

Is there passive in Hong Kong Sign Language?

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1. Aim of this study

This paper investigates whether there are passive constructions in Hong Kong Sign Language (hereafter HKSL), and what are their syntactic and morphological properties.

2. Previous proposals on passive constructions in ASL

2.1 Kegl (1990)

- A transitive agreement verb can be passivized in the presence of AT, an intransitive locative verb.
- The patient becomes the subject (i.e. promotional passive), the signer assumes the role of the patient, and the detransitivized agreement verb is articulated close to the signer's body with a constrained, minimal movement that does not agree with any position other than the signer's body.

2.2 Janzen et al. (2001)

- Passives in ASL pattern similarly to the non-promotional passives in languages such as Ute.
- A prototypical passive construction involves the signer moving the shoulders or torso slightly toward the patient's locus, with eye gaze directed towards the agent. The agent is demoted, though a more weakly demoted agent, such as SOMEONE or WHO, may still be present. Morphologically, the passivized agreement verb moves towards the signer, and the movement begins at a relatively distant point in the signing space which is semantically empty.

3. Issues left unaddressed in previous proposals

- Most of the passive examples given by the two previous studies in ASL involve animate patients and agreement verbs.
 - o What about inanimate patients, which generally don't partake in role shift system in sign language discourse? Can they be passivized, too?
 - o What about other verb types? Can they also manifest passive verbal morphology? If so, what are the morphological characteristics?

4. Current study:

4.1 Spontaneous discourse data

- i. Around 1 hour 30 minutes of monologue data (semi-structured) by four native signers
 - o Answers to questions
 - o Picture-based narratives
- ii. Around two hours of paired conversation with no restrictions on topics by four native signers (i.e. free conversation - unstructured)

