Overview

This latest volume on grammatical voice is a fairly in-depth cross-linguistic look at voice and voice-related phenomena in the world’s languages. The authors’ stated goal is to provide “a clear and useful conceptual delimitation” (p. i) of the category of voice, which is both sufficiently narrow “to draw meaningful lines between voice phenomena, voice-like phenomena, and categories that are related to voice but best seen as different from it” (p. 2) and broad enough to account for the huge amount of variation in the way languages map form to meaning with respect to grammatical roles. To this end, the authors organize the phenomena discussed in this volume into a number of oppositional categories: diatheses versus voices, argument-structure modifying versus argument-structure preserving operations, coded versus uncoded alternations, and prototypical versus non-prototypical examples. While all of these categories are familiar to researchers interested in argument structure, voice, and valency, the fact that the authors use these criteria as organizing principles is a point of difference from other accounts.

The volume is intended as an update to typological discussions of voice, namely with respect to how the field conceptualizes and analyzes voice after four decades of fairly intense and continuous research. In particular, the authors explore both the advances and gaps left by Klaiman, 1991 typology of voice (possibly singled out since it is a typological survey of voice from the same press), and also synthesize a good amount of new descriptive work on a wide range of languages in their characterizations of voice phenomena. However, the authors pointedly state that “a thorough investigation of voice typology lies beyond the scope of the present study” (p. 247), which on one hand leaves readers feeling the lack of an overarching analysis of the mountain of data they have just been given, but on the other hand is perhaps for the best; there is currently a great deal of
interest in and new work resulting from in-depth studies of voice and valency in languages all over the planet (see, for example, the last 3 years of workshops at the Societas Linguistica Europaea annual meetings, and recent abstracts from the International Austronesian and Papuan Languages Conference for a gauge of recent voice-related research in Austronesian). The body of work that results from this renewal of interest in voice phenomena is likely to create the need for a new update in voice typology in the relatively near future.

Both Zúñiga and Kittilä are well-known scholars with extensive experience who have published robust work in voice and transitivity in both minority and majority languages, primarily from the Americas, Europe, and Scandinavia. The influence of their experience is evident in the text from the abundance of English, Finnish, German, Mapudungun, and Spanish examples. However, the book does a good job of showcasing the voice and voice(-like) phenomena from around world; as stated in the book’s abstract, the work includes data from over 200 languages.

Although the volume does bring some clarity to the typological discussion of voice, the reader will not find any real surprises. The authors stick quite closely to what one might call a mainstream functional-typological understanding of voice (as they say, they do not “break unnecessarily with Western linguistic tradition” p. 252), which was overtly referenced at various points in the book with respect to prototypical versus non-prototypical structures (see also below). The authors provide a primarily structural account that claims to be in the tradition of Comrie (1985) and Kulikov (2011) (p. 10), and indeed strikes me as following Kulikov closely. Their characterization of voice does differ from some accounts mainly in the explicit inclusion of causative and anticausative and applicative and anti-applicative operations as voices, which has increasingly been the trend (see e.g., Kulikov et al. 2006). The authors also do a better job than most others who provide a primarily structural account of voice in discussing the functional aspects of each construction, including semantic correlates, lexical effects, and how Aktionsart, person, and aspect interact with the domain of voice.

**Critique**

The elements of this volume that scholars will criticize pertain to the realm of typological theory, where the authors provide too brief and uncritical a treatment of some concepts foundational to characterizations of voice. The first issue pertains to their explanation of overt morphological voice marking. Whether to consider both overtly morphologically marked and unmarked (here “coded” and “uncoded”) structures as voice has long been a point of debate and division, particularly with respect to passives and antipassives (see e.g., Spreng 2010; Vigus
2018 vs. Heaton 2017 for antipassives, and Dryer 1982; Andersen 1990 vs. Haspelmath 1990; Siewerska 2013 on passives). The authors make the choice to only consider coded operations as voice proper, and discuss uncoded alternations separately. The authors clearly expected pushback on this choice, saying “the requirement that only coded diatheses be labeled voices may strike some readers as unnecessarily Eurocentric” (p. 5). They justify their decision by noting that “such predicate marking patterns are not only found outside Europe but are also quite widespread, both areally and genealogically”, and that “we have followed current mainstream studies here in taking a conservative tack” (p. 5).

