

THE CLASSIFICATION OF ENGLISH PASSIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Passive voice has long been considered an important part in English grammar. Grammarians have classified the English passive construction in numerous different ways and each construction has a different meaning, a different use or a different function which can puzzle any novices. This paper is an attempt to review the classification of English passive.

Keywords: English passive, passive construction, classification.

1. Introduction

The English passive has a wide range of passive types. Sometimes this can confuse learners and users because a certain passive can be named in different ways by different grammarians. Below is a description of the passive types illustrated with examples which have been found from the readings.

2. English passive types

2.1. Full passive

Horgan (1978) defines a sentence as a full passive "if it contained a form of 'be' or 'got', a past tense marker, and a preposition, followed by a noun phrase that could logically be construed as the actor or instrument" (p. 67). This passive construction is also called "long passive where the agent is expressed in a by-phrase" (p. 31). The long passive can be finite (See example 1 below) or non-finite (See example 2 below) (Biber et al. 1999). Stein (1979) assumes that there is "about 15-20% of the passive occurrences in English" are full passives (p. 165).

(1) They were stopped by a ferocious animal. (Horgan, 1978, p. 67).

(2) Senhora Neto-Kiambata had the honour of being received by The Prince of Wales and The Prince Edward. (Biber et al., 1999, p. 937)

2.2. Agentless passive

According to Yip (1994), an agentless passive is intransitive and lacks an agent. It has other names such as "short passive" (Biber et al., 1999, p. 935) and "truncated passive" and is said to be "derived from the full passive by deleting the logical subject" (Horgan, 1978, p. 68):

(3) The lamp was broken (by the girl) (Horgan, 1978, p. 68).

2.3. Transitive passive

This passive "occurs only with verbs used transitively, that is, verbs that can be followed by an object" (Alexander, 1988, p. 241):

(4) That building is going to be destroyed.

2.4. Semi-transitive passive

Svartvik (1966) says that passive sentences of this kind "have prepositional phrases as adjuncts where the prepositions collocate closely with the verb" (p. 144).

(5) Any soldier who leaves his post will be confined to the barracks. (Longman Dictionaries, 1978, p. 285).

(6) It [this word] was also applied by Shakespeare to human beings... (Svartvik, 1966, p. 144).

2.5. Ditransitive passive

Active sentences with ditransitive verbs can

have an indirect object and a direct object and either object can be the surface subject of their passive counterparts (Collins Cobuild, 1990). Svartvik (1966) classifies this type of passive into three sub-classes: those with "nominal as complement" as in (7), those with "nominal + preposition as complement" as in (8), and those with "finite verb clause as complement" as in (9) (p. 145):

(7) a. My daughter was taught **English** by an Australian.

b. English was taught to my **daughter** by an Australian.

(8) she might judge she was made **fun of** (Svartvik, 1966, p. 145).

(9) I was told **you wanted to see me** (Svartvik, 1966, p. 145).

We should note that the subject *English* in (7b) is the direct object in the active version, and in (7a) the logical indirect object *My daughter* becomes the grammatical subject. This may be the reason why this passive is also named "indirect passive" (Stein, 1979, p. 168).

2.6. Semi-factive passive

Similar to the semitransitive passive type, semifactive passive sentences "have close collocation of verb and preposition". However, the former has verbs collocating with different prepositions and the latter has verbs collocating "almost exclusively with *as*". Semifactive passives occur with "three kinds of prepositional adjuncts: preposition + nominal, preposition + present participle, and preposition + adjective or past participle" (Svartvik, 1966, p. 145).

(10) You'll be classed **as a second-rater**. (Svartvik, 1966, p. 145).

(11) They [those who were killed in the First World War] are remembered with grief **as young and gay and beautiful** by those who survive them (Svartvik, 1966, p. 146).

(12) Every few months the gap at Geneva is reported **as being narrowed** (Svartvik, 1966, p. 146).

2.7. Factive passive

Passives of this kind have "nominal, present participle, adjective, past participle, etc" as complements.

(13) The ship was named '**Lantana**'.

