

Morphological and syntactic evidence for the actor/agent distinction in Indo-European

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The problem

- ▶ Distribution of active vs. middle (nonactive) morphology in IE: contexts of alternations are reasonably well understood (causative alternation, passives, reflexives, etc.), but what about “*tantum*” behavior?
- ▶ Why do some verbs surface as *actīva tantum* and some as *media tantum*, and why is there variation across the IE languages w.r.t. which verbs are which?
- ▶ Specifically, why and how do (primary/denominal) intransitives differ within and across IE languages w.r.t. which type of *tantum* behavior (active vs. middle) they display?
 - ▶ primary statives
 - ▶ intransitive deadjectival state/change-of-state verbs
 - ▶ **pseudo-agent verbs**

Pseudo-agent verbs

(1) Active vs. middle “pseudo-agent” verbs in IE

Active				
Ved.	<i>gopāya-ti</i>	‘act as <i>gopā-</i> ; protect’	<i>go-pā-</i>	‘herdsman’
Gk.	βασιλεύω	‘be king; rule’	βασιλεύς	‘king’
Lat.	<i>auspicō</i>	‘be an <i>auspex</i> ’	<i>auspex</i>	‘bird-diviner’
Nonactive/middle				
Ved.	<i>indraya-te</i>	‘act like Indra’	<i>indra-</i>	‘Indra’
Gk.	τεκταίνομαι	‘frame’, do carpenting’	τέκτων	‘carpenter’
Lat.	<i>arbitror</i>	‘act as witness’	<i>arbiter</i>	‘witness’

Today's goals

- ▶ Use *tantum* behavior in (synchronically productive) denominal pseudo-agent verbs to investigate which types of intransitive verbs were marked with active and which ones with nonactive morphology in IE.
- ▶ Argue that the variation may point to a syntactic difference in the treatment of AGENT vs. ACTOR arguments in some older IE languages and maybe also in PIE
- ▶ ACTOR arguments could either be reanalyzed as *agent* arguments → active unergative verbs or be treated like EXPERIENCER arguments → (tr./itr.) *media tantum*

Background: AGENT vs. ACTOR

- ▶ Syntactic evidence that some languages distinguish between “high” and “low” agents, i.e., they treat the subject of transitive verbs differently from the subject of unergative intransitives (Massam 2009; Tollan 2018, 2019 etc.)
- ▶ E.g., in Samoan (Polynesian), only the subjects of canonically transitive verbs receive ergative case, while the subjects of unergative intransitives and (transitive) “middles” receive (zero-marked) absolutive case.

High vs. low agents in Samoan

(2) Samoan (Tollan 2018: 2)

a. Transitive

Sā fau [e le tamāloa] [le fale].

PST build **ERG** DET man DET house.ABS

‘The man built the house.’

b. Unergative

Sā siva [le teine].

PST dance DET girl.ABS

‘The girl danced.’

c. Unergative + (cognate) object

Sā siva [le teine] [i le siva].

PST dance DET girl.ABS I DET dance

‘The girl danced a/the dance’

d. “Middle”

Sā mulimuli [le leoleo] [i le au gaoi].

PST follow DET police.ABS I DET robbers

‘The police followed the robbers.’

High vs. low agents in Samoan

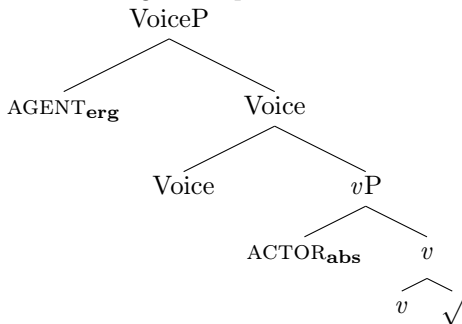
Tollan (2018, 2019) argues that this syntactic distinction reflects a semantic distinction in terms of proto-roles (building on Dowty 1991):

