i> | ‘do’          | <i>xor-a-ni</i>                     | ‘make do’          |
| <i>for-</i> | ‘read’        | <i>for-a-ni</i>                     | ‘make read, teach’ |
| <i>xa-</i>  | ‘eat’         | <i>xa-oa-ni</i>                     | ‘make eat, feed’   |
| <i>dex-</i> | ‘see’         | <i>dex-a-ni</i>                     | ‘make see, show’   |
| <i>lag-</i> | ‘be attached’ | <i>lag-a-ni</i>                     | ‘attach’           |

Typologically, we identify that Sylheti follows the same structure as other languages of the Eastern group of Indo-Aryan languages. As argued by Thompson (2012) for Bengali, Sylheti makes use of two auxiliaries for the

formation of passives. First, there is the *o-* ‘become’ auxiliary which forms what looks like a ‘prototypical’ passive which allows the realisation of an agent. Secondly, there is the *za-* ‘go’ auxiliary which does not allow the realisation of an agent and gives rise to possibilitive readings (David 2015 describes it for Bengali as expressing a passive, as well as an abilitative meaning). Sylheti is, thus, consistent with languages of the Eastern branch of Indo-Aryan languages in using the *za-* ‘go’ auxiliary for more specialised meanings. This is in contrast to languages from the Western branch, where the ‘go’ passive auxiliary is involved in forming passive constructions more generally and which could give rise to (in)abilitative readings, especially with negation (as argued for in Hindi, see Srishti 2011).

#### 4.1. Passive with auxiliary *o-* ‘become’

A passive construction with the use of the auxiliary *o-* ‘become’ is illustrated in (29), the passive variant of active (28).

- (28) *fua-e*            *xagoz*    *xat-s-e*  
 boy-A            paper    cut-PRF-3

‘The boy has cut the paper.’

- (29) (*fua dia*)    *xagoz*    *xat-a*            *o-i-s-e*  
 boy by          paper    cut-NMLZ        become-CONJ-PRF-3

‘The paper has been cut.’

In the passive construction in (29) the agent argument is dropped and the verbal element *xat-* ‘cut’ carries the nominalising suffix *-a* followed by the auxiliary *o-* ‘become’ inflected for tense and aspect. The auxiliary always shows the suffix *-e* or *-o* which in active sentences shows agreement in third person<sup>6</sup> irrespective of the number of the patient argument, as indicated in (30) and (31):

---

<sup>6</sup> Sylheti does not exhibit singular-plural agreement in verbs. However, it does have an honorific suffix *-n* that attaches to nouns and verbs and can lend a plural reading at times, as demonstrated in the example below:

- |                              |   |   |
|------------------------------|---|---|
| (i) <i>beḷa</i><br>‘the man’ | (ii) <i>beḷa-i-n</i><br>man-CONJ-HON<br>‘the man/men’ | (iii) <i>beḷa-ra</i><br>man-PL<br>‘the men’ |
|------------------------------|---|---|

(iv) Verb conjugation:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <i>he aise</i> ‘He has come.’             | <i>tara aise</i> ‘They have come.’             |
| <i>tumi aiso</i> ‘You have come.’         | <i>tumra aiso</i> ‘You (PL) have come.’        |
| <i>afne aisoin</i> ‘You (HON) have come.’ | <i>afnara aisoin</i> ‘You (HON-PL) have come.’ |

- (30) *undur(-ta)-re*          *dex-a*          *o-i-s-e*  
 mouse(-CLF)-NA          see-NMLZ          be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The mouse has been seen.’

- (31) *amare*      *mar-a*          *o-i-s-e*  
 1SG.NA      hit-NMLZ          be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘I was hit.’

The agent argument can optionally be realised, followed by the converbial instrumental *dia* ‘by/with’. Compare (32) and (33)<sup>7</sup>.

- (32) *amar*          *anquil*          *xaṭ-a*          *o-i-s-e*  
 1SG.GEN          finger          cut-NMLZ          be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger was cut.’

- (33) *amar*      *anquil*      *ḍaxtor-re*      *dia*      *xaṭ-a*      *o-i-s-e*  
 1SG.GEN      finger      doctor-NA      by      cut-NMLZ      be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger was cut by the doctor.’

