



# Inchoative, a Third Voice (A Synchronic Study)

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Received: 14-12- 2012

Accepted: 22-01- 2013

Published: 01-03- 2013

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.2n.2p.153

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.2n.2p.153>

## Abstract

The linguistic term "inchoative" is far from clear. Some scholars use the term synonymously with "inceptive" and "ingressive" referring to an aspectual form which expresses the commencement of a state or activity. However, inchoative has also been used in another sense by grammarians, synonymously with "ergative" or "middle" as a verb expressing a change of state. In the second sense, inchoative is more a voice in contrast with active and passive than an aspect. While the contrast between passive and inchoative plays an important role in language teaching and language learning, it has been neglected in almost all grammar textbooks. Furthermore, in the Persian language, certain sentences are ambiguous between inchoative and passive. This has resulted in the formation of some erroneous English sentences, by Iranian EFL learners. This study, scrutinizing the inchoative voice in English and Persian, aims to show the relationship between, active, passive and inchoative to help EFL learners differentiate the three voices.

**Keywords:** active, passive, inchoative, voice, Case Grammar

## 1. Introduction

The term "inchoative" is used in two different senses. Some scholars use inchoative (also referred to as inceptive and ingressive) in the sense of an aspectual form which expresses the start of a state of affairs or an action. On the other hand, inchoative has also been used as another grammatical concept to refer to a verb expressing a change of state. In the second sense, inchoative (also referred to as ergative or middle) is regarded as a voice. This third voice is in contrast with both passive and active. While this contrast has a significant part in language teaching and language learning, it is not elaborated in almost all grammar textbooks. Moreover, in Persian, some sentences with certain constructions are ambiguous between inchoative and passive. This has led to the formation of such ill-formed English sentences as \**He was graduated recently*, or *My father was retired at the age of 50*, etc., by Iranian EFL learners. This study, elaborating the inchoative voice in English and Persian, aims to show the relationship between, active, passive and inchoative, in order to help EFL learners not to mix up the three voices.

## 2. Background

The linguistic term "inchoative" is not clear at all. Some scholars use inchoative (also referred to as inceptive and ingressive) only to refer to "a distinctive aspectual form expressing the beginning of a state or activity. In Japanese, for example, the verbal suffix *-dasu*, makes *furidasu* (start to rain) from *furu* (rain), and in Latin the infix *-sc-* makes *tremescre* (start to tremble) from *tremere* (tremble)" (Trask, 1993:137).

However, inchoative has also been used in another sense by grammarians as "a verb which expresses a change of state. For instance, *yellowed* in *The leaves yellowed*" (Richards, Platt and Platt, 2006:176).

For Marcotte (2005), the inchoative is in contrast with the causative construction. Exemplifying the following sentence:

- a. The door opened.
- b. Thora opened the door.

He argues that "this outward similarity hides a fundamental differences. The two sentences exemplify different constructions: "the intransitive inchoative in (a) and the transitive causative in (b)"(p. 1).

Piñón (2001, p. 273), speaks of "pairs of verbs that participate in this alternation. Such pairs consist of a transitive and an intransitive member that are semantically related in roughly the following way: the intransitive member (a.k.a. an inchoative verb) denotes a change of state and the transitive member (a.k.a. a causative-inchoative verb) denotes a bringing about of this change of state. This informal characterization can be tested against the following pairs of sentences containing alternating verbs:

- (a) Rebecca broke the pencil.
- (b) The pencil broke.

- (a) Maria opened the door.
- (b) The door opened.

Some scholars refer to inchoative as 'ergative' or 'middle'. For (Matthews, 2007, p.187), "Inchoative is the construction, in some accounts, of an intransitive such as 'open' in the *door opened*, as opposed to one that is transitive or 'causative', as in *They opened the door*. Constructions like that of *The door opened* seem to attract the abuse of terms traditional in other senses: (1) ergative (2) middle".

"Ergative is a verb which can be used both transitively and intransitively with the same meaning. For example, boiled in:

He boiled a kettle of water.

The kettle boiled." (Richards & Schmidt 2002, p.184).

(Trask 2008, p. 37) asserts that "in ergative languages, the subject of an intransitive verb is treated the same as the direct object of a transitive verb.... In English for example, the grammar in the two sentences *Helen opened the door* and *The door opened* is quite different, though the agency of the event might be thought of as being the same".

For Radford (2006), ergative "has come to be used to denote verbs like *break* which occur both in structures like '*Someone broke the window*' and in structures like '*The window broke*', where the window seems to play the same semantic/thematic role in both types of sentences, in spite of being the complement of *broke* in one sentence and the subject of *broke* in the other"(p. 450). Giving the following examples:

They will **roll** *the ball* down the hill  
*The ball* will **roll** down the hill.

They **broke** *the vase* into pieces  
*The vase* **broke** into pieces

The **closed** *the store* down  
*The store* **closed** down

Radford argues that "many three-place transitive predicates like *roll* can be used as two-place intransitive predicates. Verbs which allow this dual use as three-place or two-place predicator are sometimes referred to as ergative predicates" (P.377-388).