- (3) a. Proto-high agent
- ▶ initiates an event
 - ▶ experiences an event
 - ▶ triggers an effect upon another entity
 - ▶ brings about a change in state
 - ▶ is effortful
 - ▶ is volitional
 - ▶ concludes an event
- b. Proto-low agent
- ▶ initiates an event
 - ▶ experiences an event
 - ▶ neither affects another entity, nor is physically affected
 - ▶ neither brings about nor undergoes a change in state

High vs. low agents in Samoan

“High” vs. “low” refers to the structural position of these arguments:

(4) External argument positions in Samoan (after Tollan 2018: 24)



- ▶ Ergative case is assigned locally by Voice
- ▶ Absolutive case is structural case assigned via agreement with T (like nominative in NOM/ACC languages)

A little closer to home

(5) *ea*_{NOM} ... *dat mihi*_{DAT} *coronas*_{ACC}
 “She gives me garlands”

(Pl. *Aul.* 23-5)

- ▶ AGENT vs. BENEFICIARY roles correspond to two different (structural/syntactic) positions in the clause & a difference in case marking.

High vs. low agents in Indo-European

- ▶ In Grestenberger 2014, 2018, 2023 etc. I've argued that the external arguments of transitive deponents such as Lat. *hortor* 'exhort', *vēnor* 'to hunt', *sequor* 'to follow' are likewise "low agents" (i.e., merged below Voice) in the older IE languages.
- ▶ Unlike in Samoan, this structural difference is expressed on the verb rather than on the case of the external argument: high agents result in active inflection on the verb, while low agents (\approx actors) result in nonactive/middle inflection.
- ▶ In the following, I'll extend this to pseudo-agent *tantum* verbs in IE to explain their fluctuation between active & middle endings.

Alternating vs. non-alternating verbs

(6) Alternating verbs, *actīva tantum* & *media tantum* in Latin

a. Active only	b. Alternating		c. Nonactive only
	Active	Nonact./Passive	
<i>e-ō</i> 'go'	<i>am-ō</i> 'love'	<i>am-or</i> 'am loved'	<i>hort-or</i> 'exhort'
<i>rube-ō</i> 'be red'	<i>dūc-ō</i> 'lead'	<i>dūc-or</i> 'am led'	<i>fru-or</i> 'enjoy'
<i>mane-ō</i> 'stay'	<i>mone-ō</i> 'admonish'	<i>mone-or</i> 'am admonished'	<i>mori-or</i> 'die'

Alternating vs. non-alternating verbs

Tantum behavior is by no means a marginal phenomenon:

(7) P-, \bar{A} -, and U-verbs in ancient IE languages (Grestenberger 2023)

	Classical Skt.		Homeric Gk.		Toch. B		Toch. A	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
P (only active)	1,038	51.9	129	36	150	28	148	33.9
\bar{A} (only nonact.)	485	24.2	89	25	103	19.2	104	23.8
U (alternating)	478	23.9	141	39	283	52.8	185	42.3
Total	2,001		359		536		437	

Cf. also Grestenberger 2018, 2023; Inglese 2021; Oikonomou & Alexiadou 2022; Grestenberger & Tanza-Kamil 2026 a.m.o.

PIE *tantum* verbs

... and of course routinely reconstructed for PIE as well:

(8) PIE *actīva tantum* root presents

- a. $*h_1es$ ‘be’ (Hitt. *ēšzi*, Ved. *ásti*, Gk. *ἐστί*, Lat. *est*, etc.)
- b. $*h_1ei$ ‘go’ (Ved. *éti*, Av. *aēiti*, Gk. *εἶμι*, etc.)
- c. $*h_2enh_1$ ‘breathe’ (Ved. *ániti* etc.)
- d. $*h_2ueh_1$ ‘blow, breeze’ (Ved. *vāti*, JAv. *vāiti*, Gk. *ἄησι*, etc.)
- e. $*ses$ ‘sleep’ (Hitt. *šašzi*, Ved. *sásti*, etc.)