Passive constructions can be derived with verbs that carry an additional valency-increasing morpheme *-a-* in which case they will be suffixed with the nominaliser *-ni*. The difference in interpretation when attaching additional morphology is exemplified in (34) and (35):

- (34) *amare*      *mar-a*          *o-i-s-e*  
 1SG.NA      hit-NMLZ          be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘I was hit.’

- (35) *amare*      *mar-a-ni*          *o-i-s-e*  
 1SG.NA      hit-CAUS-NMLZ          be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘I was (made) hit.’

In (28)-(29) and (32)-(33) the inanimates *xagoz* ‘paper’ and *anquil* ‘finger’ are unmarked in both the active and passive voice. Non-agents, however, in the passive voice can also retain the *-re* marker. For example, in both the active (36) and passive (37) voice the animate patient *undur* ‘mouse’ is marked with *-re*:

---

<sup>7</sup> In example (33) we see that the animate noun *ḍaxtor* ‘doctor’ is marked with *-re* when followed by the converbial *dia*. We hypothesize that this is a leftover effect of the tendency for animate themes of the verb ‘give’ to be marked with *-re* before grammaticalization.

- (36) *faruk-e undur(-ʔa)-re dex-s-e*  
 Faruk-A mouse(-CLF)-NA see-PRF-3  
 ‘Faruk has seen the mouse.’
- (37) *undur(-ʔa)-re dex-a o-i-s-e*  
 mouse(-CLF)-NA see-NMLZ be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The mouse has been seen.’

The realisation of the *-re* marker follows the same pattern in both the active and passive voice. In contrast to Hindi, for example, Sylheti NPs high on the animacy scale are obligatorily marked with *-re* in the passive voice. This is illustrated in (38). Example (39) shows that the drop of *-re* would result in ungrammaticality.

- (38) *beʔa-re kun xor-a o-i-s-i-l*  
 man-NA murder do-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-CONJ-PST  
 ‘The man had been murdered.’
- (39) \**beʔa kun xor-a o-i-s-i-l*  
 man murder do-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-CONJ-PST  
 ‘The man had been murdered.’

Similarly, proper names and pronouns are also always marked as non-agents, as shown in (40)-(41) and (42)-(43), respectively:

- (40) *ʃubo-re mar-a o-i-s-e*  
 Shubo-NA hit-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘Shubo was hit.’
- (41) \**ʃubo mar-a o-i-s-e*  
 Shubo hit-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘Shubo was hit.’
- (42) *tare mar-a o-i-s-e*  
 3SG.NA hit-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘He was hit.’
- (43) \**he mar-a o-i-s-e*  
 3SG hit-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘He was hit.’

With ditransitive constructions, the pattern that emerges, as we saw with active sentences, is that *-re* is obligatorily realised with recipients. This is illustrated in (44) and (45) which also illustrate the pro-drop tendency of Sylheti.

- (44) (a) *fubo-re*      *kita*      *de-oa*      *o-i-s-i-l*  
 Shubo-NA      what      give-NMLZ      become-CONJ-PRF-CONJ-PST  
 ‘What had been given to Shubo?’
- (b) *boi*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-i-l*  
 book              give-NMLZ              become-CONJ-PRF-CONJ-PST  
 ‘The book had been given.’
- (45) (a) *xare*              *boi*      *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 who.NA              book      give-NMLZ              become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘To whom has the book been given?’
- (b) *fubo-re*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 Shubo-NA              give-NMLZ              become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘(It) has been given to Shubo.’

A sequence of two *-re* marked NPs in the passive voice is illustrated in (46). Examples (47) and (48) show that while the theme *boi* ‘book’ is only optionally marked<sup>8</sup> with *-re*, the marker is obligatory with the recipient *fubo*. We see the same patterns in active clauses in section 3.2.

- (46) *boi-re*      *fubo-re*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 book-NA      Shubo-NA      give-NMLZ              be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The book has been given to Shubo.’
- (47) *boi*      *fubo-re*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 book      Shubo-NA      give-NMLZ              be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The book has been given to Shubo.’
- (48) *\*boi-re*      *fubo*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 book-NA      Shubo      give-NMLZ              be-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The book has been given to Shubo.’

Similar patterns emerge with animate themes such as *mona* ‘baby’. (49) shows that the recipient is always obligatorily marked. Examples (50) and (51b) illustrate that the theme *mona* ‘baby’ is optionally marked. When it is marked, however, the theme obligatorily precedes the recipient, as we see in active sentences, and in (50).

