

# snippets

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## Contents

1. Diego Feinmann. *Ignorance is a problem*
2. Matthew Tyler. *Passives and from-phrases in English*



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# Passives and *from*-phrases in English

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English passives are generally thought to be compatible with *by*-phrases, but incompatible with *from*-phrases that specify a non-agentive cause (Kallulli 2007, Alexiadou et al. 2015, among others). English inchoative change-of-state verbs display the opposite distribution: they are incompatible with *by*-phrases and compatible with *from*-phrases:

- (1) a. The surface was slowly cracked by the contractors / \*from the pressure.
- b. The surface slowly cracked \*by the contractors / from the pressure.

In this snippet I challenge the claim that cause-specifying *from*-phrases are uniformly incompatible with passives. The examples in (2) and (3) were all found on the internet (some are slightly adapted). I and three other native speakers of British English also find them quite acceptable, though the judgments throughout are subtle, and are contingent on the choice of lexical items. For (2a-c), the manner adverb excludes the stative reading of the passive.

- (2) a. My will **was** slowly **broken from** all the pain I had to endure.
- b. A low-temperature solder joint on the safety prop **is** quickly **melted from** the heat of a fire.
- c. The visibility afforded to crime victims **was** slowly **eroded from** the increasingly formalized system of justice.
- d. Lab tests from the case concluded that he **was killed from** a single gunshot by a National Guard soldier.
- e. After just 16 days of opening the Palace **was destroyed from** a fire.

Interestingly, the progressive further improves the acceptability of the *from*-phrase:

- (3) a. My heart **was being broken from** the constant arguments with my husband about how I discipline the children.
- b. His stomach lining **was being destroyed from** the pills and booze.
- c. She also testified about a trend of young teenagers **being killed from** the illicit drug.

Active-voice equivalents of the examples in (2) and (3) are not compatible with the *from*-phrase (though as with (3), progressive aspect may ameliorate the sentences for some speakers):

- (4) a. The villain broke my will (\*from all the pain). (cf. (2a))
- b. A National Guard solder killed him (\*from a single gunshot). (cf. (2d))
- c. My husband was breaking my heart (\*/?/?from constant arguments) (cf. (3a))
- d. He was destroying his stomach lining (\*/?/?from pills and booze) (cf. (3b))

It appears that passives and *from*-phrases are compatible, in the right circumstances. The *from*-phrase itself appears to be doing the same thing in passives as it does in inchoatives: introducing a non-agentive cause. Further work is required to determine whether it replaces a *by*-phrase in examples like (2) and (3), or whether it may be added in addition to a *by*-phrase. Examples like (5), which feature a passive with both a *from*-phrase and a *by*-phrase, do not (in my informal investigation) present a clear picture. They seem to be hard to judge (with variation in within-speaker reported judgments), and they require more rigorous study.

(5) %He was killed by a National Guard soldier from a single gunshot.

## References

Alexiadou, Artemis, Elena Anagnostopoulou, and Florian Schäfer. 2015. *External arguments in transitivity alternations: A layering approach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kallulli, Dalina. 2007. Rethinking the passive/anticausative distinction. *Linguistic Inquiry* 38:770–780.

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