(9) PIE *media tantum* root presents

- a. $*kēi$ ‘lie’ (CLuv. *zīyar(i)*, Ved. *sáye*, Gk. *κεῖμαι*, etc.)
- b. $*h_1es$ ‘sit down’ (LIV²: $*h_1eh_1s$; Ved. *áste*, YAv. 3pl. *āṇhāire*, Gk. *ἦμαι*, Hitt. *eša(ri)*)
- c. $*d^heug^h$ ‘be/make useful’ (Ved. *duhé*, Goth. *daug*, Gk. *ἔτυχον*)
- d. $*ues$ ‘wear clothes’ (Hitt. *wēšta*, Ved. *váste*, Gk. *εἶμαι*, etc.)

Why *tantum*?

→ *tantum*-behavior is a regular and widespread feature of these voice systems, not just a “peripheral” irregularity.

- ▶ In approaches in which voice morphology is assumed to “do something” (e.g., reduce argument structure, add a semantic component of affectedness, etc.), *tantum* behavior is a problem.
- ▶ Especially because there is no straightforward uniform semantics for either class:
 - ▶ *media tantum* include agentive transitive verbs (**deponents**, e.g., Lat. *hortor*) as well as intransitive inchoative and stative verbs (e.g., Lat. *morior* ‘die’)
 - ▶ *actīva tantum* likewise include unaccusative/inchoative verbs and states (*sum*, *eō*, *rubeō*) but also transitive verbs - though these mostly alternate.
- ▶ A possible way out is to analyze *tantum*-verbs as lexically specified for [\pm active] or [\pm] passive (e.g., Kiparsky 2005, Weisser 2014) or “morphomic” (Stump 2007).

Why *tantum*?

- ▶ But such approaches effectively reduce a rather large chunk of voice-marking in these languages to lexically determined conjugational class morphology (cf. Grestenberger 2019, 2023 for further discussion).
- ▶ ... and render the generalizations concerning the semantic subclasses of *media tantum* obsolete
 - ▶ Cf., e.g., Kemmer 1993; Zombolou & Alexiadou 2014; Inglese 2021, 2022, 2023; Grestenberger To appear)
- ▶ Argument structure reduction accounts are difficult to apply to *tantum* behavior anyway because if there's no alternation, what is there to “reduce” in the first place?
 - ▶ Hence the morphomic account of Stump 2007 etc.

Argument structure reduction?

- ▶ Moreover, argument structure reduction accounts cannot explain instances in which one and the same syntactic/semantic class surfaces with different voice marking in closely related IE languages such as:
 - ▶ Obligatory middle morphology on *yá*-passives in Vedic vs. active (\emptyset) η -passives in Greek
 - ▶ Active vs. nonactive anticausative/change-of-state verbs in Vedic, Greek, Latin, etc. (e.g., Vedic active *ya*-verbs, Lat. *ēscere*-verbs, vs. Greek middle inchoatives)
 - ▶ Also in modern languages, e.g., German (Schäfer 2008), French, Italian, (Heidinger 2014, Cennamo 2021), Modern Greek (Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou 2004, Alexiadou et al. 2015)
 - ▶ **Active vs. nonactive “pseudo-agent” verbs** in Greek vs. Latin, Vedic etc.

Affectedness?

- ▶ The same holds for accounts which ascribe a semantic component of “affectedness” (vel sim.) to the subject of middle-marked verbs (e.g., Gonda 1979, Klaiman 1991, Kemmer 1993): do we really want to argue that the subj. of κείμαι ‘lie’ is more affected than that of εἶμι ‘go’? Or that the subject of Ved. *pácyate* is affected but that of Lat. *mātūrescō* is not?
 - ▶ See Grestenberger 2014, Zombolou & Alexiadou 2014, Inglese 2021 for further criticism of “affectedness” & similar notions.

