

The English Passive Voice

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MODERN LINGUISTS have found the description of language according to the traditional grammatical formulations to be both inadequate and fictitious. This fact began to manifest itself as a serious problem only when many linguists and language teachers all over the world found themselves faced with the urgent task of devising courses for the teaching of modern languages to foreign students. In this they found many of the textbooks on 'syntax' based on the traditional prescriptive formulations, to which they turned for help and guidance, not only unenlightening but quite often misleading. While native-language teaching could quite well do without the help of precise and scientific analyses of the language to be taught, the measure of success achieved in the systematic teaching of foreign languages will largely depend on them. Here 'systematic teaching' includes not only classroom techniques of presentation of the language material but also the correct understanding of the material itself. Appropriate classroom techniques themselves would largely be determined by such an understanding of the mechanics of the language, among other factors.

This fact can well be illustrated by the methods used to teach the passive voice to learners of English as a second language in Ceylon, even today. Our teachers still teach the passive voice by means of the conversion exercise, following the usual method of the school grammar. It hardly occurs to them that this could only provide their pupils with a mere mental or mechanical exercise in transposing words or word groups and would in no way give them the required skill in the production of original passive voice constructions in situations where such constructions would be the most apposite in conveying the desired meaning or achieving the desired effect.

This method of teaching, I believe, is based on certain misconceptions regarding the use of active and passive voice forms and there is the danger that it would, further, lead to the inculcation of such misconceptions in the minds of the pupils. These misconceptions are: (1) that the passive construction is a mere transposition of the active voice, which is taken to be the natural form, and it is so formed in order to bring the object of the transitive verb or verb-group into front position, giving it thereby prominence over the active agent; (2) that active and passive sentences are under all circumstances interchangeable.

These misconceptions are mainly the result of the too conceptual or mentalistic approach adopted by most neo-classical grammarians to explain the function and behaviour of the different classes of words in a given utterance. Linguistic categories were hence confused with ideas and concepts. The notion that the passive voice sentence gives greater prominence to the object of the action and that, when a speaker or a writer uses the passive in preference to the active in a particular situation he does so with the intention of bringing the object into prominence, may be acceptable in particular instances. But it would not bear scrutiny as a general principle. This is what three British linguists have to say about it.

. . . *This chapel was built by Henry*. It is difficult to accept that the reason for using the passive here is to stress the fact that the chapel was built, rather than the fact of who built it; one can invent similar examples such as 'it was painted by a very good friend of mine whom I'd love to have you meet some time', where no such explanation would hold. The difficulty arises in this instance because the theory does not provide the means for distinguishing among the different kinds of passive in English; but the real point here is that conceptual definitions, as used in the theory, are allowed to stand even when they are inappropriate, because they cannot be disproved.¹

With this notion goes the tendency to take the active voice sentence as the basic linguistic pattern where a transitive verb is used for predication, the passive construction being a variation of it meant for occasions when, as mentioned above, the object of the verb needs emphasis. It would, further, lead one to assume that a speaker or a writer first formulates his statements in the active before he transfers them into the passive, when circumstances warrant the use of the passive construction. But this is obviously false, because most passive constructions would hardly occur in the active form at all, and, as Otto Jespersen observes, 'over 70 per cent of the passive sentences found in English literature contain no mention of the active subject';² in other words the *by*-adjuncts at the end are left out, not deliberately, but simply because they are not called for, as in *Her father was killed in the last war*. Hence they cannot be treated as the active sentence patterns in reverse order and it would be more realistic and helpful to both students and teachers of English as a second language to treat the passive construction as a linguistic pattern that stands in its own right, independently of the active, and depending for its use on the context.

Here are some examples of sentences that would not easily

¹*The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching*, by M. A. K. Halliday, Angus McIntosh, and Peter Strevens, Longmans, 1965, pp. 164–5.

²*Essentials of English Grammar*, by Otto Jespersen.

lend themselves to conversion into the passive without giving rise to expressions which, even though grammatical, would yet sound grotesque.

- (1) The man hit the dog.
- (2) She changed her clothes.
- (3) They wished each other goodbye.
- (4) He reached out his hand.
- (5) I drank a glass of water.
- (6) He smokes about ten cigarettes a day.
- (7) He passed all his examinations.
- (8) A complete survey will take three years.

Active voice sentences which have relative clauses as the object of the verb do not easily lend themselves to such conversion, e.g. *I heard what he said*. Active sentences which have reflexive pronouns as objects cannot be converted into the passive, e.g. *I cut myself*.

Similarly, sentences which have an infinitive plus an adjunct as object will not generally have a passive counterpart, e.g. *He wanted me to tell him everything*.