(14) It [this cheese] is kept **fresh**... by the special wrapping (Svartvik, 1966, p. 146).

2.8. Pseudo-passive

The pseudo-passive, or prepositional passive, has been the center of discussion by many grammarians (Riddle & Sheinrich, 1983). Davidson (1980) claims it is not true that "passive in English applies only to direct and indirect objects". She "defines" pseudo-passives as "English passive sentences in which the NP promoted to subject (and topic) position is not a direct or indirect object" (p. 44). The NP in this kind of passive is actually the object of adverbial preposition. The example (15) demonstrates clearly that *this actress* is not the direct object of *talk*, but it is the object of *about*.

(15) a. **This actress** was talked **about** by many people (Ackema & Neeleman, 1998, p. 16)

(15) b. Many people talked **about this actress**.

Not all the objects of prepositions, however, can be promoted; only some can. Davidson (1980) states that there are two factors that affect the passivization of this kind of passive. First, the type of adverbial prepositional phrases is "relevant in determining where Passive applies". Adverbials of time and cause, for example, normally are not affected by passivization (as shown in (16) and (17)). Meanwhile, "spatial and directional locatives, as well as instrumentals, are freely promoted" (examples (18), (19), and (20)). Second, the NP which is the surface subject in the passive refers to "a concrete entity, particularly a definite NP or proper name" (p. 46).

(16) a. Susan typed **through the night**.

*b. The night was typed through by Susan.

(17) a. The city surrendered **under siege**.

*b. Siege was surrendered under by the city.

(18) **That bed** has been slept in today.

(19) **Chicago** has been driven to in an hour and a half.

(20) **This spoon** has been eaten **with**.

(Davidson, 1980, pp. 45-46)

It is interesting to note that Bresnan (1982) uses the lexical theory to explain prepositional passives. She argues that "there is a lexical relation between the verb and its passivized subject: in each case the verb-preposition combination expresses a lexicalized dyadic relation" and that any "prepositional objects which are not lexically related to a verb in this way cannot be passivized" (p. 50) (as shown in (24). Looking at (21), (22), and (23), we can see

that *march through* means 'crossed', *gone over* means 'examined', and *looked on* means 'regarded'. Whereas, *left for* in (24) does not have a one-word synonym.

(21) The field looked like they've been **marched through** by an army.

(22) Your book needs to be **gone over** by an accountant.

(23) He is **looked on** as selfish by everyone.

(Bresnan, 1982, p. 50)

(24) a. They **left for** no reason.

*b. No reason was left for (Bresnan, 1982, p. 51).

This point of view is reviewed later in Riddle and Sheintuch's (1983) works. They say that "there is semantic unity between passive verbs and the following prepositions in cases where the preposition is conventionally linked with the verb and where a single-word synonym can be found" (p. 351). Nevertheless, they point out that the semantic unity cannot be used to account for "numerous cases of pseudo-passives" like (25).

(25) ...Whether they stay up here or we do, **this room** can be **slept in**. (Riddle & Sheintuch, 1983, p. 533).

They then propose "a functional analysis which treats passives and pseudo-passives identically" (p. 527). They claim that "all and only NPs whose referent the speaker views as being role prominent is the situation described by the passive clause occur as subjects of passive verbs" (p. 527). The property of the room (for sleeping in) in (25) is emphasized by the fact that the speaker makes it role prominent.

2.9. Adjectival passive versus verbal passive

Adjectival passives are said to be "typically derived from transitive change-of state verbs" (Oshita, 2000, p. 299). Bresnan (1982) indicates that adjectival passives are identical in form to verbal passives, but belong to the category adjective rather than category verb. Examples (26) and (27) show the difference between the adjectival passive *was furnished* and the verbal passive *was furnished*.

(26) The apartment was (quickly) **furnished** to make it more attractive (verbal passive: *furnished* has a dynamic reading.)

(27) When John moved in, the apartment was already **furnished** (adjectival passive: *furnished* has a stative intended reading.)

The "event reading" of verbal passives are the "state reading" of adjectival passives are also mentioned by Levin & Rappaport (1986) who state that adjectival passives "exhibit adjectival properties" and verbal passives "exhibit verbal properties" (p. 623).

