Revisiting Passivity and Politeness in Selected Indic Languages

Satyam Kumar
IIT Kanpur, India

Chinmay Dharurkar
IIT Kanpur, India

Abstract This paper examines politeness and its realisation through passive constructions in Hindi, drawing on established theoretical frameworks. Using fresh survey data from near-native Hindi speakers whose first languages are Eastern Indic languages (EILs), it explores how passive constructions may get differently ranked in the politeness hierarchies. This differential ranking of the passives has been argued to be correlated to the first languages (the EILs) – a reason for the regional variation in politeness judgements, suggesting that speakers of EILs – familiar with explicit honorific markings – often perceive modal forms as more polite than passives. It also discusses the grammaticalisation of the motion verb *jānā* ('to go') in passive modal constructions, proposing that indirectness via passivisation can signpost politeness, though this perception varies across language backgrounds.

Keywords Passive structures. Realisation of politeness strategy. Politeness hierarchy. Grammaticalisation. Modal construction.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Passives in Indic Languages. – 3 Passives on the Politeness Scale. – 4 Reconsidering the Judgements on the Passive. – 5 Further Grammaticalisation of *jānā* in EILs. – 6 Conclusion.

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1 Introduction

The passive voice refers to a grammatical construction in which the subject of a sentence or clause refers to the action's recipient rather than the performer.[1] Passivisation involves addition of passive markings and agreement rules. At the same time, it also boosts the underlying object and demotes the underlying subject. From a pragmatic perspective, as discussed by Brown and Levinson (1978), passivisation functions primarily to minimise negative face by depersonalising the action and diffusing potential negative attributions towards the actor. In simpler terms, when the focus is on the action, the passive voice is used. Who or what is executing the action is unimportant or unknown or is deliberately avoided. Besides the passive constructions in Hindi, this paper presents active and passive modal constructions from Thethi, Magahi, and Angika. The data is collected from Jamui, Bihar (for Thethi), Jehanabad, Bihar (for Magahi), and Godda, Jharkhand (for Angika). These languages belong to the Eastern Indic language (henceforth EIL) family.

In Indic languages, the connection between language and politeness unfolds through various linguistic mechanisms, and passivisation is one among many realisations of politeness strategies. This linguistic phenomenon, while rooted in grammatical structures, extends far beyond syntax, serving as a subtle yet potent means of expressing politeness. Passive constructions enable speakers to shift the focus of a sentence, subtly emphasising the action or event rather than the agent responsible. This strategic shift in perspective aligns with cultural norms of humility and deference, essential elements of politeness across a range of languages, the focus here is on the selected Indic languages.

2 Passives in Indic Languages

Across diverse Indic languages, the use of passive structures as a realisation of politeness strategy is particularly pronounced in formal or deferential contexts. In languages like Hindi, Tamil, Bangla, Bhojpuri, Maithili, or Telugu, this politeness-driven passivisation is evident in various instances. For example, in Hindi, according to Kachru (2006), the passive construction is indicated by the inclusion

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[1] Drawing on diverse perspectives, we examined various definitions of passives found in the works of Postal 1985; Givón 2006; Bresnan 1982. While passivisation demonstrably influences argument prominence, as highlighted by Blevins (2006), this effect can be viewed as a secondary consequence of the grammatical shift inherent in passive constructions. Consequently, defining passives solely based on their ability to invert prominence relations may be unnecessary.

of the passive auxiliary *jā* which is accompanied by the past participle of the principal verb. The motion verb *jā* has been grammaticalised to perform several functions in Indic languages, one significant function among those, arguably,[2] is expressing the passive sense. The tensed or modal form of *jā* carries the grammatical features of person, number, and gender, besides arguably partly the sense of passive itself. These are exemplified in the following sentences:

(1) *kitabẽ*   *pəɽhī*   *gə̃ī.*
    book.F.PL   read.PERF.F   PASV.F.PL[3]
    'The books were read.'
    (Kachru 2006, 93)

Similarly, a sentence like

(2) *maiṁ-ne*   *kām*   *ki-yā*   *h-ai*
    1.SG-ERG   work   do-PFV.M.SG   be-PRS.SG
    'I have done the work/task.'

It can be rendered in a more polite and indirect form through passivisation, as in (3):

(3) *kām*   *ki-y-ā*   *ga-y-ā*   *h-ai*
    work   do-PFV.M.SG   GO$_{PASS.}$[4]PFV.M.SG   be-PRS.SG
    'The task has been done.'

Including the works of Srivastava and Pandit (1988) and the works referred to therein, mainly Pandharipande (1979), the conventional understanding posits that the employment of the passive voice is commonly associated with creating a sense of distance between

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2   This is being called arguably because, though, synchronically *jānā* seems to be the motion verb undergoing grammaticalisation, historically, it seems that it is related to Sanskrit-Prakrit passive base *ya* which has later changed to *jja* which then eventually started sounding like *jānā*. For instance, *chid + ya + ti > chijjati* (to pierce or to break) is a correspondence between Sanskrit and Pali. See Bubenik 1996, 118.