It is interesting to note that the two sentences *I know him* and *He is known to me* do not carry the same meaning, and hence one cannot, in every instance, be used in place of the other. One sentence is an active voice sentence while the other is passive, and it is in fact their difference in voice that makes them different in meaning. This pair of sentences and the similar ones that follow once again show that the passive is not a derivative of the active:

- e.g. (1) (a) The child interests me.
 (b) I *am interested* in the child.
- (2) (a) He opposed the payment of the claim.
 (b) He *was opposed* to the payment of the claim.
- (3) (a) I used to get up early.
 (b) I *am used* to getting up early.

Similar to those sentences in the active voice that cannot be turned into the passive, there are many passive sentences, like those that follow, which do not lend themselves to conversion into the active.

- e.g. (1) The house *was damaged* by the storm.
- (2) The fort *was surrounded* by a wide moat.
- (3) We *were struck* by the great enthusiasm of the assembled crowd.
- (4) The visitors *were entertained* by recorded music.

As previously indicated, all passive voice sentences in which the passive agent is not mentioned also fall into this category. So do passive sentences introduced by the generic pronoun *it*, as in *It is proposed . . .*

There are a number of verbs which have a general tendency to operate in the passive for the most part. Some of them are: *impressed, delighted, worried, horrified, frightened, established, pleased, born, concerned, reserved, alleged, uninhabited, based, drenched, involved, surprised.*

The following is a brief survey of the contextual use of the passive voice.

Some verbs which occur in both the active and the passive always take the passive form when used in particular contexts, and have thus become conventionalized.

- e.g. (1) The substance that makes the plants green *is called* chlorophyll.
 (2) The army centre *was struck* by lightning and a part of the building *was damaged*.
 (3) I *am* not in the least *concerned* with their private quarrels.
 (4) Many English words *are derived* from Latin.
 (5) He *was forced* to admit his fault.
 (6) That chair *is broken*.
 (7) Some pages of this book *are torn*.
 (8) The land *is divided* into plots of five acres each.
 (9) All the rooms *were locked*.
 (10) Many Americans *were engaged* in community development projects.

Verbs tend to take the passive form when the agent of the action and the object of the same action are not and/or cannot be separated from each other, e.g. *The bridegroom was dressed in a dark blue suit.* Here the result of a past action is indicated. The bridegroom is shown as undergoing the result of an action which he himself performed at some time in the past. Similarly, in *The court house was packed with spectators* the sufferer of the action of packing, i.e. *spectators*, is itself the agent of the action.

Like intransitive verbs which do not occur in the passive because they do not take objects, there is a class of verbs which, when used in particular contexts, do not take agents, because they do not stand for actions performed or that could be performed by agents. The verb rather stands for a condition which the agent is undergoing or has undergone.

- e.g. (1) She *is* very *reserved*.
 (2) He *was wrapped* in thought.
 (3) I *was* sadly *mistaken*.
 (4) She *was* both *educated* and *accomplished*.
 (5) They *were faced* with a fearful dilemma.
 (6) We *are prepared* to accept his proposal.

The passive voice is often used to convey a sense of anonymity. The following passage is taken from a newspaper report of surreptitious activity by certain individuals whose identity the writer does not like to disclose.

Biscuits and cheese *had been served* during the interval . . . But a guard *had been posted* at the door just in case. At another one of these shows the projector *had been brought* in dismantled. The various parts *had been brought* by various people. The projector *was assembled* in double quick time and the show began.

The non-committal use of the passive is also a common occurrence in newspaper reports. In the following examples, which have also been culled from newspapers, the agents have been discreetly left undisclosed.

- (1) Large stocks of foodstuffs for Christmas *are expected* to arrive next week.
- (2) A bus-conductor *is alleged* to have kicked an old man in the stomach.
- (3) Seven thousand rupees *were reported* to have been stolen by burglars who broke into the Pettah post office.
- (4) It *is understood* that no figure was mentioned and it *is thought* unlikely that Canada . . . But Canada *is known* to have had a good harvest and it *is confidently hoped* that some help will be available.

The passive voice is frequent in scientific writings. The use of the passive here helps the writer to maintain an air of scientific impersonality.

- e.g. (1) It *was widely recognized* that when the thermometer was invented, a very significant advance had been made.
- (2) It *is often believed* that intelligence tests *are developed and constructed* according to a rationale derived from a sound scientific theory.
- (3) The speed *was easily calculated*. It *was found* to be greater with the wind. To overcome this difficulty guns *were fired* at an agreed time . . .

The passive voice is generally used either when the agent is understood, as in:

- e.g. (1) The king *was dethroned*.
- (2) Madame Curie *will always be remembered as* the discoverer of radium.

or when no agent could be identified or specified, as in:

- e.g. (1) The book *was first published* in 1957.
- (2) Just as the moon *is held* tightly in the gravitation of the earth, so Mercury *is tightly bound* to the sun.

In like manner, the passive form of the modals—*can, could, would, should, might, may*—is used to convey the idea of possibility:

e.g. A simple reflector *can be made* for less than five rupees.

A fairly large number of passive voice sentences fall into the last three categories.