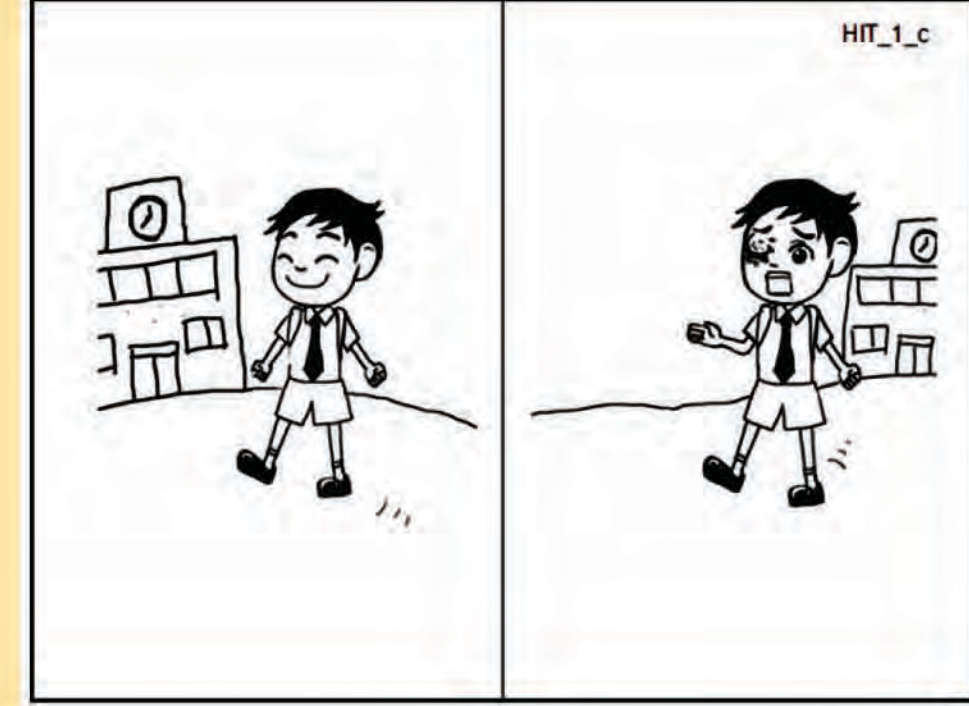
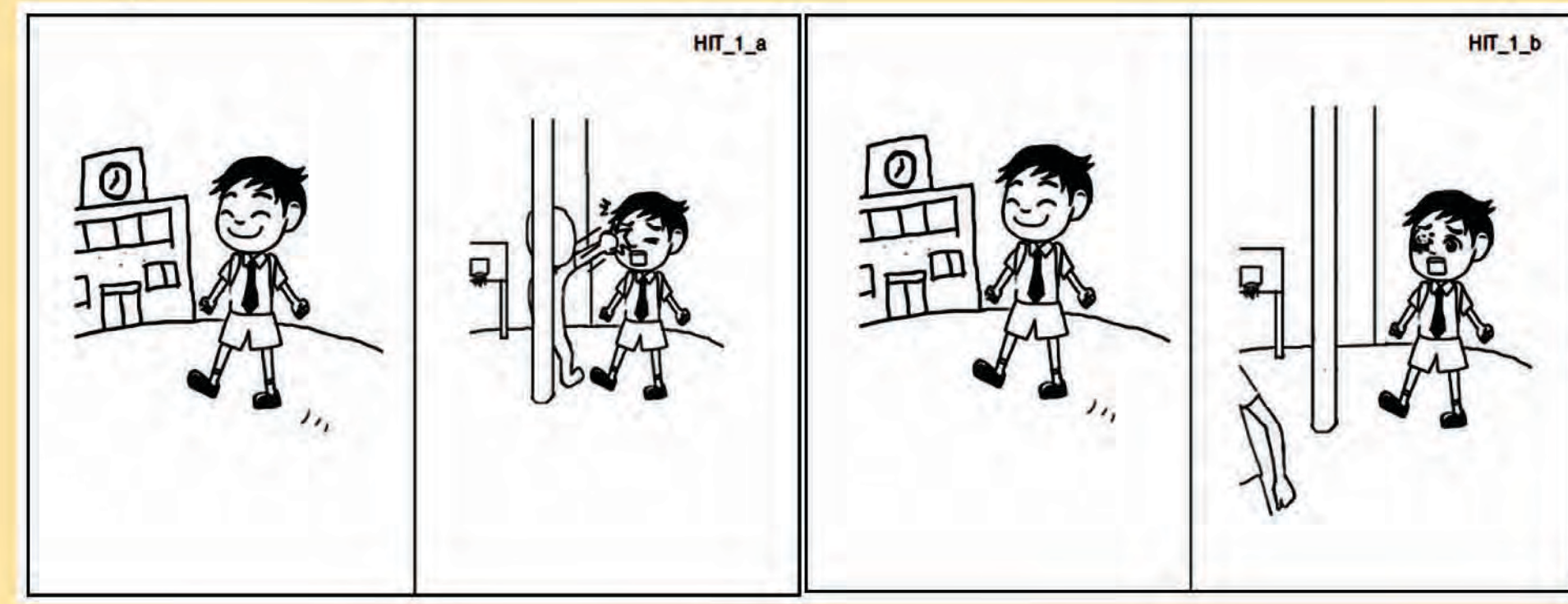
Observation:

- No passive constructions similar to what Kegl (1990) and Janzen et al. (2001) reported can be found in the HKSL spontaneous data. (Probably because all agent referents were specific definite - not the ideal discourse condition for passivization.)