3   The sentence, glossing, and the meaning has been taken from Kachru 2006. Going by the glossing followed in this paper, this would look like:

    kitāb-eṁ   *paɽh-ī*   *ga-īṁ*
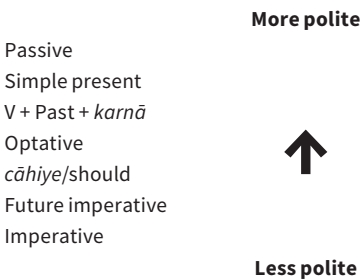   book-F.PL   read-PFV.F.SG   GOPASS-PFV.F.PL

4   Here, it is understood to be the perfective passive form of the verb itself. Historically, it has been understood to be a passive participle form of the verb by which the verb gets gender marking which is typologically unusual. It should also be noted that passivity can be understood to be expressed at once by *kiyā* and *gayā* both.

the speaker and the listener. Consequently, it is inferred that its application is likely to be perceived as more courteous, especially in scenarios involving interaction between individuals of disparate hierarchical positions, where the speaker holds a lower status compared to the listener.

3 Passives on the Politeness Scale

To measure the degree of politeness, scholars such as Brown and Gilman (1960) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 79-89) have extensively explored the maintenance of distance between the addressor and the addressee. This inquiry unfolds along two primary dimensions: the aspect of 'power', encompassing respect derived from factors like status, authority, and age, and the examination of discourse strategies. Within the realm of discourse strategies, the employment of passive voice emerges as a notably effective technique, as elucidated by Lakoff (1977) among others. The distancing quality of passives aligns with the concept of politeness, where passives are deemed suitable for situations in which the speaker and listener lack intimacy, and the speaker seeks to refrain from intruding upon the hearer's privacy. Notably, Pandharipande (1979) has proposed a politeness hierarchy for Hindi, positioning passives at the apex as the most polite forms, a categorisation illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Hierarchy of degree of politeness in Hindi, as per Pandharipande 1979

More polite

Passive
Simple present
V + Past + *karnā*
Optative   ⬆
cāhiye/should
Future imperative
Imperative

Less polite

Pandharipande seems to argue that in Hindi, there is a special, polite way to suggest to an elderly person that they might be spoiling their children. This special way involves using passive construction. Other ways of saying it might be acceptable, but not as polite. Any ranking of preferences to be polite can be made more convincing by offering some rationale, other than the one emerging from the empirical survey, may be through the form-function interaction in (a) language. While the connection between passive and indirectness is found in many languages, it does not seem to be a necessary one (as

would be evident in the hierarchy presented by us which matches with that of Srivastava and Pandit). The argument presented in this paper is suggestive of the relation between the honorific agreement richness in languages and their interpretation of imperatives vis-à-vis passives. To truly understand how polite different sentence structures are, we need to consider the intuitions people follow when they talk to each other. These rules are not written down, but they are important for showing respect and making sure the message gets across in the right way. As Srivastava (1977) points out, the social meaning behind a sentence is just as important as the words themselves.

Revisiting Pandharipande's study and the dataset of Hindi speakers from the EIL family is crucial for two key reasons. First, it allows us to survey (more or less similar sentences) for a different group of participants, providing valuable comparative insights. This reinforces the generalisability of existing findings and expands our understanding of construction-based language variation within the EIL family. Second, while previous research, like Pandharipande's, has focused primarily on sociolinguistic variation – how social factors like age, gender, and social class influence language use – our study specifically addresses the understudied area of pragmatic variation. This refers to how the context of communication and the speaker's intentions shape their language choices.

So, Pandharipande's observation about polite ways to talk about grandparents/children in Hindi presents a fascinating starting point. Her work would benefit from a more detailed explanation of how she arrived at her conclusions, as well as a consideration of the social context that influences these conversations. This leaves some important questions unanswered and invites further research on how politeness and social meaning work together in a language or its varieties. This was a motivation for reconsidering some sentences and identifying the responses of speakers of EILs to the Hindi sentences.

The following is a brief survey, which may more accurately be described as a consultation with a reasonably varied group of individuals representing three Eastern Indic languages. Their responses to selected Hindi sentences are used to gather their judgements. The aim was to offer insights that may contribute to a more nuanced comparative analysis of regional variation in a language as expansive as Hindi.

4   Reconsidering the Judgements on the Passive

Taking into consideration Pandharipande's (1979) study, we conducted a small survey with similar sentence constructions of Hindi on twenty native speakers of Thethi, Magahi, and Angika (all of them are near-native speakers of Hindi). The survey was conducted primarily in-person and the participants were given a set of Hindi sentences, the details of which follow. For all participants – and indeed, for the region where these languages are spoken – Hindi is a second language. They were asked to rank the sentences using square boxes placed beside each. In addition to this ranking task, the surveyor engaged in discussions with the participants to understand their rationale for ranking the sentences and the contexts in which they would use them. For participants who were unable to read the sentences, responses were gathered through verbal discussions and an interrogation-based approach, ensuring that their perspectives were also considered. Additionally, to provide context, participants were presented with an imagined scenario for the utterance of sentences in the survey. For instance: 'Imagine that you need to admonish an elder; which sentence would you choose to sound polite?' The set of sentences used for the survey are as follows:

Passive

(4) *vidyārthī-yoṁ*[5] *ko*   *aise*   *sajā*[6]   *nahīṁ* *diyā*[7]   *jā-t-ā*
    student-PL.OBL DAT this way punishment NEG give.PFV.M.SG go-IPFV-M.SG
    'Students are not to be punished like this.'

Habitual/[8]Simple present

(5) *vidyārthī-yoṁ*   *ko*   *aise*   *sajā*   *nahīṁ* *de-t-e*
    student-PL.OBL DAT this way punishment NEG give-IPFV-M.PL
    '(Teachers/people) do not punish students like this.'