We often come across the passive form of the verb in descriptions of a prescribed process or an accepted practice.

e.g. (1) When a person is ill with damage to his lung he *is put* in a bed and a tent *is built* round the top of the bed. Then oxygen *is passed* into the tent . . .

(2) A kind of lid *is fixed* to the top of the pipe and the oil *is allowed* to flow out gently through the taps.

This use of the passive voice is most common in stage directions:

e.g. The walls *are covered* with an ugly . . . The door which stands wide open has 'Coffee Room' *inscribed* on it . . . He with Epifania *is seated* at the end of the table.

(Bernard Shaw's *The Millionairess*)

The passive voice is used instead of the active voice sentences introduced by the generic *you*. For instance, the sentence *You will find more of the same type of vegetation towards the western half of the country*, would perhaps occur as *More of the same type of vegetation will be found towards . . .*

The use of the passive voice helps the proper integration of sentences that follow one another in a logical sequence. Hence a sentence in the active would often be followed by one in the passive, the second sentence taking for its subject the object of the first:

e.g. The proposed planning unit *will be handling* all foreign aid. Hitherto this subject *has been handled* by the economic division of the Treasury.

Much closer integration is achieved by the use of the passive voice relative clause, both of the defining and the non-defining types:

e.g. But the opportunities for the widest education, which are not offered so fully by day schools, do not come within the scope of every school-goer.

Here the agent *opportunities*, which is the 'doer' of the negative action (*do not come*), is itself the object of another negative action (*do not offer*), the agent of which is *day schools*. But this preposition *by* plus agent is left out in most relative clauses of the passive voice and rarely does it occur in defining relative clauses. The agent would be found irrelevant and unnecessary in a relative

clause, which, in its context, plays either a complementary or a supplementary role. Here are some defining relative clauses introduced by such relative pronouns as *that, so . . . that, which, if, though, whose, etc.*

- e.g. (1) I was sad that so many lives *are being lost* in this struggle.
- (2) The war *is being fought* in a place so unfamiliar that thousands of Americans are asking . . .
- (3) They believe that if the opportunities of medical laboratories *are forbidden* to non-doctors, further legislation would be unnecessary.
- (4) Here are crucial issues which *have not been* fully understood.
- (5) It is a lost technique whose secret *was not re-discovered*.
- (6) We withdrew our troops when security *had been established*.
- (7) They have special training programmes for countries where skilled workers *are needed* in a hurry.
- (8) Decisive unilateral action is vital even though a hue and cry *is raised abroad*.
- (9) If no action *is taken* in time it may lead to a lot of complications.
- (10) There is a story of a pious man who *was sustained* through a lifetime of misfortunes . . .

An examination of some sentence patterns with passive *infinitives*, passive *participles*, and passive *gerunds* will show that it is the passive form of these which, when fused with the other parts of the sentences of which they are adjuncts, gives them their distinctive character. A sentence like *I was glad to be relieved* is representative of a class of sentence patterns which derives its identity from the passive infinitive. In this sentence the passive infinitive *to be relieved* cannot be replaced by an active form having the same contextual meaning. Below are some examples of the same type.

Passive infinitive

- (1) I want to get the house whitewashed.
- (2) The accused does not like to be tried summarily.
- (3) I was proud to be chosen.

Passive participle

- (1) Lloyd George rose to greatness, kindled by stress of circumstances.
- (2) One of these dogs, being mistaken for a wolf, was shot dead.

- (3) The story tells how Elijah, disheartened by the apparent failure of his mission, his wife threatened by an alien queen, went on a pilgrimage to the sacred mountain.

Passive gerunds

- (1) He disliked being opposed.
 (2) It is necessary to save the money from being squandered.

It should be noted that there is a clear distinction in the use of the infinitive between:

- (a) There is nothing much to see there.
 and (b) He is nowhere to be seen.

While the infinitive of (a) could be alternated with its corresponding passive form, the active infinitive of (b) is not conventional.

Stress, Pitch, and Juncture

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THE PROSODIC FEATURES of English—stress, pitch, and juncture—seem to excite a fascination among teachers of English as a second language, not always with edifying results. The teaching of ‘sentence intonation’ is particularly full of pitfalls. British and American teachers sometimes insist on one pattern (usually, to be sure, a very common one) for any given sentence, and drill it excessively, either forgetting that the sentence has other intonational possibilities or, if remembering, not knowing how or whether to teach them. And native and non-native teachers alike have a great propensity, when coping with alternative intonation contours, to discover fanciful semantic or expressive connotations for each variation, often having to do with degrees of ‘politeness’ or ‘sincerity’. Thus the pattern*

²You ²look rather ³tired ²this morning, fa³ther
 has been taught as the normal one, the variant

²You look rather ³tired ²this morning, father

*The superscript numbers indicate pitch level, 2 being the normal or standard pitch, 1 low, 3 high, 4 extra high (the last is infrequently heard). In the notation, the pitch level is sustained until the number changes; thus in the second sentence above, all the words are pronounced at pitch 2 except the word *tired* at 3.