- (49) *\*mona-re*      *fubo*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 baby-NA      Shubo      give-NMLZ              become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The baby has been given to Shubo.’
- (50) *mona-re*      *fubo-re*              *de-oa*              *o-i-s-e*  
 baby-NA      Shubo-NA      give-NMLZ              become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The baby has been given to Shubo.’

---

<sup>8</sup> It is subject to further research whether a case-marked and an unmarked theme differ in terms of specificity, and whether that relates to word order.

- (51) (a) *xare mona de-oa o-i-s-e*  
 who.NA baby give-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘To whom has the baby been given?’
- (b) *mona farhana-re de-oa o-i-s-e*  
 baby Farhana-NA give-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The baby has been given to Farhana.’

While a sequence of two *-re* marked NPs is not judged ungrammatical, there is a clear preference that if the theme has *-re*, the recipient is marked with the genitive *-r* followed by *gese*, which indicates direction/proximity. *-r gese* differentiates the recipient from the theme argument with *-re*. This is exemplified in (52) with a question and answer pair:

- (52) (a) *mona-re xar gese de-oa o-i-s-e*  
 baby-NA who.GEN near give-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘To whom has the baby been given?’
- (b) *mona-re fubo-r gese de-oa o-i-s-e*  
 baby-NA Shubo-GEN near give-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The baby has been given to Shubo.’

Turning to intransitives, Sylheti may allow passivization of intransitives with the auxiliary *o-* ‘become’. Example (53) illustrates an active sentence and (54)-(56) are examples of passivized intransitives.

- (53) *farhana-e nas-e-r*  
 Farhana-A dance-3-IPFV  
 ‘Farhana (is/was) dancing.’
- (54) *nas xor-a o-i-s-e*  
 dance do-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘There was dancing.’
- (55) *bia-t nas-a o-i-s-e*  
 wedding-LOC dance-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘At the wedding there was dancing.’
- (56) *bia-t gan ga-oa o-i-s-e*  
 wedding-LOC song sing-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘At the wedding there was singing.’

Case-marking of non-agent arguments in Sylheti follows the same patterns in the active and passive voice. This shows similarities with Hindi but at the same time major differences because Sylheti obligatorily marks proper names and pronouns in the passive as non-agents (with the marker *-re*), whereas in Hindi retaining the marker on the patient argument is optional. This points to the need to discuss case-marking in Sylheti independently of voice and grammatical functions. With this in mind, we have chosen to keep away from



the notion of subject and we identify passive constructions in Sylheti in terms of the licensing of the non-realisation of an agent argument which coincides with changes in verbal morphology; we have not analysed passives on the basis of the promotion of the theme/patient or recipient roles according to various grammatical functions. This is particularly pertinent for the impersonal passive construction formed with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’ which debars the realisation of an agent, unless valence-increasing morphology is used, in which case a causee NP is allowed.

## 4.2. Impersonal passive with auxiliary *za-* ‘go’

The second type of passive in Sylheti is formed with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’<sup>9</sup> (further discussed in section 5). This impersonal passive is different from the more ‘prototypical’ passive construction formed with the auxiliary *o-* ‘become’ in two respects. First, it restricts the realisation of any agent unless a causative reading is derived with the help of a causative morpheme. Second, it seems to

---

<sup>9</sup> The passive auxiliary *za-* ‘go’ is not to be confused with the light verb *za-*. (i) illustrates a compound verb construction where the lexical verb is suffixed with the conjunctive *-i* followed by the light verb auxiliary *za-*, inflected for tense and aspect. (ii) shows a passive construction with the main verb inflected with the nominaliser *-a* followed by the impersonal passive auxiliary *za-*. (iii) and (iv) illustrate a crucial difference between the constructions – only the passive construction can be used with negation. Light verb constructions cannot be negated.

(i)

<i>amar</i>	<i>anguil</i>	<i>xat-i</i>	<i>ge-s-e</i>
my	finger	cut- CONJ	go-PRF-3

‘My finger got cut.’

(ii)

<i>amar</i>	<i>anguil</i>	<i>xat-a</i>	<i>ge-s-e</i>
my	finger	cut-NMLZ	go-PRF-3

‘My finger was cut.’