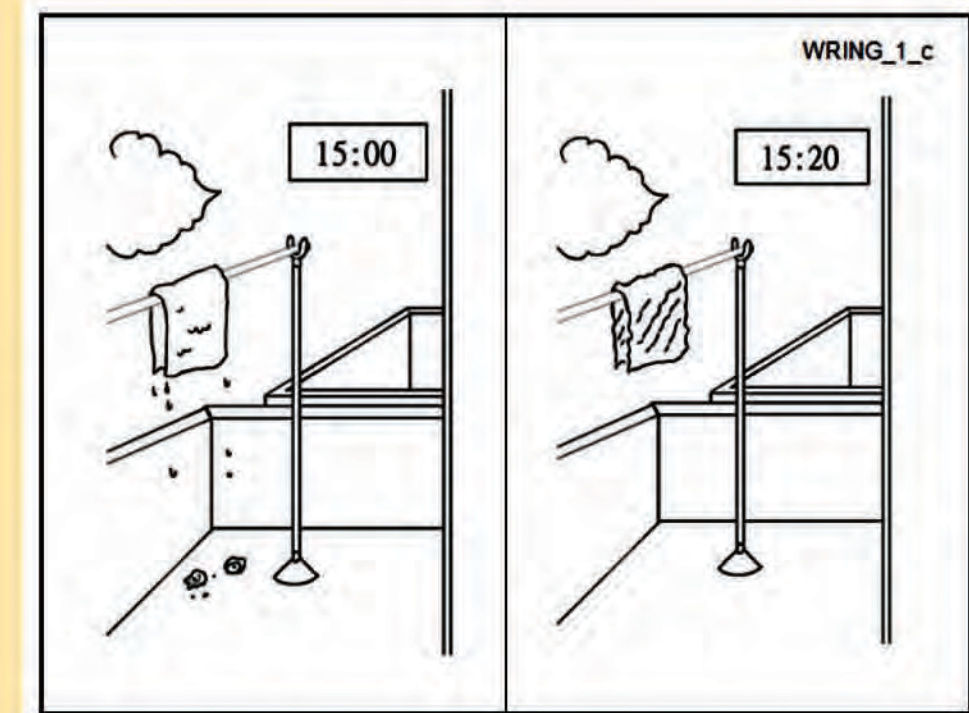
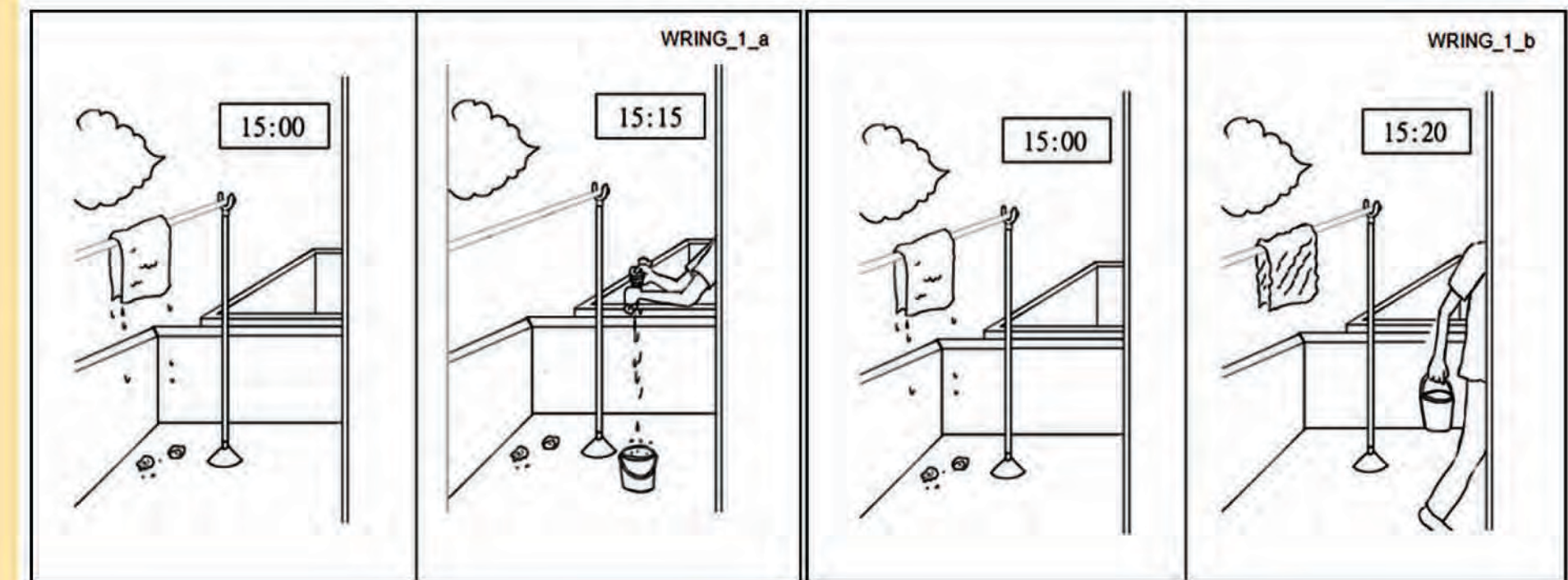
4.2. Elicited data: picture description task