→ An account that

1. takes the syntactic/semantic generalizations w.r.t. the distribution of voice morphology seriously and
2. derives the distribution of active and nonactive-marked verbs independently of whether or not they alternate

is to be preferred.

Pseudo-agent verbs & Aktionsart

= intransitive denominal verbs that appear to be based on nouns that are prototypically used as agents, i.e., animate nouns of profession, agent nouns, appellatives, etc. (Bleotu 2019)

- ▶ Other terms: “essive” (Mignot 1969, Steinbauer 1989); “*prédicatifs*/predicative” (Flobert 1975); “to act like *y*”-verbs (Xu et al. 2007); (where *y* is an animate noun; Xu et al. 2007); “pseudo-agent verbs” (Bleotu 2019: 163ff.); “behave verbs” (Oltra-Massuet & Castroviejo 2014); “unergative behavior-related verbs” (Martin & Pinon 2020); “manner of behaving verbs”, ‘ (Acedo-Matellán & Gibert-Sotelo 2022; Fábregas 2023)
- ▶ often described as ambiguous between a stative/essive and an eventive/activity (“act like”) reading

Pseudo-agent verbs

Examples:

- (10) a. English: *to butcher*, *to nurse*, *to proctor*, *to author*, *to referee*, *to monitor*, etc.
- b. Hebrew: *hitkamtsen* ‘was stingy’ (*kamts-an* ‘stingy person’), *hitbaxjen* ‘complained’ (*baxj-an* ‘crybaby’), *hiftaxtsen* ‘acted arrogantly’ (*faxts-an* ‘arrogant person’), *hitril* ‘trolled’ (*trol* ‘troll’), etc.
- c. Romanian: *a măcelari* ‘to butcher’, *a pilota* ‘to pilot’, *a păzi* ‘to guard’, *a păstori* ‘to shepherd’, etc.

Pseudo-agent verbs in IE

- ▶ In the older IE languages, synchronic denominal pseudo-agent verbs famously vary w.r.t. to the voice morphology they take — both active and middle *tantum* behavior seems to be possible & widespread.
- ▶ The Aktionsart of these verbs is notoriously difficult to pin down, as is the association of active = stative/“essive” vs. nonactive/middle = activity.
 - ▶ Flobert (1975: 66, fn. 2): “... l’appellation “essif” de X. Mignot, *Dénommatifs*, 67, convient peu aux déponents, même prédicatifs: *dominor* “j’agis en maître”, qui diffèrent nettement des actifs: *militō* “je suis soldat”.”
 - ▶ Steinbauer (1989: 161): “Es gibt m. E. kein entscheidendes Argument, das für oder gegen eine der beiden Möglichkeiten ‘X ist Basissubstantiv’ bzw. ‘X handelt/verhält sich wie Basissubstantiv’ spricht.”

Pseudo-agent verbs in Latin

(11) active pseudo-agent verbs in Plautus

<i>aucupō</i>	‘watch out for’	<i>auceps</i>	‘birdwatcher’	acc
<i>augurō</i>	‘prophesy, predict’	<i>augur</i>	‘seer’	—
<i>auspicō</i>	‘take the auspices’	<i>auspex</i>	‘bird- diviner’	—
<i>con-graecō</i>	‘live like the Greeks’	<i>Graecus</i>	‘Greek’	—
<i>iūdicō</i>	‘decide, judge’	<i>iūdex</i>	‘judge’	—/acc
<i>medicō</i>	‘heal, cure’	<i>medicus</i>	‘doctor’	acc
(?) <i>mendicō</i>	‘be a beggar, beg’	<i>mendicus</i>	‘beggar(ly)’	—
<i>militō</i>	‘be a /serve as soldier’	<i>mīles</i>	‘soldier’	—
<i>ministrō</i>	‘serve’	<i>minister</i>	‘servant’	—/dat.
<i>re-charmidō</i> (<i>dē</i> -?)	‘cease to be/act like Charmides’	<i>Charmides</i>		—
(?) <i>supplicō</i>	‘beg’	<i>supplex</i>	‘begging; beggar’	dat