It is perfectly reasonable that the authors make the choice to only consider coded alternations as voices, particularly since they are so thorough about discussing non-prototypical and other uncoded alternations with the same functions. What some scholars will find objectionable here is the rationale—that the decision was made essentially because there is a tradition in the field of viewing voice this way. A stronger rationale is needed, particularly since they themselves provide examples that would seem to argue against their own coded versus uncoded distinction. For example, in discussing locative preposition drop in English (she fled from the room vs. she fled the room) they say that “to the extent that the location is adequately interpreted as an extra-thematic argument of the predicate … such alternations are syntactically equivalent to prototypical applicativization” (p 186). Similarly, with respect to the conative in English (I hit the ball vs. I hit at the ball), which is a consistent case in point for definitional problems with the antipassive (e. g., Heaton 2017 considers it functionally antipassive-like but not antipassive, Polinsky 2017 suggests it is better dealt with lexically than syntactically, and Blight 2004 argues that it is an antipassive), the authors state that the conative is “syntactically equivalent to antipassivization” (p. 189). Since these uncoded constructions have the same functions as the corresponding marked voices, and are syntactically equivalent, a syntactician would certainly wonder why then they are being treated differently, and would be looking for a rationale that goes beyond precedent. Again, there are good reasons to consider only morphologically marked constructions, but the authors do not present or engage with any arguments on this point.

The other major concepts not directly addressed in the volume are productivity and directionality/derivation. Readers of this book are left to figure out how the authors treat these issues based on their characterizations of different phenomena, rather than having an explicit discussion of them as part of the framework. The productivity of different voices is an important parameter in cross-linguistic comparison (see e. g. Polinsky 2013 WALS feature “productivity of the antipassive construction”). However, productivity is only obliquely addressed as a systematic principle in this volume (principally in chapter 8), absent from the conceptual
discussion and the definition of prototypical constructions. However, in the
detailed discussions of particular languages, the concepts of productivity versus
lexical restriction of an alternation were often discussed as relevant parameters.
For example, in a discussion of the semantic variation of passives, the authors
write, “To be sure, the passive of result is non-prototypical because it is restricted
or specialized in scope, and because it is often lexically restricted. But note that
prototypical passives can have some restrictions as well … ” (p. 98). Statements
like this one imply that prototypical voice operations are at least mostly produc-
tive, but the reader is left to guess at what point lexical restrictedness yields a non-
prototypical operation in the view of the authors. Again, their portrayal would
have been improved by more explicit discussion of all relevant parameters.

With respect to directionality, the authors note that previous typological
studies of voice have often considered “unmarked structures as the vantage point
from which other structures are characterized” (p. 5). Indeed, what exactly the
relationship is between two semantically similar constructions and how that is
characterized has varied by scholar and by decade, and is closely tied to one’s
theory of grammar. However, after making note of equipollent alternations where
related structures are equally morphologically marked, the authors do not provide
further information about what framework they are using to discuss that all-
important relationship (p. 5).

From some of their terminological choices, it seems that the authors were
avoiding talking about the relationship in a way that implied directionality, using
terms like “counterpart” and “non-[X] counterpart”. However, in the definition of
each voice prototype they refer to “the base” or a “base clause”, and expressly state
at the beginning of chapter 3 that “in the present chapter, we acknowledge or
assume the existence of one of these voices and address operations that create
other voices” (p. 82). The fact that the authors are considering one structure to be
“basic” and then others “created” does imply directionality.

In yet other places (notably the discussion of passives), the authors regularly
refer to various levels (no, partial, or complete) of “P-promotion” and “A-demo-
tion” (referring to the syntactic status of a transitive agent or patient argument as
core or non-core). These terms likewise imply directionality, and additionally are
expressed using terminology which comes from Role and Reference Grammar.
Additionally, there are also scattered examples of the use of the word “derive”,
which, while common in typological discussions of voice, can invoke a trans-
formational framework, and certainly implies a view where one construction is
more basic than the other, rather than a view where both constructions have
separate status. However, the reader also discovers by looking carefully at their
characterization of different examples that the authors allow related constructions
with equipollent marking to be equally prototypical, which is generally not
consistent with a framework where one construction is supposed to be “created” from the other. While the various frameworks implicated above are all established ways of discussing voice, the authors need to be consistent in their characterizations, to be explicit about the debate around this foundational idea of directionality in voice alternations, and to be clear about why they treated it the way that they did.