- The pictures were designed on the basis of the following 5 considerations:
 - i. Three types of transitive verbs
 - ii. Previous studies on passives in ASL focused mainly on agreement verbs. In this task pictures were designed to elicit handle classifiers and plain verbs in addition to agreement verbs.
 - iii. The patients include both animate and inanimate entities
 - In the two previous studies on passives in ASL most examples given involve animate patients. It is not yet clear under their proposals whether inanimate patients can be passivized, too. Hence, the design of this task includes both animate and inanimate patients.
 - iii. Unknown identity of the agents
 - As pointed out by Hopper and Thompson (1980), passive agents tend to be semantically non-referring, unindividuated, non-distinct and stereotypical. In this task, the identity of the agents remains unknown:
 - (1) the agent cannot be seen at all; or
 - (2) the agent can be seen but its identity cannot be discerned clearly
 - iv. Relative visual salience of the agent and patient
 - It is commonly assumed that passive construction is favoured in discourse situations where patient is more prominent than the agent.
 - On the assumption that if both the agent and patient are seen at the same time the former will still be cognitively more salient than the latter (particularly if the patient is inanimate), two situations were set up:
 - (1) the agent can still be seen in the picture
 - (2) the agent cannot be seen in the picture
 - v. Ongoing actions vs completed actions
 - In some spoken languages, passive allows no reading other than the result (Abraham 2006). To see whether passives in HKSL, if any, are also sensitive to this aspect, two types of situations were set up:
 - (1) the action is still ongoing
 - (2) the action has already been completed

Examples: Picture (a), (b) and (c) of event (1) for HIT



Picture (a), (b) and (c) of event (1) for WRING



The order of the pictures was randomized. The four native signing informants were asked to report what they had just seen in the picture to another native signer. It was explicitly stated what verb they needed to use in the descriptions. If they used SOMEONE to refer to agent in the descriptions, they were asked if it was possible not to mention SOMEONE. If yes, they were asked to sign the sentence again. All their responses were videotaped and analyzed.

4.4 Preliminary Findings of the Picture Elicitation Task:

- i. No instances of situation (a) and (b) allowed agent suppression. The signers commented that as they actually saw the agents in situation (a) and (b), they must mention the agent with SOMEONE in describing the events. In other words, the sight of agent precludes the possibility of agent suppression.
- ii. Only some instances of situation (c) could elicit sentences in which the indefinite agent SOMEONE is suppressed and the patient argument occupies the preverbal position. The table below shows the result:

Verb	No of tokens that allow agent suppression (out of 8 descriptions)	No of signers who produced agentless clauses (out of 4)	Verb types	Patient (animate vs inanimate)	Whether and how the patient is affected
INVITE	0	0	agreement	Animate	Given an opportunity to attend a party/banquet
HELP	0	0	agreement	Animate	Personal tasks being done by others
EAT	1	1	plain	Inanimate	From existence to non-existence
GIVE	1	1	agreement	Inanimate (money) (beneficiary as animate)	Change of ownership
STEAL	4	2	agreement	Inanimate	Change of location
TEAR	4	3	Handling classifier	Inanimate	Change of state → torn
HIT	5	3	agreement	Animate	Change of state → injured
MOVE (by grasping)	5	3	Handling classifier	Inanimate	Change of location
WRING	6	3	Handling classifier	Inanimate	Change of state → dry
INSERT	6	4	Handling classifier	Inanimate	Change of location
REPAIR	6	4	plain	Inanimate	Change of state → returning to a good working condition
PHOTO-COPY	6	3	plain	Inanimate	Change of quantity
KNIT	7	4	plain	Inanimate	Change of state → become a piece of clothing