(iii)

<i>*amar</i>	<i>anguil</i>	<i>xat-i</i>	<i>ge-s-e</i>	<i>na</i>
my	finger	cut-CONJ	go-PRF-3	NEG

‘My finger did not get cut.’

(iv)

<i>amar</i>	<i>anguil</i>	<i>xat-a</i>	<i>ge-s-e</i>	<i>na</i>
my	finger	cut-NMLZ	go-PRF-3	NEG

‘My finger was not cut.’

describe agentless events and thus lends itself easily to an (in)abilitative reading and/or to the description of accidental or unvolitional actions.

An impersonal passive with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’ can be derived with both (di)transitive and intransitive verbs. Lexical meaning is displayed by the verbal root followed by the nominalising suffix either *-a* or *-ni* and the auxiliary *za-* which is inflected for tense and aspect always in the third person. This is illustrated in (57)-(58) with a ditransitive in the active and passive voice, and in (59)-(60) showing an intransitive in active and passive voice.

(57) *he amare boi di-b-o*  
3SG 1SG.NA book give-FUT-3

*ami for-t-am far-i*  
1SG read-CNFT-1 can-1

‘He will give me the book (because) I can read (it).’

(58) *amare boi de-oa za-i-b-o*  
1SG.NA book give-NMLZ go-CONJ-FUT-3

*ami iskul-o tax-mu*  
1SG school-LOC stay-FUT.1

‘I could/will be given the book (because) I will be at school.’

(59) *he bia-t nas xor-l-o*  
3SG wedding-LOC dance do-PST-3

‘He danced at the wedding.’

(60) *bia-t nas xor-a ge-s-i-l*  
wedding-LOC dance do-NMLZ go-PRF-CONJ-PST

‘Dancing had been (possible) at the wedding.’

The examples in (61) show that a first-person ending *-i* on the verb would be ungrammatical. These agreement suffixes are illustrated in the active sentences in (62).

(61) (a) *\*amare mar-a ge-s-i*  
1SG.NA hit-NMLZ go-PRF-1

‘I could be hit.’

(b) *amare mar-a ge-s-e*  
1SG.NA hit-NMLZ go-PRF-3

‘I could be hit.’

- (62) (a) *ami ge-s-i*  
 1SG go-PRF-1  
 ‘I went.’
- (b) *he ge-s-e*  
 1SG go-PRF-3  
 ‘He went.’

As reflected in the English translations, the impersonal passive construction with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’ can give rise to abilitative/possibilitative readings. We could hypothesize that these abilitative readings stem from the fact that the construction with the auxiliary *za-* ‘go’ describes an agentless event where no prototypical agent can be identified. To further illustrate the different readings associated with the *o-* and the *za-* passive constructions, consider the following examples:

- (63) *amar anquil xaṭ-a ge-s-e*  
 1SG.GEN finger cut-NMLZ go-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger was/got cut (accidentally).’
- (64) *amar anquil xaṭ-a o-i-s-e*  
 1SG.GEN finger cut-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger has been cut (by someone).’

A passive with the auxiliary *o-* freely allows realisation of an agent as indicated in (66), the passive variant of active (65):

- (65) *ḍaxṭor-e amar anquil xaṭ-s-oin*  
 doctor-A 1SG.GEN finger cut-PRF-2/3.HON  
 ‘The doctor has cut my finger.’
- (66) *amar anquil ḍaxṭor-re dia xaṭ-a o-i-se*  
 1SG.GEN finger doctor-NA by cut-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger has been cut by the doctor.’

In a passive construction with the auxiliary *za-*, the realisation of an agent argument leads to ungrammaticality:

- (67) \**amar anquil ḍaxṭor-re dia xaṭ-a ge-s-e*  
 1SG.GEN finger doctor-NA by cut-NMLZ go-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger has been cut by the doctor.’

However, an agent can still be overtly expressed in a construction with the *za-* ‘go’ auxiliary when it is the causee of a verb with the valence-increasing morpheme *-a-*. In this case the nominalising suffix *-ni* is used. To illustrate this, (68) shows an active sentence and (69b) shows a passive with a *za-* auxiliary where an agent cannot be realised. (70) shows that with additional

causative morphology a causee can be realised but not the causer. The difference between (69a) and (70) is the increased valency of *besa-* ‘make sell’ followed by the nominalising suffix *-ni* as compared to *bes-* ‘sell’ followed by the nominalising suffix *-a*.

