



Passive Constructions in Icibemba: A Minimalist Analysis of Argument Reorganisation and Agreement

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ABSTRACT

Original Research Article

This article examines passive constructions in Icibemba, a Bantu language spoken in Zambia, within the Minimalist Programme of Transformational Generative Grammar. Data come from elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgement tasks, and audio recordings collected in two secondary schools in Mungwi District. The study investigates how passivisation in Icibemba involves argument reorganisation, structural promotion of the internal argument, passive verbal morphology, and agreement adjustment. The findings show that Icibemba passives follow systematic structural constraints rather than simple surface rearrangement. Participants accepted passive constructions when the promoted noun phrase and verbal agreement were compatible, while rejecting or treating as marginal forms with agreement mismatches or unclear argument roles. The data reveal that passivisation in Icibemba is governed by feature-driven movement: the internal argument moves to subject position to satisfy the Extended Projection Principle and case requirements. Passivisation is not merely a stylistic paraphrase but a principled syntactic operation involving A-movement, agreement, and argument structure reorganisation. The article contributes to Zambian linguistics by providing a formal account of Icibemba passive syntax and to pedagogical practice by suggesting how a structural understanding of passivisation can support grammar instruction.

Keywords: Passivisation, Icibemba, Minimalist Programme, Argument Structure, Agreement, A-Movement, Grammar Teaching.

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Introduction

Passive constructions matter for syntactic inquiry because they reveal how languages reorganise argument structure, shift grammatical prominence, and adjust agreement patterns. In Bantu languages, passivisation has attracted considerable attention because these languages display rich verbal morphology and visible agreement that provide direct evidence for claims about argument structure, movement, and case (Carstens, 2005; Diercks, 2010; van der Wal, 2022; Guérois, 2025). Icibemba, a major Bantu language spoken in Northern, Muchinga, Luapula, Central and parts of the Copperbelt Provinces of Zambia, offers a useful testing ground for theories of passivisation because its noun class system and overt agreement morphology make argument reorganisation and feature valuation empirically observable.

Despite its prominence as a language of education and everyday communication, Icibemba remains underrepresented in formal generative analyses of passive constructions. Existing research has concentrated on phonology, morphology, and broad descriptive grammar (Kula, 2002; Katamba, 2003) rather than on derivational accounts of voice alternations and argument structure. Studies on related Zambian Bantu languages have provided descriptive insights but have not always pursued full derivational modelling within contemporary generative theory (Chulu, 2019; Musonda, 2020; Mulenga, 2022). This leaves a gap in both theoretical description and classroom-oriented grammatical explanation.

The problem motivating this study is that key Minimalist claims about A-movement, case assignment, agreement, and the interaction between argument structure and verbal

morphology remain insufficiently tested in Ibibemba. It remains unclear whether Ibibemba passives are best explained through movement of the internal argument to subject position, whether passive morphology reflects a change in argument structure or merely a surface voice alternation, and how far locality constraints govern argument promotion. This gap also has pedagogical implications: in school contexts, passive voice is often taught as a simple conversion exercise that moves the object to the front, while the deeper structural changes involving agreement, verbal morphology, and argument prominence are underexplained.

This article addresses these gaps by examining passive constructions in Ibibemba within a Minimalist framework, drawing on data from elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgement tasks, and audio recordings collected in two secondary schools in Mungwi District. Section 2 reviews literature on passivisation in Bantu languages and the relevant Minimalist concepts. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 presents and discusses the findings. Section 6 concludes.

Literature Review

Passivisation in Generative Grammar

Passive constructions have been central to generative syntax since transformational grammar's earliest formulations. The core insight is that passivisation reorganises argument structure: the internal argument (object) becomes the subject of the passive, while the external argument (subject) is demoted, suppressed, or expressed in a *by*-phrase (Chomsky, 1981, 1995; Carnie, 2021). This reorganisation affects grammatical relations, case, agreement, and interpretive prominence.