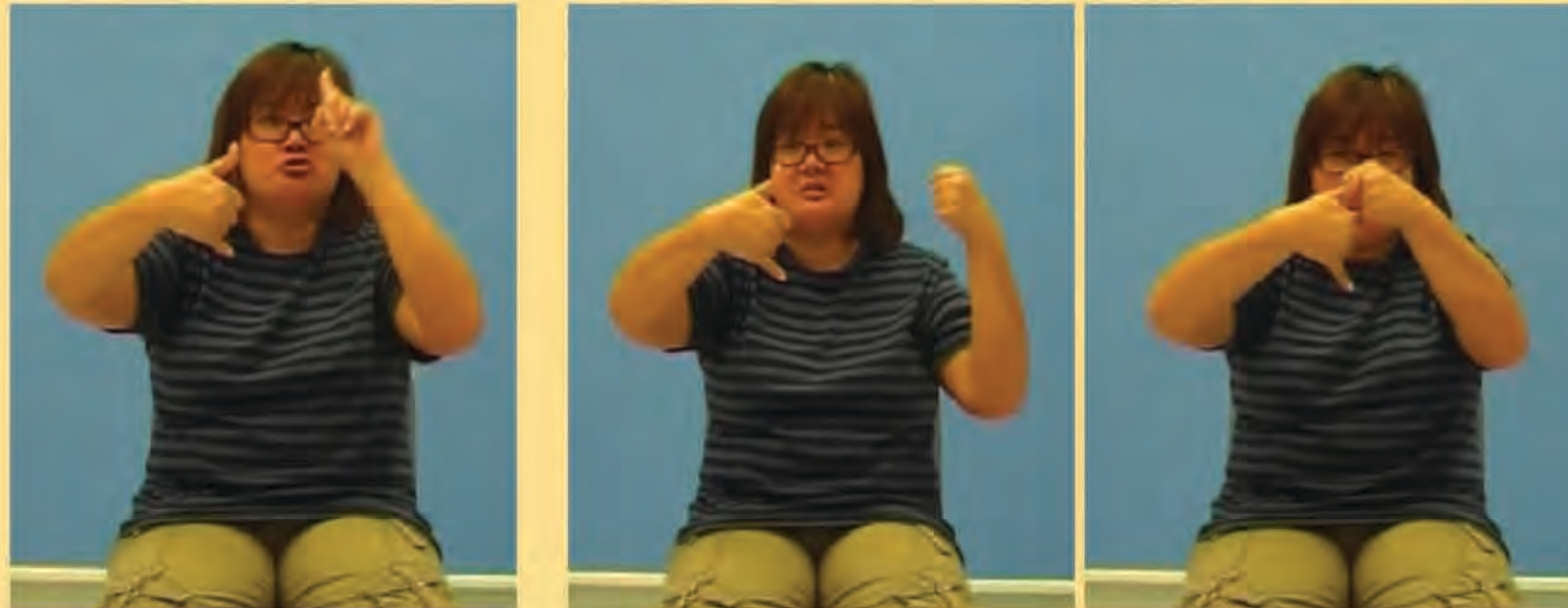
Morphosyntactic category of verbs involved and whether the patient is animate or not do not determine the possibility of agent suppression. What appears to be important is the nature and degree of affectedness of the patients which undergo the transitive events. For verbs whose indefinite agents were suppressed at least half of the times (4 tokens out of 8) in the experiment, all lead to a tangible and visible change of state or location of the affected patients.

iii. Characteristics of sentences in which the agent is suppressed:

- a) Suppression of agent agreement:
For HIT, suppression of agent agreement and a shift of the patient's perspective are observed (similar to what Janzen et al. (2001) and Kegl (1990) reported).

Example 1a: HIT

.....SOMEONE CL:hit-a-person
'(the boy walked along the road.) Someone had hit the boy.'



Example 1b: HIT

IX + CL:person HIT SWOLLEN
'That person was hit and his face was swollen.'



b) Morphological reduction of handling classifiers

In general, if the clause contains an agent, there is a strong tendency for the handling classifier predicate to begin with a grasping action followed immediately by the predicate movement. In contrast, for agentless handling classifier predicates, there is no such grasping action.

Example 2a: CL-grasp-and-move-food-tray

SOMEONE CL-grasp-and-move-tray
'Someone moved the tray.'