Pseudo-agent verbs in Latin

(12) nonactive pseudo-agent verbs in Plautus

<i>arbitror</i>	‘act as witness’	<i>arbiter</i>	‘witness’	tr./AcI
<i>(h)ariolor</i>	‘act as prophet, prophecy’	<i>hariolus, -a</i>	‘prophet’	—
<i>aucupor</i>	‘act like a bird- watcher, watch out for something’	<i>auceps</i>	‘birdwatcher’	—
<i>bacchor</i>	‘act like a bacchant, rave madly’	<i>baccha</i>	‘bacchant’	—
<i>bubulcitor</i>	‘be an oxdriver’	<i>bubulcus</i>	‘oxdriver’	—
<i>per-graecor</i>	‘act/live like the Greek’	<i>Graecus</i>	‘Greek’	—
<i>fūrōr (sub-)</i>	‘steal’	<i>fūr</i>	‘thief’	tr./acc
<i>interpretor</i>	‘act as interpreter; interpret’	<i>interpret-</i>	‘interpreter’	gen; tr./acc

Pseudo-agent verbs in Latin

(13) nonactive pseudo-agent verbs in Plautus (cont'd)

<i>mēdicor</i>	‘act as healer’	<i>mēdicus</i>	‘healer’	dat.
<i>parasītōr</i> (<i>sub-</i>)	‘be a parasite’	<i>parasītus</i>	‘parasite’	—(/dat.)
<i>philosophōr</i>	‘act like a philosopher’	<i>philosophus</i>	‘philosopher’	—
<i>sycophantōr</i>	‘be a fraud, cheat’	<i>sycophanta</i>	‘fraud’	—/dat.
<i>vēlitor</i>	‘wrangle, fight’	<i>vēlit-</i>	‘foot soldier’	tr/acc.

Pseudo-agent verbs in Latin

- ▶ Almost all middle-marked forms can be used intransitively in Plautus
- ▶ Some also appear with objects/transitive use: Inf. & acc. objects.
- ▶ But more commonly with dat. (less common: gen), beneficent datives?

(14) Dat: *Enim vero ego nunc **sycophantae huic sycophantari** volo* (Trin. 4.2) ‘For now I really want to trick that trickster’

- ▶ *Pace* Flobert, the active-marked ones do not really mean ‘be X’, e.g.:

(15) Dat: ***Medicari** amicus quin properas mihi?* (Mer. 5.2) “Why don’t you, as friend, hasten to act as a medic to me?”

(16) *Habe bonum animum: ego istum lepide **medicabo** metum.* (Mos. 2.1) “Have faith, I will elegantly remedy this problem.”

- ▶ *medicō/medicor* and *aucupō/aucupor* could suggest contrast in transitivity rather than BE vs. ACT.

Pseudo-agent verbs in Greek

- ▶ Greek pseudo-agent verbs are (relatively consistently) *active*
 - ▶ A few nonactive ones that could be archaisms, e.g., τεκταίνομαι ‘frame, do carpenting’ (τέκτων, *τέκταν- ‘carpenter’), μαντεύομαι ‘prophecy, act as prophet’ (μάντις, *μαντης ‘prophet’); more study needed.
- ▶ The pseudo-agent verb-forming class in -εύω is moreover transitive fairly early on
- ▶ There is no *morphological* equivalent to the putative “act like x”/“be like x” distinction claimed for Latin

Pseudo-agent verbs in Greek

(17) Homeric pseudo-agent verbs from nouns in -εύς (+ *-*ǰe/o-*)