In Government and Binding Theory, passivisation was analysed as a transformation moving the internal argument to subject position, assigning it nominative case and satisfying the Extended Projection Principle, with passive morphology absorbing accusative case and forcing the object to move (Baker, 1988). In the Minimalist Programme, this has been refined as feature-driven movement: the internal argument moves to satisfy the EPP feature on T and to have its case valued (Chomsky, 1995; Carnie, 2021). More recent accounts treat the passive morpheme as a defective *v* head that cannot assign accusative case and fails to value the EPP feature, triggering movement of the internal argument (Chomsky, 2000, 2001; Bruening, 2013).

Passivisation in Bantu Languages

Bantu languages provide rich evidence for passivisation theories because they display overt verbal morphology associated with voice alternations and visible agreement patterns that reveal argument structure. Guérois (2025) showed that passivisation across Bantu languages is both rich and diverse, with passive voice typically encoded through

morphological marking on the verb (suffix *-w-* or *-iw-*), alongside periphrastic strategies.

Carstens (2005) demonstrated that agreement and EPP effects in Setswana reveal clause structure and argument reorganisation: the promoted internal argument controls verbal agreement, evidence that it has moved to subject position and that agreement reflects the structural subject rather than the thematic agent. Khumalo (2014) showed that Ndebele passives involve systematic structural change where the internal argument becomes the grammatical subject and the verb bears passive morphology — not merely a surface marker but a reflection of changed argument structure and verbal valence. Mallya and Visser (2019) demonstrated that passivisation interacts with morphosyntax and lexical semantics in systematic ways. Devos and van der Wal (2020) and Diercks and Sikuku (2021) have refined our understanding of how agreement and movement interact in Bantu passives, showing that cross-linguistic variation reflects differences in the featural makeup of functional heads.

Passive Constructions in Ibibemba and Related Zambian Work

Existing Zambian studies on Ibibemba have contributed useful insights into morphology, negation, and clause patterns, but much of this scholarship has been descriptive or morphologically focused rather than fully derivational. Studies on compound nouns, negation, or clause patterns provide language-specific data without modelling how passive constructions are generated using X-bar theory, Agree, movement, or phase-based locality (Chulu, 2019; Musonda, 2020; Mulenga, 2022).

Kula (2002) provided an important foundation for understanding how Bemba verbal morphology is organised, but focused mainly on phonology and morphology rather than syntax. This leaves room for the present study to extend the analysis to sentence-level derivation of passive constructions.

The Zambian context matters because Ibibemba is widely spoken and used in educational settings, yet formal syntactic scholarship on passive constructions remains less developed than its social and pedagogical importance would suggest. A language playing such a communicative and educational role requires more than basic descriptive grammar — it requires formal studies that explain how passive constructions are built, how argument structure is reorganised, and how agreement relations are represented.

Theoretical Framework

Core Minimalist Concepts

This study is anchored in the Minimalist Programme of Transformational Generative Grammar, which provides explicit tools for modelling hierarchical phrase structure, feature-driven movement, agreement dependencies, and the

derivation of surface forms. Since Ibibemba exhibits visible agreement morphology and theoretically informative passive patterns, Minimalism offers a suitable basis for this analysis.

The foundation of the analysis is Merge, the operation through which lexical and functional items are combined into hierarchical constituents (Chomsky, 1995; Carnie, 2021). X-bar theory is used to represent heads, complements, and specifiers within hierarchical phrase structure, allowing active and passive clauses to be modelled consistently (Radford, 2004; Carnie, 2021). Movement is treated as feature-driven (internal Merge), triggered by formal requirements associated with functional heads. The Extended Projection Principle requires the subject position to be filled, motivating movement of the internal argument when the external argument is not available.

A-Movement and Argument Reorganisation

Passivisation is analysed as A-movement, where the internal argument moves to the subject position (Spec-TP) to satisfy the EPP and to have its case feature valued. This movement is motivated by the fact that the passive morphology (analysed as a defective *v* head) cannot assign accusative case and does not satisfy the EPP. The internal argument must therefore move to Spec-TP to receive nominative case from T. In passives, the internal argument behaves like a structural subject, controlling agreement on the verb and occupying the subject position.

