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Variation between Gothic synthetic and periphrastic passive forms

This paper explores the variation between non-past (present and future) synthetic and periphrastic passive verb forms in the Gothic Bible in an effort to understand the synchronic factors that underlie the variation and reasons for the decline of the synchronic passive in favor of the periphrastic passive in early Germanic.

In the older Germanic languages, the passive voice is realized periphrastically by means of the auxiliary ‘be’ or ‘become’ and the past participle of the notional verb. Gothic is the only older Germanic language, which, in addition to realizing the passive periphrastically, has retained an older synthetic passive form (inherited “mediopassive”), utilized in the non-past (present or future) side by side with periphrastic non-past passive. For instance in Philippians 1:20 the synchronic and periphrastic forms are attested side by side: *unte ni in waihtai gaaiwiskoþs wairþa, ak in allai trauainai, swe sinteino jah nu, mikiljada Kristus in leika meinamma* ‘That in nothing I will be(come) ashamed, but that will all confidence, as always so now also, Christ shall be magnified in my body.’ In the present tense as well as the past, the difference between the ‘become’ and ‘be’ passives is that the former are actional passives that convey a sense of inchoativity or change of state, while the latter are stative passives. The synthetic forms of the non-past have traditionally been assumed to be semantically ambiguous (stative or actional). As a result, the (non-past) synthetic forms, capable of the same range of functions as the periphrastic forms, are in competition with them.

Despite attempts to argue that some of the Gothic contrasts are due to the synthetic forms preserving their original middle value (e.g. Guxman 1964; Lühr 2008), I show that all alleged examples of middles are clear passives. The notion that the periphrastic forms could form a contrast with the synthetic forms in terms of the passive vs. middle voice is baseless. Instead, I argue that at least some of the contrasts are motivated stylistically, with the inherited synthetic forms being stylistically charged in relation to the neutral periphrastic forms. For instance, in Philippians 1:20 (above) the elevated tone of the exhortation *mikiljada Kristus* ‘Christ shall be glorified’ is what justifies the use of the synthetic passive form. By contrast, the periphrastic passive in the first half of the verse has reference to the apostle himself rather than Jesus and is therefore given a neutral periphrastic rendering. Stylistic differences of this kind are, no doubt, an epiphenomenon of the competition between an older and a newer form.

The evidence shows that the most clearly demonstrable difference between the Gothic non-past synthetic and periphrastic ‘be’ passives is that the synthetic forms are actional,

while the periphrastic 'be' forms are (in the majority of the examples) stative. This finding calls for a revision of the assumption that the Gothic synthetic forms were ambiguous (either actional or stative), providing an insight into the functioning and decline of the inherited synthetic passive. Having become stylistically specialized and functionally narrowed to the actional passive, the synthetic forms were considerably inflexible. Their paradigm was also seriously defective, with the active's 40 forms offset by only six of the synthetic passive, which contained no verbals and no morphological differentiation of person in the plural. This imbalance made the synthetic paradigm vulnerable to incursion by the more robust periphrastic passive, which expanded its range of functions in the present tense on analogy of the past-tense periphrastic passive, where 'be' passives could be stative as well as actional.

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