

Passivizability of *Possess*

Yuko Kobukata

In this paper, we discuss the passivizability of *possess* and point out that some previous approaches do not deal with this issue properly.

There is no disagreement among previous studies on the passivizability of *have* and *own*; *own* can be passivized, while *have* cannot:

- (1) A house on Kauai is owned (by Leslie).
 (2) * A house on Kauai is had (by Leslie). (Wasow (1980:308))

As for *possess*, however, there are notable differences among previous studies as shown in the following (3).

- (3) unpassivizable verb / passivizable verb
 a. *have, possess* / *own*
 b. *have* / *possess, own*
 c. *have, possess* (inalienable) / *possess* (alienable), *own*
 d. *have* / *possess* (alienable, inalienable), *own*

(3a) is an observation made by researchers like Palmer (1974), Quirk et al. (1985) and Dixon (1991), where *possess* is assumed to be unpassivizable. However, they do not explain why *possess* cannot be used in passive.

(3b) shows the prediction that is made from positions taken in Wasow (1980) and Kageyama (1996, 1997). First, Wasow (1980), based on the view that the passive formation involves a morphological, but not syntactic, process, considers that the passivizability of verbs of possession has a systematic correlation to their ability to have various affixes, as shown in (4):

- (4) a. owner, ownership, pre-owned, homeowner
 b. *haver, *havership, *pre-had, *homehaver, *havelion, *haverive
 c. possessor, possession, possessive, repossess, etc. (Wasow (1980:309))

Wasow then states that *own* can undergo the affixation, while *have* cannot. As for *possess*, he only gives examples like (4c), but there is no mention as to whether *possess* is passivizable or not. However, it may safely be predicted that Wasow would take it as passivizable, in view of the fact that it is compatible with affixation. Kageyama (1997:50), on the other hand, tries to account for the passivizability of this class of verbs in terms of whether they have external arguments or not. This distinction, he further assumes, has much to do with the fact that *own* can be used in the form of *owner* but *have* has no corresponding nominals. Though Kageyama does not make an explicit reference to the nominal *possessor*,

he claims that *possess* is also passivizable. It is clear that his claim is based on the presence of that nominal.

Still another view is taken by Pinker (1989), which can be summarized into (3c). He assumes that there is a close relation between verbs that express alienable possession and their passivizability: alienable possession has the implication that the possessee is likely to move away from the owner, which means that alienable possession can be regarded as a quasi agent-patient relation between the possessor and possessee. Thus, it should be predicted that the passive of *possess* would be possible when alienable possession is expressed.

My position about the passivizability of verbs of possession is shown in (3d), which is obtained by my inquiry into the body of attested data. Importantly, as the following examples show, *possess* can invariantly allow passivization regardless of whether it expresses alienable or inalienable possession:

- (5) a. ... by far the most powerful fleet hitherto possessed by any State.
 b. The herding, hunting, guarding, group companionship and communication possessed by the wolf and many wild dogs of today.

(British National Corpus)

(5a) is an example of alienable possession, since *the most powerful fleet* can be separable from its possessor. In (5b), the passive subject *the herding, hunting, guarding, group companionship and communication* expresses one of the characteristics of *the wolf and many wild dogs of today*, and thus they are in inalienable relations.

From this result, it can be said then that some of the studies I reviewed are inadequate in one respect or another, though it does not pose a problem to Wasow (1980) and Kageyama (1996,1997), since they take *possess* as passivizable. Yet, I do not adopt their explanations, and try to explain the passivizability of this class of verbs from a perspective that shed new light on the issues that would not have been given an appropriate treatment in the literature. I would refer the interested reader to my paper in this volume.

REFERENCES

- Dixon, R. M. W. (1991) *A New Approach to English Grammar, on Semantic Principles*, Clarendon Press, Oxford. Kageyama, T. (1996) *Doshi Imiron*, Kuroshio, Tokyo. Kageyama, T. (1997) "Gush Doshi no Jitakotai to Hitaikakuse," *Tozai Gengo Bunka no Ruikeron Tokubetsu Purojekaito Kenkyu Hokokusho*, 47-56, University of Tsukuba. Palmer, F. R. (1974) *The English Verb*, Longman, London. Pinker, S. (1989) *Learnability and Cognition: The Acquisition of Argument Structure*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA. Quirk, R., S. Greenbaum, G. Leech, and J. Svartvik (1985) *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, Longman, Harlow. Wasow, T. (1980) "Major and Minor Rules in Lexical Grammar," *Lexical Grammar*, ed. by Teun Hoekstra, Harry van der Hulst, and Michael Moortgat, 285-312, Kluwer, Dordrecht.