The demoted external argument, if expressed, appears in a by-phrase that is not an argument of the verb but rather an adjunct-like element. In Bantu languages, the by-phrase may be introduced by *na* or a similar preposition (Guérois, 2025). The by-phrase is optional, and in many Bantu passives the agent is simply omitted.

The structure of a passive clause in Ibibemba can be represented as in (1), where the internal argument (IA) moves from its base position as complement of V to Spec-TP, and the passive morphology is on *v*:

(1) [TP IA_i [T' T [vPv_{pass} [VP V IA_i]]]]

This representation captures the essential properties of passivisation: the internal argument moves to subject position, the external argument is not projected, and the verb bears passive morphology.

Agree and ϕ -Features in Passives

Because Ibibemba shows overt agreement linked to noun class morphology, the analysis incorporates Agree as a central mechanism through which probes establish dependencies with goals to value formal features (Carstens, 2005; Baker, 2008). In passive constructions, the agreement relation is central: the promoted internal argument controls agreement on the verb, and the verbal morphology reflects the ϕ -features (person, number, noun class) of the promoted argument. The agreement morphology provides visible

evidence that the internal argument has become the structural subject.

The operation Agree establishes a dependency between a probe (on T or *v*) and a goal (the argument with matching ϕ -features). In passives, T probes and agrees with the internal argument in Spec-vP, valuing its case and ϕ -features. The passive morphology on *v* (analysed as a defective head) lacks the relevant ϕ -features to assign accusative case, thereby forcing movement. The agreement relation can be formalised as in (2):

(2) Agree (T, IA): T [ϕ : ____] values its ϕ -features against the IA's ϕ -features, and the IA's case feature is valued as nominative.

The visible agreement on the verb reflects this Agree relation. In Ibibemba, noun class agreement is particularly salient, and the passive construction provides a clear window into how agreement works in the syntax.

Phase Theory and Locality

The study adopts Phase Theory, particularly the view that vP and CP function as phases transferred to the interfaces during derivation (Chomsky, 2001, 2008). The Phase Impenetrability Condition is used as a locality principle that explains why movement is structured rather than unconstrained. In passive constructions, phase-based locality is relevant to the movement of the internal argument from Spec-vP to Spec-TP, a movement that crosses the vP phase.

The movement of the internal argument to Spec-TP is local and clause-bound, unlike wh-movement which may be long-distance. This is consistent with the view that A-movement is governed by different locality conditions than $\bar{A}$ -movement. Phase theory explains why passivisation does not create long-distance dependencies and why the promoted argument must be from the same clause.

Methodology

Research Approach and Design

The study employed a qualitative case study design with a descriptive-analytical orientation. The case was the selected Ibibemba-speaking school context in Mungwi District, represented by two secondary schools. This design allowed the researcher to investigate Ibibemba sentence structures within a bounded educational and linguistic setting. The descriptive dimension involved documenting sentence forms produced, judged, and explained by participants; the analytical dimension involved modelling these forms using X-bar theory and Minimalist syntactic concepts.

Participants

The study involved twenty-five participants drawn from two secondary schools in Mungwi District. Five were Ibibemba language teachers, and twenty were learners who could speak, read, and understand Ibibemba well enough to

participate in elicitation and grammaticality judgement tasks. The teachers were coded as Teacher T1 to Teacher T5, and the learners as Learner L1 to Learner L20. The sample was appropriate for a qualitative formal syntactic study because the aim was not statistical generalisation but depth of analysis, repeated testing, and careful interpretation of grammatical patterns.

All participants provided informed consent. For learners under 18, parental consent was also obtained. The study was approved by the relevant institutional ethics committee and by the Zambian Ministry of Education.

Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through semi-structured teacher interviews, elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgement tasks, and audio recordings. The main empirical focus was on passive constructions, with approximately fifteen to twenty stimulus items prepared for passives. Ten to fifteen agreement-related contrasts and distractor items were also included to test the consistency of participant judgements and reduce response predictability.