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5 Here the word *vidyārthī* has been considered as default singular form and hence the plurality is glossed against the oblique marker *yoṁ*.

6 In standard Hindi-Urdu, the word is typically pronounced as *sazā*. However, while collecting this data, the participants consistently rendered the same word as *sajā* instead. It aligns with broader features of the regional varieties found in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. Such shifts might reflect historical linguistic influences or phonological differences in the registers, diglossic usages, or some other axes of variation.

7 Complex predication including examples like *becnā, diyā, denā, ānā*, etc. do not go for any gender agreement and by default, these always remain as masculine singular in this variety. Hence, these are expressed in M SG.

8 We get a more habitual sense from this and the following examples, but this has been termed as simple present in Pandharipande's paper.

V+*karnā*

(6) *vidyārthī-yoṁ*   *ko*   *aise*   *sajā*   *nahīṁ*   *di-yā*   *kar-t-e*
  student-PL.OBL   DAT   this way   punishment   NEG   give-PFV   do-IPFV-M.PL
  '(Teachers/people) do not (usually) punish students like this.'

cāhiye/should

(7) *vidyārthī-yoṁ*   *ko*   *aise*   *sajā*   *nahīṁ*   *de-nā*[9]   *cāhiye*
  student-PL.OBL   DAT   this way   punishment   NEG   give-INF   wish.SBJV
  '(Teachers/people) should not punish students like this.'

Optative

(8) *vidyārthī-yoṁ*   *ko*   *aise*   *sajā*   *nā*   *d-eṁ*
  student-PL.OBL   DAT   this way   punishment   NEG   give-PL.OPT[10]
  '(Please) do not punish the students like this.'

Imperative

(9) *vidyārthī-yoṁ*   *ko*   əise   *sajā*   *nā*   *dī-jiye*
  student-PL.OBL   DAT   this way   punishment   NEG   give-IMP.H[11]
  '(Please) do not punish the students like this.'

Pandharipande's (1979) examples:[12]

Passive

(10)   baccon   ko   is tarah   bigaaṛaa   nahiin   jaataa.
  Children-   acc   this way   spoil   neg   passive marker
  'Children are not to be spoilt like this.'

Simple present

(11)   baccon   ko   is tarah   nahiin   bigaaṛate.
  Children-   acc   this way   neg   spoil-imp
  '(People) do not spoil children like this.'

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9 Refer to fn. 7.

10 OPT stands for optative.

11 H stands for honorific.

12   The data and glossing in these examples are as per Pandharipande (1979) as quoted in Srivastava, Pandit 1988.

V + karanaa

(12) baccon   ko   is tarah   nahiin   bigaaṛaa   karate.
      Children-   acc   this way   neg   spoil   do
      '(People) do not (usually) spoil children like this.'

Caahiye/ 'Should'

(13) baccon   ko   is tarah   nahiin   bigaaṛannaa   caahiye.
      Children-   acc   this way   neg   spoil (non-finite)   modal
      '(People) should not spoil children like this.'

Optative

(14) baccon   ko   is tarah   na   bigaaṛen.
      Children-   acc   this way   neg   spoil (plural-imp)
      'Please do not spoil the children like this.'

Imperative

(15) baccon   ko   is tarah   na   bigaaṛiye.
      Children-   acc   this way   neg   spoil-imp (honorific)
      'Please do not spoil the children like this.'

In the sentence set provided by Pandharipande, the propositional content remains unchanged ('someone will spoil the children in this manner'). In contrast, our study includes structurally similar sentences but with a different propositional meaning ('someone will punish the students in this manner'). The participants' engagement in ranking the given sentences according to their individual judgements and perceptions of politeness reveal noteworthy and systematic patterns. The responses exhibit how politeness is conceptualised, with respect to these constructions, across speakers of the EI languages. The following sub-section presents a detailed analysis of the survey findings, including the derived politeness hierarchy, through both tabular and figurative representations for clarity and comparative interpretation.

4.1   Tabulation of the Data

We found that among the sentences in our survey, participants ranked 'passives' at the bottom on the politeness scale, while 'imperatives' were placed at the top. The tables given below depict the rankings allotted by the participants to the various sentence structures. We have mentioned the age and language proficiency of the speakers and ranking allotted by them for the respective structures. Table 2 represents the participants and their ranking for different sentence structures.

Table 2   Participants and their ranking for different sentence structures

Sentence structures	Ranking by the participants (with gender, age and 1st-2nd language proficiency)																		
	A^m	B^m	C^f	D^m	E^f	F^f	G^m	H^m	I^m	J^f	K^f	L^m	M^f	N^f	O^m	P^m	Q^f	R^f	S^m	T^f
	26 TH	29 TH	32 TH	27 TH	63 MH	58 TH	41 TH	22 TH	47 TH	59 TH	33 AH	41 TH	19 AH	25 TH	27 AH	36 MH	39 MH	44 TH	76 TH	68 TH
Passive	6	5	6	5	6	6	6	5	5	6	6	5	6	6	6	5	6	6	5	6
Habitual/Simple present	5	6	5	6	5	5	5	6	6	5	5	6	5	5	5	6	5	5	6	5
V+Past *karnā*	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Optative	2	1	2	2	1	3	3	2	1	3	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	1	3	1
cāhiye/should	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3
Imperative	1	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	2