Bresnan (1982) and Levin & Rappaport (1986) suggest some ways in order to distinguish adjectival and verbal passives. Bresnan uses the lexical theory which Levin & Rappaport call "morphological context" (p. 625) to show the difference. They all argue that the negative prefix *un-* which means "not" can attach to adjectives but never attach to a verb. With example (28), Bresnan reasons that *untouched* is an adjective based on the adjectival passive *touched* and that the prefix *un-* does not attach to the verb *touch* since "there is no verb *to untouch".

(28) The jacket was **untouched** by human hands (Bresnan, 1982, p. 21).

The fact that some verbs in English such as *seem, remain, sound, look* "select adjectival but not verbal-complement" is another way that helps differentiate the two passives (Levin & Rappaport, 1986). (29) is an adjectival passive.

(29) The quarrel of the night before **seemed forgotten**. (Collins Cobuild, 1990, p. 174).

Third, Bresnan says that "adjectives but not verbs can be modified by 'very'". Thus, any passive participle preceded by 'very' is certainly adjectival passive.

2.10. Impersonal passive

This kind of passive with the impersonal subject *it* is often used with verbs like *believe, consider, say, think, understand* in more formal, written styles (Parrot, 2000). Note that (30b) is another personal passive version of (30a) and is more common in use than (30a).

(30) a. **It is said** that women live longer than men.

b. **Women are said** to live longer than men.

Hewings (1999) claims that the English impersonal passive is normally used to report what people say, think, and so forth, especially when the speaker/writer wants to avoid mentioning who said or thought what s/he is reporting.

(31) It is reported that the finance minister is to resign (Hewings, 1999, p. 64).

(32) a. **It is thought (that)** there are too many obstacles to peace.

b. **There are thought to be** too many obstacles to peace.

(32b) with the “preparatory subject” *there* (Swan, 1995) is another version of (32a). This is noticed by Hewings (1999) that “when a *that*-clause begins **that + there...**, we can make a passive form **there + passive verb + to be**” (p. 64).

2.11. Double passive

Bresnan (1982) mentions about the existence of “double passives” as in (33) and (34) in English.

(33) a. No one took **advantage of her talents**.

b. **Not much advantage** was taken of her talents.

c. **Her talents** weren't taken advantage of.

(34) a. No one could find **fault** with Inge's performance.

b. **No fault** could be found with Inge's performance.

c. **Inge's performance** couldn't be found fault with.

(Bresnan, 1982, p. 60)

She tries to explain this passive construction applying the V-P Incorporation. She says:

...the “external” object can passivize only when the “internal” noun has been incorporated with the verb. It follows from the lexical integrity hypothesis that when the external object is passivized, the internal noun cannot be moved from its position within the lexical category V; but when the internal object is passivized, nothing should prevent its movement (p. 61).

In (33b), the internal noun *advantage* is passivized, and in (33c), the external object *her talents* is passivized.

2.12. Mediopassive

This structure is also called “notional passive” by Stein (1979) who says that in a passive sentence of this type, “the linguistic form is active but the meaning is said to be passive” (p. 166). She adds that a *by-agent* phrase is excluded in mediopassives; in fact, mediopassives “imply an agent which is never syntactically realised” (Gnutzmann, 1991, p. 53). Stein mentions that prepositional phrases with *in, with* “can be added but they cannot be interpreted as quasi-agents” (as shown in (37)) (p. 166).

(35) The book doesn't sell (Stein, 1979, p. 166)

(36) T-shirts wash easily (Gnutzmann, 1991, p. 53)

(37) a. This fabric washes easily with soap (Stein, 1979, p. 167)

*b Soap washes this fabric easily.

2.13. Causative passive

Causative passive usually has “a form of *get* or *have* followed by an object and then the past participle of the main verb”. In these passive constructions, “the object is the recipient of an action – the subject is in some way responsible for what happened, but didn't do it” (Parrot, 2000, pp. 292-293). This type of passive is usually used to describe what people arrange for someone to do for them (as in (38)) or to describe unfortunate experiences (as in (39)).