Elicitation tasks required participants to convert active declarative sentences into passive constructions. The active sentence in (3a) produced passive forms such as (3b):

(3) a. *Umwana a-lee-som-aicitabo.*

child SM-read-FV book

'The child is reading a book.'

b. *Icitabo ci-lee-som-w-a namwana.*

book SM-read-PASS-FV by child

'The book is being read by the child.'

Participants also produced passive constructions involving plural objects and farming-related actions.

Grammaticality judgement tasks required participants to rate sentences on a 7-point scale from 1 (completely unacceptable) to 7 (fully natural). Space was provided for brief comments so that numerical ratings could be interpreted alongside qualitative explanation. Items included well-formed active and passive sentences, agreement-mismatched passive forms, and passive forms with unclear argument roles. The full set of stimulus items is provided in Appendix A.

Audio recordings of all spoken responses were digitally recorded with participant consent to support accurate transcription, re-checking of examples, and comparison between elicited forms and later analytical claims.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis combined qualitative syntactic analysis with cautious interpretation of grammaticality judgement patterns. First, audio recordings and written responses were transcribed, organised, and labelled according to participant codes. Second, the researcher screened the sentence items by separating clearly acceptable, clearly unacceptable, and borderline constructions. Third, passive constructions were

analysed using Minimalist concepts such as Merge, internal Merge, Agree, ϕ -features, case, phases, and locality. Tree diagrams were drawn for representative structures to show hierarchical relations. Fourth, participant judgements were used to check the plausibility of the proposed analysis. Finally, the formal syntactic findings were interpreted in relation to grammar teaching.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample is relatively small (twenty-five participants) and drawn from a single district, which limits generalisability. Second, all participants are from a school context, which may introduce a formal or educational register bias. Third, the elicitation methodology (requiring participants to convert active sentences to passive) may have influenced the forms produced, as participants may have produced forms they thought were expected rather than forms they would naturally use. Fourth, the study does not include statistical analysis of the judgement task data, relying instead on qualitative interpretation of rating patterns. Fifth, the study does not systematically address dialectal variation within Ibibemba. Future research should address these limitations through larger and more diverse samples and more naturalistic data collection methods.

Findings and Discussion

Active-Passive Transformations: Argument Reorganisation

The elicitation tasks revealed that participants systematically reorganised argument structure when converting active sentences into passive constructions. The active sentence *Umwanaaleesomaicitabo* (The child is reading a book) produced passive forms such as *Icitabocileesomwa no mwana* (The book is being read by the child). Similarly, the active farming-related structure *Umulimialelimaibala* (The farmer is cultivating the field) produced passive responses such as *Ibala lilelimwa no mulimi* (The field is being cultivated by the farmer). These responses showed that participants understood passivisation as a change in which the affected participant becomes the grammatical focus of the sentence, while the original doer can be expressed in a by-phrase or backgrounded.

The most consistent passivisation pattern involved promotion of the internal argument to the initial position and the use of passive verbal morphology. The verbal passive suffix *-w-* or *-iw-* appeared on the verb, marking the construction as passive. Participants often explained the change by saying that the thing receiving the action comes first.

Learner L5 stated:

(4) "In the passive sentence, the book comes first because now we are talking about the book. The child is still there, but the sentence is not starting with the child anymore."

This response captured the functional and structural shift involved in passivisation. Although the learner did not use terms like internal argument or A-movement, the explanation showed awareness that the sentence had changed its centre of attention. In generative analysis, this supports the claim that passivisation is not merely a stylistic paraphrase. It changes the structural relation between arguments, affects agreement, and alters which participant is foregrounded.

Teachers confirmed this understanding:

(5) Teacher T4: "For passive voice, I usually tell them that what received the action comes first, but I have noticed that they still forget to change the verb. Maybe if they see the sentence in parts, they can follow the changes better."

Teacher T4's explanation showed that passive teaching requires more than a surface rule. Learners need to understand how the promoted noun phrase affects the rest of the sentence. A step-by-step transformation chart could help learners see the active subject, active object, passive subject, passive verb form, and optional agent phrase, making

passivisation more understandable because learners would see that the transformation affects several grammatical relations at once.