In the forthcoming sections, the concept "inchoative" as a verb expressing a change of state, and its contrast with passive and active will be scrutinized.

### 3. Data of the Study

The data of the study are simple sentences, collected from elementary language text-books. Simple sentences are deliberately chosen for the convenience of the discussions and argumentations.

### 4. Discussions

From what argued before, one may come to the conclusion that an inchoative sentence has a structure held between passive and active. That is why it is also referred to by some scholars as 'middle'. Tables (1) and (2) show the middle structure of the inchoative in English and Persian, respectively:

Table 1. The middle structure of the inchoative in English and Persian

	Voice	Subject	Verb	Post-verbal Element
(1)	Active	<u>Agent</u> The kid	<b>broke</b> (tr.)	the vase
(2)	Inchoative	<u>Patient</u> The vase	<b>broke</b> . (in.)	
(3)	Passive	<u>Patient</u> The vase	was broken (in.)	by the kid.

Table (1) illustrates that, on the one hand, the active and inchoative sentences, unlike the passive sentence, benefit from active verbs. On the other hand, the subject of the inchoative and passive sentences, unlike the active sentence, overlaps the patient. The subject-agent overlap in the active sentence (1) requires that its verb be transitive, while the subject-patient overlaps in (2) and (3) requires that their verbs be intransitive.

Table 2. The middle structure of the inchoative in English and Persian

	Voice	Subject	Pre-verbal Element	Verb
(4)	Active	<u>Agent</u> /bætʃe kid	goldan-ra vase-DO marker	ʃekæst/ broke (tr.)
(5)	Inchoative	<u>Patient</u> /goldan vase		ʃekæst/ broke. (in.)
(6)	Passive	<u>Patient</u> /goldan vase		ʃekæste ʃod/ broken became (in.)

Sentence (4 to 6) in Table (2) are the translation of sentences (1 to 3) into Persian. Except for the fact that Persian, unlike English, is a verb-last language, there is a thorough similarity between the two languages with regard to the fact that inchoative is in contrast both with active and passive.

#### 4.1 Passive in Persian

Passive in Persian is totally different from that of English and some other European languages. This difference is to the extent that has misled some scholars to claim that "There is no passive structure in Persian, all cases referred to as passive are, in fact, inchoative structures. There is no active-passive contrast in Persian ... however, some inchoative structures with the verb /ʃodæn/(become) can be found"(Moyene, 1974, p. 265).

Contrary to what Moyene (1974) claims, Persian, like English and many other languages, does have passive. What makes the Persian passive different is the fact that long (agentive) passive sentences are not formed in Persian. Many scholars (Bahar et al 1963, Lazard 1957, Lambton 1966, Najafi 1987, Shari'at 1988, Natel Khanlari 1991, Vahidian Kamyar 1992, Jabbari, 2003 & 2012) argue that in Persian, agentive or long passive sentences are not made. Persian passive sentences, referred to as /mædʒhul/(literary meaning unknown) are formed only when the agent or doer of the action is unknown or not intended to be known for any reason.

The Persian passive is "made today with the help of the past participle of the main verb of the active sentence and the auxiliary verb (/ʃodæn/=become)" (Farshidvard, 2003, p.431). The following examples manifest the formation of passive in Persian:

(7) /bætʃe goldan -ra ʃekæst /                      The kid broke the vase.  
kid vase-ACCmarker broke

(8) /goldan ʃekæste ʃod /                              The vase was broken.  
vase broken became

(7) is a Persian active sentence. (8) is its corresponding short (agent-less) passive sentence. Long (agentive) passive sentences as (9) are not naturally made in Persian:

(9) /goldan be-væsile-je bætʃe ʃekæste ʃod/      The vase was broken by the kid.  
vase by-means-of kid broken became

Sentences like (9), if any, is the result of word-for-word translation from English or other European languages.

The reasons why long (agentive) passive sentences are not made in Persian and how long passive sentences are translated into Persian, are beyond the scope of this article. However, there is a close relationship between Persian inchoative and lack of agentive passives in Persian which will be elaborated in due course.

As was mentioned earlier, in Persian, passive is, most of the time (not always), in contrast with inchoative. (10) is the an inchoative sentence corresponding to the passive sentence (8):

(10) /goldan ʃekæst/                                      The vase broke.  
vase broke

Examples (8) and (10) show how inchoative and passive have different structures. However, it is not always the case. What makes the Persian inchoative unique is the fact that under certain circumstances, passive and inchoative sentences become structurally identical and therefore ambiguous<sup>1</sup>.