In Table 2, the abbreviations T, M, A, and H represent the participants' proficiency in Thethi, Magahi, Angika, and Hindi, respectively. The first letter in the sequence denotes the participant's first language, while the second letter indicates their second language, which is Hindi in all cases. For example, read TH as, the participant's first language is Thethi and second language is Hindi. Additionally, superscripted 'm' or 'f' signifies the gender of the participants. However, since this is not a unified or homogeneous group of people but a diverse and variegated one, the idiosyncratic details on the individuals have not been specified. It has been ensured that diversity of the respondents has been retained on each parameter, i.e., age, sex, and language background. The numbers placed above each language proficiency label represent the age of the participants, providing a clearer demographic overview of the surveyed group.
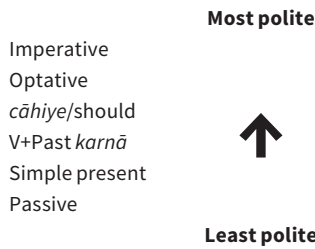
Table 3   Preferences of the participants for different sentence structures

Sentence structures	1st preference[*]		2nd preference (if any)		3rd preference (if any)		% of first preference
	Number of participants	Rank	Number of participants	Rank	Number of participants	Rank	
Passive	13	6	7	5	-	-	Least polite (65%)
Simple present	13	5	7	6	-	-	
V+Past *karnā*	20	4	-	-	-	-	
Optative	9	2	6	3	5	1	
cāhiye/should	14	3	6	2	-	-	
Imperative	14	1	6	2	-	-	Most polite (70%)

*   Read the columns as: 13 out of 20 participants ranked passives on number 6.

The rankings assigned by participants in Table 2 are summarised in Table 3. Notably, the passive construction is ranked as the least polite by 65% of participants, while the imperative is considered the most polite by 70% of participants. Based on these survey results, the corresponding politeness scale is represented in Table 4.

Table 4   Politeness scale based on the result of this survey

<div align="center">

Most polite

Imperative
Optative
cāhiye/should
V+Past *karnā*
Simple present
Passive

↑

Least polite

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Pandharipande (1979) presented the hierarchy based on the sentences of her survey and the responses of the consultants. The hierarchy she proposes is indeed in consonance with the principle of indirectness and the principle of optionality.[13] We have conducted the survey by offering similar sentences to our consultants who are speakers of Thethi and some Bihari languages, and are near-native speakers of Hindi. The same has been dealt with in detail in the following section. Indeed, their perception seems to differ from the perception of Pandharipande's consultants.

13   These two principles have been elaborated upon in Section 4.2.

Our research examined how people politely suggest to elders that children should be taken care of in a better way. Interestingly, we found that direct requests phrased with respect ('Please don't punish them like this') were perceived as more polite than indirect expressions using the passive voice ('Students should not be punished like this'). This preference for the direct but respectful requests seems to have stemmed from a desire to avoid implying criticism or judgement. The passive voice, while traditionally considered polite, can carry an undercurrent of disapproval, suggesting that the elder is violating some unspoken precept. A direct request, when softened with a 'please' and appropriate honorifics, becomes more about seeking understanding and cooperation.

Furthermore, social hierarchy appears to play a role. Even individuals of lower social standing felt comfortable suggesting restraint through respectful requests, finding them less controlling than the indirectness of the passive voice.[14] This finding contradicts traditional politeness guidelines, which often prioritise indirectness. However, this research suggests that when dealing with sensitive topics like precept, prioritising respect and avoiding any hint of censure can outweigh established grammatical conventions.

Interestingly, this trend is supported by another study, Srivastava and Pandit (1988), investigating similar dynamics in situations with unequal social status. Their finding aligns with ours, suggesting that the preference for respectful directness might be more widespread than initially assumed. Our politeness scale prepared based on the survey, almost completely matches the politeness scale of Srivastava and Pandit (1988). A slight difference is that we have also considered the 'V + Past *karnā*' constructions which are absent in their scale. Also, we have taken into consideration both status equals as well as status unequals. Table 5 shows the politeness scale proposed by Srivastava and Pandit.

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14 See Ogiermann 2009, 191; Decock, Depraetere 2018, 36; Ruytenbeek 2020 for discussions on the relationship between indirectness and politeness.

Table 5   Politeness scale proposed by Srivastava, Pandit 1988

Most polite

Imperative
Optative
cāhiye/should
Simple present
Passive

Least polite
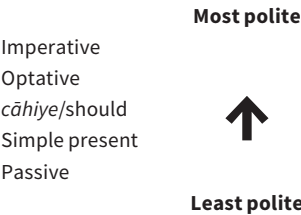
Subbarao et al. (1991), in line with Srivastava and Pandit (1988), examine syntactic strategies for politeness in Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages, arguing that passive constructions are generally not employed as a primary means of achieving politeness.[15] However, they note that in certain mundane contexts, particularly negative statements (it is customary in Telugu to say, *uppu ivavā* literally, 'won't you give the salt' i.e., 'please pass the salt on'), passives may contribute to mitigating face-threat or indicating politeness. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that in Thethi, Magahi, and Angika, passive constructions can function as realisations of politeness strategy in specific contexts, such as calls to joint action. This suggests that while passives may not be a conventional politeness device across Indo-Aryan languages, their pragmatic role can vary depending on sociolinguistic and contextual factors. Thus, the findings of this study both align with and extend the observations of Subbarao et al. (1991) by highlighting how passive structures can serve politeness functions in different discourse settings.