The active-passive transformations in Ibibemba are consistent with passivisation as argument reorganisation. In Minimalist terms, the internal argument moves from its base position as complement of the verb to Spec-TP, where it receives nominative case and controls agreement. The external argument is demoted and, if expressed, appears in a by-phrase.

Figure 1 provides a tree diagram for the active sentence (6a), and Figure 2 for the corresponding passive (6b):

- (6) a. *Umwana a-lee-som-aicitabo.*
 child SM-read-FV book
 'The child is reading a book.'
 b. *Icitabo ci-lee-som-w-a no mwana.*
 book SM-read-PASS-FV by child
 'The book is being read by the child.'

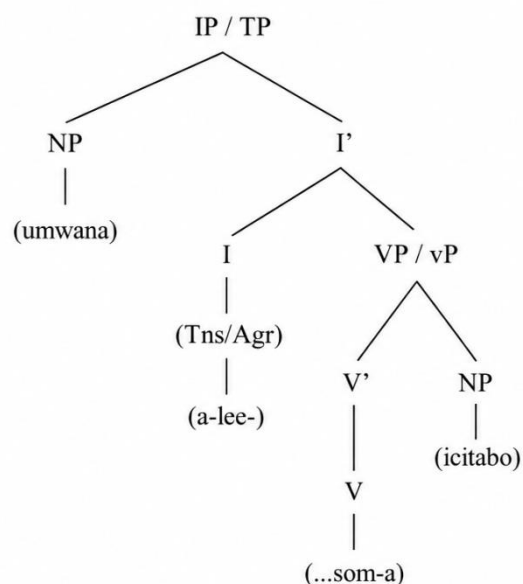


Figure 1. Tree Diagram of Active Clause

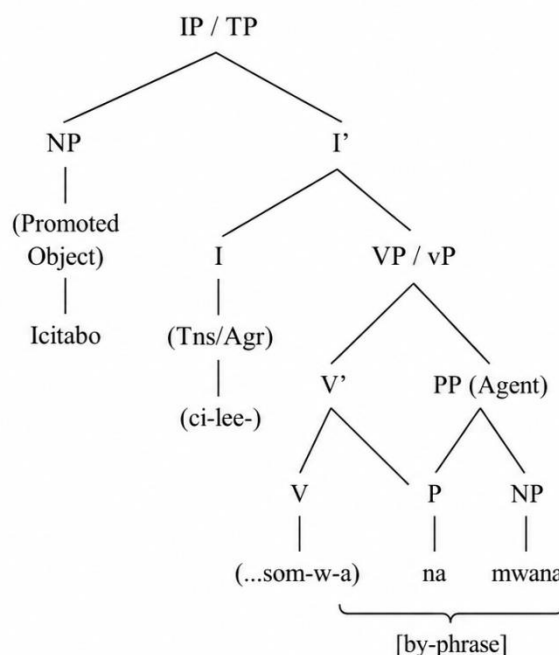


Figure 2. Tree Diagram of Passive Clause

As Figure 2 shows, the internal argument *icitabo* moves from its base position as complement of V to Spec-TP, crossing the vP phase. The passive morpheme *-w-* is on v, which is defective in its ability to assign accusative case. The external argument *umwana* is not projected in the vP; if expressed, it appears in a PP adjunct introduced by *na*.

Agreement in Passive Constructions

The grammaticality judgement tasks showed that participants accepted passive constructions most readily when the promoted noun phrase and verbal agreement were compatible. For example, *Icitabo cileesomwa no mwana*

received high ratings because the singular noun class agreement on the verb matched the promoted noun. *Ifitabo filesomwa na bana* also received high ratings when participants recognised the plural noun phrase and corresponding verbal agreement. However, passive forms with unclear or mismatched agreement were often rejected or treated as borderline.

Table 3 summarises the mean grammaticality ratings for the different construction types.