ἀριστεύω	‘be the best’	ἀριστεύς	‘the best’	—/inf
βασιλεύω	‘am king; rule’	βασιλεύς	‘king’	—/gen
ἡνιοχεύω	‘be/act as charioteer’	ἡνιοχεύς,	‘charioteer’	—
ἡπεροπεύω	‘cheat, deceive’	ἡπεροπεύς	‘a cheat’	acc
χαλκεύω (1x)	‘make from copper’	χαλκεύς	‘coppersmith’	acc
νομέω	‘am a herdsman; herd’	νομέυς	‘herdsman’	acc
πομπεύω (1x)	‘guide’	πομπεύς	‘guide’	acc

- ▶ Marescotti & Grestenberger 2026: Gk. -εύω verbs started out as canonical agentive unergatives (i.e., intransitives) and became transitivized early on.
- ▶ No evidence for an “essive”/BE reading or a stage where middle morphology was canonical in this class, unlike in Latin.
 - ▶ Basically, these verbs were always Stage Level (SL) predicates, and only these can lexicalize as verbs (whereas truly “essive”, Individual Level (IL) predicates cannot, Acedo-Matellán 2022a, 2022b)

Pseudo-agent verbs in Greek

- ▶ -εύ-ε/ο- is reanalyzed as a verbal stem-forming suffix early on and extended to nominal bases without -εύς
- ▶ it continues to be used to derive denominal pseudo-agent verbs from agent(-like) nouns in -της, -ος, etc. (Fraenkel 1906: 182ff., Tucker 1990: 75ff.)
 - ▶ ἀρχεύω ‘lead, command’ (ἀρχός ‘commander’)
 - ▶ δαιτρεύω ‘distribute’ (δαιτρός ‘distributor’; or δαιτρόν ‘portion’?)
 - ▶ πτωχεύω ‘am a beggar, beg’ (πτωχός ‘beggar’)
 - ▶ ἡγεμονεύω ‘command, lead’ (ἡγεμών ‘leader, commander’)

Pseudo-agent verbs in Greek

Other types:

- (18) -ος → -έω (including compounds; Tucker 1990: 75ff.)
- οἰνοχόος ‘winepourer’ → οἰνοχοέω ‘to be/act as a winebearer’; pour wine’ (+ οἶνον, *Od.* 3.472)
 - βουκόλος ‘cowherd’ → βουκολεύω ‘act as cowherd, herd cattle’
 - θεοπρόπος ‘prophet’ → θεοπροπέω ‘act as/be a prophet, prophesy’ (only as ptcp., no obj.)
 - κοίρανος ‘leader’ → κοιρανέω ‘be a leader, lead’
- (19) $*(m)\eta/-(\mu)\alpha\nu \rightarrow *(m)\alpha\eta\text{-}\acute{\iota}e/o\text{-}$:
- ποιμήν, -μενος ‘herdsman’ ($*-m\bar{e}\eta\text{-}$, $-mn\text{-}$) → ποιμαίνω ‘herd/tend a flock’ (tr. +acc); mid. ‘be herded’
 - τέχτων ($*\acute{\tau}\acute{\epsilon}\chi\tau\alpha\eta\text{-}$) ‘carpenter’ → τεχταίνομαι ‘frame, do carpenting’

Pseudo-agent verbs in Vedic

- ▶ Primary verbalizer = *-ya-* < **-ie/o-*
 - ▶ Sütterlin 1906, Tucker 1988, Insler 1997, Vine 2016.
- ▶ No clear generalization w.r.t. active vs. non-active morphology; most forms are non-finite/participial

(20) Active pseudo-agent verbs in (Rig)Vedic Sanskrit

<i>amitráyant-</i> (3x)	‘acting as an enemy’	<i>a-mitra-</i>	‘enemy’	—
<i>gopāya-^{ti}</i> (3x)	‘protect’	<i>go-pá</i>	‘herdsman’	tr.
<i>satvanāyánt-</i> (AVŚ)	‘acting like a warrior’	<i>sátvan-</i> , <i>satvaná-</i>	‘warrior’	—
<i>kavīyánt-</i> (1x)	‘act/be (like) a <i>kaví-</i> ’	<i>kaví-</i>	‘poet’	—
<i>sakhīyánt-</i> (8x)	‘being a friend (with); seeking friendship’	<i>sákhi-</i>	‘friend’	—/instr