**Volume structure**

One of the strongest selling points of this volume is its consistent and logical structure. The book employs a multi-tiered hierarchical organization that moves from what the authors label “argument-structure modifying operations” that add or remove arguments (causatives, applicatives, anticausatives, antiapplicatives) in chapter 2 to “argument-structure preserving operations” that modify the core argument structure of the verb (passives, antipassives, and “related constructions”) in chapter 3, before moving to uncoded and other non-typical voice-related constructions. The discussion of each voice follows the same format: they begin with a definition of the prototype for that voice, first in terms of its effect on argument structure and then in terms of role mapping. They then discuss non-prototypical constructions, followed by a survey of structural and semantic variation found cross-linguistically. This is followed by brief remarks on the distribution of each voice geographically, genetically, and with respect to other typological features, to the extent that information exists. This format helps the volume feel more like a textbook (per its inclusion in the *Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics* series), and helps ensure that the same sort of consideration is provided for each voice.

The next four chapters are dedicated to various types of constructions that do not fit clearly into the traditional typological schema presented in chapters 2–3. Given that much of chapters 2 and 3 are spent discussing non-prototypical examples of voice operations, really the majority of the book focuses on examples outside of what is traditionally considered the core of voice phenomena. Chapter 4 provides a dedicated discussion of symmetrical voice, which includes what are commonly labeled “voices” in western Austronesian languages and various “inverse” phenomena in North and South American languages.

Although appropriate analyses for “agent voice (AV)” and “patient voice (PV)” in Austronesian are still hotly debated in languages throughout the family, the authors survey the major literature on symmetrical and ergative analyses. They focus specifically on antipassive analyses of AV, noting that at least in Tagalog both agents and patients are core arguments, not adjuncts, because they cannot be fronted (citing Kroeber 1993). They also discuss the influential Kapampangan data
in Mithun (1994), deciding against an ergative/antipassive analysis. I refer readers to Chen and McDonnell (2019) for a good overview of the current state of research on western Austronesian voice.

The second half of chapter 4 makes the interesting observation that inverse voice in some South American languages (namely Mapudungun, Jarawara, and Movima) can be equated to patient voice in symmetrical systems. However, unlike in western Austronesian languages where the difference between AV and PV involves aspect or definiteness, inverse is usually constrained by the person and number of the arguments. They also investigate inverse voice in North America, most famously with Algonquian languages but also Kiowa–Tanoan. After summarizing inverse phenomena in these languages, the authors state that syntactic tests do not suggest that North American inverse constructions are instantiations of patient voice. It is also important to note that “patient voice” can exist in languages in addition to passives and antipassives (e. g., in Movima and Meskwaki), which suggests that it does not serve the same function as passives/antipassives in such languages.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to middles, reflexives, and reciprocals, some instantiations of which the authors label the “duplex voice”, where two grammatical roles are assigned to a single syntactic argument (p. 167). This duplex mapping is a defining feature of their prototypical reflexives and reciprocals, leaving the many instances where arguments are coded in different ways (e. g. reflexives with itse “self” in Finnish, p. 154) as non-prototypical or simply not as instantiations of voice.

While fairly in-depth typologies of reflexives and reciprocals already exist (see e. g., König and Gast 2008; Nedjalkov 2007 and the contributions therein), many scholars continue to consider middles to be a problematic category (cf. p. 174). The authors survey different semantic approaches to middles, but find little structural similarity. In response, they attempt to clarify the semantic and structural space by introducing new terminology to deal with different kinds of middle phenomena: linguists are urged to use “middle inflection” to refer to the various diatheses like anticausative, reflexive, reciprocal, passive, etc. that bear the same morphological marking (as in classical European languages), and then use the term “middle cluster” to refer to “syncretisms based on the semantic connectedness of different event types” (p. 175–176), where some but not all of the above diatheses may be encoded in the same way, perhaps operating on a different semantic principle (e. g., subject affectedness, as in an example given from Pilagá, p. 176–177).

Chapter 6 deals with uncoded alternations, which were excluded from the discussions of different voice phenomena in the previous chapters. While the authors note that these uncoded alternations have syntactic and functional parallels to their overtly marked counterparts, “they signal quite a different make-up of both the grammar and the lexicon of the languages that make ample use of such uncoded alternations” (p. 11) (although this is not elaborated on in chapter 1 or chapter 6). The
structure of chapter 6 mirrors the structure of earlier chapters and the first half of the volume, where uncoded alternations are discussed for each type of construction in chapters 2–5 (note that auxiliary alternations like in Basque are classified as “uncoded”). The fact that there are semantically (and sometimes syntactically) comparable constructions for each voice type makes one wonder why they were separated out rather than included in, for example, the individual sections on non-prototypical constructions (see also comments on marking above). The authors conclude the chapter with the observation that the lack of morphological marking can be functionally motivated, particularly for verbs where the reflexive, the spontaneous, etc. is the natural way to express that event. They then extend this principle to argument structure, observing that some alternations never seem to be uncoded, e. g., the addition of a causer to a bivalent predicate (p. 199).