The ambiguity between passive and inchoative in Persian happens under two circumstances:

a-There is an exception (though rule-governed) to the passivization rule in Persian to the effect that "whenever the verb of an active sentence is a compound verb made of a noun or an adjective plus the verbal element (/kærdæn/= to do),

then to make the sentence passive, the verb is not changed to a past participle. By virtue of the 'least effort principle', the verbal part (/kærdæn/=to do) directly changes to (/fodæn/=become)" (Farshidvard, 2003, p.433). In this case, the consequent passive sentence is identical with the corresponding inchoative sentence. Consider the active sentence (11):

(11) /bætʃe dær-ra baz kærd/ The kid opened the door.  
kid door-ACCmarker open did

Overgeneralizing the above-mentioned "exception" to the rule results in the formation of the ungrammatical sentence (12):

(12) \* /dær baz kærde fod/  
door open done became

The corresponding (grammatical) passive of (11) is rather (13):

(13) /dær baz fod/  
door open became

However, (13) is ambiguous between passive and inchoative, .i.e. it has the following two interpretations:

(14) The door was opened. (Passive)  
(15) The door opened. (Inchoative)

It is worth mentioning that the above-mentioned ambiguity is subject to some limitations. Compare the following pair of sentences:

(16) /name zærd fod/ The letter was yellowed/The letter yellowed.  
letter torn became (Passive) (Inchoative)

(17) /name post/taɪp fod/ The letter was posted/typed.  
letter post/type became (Passive)

(16) is ambiguous between passive and inchoative, while (17) is not. Sentence (17) is only passive and cannot be inchoative. The difference is that /post kærdæn/(to post) and /taɪp kærdæn/ (to type) necessarily need a human agent. No letter can be *posted* or *typed* by itself. This is not the case with (16). A *letter* can be yellowed by someone or by itself (e.g. decay).

b- If a past participle is also used as an adjective, then, again, the resulted sentence has two reads. i.e. passive and inchoative.:

(18) /bætʃe dær-ra bæst/ The kid closed the door.  
kid door-ACCmarker close-past

(19) /dær bæst-e fod/ The door was closed/ The door closed.  
door closed-pp became (Passive) (Inchoative)

Unlike the active verb in sentence (11), the verb in the active sentence (18) is the simple verb /bæstæn/(= to close). Yet, (19) is ambiguous. Here the ambiguity is owing to the fact that /bæst-e/(=closed), the past participle of the verb, also serves as an adjective.

## 5. Applications

Differentiating passive from inchoative is an important issue in language learning and language teaching. Moreover, there is a considerable difference between Persian and English inchoative. While in English passive and inchoative are in contrast, in Persian, under the aforesaid circumstances, passive and inchoative have the same surface structure. These facts are ignored, by language textbooks and/or teachers, especially in Iran. They limit 'voice' simply to active and passive and neglect inchoative as the third voice. This has resulted in the formation of some intended passive sentences, where inchoative has been appropriate. Some examples are as follows:

I will be graduated next semester.	for	I will graduate next semester.
My father has been retired.	for	My father has retired.
Poems are not translated well	for	Poems do not translate well.

Research<sup>ii</sup> has shown that some Iranian EFL learners who were provided with a short-term instruction on passive-inchoative contrast in Persian and English, did significantly better in the post-tests.

## 6. Concluding remarks

Inchoative, also referred to as 'ergative' and 'middle' is a third voice standing in contrast with both active and passive universally<sup>iii</sup>. In Persian, however, sometimes, inchoative and passive surfaced the same. This, hand in hand with lack of a minute instruction on the said concepts, has resulted in the unnecessary use of passive construction where inchoative is appropriate, by Iranian EFL learners.

## 7. Suggestion for further studies

The findings of this research show that although inchoative is a universal linguistic concept, it may be formally different in different languages, as is the case in Persian and English. It is suggested that similar research be conducted on other languages such as French, German, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, Turkish, Arabic. etc.

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## Notes

i-There is another passive construction in Persian which is never ambiguous. Giving the example: /dær-ra baz kærdænd (one or more) opened the door/the door was opened, Windfuhr (1979) shows that " an agent is implied and surfaced in the form of 3<sup>rd</sup> plural ending, but is unspecified"(p.111).

ii- An English placement test is given, by the English Department of Yasouj University (Iran), where this researcher works, to newly admitted undergraduate students, in the beginning of each academic year. The writer, having coordinated with the department, has conducted the following experimental study, a number of times (6 times, so-far). Each time, as many as 30 students having obtained the lowest scores on the grammar part of the placement test are divided into two 15-student sections of Elementary English course. One section (the control group) was provided only with a placebo, i.e. the conventional method of teaching active passive contrast. The other section (the experimental group) received treatment, i.e. teaching the passive-inchoative contrast in Persian and English, upon introducing the concept active. The period of the instruction for both groups has been equal, amounting to 6 hours within 3 weeks. In the end, the two groups were given an identical mid-term exam. As was predicted, the scores obtained by the experimental group proved significantly higher than those of the control group, in all instances of the experiment.

iii- Examples are indicative of a thorough similarity of inchoative-passive contrast in French and German and English:

	French	German	
(Active)	L'enfant ouvrait la porte.	Das Kind öffnete die Tür.	The kid opened the door.
(Inchoative)	La porte s'ouvrait .	Die Tür öffnete sich. Die Tür wurde offen.	The door opened. The door became open.
(Passive)	La porte a été ouvirt .	Die Tür wurde geöffnet.	The door was opened.