In conclusion, when offering suggestions about precept/child-rearing, particularly to elders, respecting the addressee and avoiding even unintentional objection may be more important than adhering to strict grammatical rules of politeness. This finding underscores the importance of considering social context and implicit assumptions when studying the nuances of language and communication.

4.2   Reconsidering Indirectness and Optionality

In the above sections, we saw that passive sentences have been ranked at the top of the politeness scale in the data surveyed by Pandharipande (1979), through principles such as indirectness and

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15   Their classification of certain constructions as 'syntactic strategies' or 'politeness strategies' – without the qualifier 'realisations of' – appears to diverge from Brown and Levinson's (1978) proposed universals.

optionality, whereas what Srivastava and Pandit (1988) found, was the other way round. Our participants too seem to align with the ranking presented by Srivastava and Pandit.

Brown and Levinson (1978) discuss several strategies, the one among them relevant for this paper is the impersonalisation mechanism discussed therein using the passive constructions, see Brown, Levinson 1978, 278-81. The principled understanding of the indirectness and optionality may be understood in the following way:

Indirectness is a strategy where direct expressions (like imperative forms used while giving commands) are avoided and some indirect ways of suggesting carrying out an action are preferred. An example in Thethi: *ab sute ke cāhī* 'Let us sleep now'.

Optionality is a strategy where the listener is offered a choice and thus softens the imperative force of a command or an appeal to carry out some action. This reduces the perceived imposition compared to direct commands and generates a sense of mutual respect. An example in Thethi: *ab khāyl jāy ki?* 'Shall we eat now/Let us eat now?'

By adhering to these principles, speaker balances between effectively conveying their message and maintaining positive social interactions. According to Leech (1983), by using indirect speech acts and offering more options, the speaker minimises the potential for conflict or negative interpretation by the hearer. This creates a more cooperative and considerate atmosphere in communication.

Passive constructions are central to this paper as it engages with the ranking of the passives on the politeness scale. The way passives have been defined also holds significance in relation to which aspect of passive construction does a definition hold central. One way is to focus on the influence of passivisation on argument prominence, as done in Blevins 2006, or the other is to focus on the grammatical shift inherent in passive constructions, and view argument prominence as a mere consequence of it (the same has been pointed out in Blevins 2006, 236). Whichever way does one define passive, these grammatico-pragmatic shifts do hold significance in relation to the sense of indirectness that passives bring to the table.[16]

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16 The grammatico-pragmatic shifts mentioned here can be seen as the alternate forms carrying more or less the same denotative meanings. Although forms adopting new functions (such as becoming more indirect and thus more polite) may correlate with argument prominence, we do not explore that connection to make any definitive claims about it. For the very reason that when it comes to placing the constructions in the overall hierarchy, many other formal (of or related to the form of language) parameters come to converge, and each language or variety comes to assume (i.e., grammaticalise or pragmaticise) the nuanced senses of politeness in different ways. So, while the grammatico-pragmatic shifts may be correlated to the forms and their dynamics, what stands central to this paper is the difference among the varieties in relation to how they interpret the hierarchy in their own way(s).

Passives used in EILs to reduce face threats or enhance politeness often appear as impersonal constructions. The impersonal constructions exemplified in Section 5 make an interesting case regarding the degree of indirectness and therefore, politeness. We have referred to Blevins (2006) which offers a general encyclopaedic survey of core ideas related to passive and impersonal constructions. Impersonal constructions differ from passives in a number of significant respects, which have been summarised in Blevins 2003. We are inclined to identify example (16) and similar ones as impersonal constructions, not only because of the absence of the overt subject, but also because they seem to be historically related to the impersonal or *bhāve* constructions in Sanskrit.[17]

Our surveyed data shows differences in the arguments suggested by these two principles. For example, sentence number (9), which presents an imperative structure, is a direct speech act in itself. Despite this, due to the verbal inflection of respect and request used here, this sentence is interpreted by the speakers as a polite sentence and a polite speech act. Because of this, despite being a direct speech act, it emerges as a more polite sentence than other sentences. On the other hand, we can also see that through passive sentence, as in (4), a speaker, without imposing his/her command or intention on the listener, also provides him/her an option not to do that thing. Due to the absence of an explicit marker conveying respect or request, this sentence is interpreted as less polite by the consultants in this survey, and therefore, it got the lowest position on the politeness scale in our survey.

One generalisable insight that emerges through this is – if honorificity is morphologically encoded in the pronominal system of a language and the honorifics have corresponding imperative forms, then, despite being direct expressions, the directness is subdued by the explicitly marked honorific imperative forms of the verbs. Why

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Given the multiple grammatico-pragmatic shifts offered by a language's grammar or morphology, alternate forms are likely to develop new or different functions. This can lead to a specific mapping between form and pragmatic interpretation, meaning these forms may undergo grammaticalisation in various ways across language varieties. The autonomy of these varieties lies in their distinct choices of grammaticalisation pathways; some may adopt one pathway, while others adopt another.

17   *bhāve prayoga* refers to a construction where the verb is in the impersonal or passive form, and the action is emphasised rather than the agent. This is commonly referred to as impersonal construction or passive construction (when the agent is omitted or deemphasised) or a less precise middle voice construction, in some contexts. The *bhāve prayoga* typically uses the third person singular verb form (often in the *ātmanepada* middle voice or passive) and does not specify an agent. For example, the active voice of an intransitive verb like 'laugh' in present tense construction *saḥ hasati –he laughs*. The impersonal form of this is – *(tena) hasyate* – can be roughly rendered in English as *–(by him) it is laughed or laughing is done*. For details, see Pāṇini sutra 3.4.69, for English translation and explanation, see Sharma 1995, 637-9.

would some languages/varieties choose indirect forms to be more polite while others would go for directness and clarity, seems to be one of the questions of typology and historical pragmatics at once.