- ▶ active inflection and desiderative meaning generally agreed to be secondary developments that started in the participial forms (Tucker 1988, Vine 2016), so it’s possible that this class originally consisted of *media tantum*

Pseudo-agent verbs in Vedic

(21) Nonactive pseudo-agent verbs in (Rig)Vedic Sanskrit

<i>indrāya-te</i> (1x)	‘act like Indra’	<i>indra-</i>	‘Indra’	—
<i>kavīyāmāna-</i> (1x)	‘act/be (like) a <i>kavī-</i> ’	<i>kavī-</i>	‘poet’	—
<i>vīraya-te</i> (3x)	‘act like a hero’	<i>vīrā-</i>	‘hero’	—
<i>vṛṣāyā-te</i> (10x)	‘act like a bull’	<i>vṛṣan-</i>	‘bull’	—/dat (/goal acc)

ACT vs. BE?

- (22) *apó vṛṇānáḥ pavate kavīyān*
vrajāṃ ná paśuvárdhanāya mánma
 “choosing the waters, he [Soma, *LG*] purifies himself, **poetically**
crafting a thought like a stable for the raising of livestock,”
 (RV 9.94.1c–d, Jamison & Brereton 2014)
- (23) *kavīyámānaḥ ká ihá prá vocad*
devám mánaḥ kúto ádhi prájātam
 “**Showing himself** to be a poet, who will proclaim this here:
 from whence has divine thought been born?”
 (RV 1.164.18c–d, Jamison & Brereton 2014)

A PIE pseudo-agent verb?

A (potentially) reconstructable pseudo-agent verb:

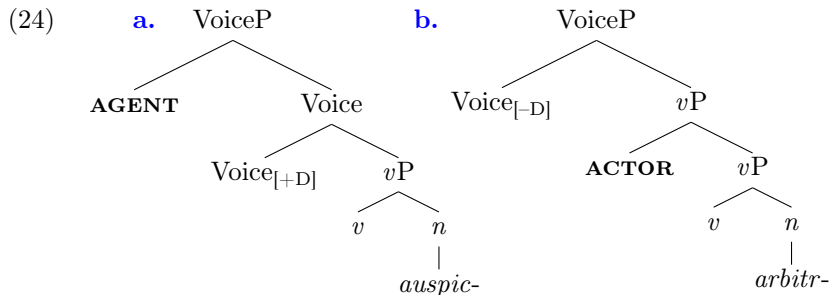
- ▶ Ved. *pátyate* ‘possess, own’ (+acc); rule over (+loc)’ (*páti-* ‘lord’), YAv. *paiθiiete*, Lat. *potior* ‘be(come) master of; possess’ (+acc/gen/abl; *potis*) < **poti̯-e/o-* ‘to be/act as lord’ (?)
 - ▶ Act.: Lat. *potīre* ‘take into possession’, YAv. *paiθiieiti* (?)
- ▶ Problem: *-e/o- as verbalizer seems unlikely (*pace* EWA II), must be **póti-īe/o-* > / → *póti̯e/o-*

Summary

- ▶ Vedic and Latin vary between nonactive and active, Greek has active with some possible nonactive remnants/archaisms
- ▶ No evidence for this type in Hittite, Avestan and Tocharian (but it's a small class anyway so could be a coincidence); haven't checked the other relevant languages (e.g., Luwian, Old Irish).
- ▶ Sole potentially reconstructable example suggests middle is older

Proposal

- ▶ (productively formed) *active* pseudo-agent verbs like Lat. *auspicō*, Gk. βασιλεύω, ἡγεμονεύω, etc. treat the external argument as a “high agent” which is merged in (the specifier of) Voice, (24a).
- ▶ (productively formed) *nonactive* pseudo-agent verbs like Lat. *arbitror*, Ved. *vīrayate*, etc. treat the external argument as “low agent”/ACTOR, which is merged below Voice, (24b).