Table 3: Mean Grammaticality Ratings for Passive Construction Types

Note: Ratings based on 7-point scale where 1 = completely unacceptable, 7 = fully natural

Participants were sensitive to the agreement requirements of passive structures. The internal argument, once promoted, needed to control the verbal agreement in ways that made the sentence sound natural. When the verbal form reflected a different noun class or number pattern, participants often rejected the sentence even if they understood the intended meaning. This supports the claim that passivisation interacts with agreement and cannot be adequately explained as a simple movement of words.

(7) Teacher T5: "When the object comes in front in passive voice, the verb must also respect that noun. If the noun is plural, the verb should show that. If the noun is singular, the form must also show it. That is where learners make mistakes."

Teacher T5's explanation directly supported the focus on Agree and ϕ -features. The teacher described, in classroom language, the formal relation between the promoted argument and the verbal complex. This relation was visible in the difference between acceptable and unacceptable passive forms. The finding demonstrated that passivisation in Ibibemba requires attention to both structural promotion and agreement matching. It also confirmed that learners' difficulties with passives are often not caused by lack of meaning but by failure to coordinate movement, voice morphology, and agreement.

In Minimalist terms, the agreement pattern in Ibibemba passives provides evidence that the internal argument has moved to Spec-TP. T agrees with the internal argument, valuing its case and ϕ -features, and the verbal morphology reflects this agreement. The passive morphology on v is defective in its ϕ -features, preventing the verb from assigning case to the internal argument and thus motivating movement.

The Role of Passive Morphology

Passive morphology is an essential marker of passivisation in Ibibemba. Participants consistently used verbal morphology with the passive suffix *-w-* or *-iw-* when producing passive constructions. Forms without passive morphology were not accepted as passive sentences, even when the word order suggested that the object had been moved to the front.

The passive morphology serves two functions. First, it marks the verb as passive and signals the change in argument structure. Second, it signals that the v head is defective in its ability to assign accusative case, thereby motivating movement of the internal argument to Spec-TP. This is consistent with the analysis of passive morphology in other Bantu languages, where the passive suffix marks voice alternation (Guérois, 2025; Khumalo, 2014).

The distribution of the passive allomorphs *-w-* and *-iw-* is phonologically conditioned: *-w-* appears after vowels, while *-iw-* appears after consonants:

- (8) a. som-a → som-w-a 'read' (passive)
- b. lim-a → lim-w-a 'cultivate' (passive)
- c. tem-a → tem-w-a 'cut' (passive)
- d. bet-a → bet-w-a 'beat' (passive)
- e. sang-a → sang-iw-a 'find' (passive; consonant cluster avoidance)

The passive morphology also interacts with agreement. In well-formed passive sentences such as *Icibabo cileesomwa no mwana*, the verb bears both passive morphology and agreement markers that reflect the features of the promoted argument. The combination of passive morphology and agreement markers makes the passive construction visibly distinct from active constructions and provides evidence for the structural reorganisation of arguments.

(9) Teacher T2: "A learner may start well by putting the object in front, but if the verb remains as if the first noun has not changed, the sentence becomes weak. That is why I say passive voice must be taught slowly, part by part."

Teacher T2's observation showed that learners often understand the need to move the object to the front but forget to change the verb morphology. This suggests that passivisation is not a single operation but a coordinated set of changes involving argument promotion, verbal morphology, and agreement. Teaching must therefore present passivisation as a systematic transformation rather than a simple word-order change.

Demotion of the External Argument

The external argument (agent) is demoted in Ibibemba passives and may be expressed in a by-phrase or omitted entirely. Participants produced passive sentences both with and without by-phrases. Some participants produced *Icibabo cileesomwa* (The book is being read) without expressing the agent, while others produced *Icibabo cileesomwa na mwana* (The book is being read by the child) with the agent expressed.

In Minimalist terms, the external argument is not assigned a structural position in the passive clause, or its role is suppressed by the passive morphology. If expressed, it appears in a by-phrase that is not an argument of the verb but rather an adjunct. The optionality of the by-phrase in Ibibemba is consistent with the view that the agent is not a necessary component of the passive construction.