It is interesting to note that the EILs encode honorificity even on the tensed forms of the verbs. And therefore, perhaps for the speakers of these languages, when they see concrete markings for each level of honorificity in the modal forms, they are more inclined to interpret the modal forms, despite (or rather, because of) their directness to be more polite than the indirect expressions like passives, and in addition to it, causatives, interrogatives-exclamatives, etc. (see Kumar 2024). From a syntactic perspective, the availability of multiple domains – such as DP, vP, and ForceP or CP – for encoding politeness or checking honorific feature (see Hong 2013 on similar line) allows EILs to express politeness mainly through imperatives and/or other direct constructions, rather than relying on indirect forms like passives, interrogative-exclamatives, or causatives. Additionally, distinctive features such as MAP and addressee/allocutive agreement[18] further support this tendency in these languages. In other words, when politeness is explicitly marked in the structure of a language, it takes precedence over the indirect forms of expressing politeness. As we come westward (i.e., in the area of Central and Western Indic languages), such distinctions in the modal forms seem to decrease, and due to overall lack of morphological richness of the corresponding modal forms, the speakers (as in Pandharipande's set of consultants) would be more inclined to interpret passives as more polite.

Our findings suggest that, for a language like Hindi, which has a huge geographical expanse, there cannot be an absolute ranking of sentence structures that are rigidly associated with indirectness and optionality. Which structures are to be ranked more polite or less polite, would vary from variety to variety or language to language. Explicit modal inflections seem to be interpreted as more polite vis-à-vis the passive constructions. In some contexts, directness and clarity might be preferred. As far as the speakers of these languages of Bihar and Jharkhand are concerned, as has been discussed in the preceding paragraph, it seems that since verbal inflections and honorific markers are available in abundance in these languages to show respect towards an addressee, they tend to keep it specific and clear. Perhaps this is why these speakers neither hesitate nor see the need for using passive structures or indirect methods over active structures or direct methods.

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18 See Bhattacharya 2016; Alok 2021; Kumar 2024; Raina 1994; Antonov 2015 for details on these phenomena across world languages

Pandharipande's ranking of passives based on these politeness principles may not fully reflect how speakers of EILs and nearby regions perceive and use them. While these principles offer a theoretical framework, our survey suggests that the speakers of these languages prioritise different factors when expressing and judging politeness through passives. For them, the entire passive construction seems to act as a single politeness marker rather than individual grammatical elements like verbal inflections and vocatives. This can be understood as an instance of periphrasis.[19] This suggests that passivisation inherently expresses politeness (albeit to a slightly lesser extent than direct honorific imperatives, particularly in contexts where direct address is deliberately avoided), without needing to adhere to specific rankings based on individual features. This flexibility allows speakers to adapt the form and level of politeness depending on the context.

Our findings indicate that the passives, previously suggested as the most polite option based on the discussed principles and Pandharipande's regional data, may not universally translate to greater perceived politeness. This is further supported by similar observations in Srivastava and Pandit 1988, 199. These variations suggest that politeness interpretations and applications can differ across varieties or languages or contexts. Since we are looking at the hierarchy as a spectrum, it may be observed that for the Bihari speakers, passives could still, despite being on the other end of the spectrum, be a general politeness tool. Further research is needed to understand the specific factors influencing their perception and use of passives for expressing politeness.

In the above sections so far, we have seen how the survey conducted by Pandharipande is based on two principles and we have also seen that when we surveyed the similar data set on the speakers of EILs, the results are different. Since Hindi is a second language of these speakers, we wanted to study how they use passives in their mother tongue, i.e., in Thethi, Magahi, and Angika. The following section is not presented as a further proof for how the informants treat passive constructions differently from standard Hindi speakers. The idea here is to see, rather in what ways, the sense of politeness is visible in certain passive/impersonal constructions at once in

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19 It is interesting to note that the indirectness conveyed through passives may be leading to the sense of politeness. It is further interesting to note that apart from the indirectness in the sense of the passive constructions, the constructions themselves exhibit an instance of longer phrasing, and in some cases the passivity is not just marked on one word but is understood through a combination of words in a phrase. For instance, in *kiyā jānā – kiyā* is a perfective form followed by the motion verb *jānā* which has been grammaticalised to convey passivity. We call such passive construction analytic for the passivity is conveyed here through a combination of words in the phrase.

EILs and the Hindi spoken in and around this region. No empirical survey is conducted for this, mainly because this is presented as a similarity that may be further investigated. One of the authors of this paper is a native speaker of Thethi and also speaks Hindi spoken in this region, and so the suggestive direction is based on the native speaker's intuition which is indeed open for investigation. The merit of this correlation lies in the formal similarity of the modal passive construction which is generally related to grammaticalisation of *jānā*. Let us take a look at the passive constructions in these languages.