Proposal

- ▶ The difference in voice morphology between (24a–b) follows from the way the verb endings are realized in the different conditions: If Voice has a DP specifier (“Voice_[+D]”), it is marked as active, if it does not have a DP specifier (“Voice_[-D]”) it is marked as nonactive and the verb surfaces with nonactive/middle endings.
 - ▶ Embick 1998, 2004, Alexiadou et al. 2015, Grestenberger 2018, 2021, 2022, Kastner 2020, Oikonomou & Alexiadou 2022 a.m.o.
- ▶ Essentially, if the subject of pseudo-agent verbs is treated like a canonical agent (e.g., like that of verbs like *ferō*, *ducō*, *scindō* in Latin), the verb is marked active.
- ▶ If it’s treated more like an experiencer, it is marked non-active.
- ▶ But crucially this is primarily a *syntactic* distinction rather than a semantic one.

Theoretical background: Voice

- ▶ More syntactic contexts (e.g., active, passive, reflexive ...) than voice markers (active, nonactive) to mark these context → define a syntactic condition in which nonactive/“middle” morphology appears and treat active morphology as “Elsewhere”.
- ▶ The condition has to be fairly broad because of the many different environments in which we encounter nonactive morphology → “no external argument DP”, [-ext.arg.]/[-D].

(25) Spell-Out condition on non-active morphology (Alexiadou et al. 2015: 101–2)
Voice → Voice[NonAct]/_ No DP specifier

- ▶ This independently motivated morphosyntactic rule is enough to derive the difference between active and nonactive endings on (24a) vs. (24b).

Diachrony: AGENT vs. ACTOR arguments

- ▶ If this is on the right track, some early IE languages (and maybe PIE, too) morphosyntactically distinguished between the AGENT and ACTOR thematic roles (like Samoan)
- ▶ reanalysis of ACTOR as AGENT automatically results in morphologically *active* pseudo-agent verbs that behave like ordinary (transitive) agentive verbs
 - ▶ Not all languages systematically distinguish between AGENT and ACTOR
- ▶ A wrinkle: “low agents” in agentive (transitive) deponents behave like “high agents” w.r.t. relevant tests in Latin, Greek & Sanskrit, e.g., agent noun formation (Grestenberger 2018, 2023)
- ▶ But these (and other relevant) tests have not been applied to the productively formed middle-marked pseudo-agent verbs in, e.g., Latin → future work.

Conclusion

- ▶ Productively formed pseudo-agent verbs: a diagnostic for how different types of unergative verbs were treated w.r.t. voice marking and the syntactic status of the external argument/subject in (P)IE
- ▶ These verbs usually do not alternate and thus provide insights into synchronic *tantum* behavior
- ▶ Vedic and Latin evidence suggests that at least some derived unergatives were middle-marked in PIE, hence a morphosyntactic reflex of the AGENT/ACTOR distinction also seen in other languages.

Thank you!



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Appendix: Deadjectival states/CoS verbs

(26) Active vs. middle deadjectival state/CoS verbs in IE

Active				
Gk.	ἀτασθάλλω	‘be insolent’	ἀτάσθαλος	‘insolent’
Ved.	<i>sanāyánt-</i>	‘be old’	<i>sána-</i>	‘old’
Lat.	<i>rubeō, rubescō</i>	‘be, become red’	<i>ruber</i>	‘red’
Nonactive/middle				
Ved.	<i>ajirāyá-^{te}</i>	‘be swift’	<i>ajira-</i>	‘swift’
Gk.	λευκόμαι	‘become white’	λευκός	‘white, bright’
Lat.	<i>laetor</i>	‘be glad’	<i>laetus</i>	‘glad’

→ animacy/agentivity of the subject partly relevant (Marescotti 2024, 2026)

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