Teachers noted that learners often struggle with the demotion of the agent, particularly when they try to force English patterns into Ibibemba:

(10) Teacher T3: "Sometimes learners want to force the English pattern into Ibibemba. They know what they want to say, but the sentence comes out as if it has been translated word for word. We have to remind them that Ibibemba has its own way."

This highlights a pedagogical implication. Learners operate in a multilingual academic environment where English grammar

terminology and examples may influence how they think about Ibibemba. The challenge is not to reject useful comparison with English but to prevent English from becoming the hidden measure of Ibibemba grammar. The syntactic analysis therefore supports an Ibibemba-centred approach in which the language's own passive patterns are explained on their own terms.

Locality and Clause-Bound Movement

Passivisation in Ibibemba is clause-bound, consistent with the view that A-movement is governed by locality conditions. Participants did not accept passive constructions where the internal argument was promoted from a subordinate clause into the matrix clause. For example, the attempted long-distance passive in (11b) was rejected by all participants:

- (11) a. Nde-fwaya [ukuti umwana a-lee-som-a icitabo].
1SG-want that child SM-read-FV book
'I want that the child reads the book.'
- b. Icitabo ci-lee-som-w-a [ukuti umwana a-lee-som-a].
book SM-read-PASS-FV that child SM-read-FV
Intended: 'The book is being read that the child reads.'
(rejected)

The clause-bound nature of passivisation distinguishes it from wh-movement, which may be long-distance. This difference is captured in Minimalist terms by the distinction between A-movement and $\bar{A}$ -movement. A-movement, which is involved in passivisation, is local and clause-bound, while $\bar{A}$ -movement, involved in wh-questions, may be long-distance.

The locality of passivisation has implications for grammar teaching. Learners need to understand that passivisation applies within a single clause and that the promoted argument must come from the same clause as the verb. This would help learners avoid errors in which they attempt to passivise a subordinate clause's object in the matrix clause.

Passive Constructions and Meaning

Passive constructions in Ibibemba are not simply active sentences with different word order; they differ in meaning and interpretation. The passive foregrounds the affected participant and backgrounds the agent, which explains why speakers choose passive constructions in certain contexts. As Learner L5 noted earlier (example 4), the book comes first because "now we are talking about the book," showing that the passive has a different communicative function from the active.

This matters for grammar teaching because learners need to know not only how to form passives but also when to use them. The interpretive difference is captured in Minimalist terms by the interaction between syntax and the semantic interface: the passive changes the structural position of arguments, which affects interpretation. The promoted internal argument becomes the topic or focus, while the demoted agent is backgrounded or omitted.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings suggest several adjustments for teaching Ibibemba passive constructions.

First, passive teaching should begin with analysis of the active sentence: learners should identify the subject, verb, object, and agreement pattern before attempting the transformation, so they understand that passivisation affects multiple grammatical relations simultaneously.

Second, teachers should use transformation charts showing step-by-step changes. Table 1 provides a sample chart for the active-to-passive direction, and Table 2 provides the corresponding chart for the reverse transformation.

Table 1: Sample Transformation Chart for Active to Passive Conversion

Component	Active Sentence	Passive Sentence
Subject (agent)	Umwana (child)	(omitted or na mwana)
Verb	aleesoma (is reading)	cileesomwa (is being read)
Object (patient)	icitabo (book)	icitabo (book)
Word order	Subject–Verb–Object	Object–Verb–(by-phrase)
Agreement on verb	Agrees with subject (umwana)	Agrees with object (icitabo)

Table 2: Sample Transformation Chart for Passive to Active Conversion

Component	Passive Sentence	Active Sentence
Subject (patient)	Icitabo (book)	Umwana (child)
Verb	cileesomwa (is being read)	aleesoma (is reading)
Agent (by-phrase)	na mwana (by child)	— (becomes subject)
Word order	Object–Verb–(by-phrase)	Subject–Verb–Object
Agreement on verb	Agrees with promoted object (icitabo)	Agrees with subject (umwana)

Such charts would help learners — particularly those who speak Ibibemba naturally but struggle with formal grammar — see the transformation as systematic in both directions.