5 Further Grammaticalisation of *jānā* in EILs

Passives fall low on the politeness scale as is evident in our survey. Still, being low on the scale means a certain degree of politeness, though the lowest, is associated with them. The relationship between passives and politeness cannot be denied altogether. To understand this better let us have a look at the EILs which use passive constructions to express politeness. For this, we took three languages: Thethi, Magahi, and Angika. In all these languages, grammaticalisation of *jānā* 'to go' partly contributes to passive constructions. The grammaticalised motion verb also shows up in modal constructions which have a passive-like syntax and appear to be impersonal, more like the Sanskrit *bhāve* mentioned earlier. The same have been exemplified in sentences (16) onwards. While we are concerned mainly with the passive forms, we are deliberately positing the corresponding active constructions to make the contrast evident, especially with respect to the presence of 'GO$_{PASSIVE}$' and the degree of politeness.

5.1 Thethi

Thethi shows synthetic and analytic realisations of passives. Verbs are first changed into their participle form by adding a marker -*al*- or some of its variants like -*yl*- (the palatalised form), that is how the passives are partly synthetic, and then followed by an auxiliary motion verb *jāy* (the analytic realisation) 'to go' at the end. This process makes the expressions passive, which start functioning like a polite expression without overtly marking subject in the constructions. Following are some examples where the passive constructions have been listed first, followed by the probable corresponding active constructions.

(16)   *khel-al*   *jā-y*[20]
        play-PST PTCP   GO-OPT[21]
        'Let us play.'[22] or '(Please) come to play.' [literally, 'let it be played now.']

(17)   *ab*   *kha-yl*   *jā-y*
        now   eat-PST PTCP   GO-OPT
        'Let us eat now.' or '(Please) have a meal.'

Corresponding active constructions of (16) and (17):

(18)   *cal*   *(kireṭ)*   *khel-iy-ay*
        come.IMP.1.NH   cricket   play-1-D_1.[23]SBJV
        'Let us play cricket.'

(19)   *he-re,*   *cal*   *kha-iyy-ay*
        VOC.2-M.SG.NH   come.IMP.1.NH   eat-1-D_1.SBJV
        'Hey (friend/younger brother), let us eat.'

Let us look at the passive of tensed construction in Thethi. These are the typical canonical passives where, like Hindi, the motion verb is grammaticalised for the sense of passivisation, as shown in (20):

(20)   *cor-ā*   *pakṛ-āy*   *ge-l-ay*
        thief-M.SG   catch-PFV   GO$_{PASS}$-PFV-3.NH
        'The thief got caught.'

Constructions (16) and (17) show evidence of synthetic as well as analytic passives where both the realisations are carried out by tweaking the main verb into its past participle form and adding

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20   It is common in Sanskrit to use imperative passive (*ājñārtha* or LOT passives). For instance, *karotu* vis-à-vis *kriyatām* (i.e., *Do* vs. *May it be done*). Similarly, *bhāve* constructions are also unique to Sanskrit. Indeed, in Sanskrit too, these are understood to be more polite than their active counterparts.

21   We are calling it a passive optative because the structure *khelal jāy* also appears in passive constructions. For instance, in example *ī khel hamrā taraph khelal jāy hai* (This game is played in my region).

22   In this sentence (and also in the following ones), even though the verbs appear in their singular form, the way they are used together implies that there are multiple participants (usually 1P and 2P) involved. This makes a direct word-for-word or literal translation tricky, so we have focused on conveying the overall meaning instead.

23   *-ay* in Thethi (and Angika, and *-ai* in Magahi), appearing here and at other places in this paper, due to their consistent occurrence with first person and third person non-honorific subjects, have been glossed as default (D1) (see Kumar 2024 for more details).

an auxiliary *jāy* after it. Examples (18) and (19) present the active counterparts of the previous two passive constructions. (20) is an example to show how the morph *-ay* as the past participle marker to the verb root is used to transform the verb as well as the construction into a passive one.

5.2 Magahi

Magahi shows a similar way to construct passives by adding the auxiliary motion verb *jāy*, as in (21), after the past participle form of the verb in the constructions. Like Thethi, *-al-* is the most usual morphological suffix to be added to verb, converting it to past participle form, as can be seen in the constructions below. This makes the process synthetic as well. For example:

(21) *baiṭh-al*   *jā-y*[24]
      sit-PST PTCP   go-OPT
      '(Please) be seated.' (Singh et al. 2014, 115)

Example (22) presents the active counterpart of the sentence in (21):

(22) *cal*   *baiṭh-i-ai*
      come.IMP.1.NH   sit-1- D_1.SBJV
      'Let us sit.'

In the following examples, (24) presents the active counterpart of the passive construction with the past participial form of the verb 'sleep', as shown in (23):

(23) *ab*   *kirkeṭ*   *khel-al*   *jā-y*
      now   cricket   play-PST PTCP   GO-OPT
      'Let us play cricket now.' or '(Please) play cricket now.'

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24 Singh et al. (2014) offer a different gloss for the sentence:

baiThal   *jay*
sit-pass   go-PASS
'Please be seated.'

They seem to consider *-al* and *jā-y* together working towards the sense of passive. However, our gloss here differs from theirs because we associate *baiṭh-al* or *-al* ending forms of nouns with the participial forms and *jāy* as an optative form. We consider passivity as a consequence of these morphological details. *baiṭh-al* appears in other Magahi or Thethi sentences, for example *ayse nāy baiṭhal jāy hai* 'This is not the right way to sit' and so on in other tensed constructions. It would be inconsistent to gloss it as participle in these constructions and as passives in (21).

(24) *cal*   *kirkeṭ*   *khel-i-ai*
      come.IMP.1.NH   cricket   play-1- D$_1$.SBJV
      'Let us play cricket.'