The scope of the volume broadens further in Chapter 7, which is dedicated to “voice-related phenomena” that are conceptually related to voice but have none of the morphosyntactic hallmarks of voice discussed in chapters 2–5. This chapter includes discussions of a wide variety of phenomena, some of which (e. g., differential object marking) have been addressed earlier as well, which partially obscures the distinction the authors try to make between “voice-like” and “voice-related” alternations. Most have to do with less transitive coding of A or P in some way, often without any change to the predicate, but usually with a change in nominal marking. The two major types of phenomena covered here include noun incorporation/pseudo-noun incorporation, and then what they call “transitivity discord constructions”. The latter category includes lexically restricted alternations that otherwise would qualify as voice (see comments on productivity above), as well as alternations that “have no diathetical effects” (p. 208). Most of the examples they touch on here are more typically dealt with in the antipassive literature, since they have to do with variation in the marking of P (see e. g., Heaton 2017: 182–240). These most notably include the AI + O (intransitive verbs which have expressed patients) and (O)TI (transitive verbs which lack inanimate patients) constructions in some Algonquian languages, as well as alternations in eastern Kiranti languages and Nez Perce that are often associated with indefinite patients, where the patient is present but lacks typical patient marking and the verb is morphologically intransitive. These constructions exemplify either two-argument clauses with morphologically monovalent verbs or one-argument clauses with morphologically bivalent verbs, all of which under some definitions would be considered antipassives.

Chapter 8 deals with diachrony and syncretism, both of which are concepts referenced throughout the book. As with chapter 6, since the structure of chapter 8 mirrors the structure of the rest of the book where each voice type is discussed in turn, one wonders why diachrony was not simply part of each earlier discussion. The authors purposefully do not discuss the diachrony for unmarked alternations,
likely for reasons related to both lack of documentation and space. While this chapter provides a one-stop overview of the current state of knowledge on the origins of different voice phenomena, in a functional/typological framework a lot of explanatory power is derived from diachrony in that historical developments can often explain why observed variation exists. This type of connection is clear for example in the work of Sansò (2018) on antipassives, and should be highlighted in diachronic typological approaches to voice.

The final chapter revisits voice typology, particularly with respect to discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the framework for a typology of voice introduced in Klaiman 1991. This volume claims to bring modern typological bottom-up (non-a priori) categorizations to studies of voice, and to provide a base upon which researchers can build fine-grained descriptions of voice phenomena “in as much detail as possible” (p. 247). The authors suggest that “future refinements and developments of a functional-typological theory of voice are likely to merely propose prototypes that differ from ours slightly or markedly” (p. 252).

Contributions

The primary value of this work comes from its thorough discussion of both prototypical and peripheral examples of each type of voice alternation, as well as an overview of related phenomena, which are often neglected once the prototype has been (narrowly) delineated. And even though the goal of the volume was not to provide a typology of voice, all cross-linguistic investigations of linguistic phenomena lend themselves to some amount of generalization. This volume contains many such generalizations, some of which are more along the lines of universal tendencies helpful in characterizing phenomena, while others are more obviously verifiable/falsifiable claims which encourage the collection of more data on the topic. Included here are some statements that struck me as useful generalizations or testable hypotheses that may be of interest to typologists working in this area. Some of these are observations from other authors, while others are unique to this volume. These observations are presented here under the same structure as in the volume.

Causatives

- “If a language has any kind of morphological causative, it applies at least to the kind of event defined above.” [i.e., verbs that inherently lack an agent, and where the introduced agent can exercise control over the event] – p. 19
- “If languages allow some causatives to apply rather liberally but restrict others to some valency classes, monovalent predicates, particularly those with a patientive subject, seem to be universally causativizable.” – p. 33
- “It appears that aivalent predicates (e.g., meteorological verbs) and trivalent predicates (e.g., verbs of giving and saying) are the most commonly excluded, or at least dispreferred, classes [for causativization] (Eriksen et al. 2010; Kittilä 2007).” – p. 33
- “If there are multiple causative strategies and they differ along the complex direct-indirect parameter, formally more integrated constructions will tend to express semantically more integrated causal chains, rather than vice versa.” – p. 35