Third, teachers should emphasise agreement in passivisation. The promoted noun phrase controls verbal agreement, and mismatches produce unacceptable sentences. Agreement-focused exercises comparing acceptable and unacceptable forms, as used in the judgement task, would help learners develop grammatical sensitivity (see Appendix B for sample materials).

Fourth, teachers should explain when passives are used, not only how to form them — the interpretive difference between active and passive constructions.

Fifth, teachers should be aware of English influence on learner production. Learners may force English patterns into Ibibemba, producing unnatural sentences. Teachers should present Ibibemba passive patterns on their own terms before comparing them with English.

Passive Constructions in the Broader Bantu Syntactic Landscape

The Ibibemba findings can be situated within the broader Bantu syntactic landscape. Scholars such as Carstens (2005), Diercks (2010), and van der Wal (2022) have demonstrated that Bantu morphosyntax provides evidence for the interaction of agreement, movement, and clause structure. The Ibibemba data confirm this, particularly in the visibility of noun class agreement and the role of feature-driven movement in passivisation.

Carstens (2005) highlights the centrality of ϕ -features and agreement in Bantu syntax; the Ibibemba findings align with this, as agreement shifts in passives reveal argument structure reorganisation. Guérois (2025) demonstrates that Bantu passives involve morphological marking, argument promotion, and agreement adjustment, and the Ibibemba data are consistent with this broader pattern. While Ibibemba exhibits language-specific morphological realisations, its syntactic behaviour is part of a larger typological pattern in which agreement, movement, and locality constraints are central to clause derivation.

Summary of Theoretical Implications

The findings have several implications for Minimalist theory. First, they provide evidence that passivisation in a Bantu language involves A-movement of the internal argument to Spec-TP, consistent with the standard Minimalist analysis. Second, they demonstrate that the passive morpheme is best analysed as a defective v head that cannot assign accusative case and fails to value the EPP feature. Third, they show that Agree operates in Ibibemba passives in a way consistent with the theory of ϕ -feature valuation. Fourth, they provide evidence for the clause-bound nature of A-movement, consistent with the Phase Impenetrability Condition.

The findings also raise questions for further investigation. The precise nature of the defective v head in Ibibemba passives requires further study: does it lack ϕ -features entirely, or does it have ϕ -features that are defective in some way? The status of the by-phrase in Ibibemba also remains unclear: is it a PP adjunct, or does it have a different structural position? These questions are left for future research.

Conclusion

This article has examined passive constructions in Ibibemba within a Minimalist framework, drawing on data from elicitation tasks, grammaticality judgement tasks, and audio recordings collected in two secondary schools in Mungwi District. The findings show that Ibibemba passives follow systematic structural constraints rather than simple surface rearrangement: participants accepted passives when the promoted noun phrase and verbal agreement were compatible, while rejecting or treating as marginal forms with mismatches or unclear argument roles.

Passivisation in Ibibemba is governed by feature-driven movement, where the internal argument moves to subject position to satisfy the EPP and case requirements. The passive morphology (analysed as a defective v head) fails to assign accusative case, motivating movement to Spec-TP. The promoted internal argument controls agreement, providing visible evidence of its structural subject status. The external argument is demoted and, if expressed, appears in a by-phrase. The transformation is clause-bound, consistent with locality constraints on A-movement and the Phase Impenetrability Condition.

Theoretically, Minimalist concepts such as A-movement, case, Agree, and ϕ -features provide principled explanations for Ibibemba passives. Methodologically, speaker-based data from school settings can yield reliable evidence for formal syntactic analysis when collected through carefully designed tasks. Pedagogically, passive teaching should begin with sentence analysis, use transformation charts, emphasise agreement, and explain when passives are used. The article provides concrete classroom materials that teachers can adapt.

Future research should extend the analysis to other voice alternations in Ibibemba (applicatives, causatives, reciprocals) and examine how passivisation interacts with wh-question formation, relativisation, and topicalisation. Comparative studies across Zambian Bantu languages would show whether the patterns observed here are shared with related languages or reflect language-specific properties.

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