Example 2b: CL-move-food-tray

IX-that (food tray) CL-move-food-tray
'The food tray was moved.'



In addition to a lack of the grasping motion, the movement path associated with an agentless handle classifier predicate also tends to be shorter:

Example 3a: CL-insert-knife-into-knife-holder

SOMEONE CL-grasp-knife CL-insert-knife-into-knife-holder
'Someone grasped the knife and inserted it into the knife-holder.'



Example 3b: CL-insert-knife-into-knife-holder

IX-that (knife) CL-insert-knife-into-knife-holder
'The knife was inserted into the knife-holder.'



c) Very restrictive pragmatic contexts

- The agent must not be 'known' or 'seen'.
- Sufficient context clues (i.e. non-manuals) must be provided to show that the signer is not the agent, since the default interpretation for an agentless sentence would be the signer being the agent.

d) Have a strong resultative meaning

- For verbs that already encode the end-state of the affected patient, e.g. INSERT, MOVE (by carrying), they can be optionally followed by FINISH.
- For verbs that do not explicitly encode the end-state, e.g. KNIT, COPY, WRING, the verbs are very often followed by FINISH, ALL-DONE, and/a description of the end state.

Example 4:

IX-that T-SHIRT WRING FINISH
'That shirt was wrung out.'



Example 5:

IX-that (bicycle) REPAIR ALL-DONE
'That bicycle was repaired well.'



Example 6:

IX-that(book) COPY FINISH CL-pile of paper
'The book was copied and there was a pile of copied materials.'



5. Proposal:

- The agentless sentences are potential candidates of passive constructions in HKSL which bear a strong resultative meaning.
- Some of the unaddressed issues that warrant further investigation:
 - o Can agent be suppressed in other non-resultative contexts? E.g. transitive events with a present progressive reading.
 - o To what extent are the morphological changes observed in this study applicable to other transitive verbs?

Reference:

Abraham, Werner. 2006. Introduction: Passivization and typology: form and function – a confined survey into the research status quo. In: Werner Abraham & Larisa Leisiö. Passive and Typology: Form and Function. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 1-27.

Janzen, Terry, Barbara O'Dea, & Barbara Shaffer. 2001. The construal of events: Passives in American Sign Language. Sign Language Studies, 1(3), pp.281-310.

Kegl, Judy. 1990. Predicate Argument Structure and Verb-Class Organisation in the ASL Lexicon. In: Ceil Lucas, ed. Sign Language Research: Theoretical Issues. Washington DC: Gallaudet University Press, pp.149-176.

Table 1: Items of Picture Stimuli

Transitive Verb Types	Verbs	Events
1. Agreement verb	HIT	1. A boy being hit in his eye. 2. A girl being hit on her nose.
	GIVE	1. A beggar being given some money in his begging bowl. 2. A charity organization being given some money in the donation collection box.
	INVITE	1. A girl being invited to a party. 2. A girl being invited to a wedding banquet.
	STEAL	1. A diamond being stolen. 2. A bicycle being stolen.
	HELP	1. An old man being helped with his shoe making. 2. A poor girl being helped with her household chores.
2. Handling classifier predicates	TEAR	1. A page in the book being torn. 2. A poster on the wall being torn.
	WRING	1. A wet towel being wrung. 2. A wet T-shirt has been wrung.
	PUT (by grasping)	1. A food tray being put on another table. 2. A luggage being put on a chair.
3. Plain verbs	INSERT	1. A knife being inserted into the knife holder. 2. A key being inserted into a key hole.
	EAT	1. A fish being eaten. 2. A cake being eaten.
	REPAIR	1. A clock being repaired. 2. A bike being repaired.
	PHOTO-COPY	1. A book being photocopied. 2. A poster being photocopied.
	KNIT	1. A woolen scarf being knitted. 2. A woolen cardigan being knitted.

- For each verb, two transitive events that involve a patient and an agent whose identity is unknown were construed.
- For each event, three situations were set up:
 - (1) The picture shows that the action is being performed.
 - (2) The picture shows that the action has just been performed and the agent is leaving the scene.
 - (3) The picture shows only the affected patient after the action. The agent can no longer be seen.