**Anticausatives**

- “Formal and functional variation is less significant for anticausatives [than for causatives].” – p. 41
- “Causativization usually applies to most verbs in natural languages, while anticausativization is usually available for only those bivalent verbs that allow agents to be omitted altogether. It does not apply to monovalent verbs and trivalent verbs, which usually allow some sort of causativization (even though the mechanisms may vary) in most languages.” – p. 41
- “Unlike passives, anticausatives do not seem to have syntactic motivations in any language we have data for.” – p. 43
- “Periphrastic strategies do not seem to constitute the default anticausativizing mechanism in any natural language.” – p. 49
- “Languages usually have only one anticausativizing mechanism at their disposal, or at least only one mechanism is clearly the primary one.” – p. 49
- “All languages with any type of anticausative allow the complete removal of the agent …” – p. 51
- “Only semantically bivalent predicates whose A is not necessarily a prototypical agent (i.e., with a ‘thematically underspecified causer’) can be anticausativized (Haspelmath 1987: 15; Koontz-Garboden 2009: 80f).” – p. 51

**Applicatives**

- “In general, the roles borne by applied objects are usually more peripheral than those of base objects …” – p. 68
- “[Applicative] constructions seem to be commonly found in languages with little or no case marking on NPs and with rather rich verb morphology …” [referencing Polinsky 2013, and noting Pama–Nyungan as an exception] – p. 69
- “Languages with applicatives formed exclusively from monovalent bases seem to be extremely rare …” [citing Polinsky 2013, and noting Pama–Nyungan as an exception] – p. 69
- “A negative correlation with dominant accusative alignment appears to be robust.” [citing Peterson 2007] – p. 69
- “Locative and circumstantial applicatives require the existence of other applicative constructions, whereas benefactive and instrumental/comitative applicatives do not.” [citing Peterson 2007] – p. 70

Passives

- “(Prototypical) passives are simply less common in languages with morphological ergativity (Kazenin 2001: 926; Nichols 1992: 158; Polinsky 2017: 329).” – p. 102

Antipassives

- “Unlike with passives, however, such periphrastic constructions [for antipassives] seem to be rather rare (leaving aside those instances that simply contrast two different auxiliaries in the base and the antipassive voices).” – p. 114

Reflexives

- “Dedicated reflexive affixes are relatively uncommon …” [noting exceptions in Swahili and Navajo] – p. 157
- “(i) Nominal reflexives correlate with a wider range of GRs [grammatical roles] than verbal markers, (ii) the relevant implicational hierarchy is SBJ > DOBJ/POBJ > IOBJ/SOBJ > ADJ (i. e., if the reflexive strategy allows any given GR, it will also allow those to its left), and (iii) animacy and agentivity also play an important role in some languages.” – p. 157–158
Reciprocals

- “Even more frequent than valency-reducing reciprocal strategies with nominals are valency-neutral or uncertain cases with verbal reciprocals.” – p. 164

Uncoded alternations

- “Cross-linguistically, uncoded symmetrical voice alternations seem to be extremely rare.” – p. 194
- “Uncoded causatives of bivalent predicates seem not to occur at all …” – p. 199
- “Applicative NICs [nominal incorporation constructions] seem to be less widespread than antipassive-like NICs but appear to be a relatively stable family-specific feature.” [the authors mention Paraguayan Guaraní and Mohawk, but no particular language families] – p. 207

Syncretism

- “Passive-antipassive syncretism of the ‘asymmetric’ Slavic/Romance type seems to be more widespread than markers which passivize or antipassivize verbs equally productively.” – p. 241
- “The antipassive-applicative syncretism seems to be rare.” – p. 243
- “Since prototypical causatives have little in common with either reflexives or antipassives—their etymology, their semantics, and their syntax are too disparate—such syncretisms do not seem to be attested.” – p. 245 [but see Juárez and Álvarez González 2017 on Mocoví, and Creissels 2012 on Soninke]
- “Several voices have their typical origin outside the voice domain, like reflexive and reciprocal markers (whether they occur in agent/patient- or duplex-diathesis constructions), while others, most notably the anticausative, always seem to evolve from other voices.” – p. 245

Summary comments

As a text whose stated primary aim is to provide a functional-typological framework for discussing voice, I think this book serves its function well. In addition to providing a better overview than most primarily structural accounts of the
functional correlates of different voice phenomena, the authors deserve credit for giving a thorough treatment to non-prototypical and uncoded alternations. They also do not shy away from the often messy reality of language data, and discuss quite a bit of language-specific detail for their chosen examples. I recommend this volume for descriptive linguists looking to create their own descriptions of voice(-like) phenomena in a way that is more or less in line with current functional understandings of voice, and for students seeking a good overview of the structural and functional variety that exists within the broad domain of voice.

References