5.3   Angika

Synthetic and analytic realisations of passives are present in Angika as well. Like Thethi and Magahi, it adds the form *jāy* (auxiliary verb of motion), as in (25) and (26), after the past participle form of the active verb to make the expression passive. Marker for the past tense in Angika is usually *-l-* and then a following morph *-ô* forming the participle, as evident in the following constructions:

(25) *cal-l-ô*   *jā-y*
      come-PST-PTCP   GO-OPT
      'Let us go.' or '(please) Come.'

(26) *sut-l-ô*   *jā-y*
      sleep-PST-PTCP   GO-OPT
      'Let us sleep.' or '(Please) sleep.'

Following is the corresponding active construction of (25):

(27) *cal*
      come.IMP.1.NH
      'Let us go.' or 'Come.'

In all the three languages we discussed in this section, we observed that speakers generally use passive constructions (which have an impersonal thrust in modal constructions) either to express respect or to avoid the risk of disrespecting the addressee. The active counterparts of these constructions also exist very commonly, but they do not seem to be as polite as the passive ones. This feeds into saving the 'face' of an addressee. Such constructions are also generally used in situations when the speaker is not familiar with the person he/she is addressing, and he/she has to express respect towards them.

Table 3 presents the observation regarding passives in Thethi, Magahi, and Angika with clear distinctions between participial suffixes, the auxiliary verb of motion added, and the type of passives:

Table 6 Passives in Thethi, Magahi, and Angika.

	Participial Suffix	**Auxiliary Verb**	**Form of Passives**
Thethi	*-al/-yl*	*jāy*	Synthetic and Analytic
Magahi	*-al*	*jāy*	Synthetic and Analytic
Angika	*-l-ô*	*jāy*	Synthetic and Analytic

Table 6 shows that all three varieties exhibit the synthetic and analytic realisations of passives. The auxiliary verb of motion, i.e., *jāy* appears across the three languages. Participial suffixes with morphological variations precede the auxiliary verb of motion which makes this pattern quite similar in these varieties.

6 Conclusion

Let us have a look at the general overriding concerns discussed in this paper.

In the hierarchy presented by Pandharipande (1979), the passive has been placed at the top on the basis of the indirectness and optionality principles. The result presented by Srivastava and Pandit (1988) more or less inverts the hierarchy. When we surveyed similar data on speakers of EILs, the passive was found to be at the bottom of the hierarchy, which matches with the result of Srivastava and Pandit's. This paper, however, does not intend to falsify the research of Pandharipande nor verify the study of Srivastava and Pandit, rather, the idea is to see how the judgements on the politeness hierarchies vary based on the region and the first languages of the near-native speakers of Hindi.

We also saw that in languages like Thethi, Magahi, and Angika, some modal constructions, going by their morphological make-up, appear to be passives. In addition to the fact that the morphological or the grammaticalised form conveys passivity, we have also discussed how some constructions could be understood as their active counterparts. These active counterparts, in turn, make the indirectness evident in the passive constructions, and the ensuing politeness of the modal constructions accrued historically through grammaticalisation.

It is interesting to note that the passive construction was ranked lowest by speakers of EILs in Hindi. However, in their first languages, the passives of modal constructions appear to be more polite than their active counterparts. So, passivity indeed, has a considerable connection to indirectness, and therefore politeness; only that in comparison to other non-passive constructions – its position on the spectrum of politeness varies.

One typological and perhaps areal implicational feature or a correlation that may emerge from this paper, which of course needs to be fortified by further empirical research, is the presence of personal pronominal honoroficity and the corresponding verbal modal imperative forms lead to diminishing of the sense of politeness expressed by the passive constructions.

In future studies, it can be seen what kind of behaviour this passive has in other languages of the world. It can also be studied whether there is a typological implicational relation between indirectness and politeness. The way in which passive constructions have been studied in relation to politeness, more such constructions, like causatives, interrogatives-exclamatives, past tense, etc., other than passives too, could be studied in relation to politeness or other strategies, and more such differences across the regions could be mapped to study several aspects of pragmatic variation. It is the intuitions of the speakers that seem to cause the variation, in our case, for example, the ranking of passive constructions to be lowest, or as the set of consultants in the study of Pandharipande, the ranking of passive constructions is highest. What are the underlying factors that dictate these intuitions – whether it is the overall inclination of the community to interpret a construction with a certain degree of politeness, whether there are any historico-morphological reasons that guide the speakers' intuitions, whether there are any typological implicational universals behind this or whether there is some areal linguistics at work here are the areas that may elucidate our understanding of such variation. It is in this sense that this paper does not intend to falsify or verify objectively the conclusions of the previous studies but holds that variation is inevitable and that the causes for the same should be extensively studied.

The discussion in this paper underscores that politeness hierarchies are not static but may vary according to region and first languages of the speakers. The modal passive constructions (and several other constructions, as well) in Thethi, Magahi, and Angika serve as invitations to joint action and are thus perceived to be polite. However, for the same speakers, the passive construction in Hindi which evokes the sense of reproach are ranked lowest on the politeness scale. This contrast highlights the complex interaction between morphosyntax and pragmatics. This variation suggests that politeness is not solely a matter of indirectness but is mediated by how specific constructions are conventionally understood within a linguistic community. Future research comparing semantically equivalent passive constructions across these languages could provide a clearer picture of how linguistic background influences politeness perception, further refining our understanding of pragmatic variation in Indic and/or non-Indic languages.

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