- (68) *faruk-e bazar-o boi bes-e*  
 faruk-A market-LOC book sell-3  
 ‘Faruk sells books at the market.’
- (69) (a) *bazar-o boi bes-a ge-s-e*  
 market-LOC book sell-NMLZ go-PRF-3  
 ‘Books were/could be sold at the market.’
- (b) *\*bazar-o boi faruk dia bes-a ge-s-e*  
 market-LOC book faruk by sell-NMLZ go-PRF-3  
 ‘Books were/could be sold at the market by Faruk.’
- (70) (*fubore dia bazar-o boi*)  
 (Shubo-NA by) market-LOC book  
  
*bes-a-ni ge-s-e*  
 sell-CAUS-NMLZ go-PRF-3  
 ‘Books were/could be made sold by/through/via Shubo at the market.’

In (70) an agent causee can be expressed, permitted by the causative morpheme *-a-*, but not the causer.

In short, Sylheti demonstrates an impersonal passive construction with the auxiliary *za-* which is used when describing events with no prototypical agent. We hypothesize that the abilitative, accidental, and unvolitional readings that native speakers describe with the use of the *za-* passive auxiliary are a result of its primary function of describing agentless events and these readings are not ‘encoded’ morphologically. We will leave a detailed investigation into this for further research.

## 5. Anticausative

Another agentless construction in Sylheti is the anticausative in which an intransitive verb takes a single non-agent argument, the ‘undergoer’ of the event. This construction is formed with an intransitive main verb (e.g., ‘fall’) or an ambitransitive verb (such as ‘cut’, ‘break’, ‘burn’) that expresses a change of state, suffixed with the conjunctive *-i* and followed by the tensed light verb *za-* ‘go’. This is illustrated with the main verbs *xat-* ‘cut’ and *zol-* ‘burn’ in (71) and (72), respectively.

(71) *amar aṅguil xaṭ-i ge-s-e*  
 my finger cut-CONJ go-PRF-3  
 ‘My finger got cut.’

(72) *zəṅgɔl zol-i<sup>10</sup> ge-s-e*  
 forest burn-CONJ go-PRF-3  
 ‘The forest burned.’

This construction does not permit the realisation of an agent but does allow the realisation of a natural force as the cause of an event marked with the instrumental *-e* (see section 3.1 on agentive and instrumental uses of *-e*). This is illustrated in (73) and (74) where *bataf* ‘wind’ is marked with *-e* and is interpreted as the reason for the house being broken, but the realisation of a proper name *faruk* leads to ungrammaticality, whether it is marked or unmarked with the agentive *-e*.

(73) *(bataf-e) gor baṅg-i ge-s-e*  
 (wind-INS) house break-CONJ go-PRF-3  
 ‘The house broke (as a result of the wind).’

(74) *\*faruk(-e) gor baṅg-i ge-s-e*  
 Faruk(-A) house break-CONJ go-PRF-3  
 ‘Faruk broke the house.’

---

<sup>10</sup> *zol-* here is treated as an intransitive stem that takes a single argument. To form a passive, a valence-increasing morpheme *-a-* is added (to form *zal-a-* through umlaut). (i) gives an active transitive clause, and (ii) a passive.

(i)  
*he zəṅgɔl aṅun dia zal-a-i-s-e*  
 3SG forest fire by burn-CAUS-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘He burned the forest with fire.’

(ii)  
*zəṅgɔl aṅun dia zal-a-ni o-i-s-e*  
 forest fire by burn-CAUS-NMLZ become-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The forest was burned with fire.’

To support our claim that the inability to realise an agent stems from properties of the construction formed with the light verb *za-* ‘go’, consider (75) and (76) which show a compound verb construction with the transitive light verb *la-* ‘take’ and the main verb *bang-* ‘break’ (as above). Here, both an animate and a natural force NP marked with *-e* are allowed, as indicated in (75) and (76).

(75) *bataf-e gor bang-i la-i-s-e*  
 wind-A house break-CONJ take-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘The wind broke the house.’

(76) *faruk(-e) gor bang-i la-i-s-e*  
 Faruk(-A) house break-CONJ take-CONJ-PRF-3  
 ‘Faruk broke the house.’