(38) She goes to hospital and **has** her blood pressure **taken**

(39) He **got** his leg **broken** playing football.

(Parrot, 2000, p. 293)

2.14. Non-finite passive

These passive constructions can be – post-modifier of a noun, an infinitive clause complement of a verb, to-infinitive complement of an adjective, a supplementive adverbial *ed*-clause, or an *ing*-clause complement of a preposition (Biber et al., 1999)

(40) That would be the cause of death, I think, heavy blow from a piece of lead piping **wrapped** in a sock (Biber et al., 1999, p. 936).

(41) Tim started to **be respected** (Hewings, 1999, p. 62).

(42) But there is no debate, and any decisions are likely to **be taken**, piecemeal and by default.

(Biber et al., 1999, p. 937).

2.15. Become-passive

On the review on Stein's (1979) book, Beedham (1981) says that “the *become*-passive is called durative and combines only with verbs which ‘connote a non-momentary action.’ The verbs used in *become*-passives “lead up to a result or state which can also be verbalized” (p. 150). Similarly, Svartvik (1966) mentions:

Become usually has the specific aspectual function if indicating gradual change, which is often enhanced by modification with *more and more, increasingly*, etc. and suffixation with *-ize (conventionalize, industrialize, mechanize, organize, etc.)* (p. 149).

(43) Taking the argument still farther, it is **becoming increasingly** widely **recognized** that African numerical superiority in Kenya will have ultimately to be reflected in the constitution.

(Svartvik, 1966, p. 149)

2.16. *Get-passive*

The name of this type of passive tells us about its form: *get + past participle*. *Get* in the construction is not an auxiliary; it is "formally a full lexical verb" (Haegeman, 1985, p. 54). There is a "lack of focus on agency" in *get-passives*: Granger (1983) points out that one of nine *get-passives* has an explicit agent (cited from Carter & McCarthy, 1999). There is a notion that "the *get-passive* removes focus from the agent and places it on the patient/grammatical subject" (Carter & McCarthy, 1999, p. 43). Carter and McCarthy (1999) give some examples of *get-passives* with explicit agents which are claimed to be mostly impersonal or nonhuman and which give new rather than given information.

(44) She's going to **get eaten by the wolf** (Carter and McCarthy, 1999, p. 51).

When discussing about the use of the *get-passive*, Lakoff (1971) says: the *get-passive* is frequently used to reflect the attitude of the speaker

toward the events described in the sentence: whether *s/he* feels they are good or bad, or reflect well or poorly on him/her or the superficial subject of the sentence (for whom he thus expresses implicit sympathy) (cited from Carter & McCarthy, 1999, p. 42).

(45) Jane's bike **got fixed**.

(46) Jane's bike **got stolen** (Collins, 1996, p. 43)

In (45) the subject has a fortunate consequence and in (46) an unfortunate consequence (Collins 1996). (45) and (46) are also called "beneficial" and "adversative" *get-passives* (cited from Sussex 1982).

3. **Conclusion**

We have seen that there is a variety of English passive types with different uses and meanings. Hopefully, this piece of work can help English learners and users have a deeper knowledge and a proper understanding of these passive constructions ■

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PHÂN TÍCH CÁC LOẠI CÂU BỊ ĐỘNG TRONG TIẾNG ANH

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TÓM TẮT:

Thể bị động từ lâu đã được xem như một phần quan trọng trong ngữ pháp tiếng Anh. Các nhà ngữ pháp đã phân loại cấu trúc câu bị động tiếng Anh theo nhiều cách khác nhau. Những người mới học ngữ pháp tiếng Anh sẽ cảm thấy lúng túng vì mỗi cấu trúc câu bị động mang nghĩa khác nhau, có chức năng khác nhau và được dùng trong các ngữ cảnh khác nhau. Bài viết này tổng hợp và phân tích các loại câu bị động trong tiếng Anh.

Từ khóa: Câu bị động tiếng Anh, cấu trúc câu bị động, phân loại.