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we have attempted a first descriptive account of constructions in Sylheti which affect the realisation of an agent argument. We identified two types of passives. While the *o-* construction describes an event which involves the active participation of an agent and licenses non-mention of this agent argument, the *za-* construction allows the description of events which lack an agent and give rise to possibilitive readings. Further, *za-* also acts as a light verb which combines with verbal stems which can take a single argument achieving an anticausative reading.

We also provided a sketch description on case-marking in Sylheti. We analysed *-e* as homophonous between an agentive and an instrumental use which was key for our account of the anticausative construction formed with verbs that take a single argument. We analysed the marker *-re* as a non-agentive marker attaching to themes/patients and recipients.

This paper has touched on (in)transitivity, case-marking, valency-affecting constructions and semantic roles in Sylheti. We hope that this discussion, despite its limitations, has pointed to areas for further research in Sylheti. Specifically, what seems to emerge as a burning question is the subject status of the arguments in the constructions we described. Sylheti, and perhaps Indo-Aryan languages in general, seems to pose a challenge with a case-marking system that is distributed on semantic grounds.

## References

- Aissen, Judith. 2003. Differential object marking: Iconicity vs. economy. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 21, 435-483.
- Bhatt, Rajesh. 2007. Unaccusativity and case licensing. <https://people.umass.edu/bhatt/papers/mcgill-may2007-handout1.pdf> (accessed 2017-12-20).
- Bhatt, Rajesh & Elena Anagnostopoulou. 1996. Object shift and specificity: Evidence from ko-phrases in Hindi. In Lise M. Dobrin, Kora Singer, & Lisa McNair (eds.), *Papers from the 32nd regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistics Society [CLS]*, 11–22. Chicago: Chicago Linguistics Society.
- Butt, Miriam. 2010. The light verb jungle: Still hacking away. In Mengitsu Amberber, Brett Baker & Mark Harvey (eds.) *Complex predicates in cross-linguistic perspective*, 48-78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Comrie, Bernard. 1978. Ergativity. In Winfred P. Lehmann (ed.) *Syntactic typology: Studies in the phenomenology of language*, 329-394. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Comrie, Bernard. 2013. Alignment of case marking of full noun phrases. In Matthew S. Dryer & Martin Haspelmath (eds.) *The world atlas of language structures [WALS] online*. <http://wals.info/chapter/98> (accessed 2017-06-13).
- David, Anne Boyle. 2015. *Descriptive grammar of Bangla*. Berlin/Boston: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Dowty, David. 1991. Thematic proto-roles and argument selection language. *Language* 67, 547-619.
- Hoop, Helen de & Bhuvana Narasimhan. 2005. Differential case-marking in Hindi. In Mengitsu Amberber & Helen de Hoop (eds.) *Competition and variation in natural languages: The case for case*, 321-345. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Klaiman, M. H. 1991. *Grammatical voice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klimov, Georgiy Andreyevich. 1974. On the character of languages of active typology. *Linguistics* 131, 11- 25.
- Kulikov, Leonid. 2011. Voice typology. In Jae Jung Song (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Linguistic Typology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mel'čuk, Igor. 2006. *Aspects of the theory of morphology*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Mithun, Marianne. 1991. Active/agentive case marking and its motivations. *Language* 67(3), 510-546.
- Mohanan, Tara. 1994. *Argument structure in Hindi*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications.
- Palmer, Frank Robert. 1994. *Grammatical roles and relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Perlmutter, David M. 1978. Impersonal passives and the unaccusative hypothesis. In Jeri J. Jaeger, Anthony C. Woodbury, Farrell Ackerman, Christine Chiarello, Orin D. Gensler, John Kingston, Eve E. Sweetser, Henry Thompson & Kenneth W. Whistler (eds.), *Proceedings of the fourth annual meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society [BLS]*, 157-190. Berkeley: Berkely Linguistics Society.
- Pustet, Regina. 2002. Split intransitivity revisited: Comparing Lakota and Osage. *International Journal of American Linguistics* 68(4), 381-427.
- Srishti, Richa. 2011. *Hindi verb classes and their argument structure alternations*. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Thompson, Hanne-Ruth. 2012. *Bengali: A comprehensive grammar*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins.
- Valin, Robert D. van. 1990. Semantic parameters of split intransitivity. *Language* 66, 221-260.