

Passivizability of Verbs of Possession*

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1. Introduction

One of the best known functional concepts for explaining the passive is affectedness. This concept or a similar one has been employed by many scholars including Bolinger (1975). Bolinger (1975) proposes the following hypothesis in order to capture the acceptability of passives:

- (1) The subject in a passive construction is conceived to be a true patient, i.e., to be genuinely affected by the action of the verb. If the grammatical object in the active construction is not conceived as a true patient, there will be no corresponding passive. (Bolinger (1975:67))

The acceptability of the following sentences can be accounted for by this concept:

- (2) a. * He was crawled on by a bug.
 b. He was stepped on by an elephant. (Bolinger (1975:74))

Bolinger states that in (2a), it is quite implausible to consider that someone is affected as a result of a bug's crawling on him; in this sense, the passive sentence is not allowed. In (2b), it is clear that a person is affected and may suffer from serious injury as a result of an elephant's stepping on him. Thus (2b) fulfills the constraint based on the notion of affectedness, hence the acceptability.

The following passive examples, where stative verbs are used, can also be accounted for by such a functional concept (cf. Quirk et al. (1985), Palmer (1974), among others):¹

- (3) a. John resembles his father.
 b. * His father is resembled by John.
 (4) a. This color suited Jane.
 b. * Jane was suited by this color.

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¹ Some stative verbs, such as those of volition or attitude, can easily occur in the passive:

- (i) a. The police want him.
 b. He is wanted by the police. (Quirk et al. (1985:162))

- (5) a. The book weighs a pound.
 b. * A pound was weighed by the book.
- (6) a. The book cost five dollars.
 b. * Five dollars was cost by the book.

The passive sentences in (3-6) are all unacceptable because of their violations of the affectedness constraint. In (3b), for example, the fact that John resembles his father illustrates his permanent state. That is, John's resemblance does not affect his father at all. The subject of each unacceptable sentence is difficult to consider to have been affected by the static relation described by the rest of the sentence. Thus it is generally accepted that stative verbs are not compatible with the passive because they do not express affectedness.

This paper will discuss the passivizability of verbs of possession, in particular *possess* and *own*, which are generally considered to be stative verbs.² Although verbs of possession are known to be stative verbs, they can be passivized in some cases. Dixon (1991), for example, points out the different behavior among the passives of *have*, *possess* and *own*. He regards *have* and *possess* as unpassivizable, while he takes *own* as passivizable, as the following examples show:

- (7) a. They have a beautiful house.
 b. * A beautiful house is had by them. (Quirk et al. (1985:746))
- (8) a. John possessed a cow.
 b. * A cow was possessed by John. (Lakoff (1970:19))
- (9) a. John owns that car.
 b. That car is owned by John. (Dixon (1991:308))

As for the passivizability of *have* and *possess*, Palmer (1974), Quirk et al. (1985) and Lakoff (1970) make the same observation as Dixon though they do not make explicit reference to the passivizability of *own*. Not all scholars, however, agree that *possess* is unpassivizable.

The aim of this paper is thus to answer the following question:

- (10) Why can verbs of possession be passivized though they are stative verbs?

In what follows, I examine a body of attested data and try to examine what determines their passivizability.

² The term 'verbs of possession' refers to such as *have*, *possess*, and *own* in this paper.

Before entering into the discussion, it should be noted that my target is limited to the stative reading of verbs of possession, for they can be easily passivized when they denote dynamic eventualities, as the following sentences show:

- (11) a. A good time was had by all.
 b. Have you ever been had?
 (12) a. He was possessed by the devil.
 b. He was possessed by the fear that she would leave him.

(Quirk et al. (1985:746))

Notice that the *have* in (11a) can be paraphrased as *enjoy* or *experience*, and that in (11b), *trick* or *deceive*. The *possess* in (12) has a similar meaning to *control someone* or *exert a strong influence on somebody*.

This paper is organized as follows: In section 2, we will review some previous studies: Dixon (1991), Wasow (1980), Kageyama (1996,1997), and Pinker (1989). We will point out that there is wide disagreement on the passivizability of *possess* among these studies. In section 3, we will give attested data of passives of *possess*, and point out problems of the previous studies. We propose then the reasons why *own* and *possess*, while they are stative, are passivizable. In section 4, we will make concluding remarks and point out some remaining problems.

2. Previous Studies

2.1 Wasow (1980)

Wasow (1980) points out that *have* and *own* differ with respect to their passivizability as shown by the following contrast:

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

Own can be passivized as exemplified in (13), while *have* cannot as in (14). Wasow accounts for their difference in passivizability in terms of their morphological properties, which can be summarized as follows:

- (15) owner, ownership, pre-owned, homeowner,
 (16) *haver, *havership, *pre-had, *homehaver, *havelion, *haverse
 (ibid.)

As shown above, *own* can undergo the affixation of *-er*, *-tion*, *pre-*, etc., while *have* cannot. That is, *own* can undergo morphological derivation, while *have* cannot. Taking this fact into consideration, Wasow accounts for the passivizability of the verbs in question. He regards the passive formation as a

morphological, but not syntactic, process. He argues that *have* is unpassivizable because of its incompatibility with affixation, while *own* is passivizable because of its compatibility with affixation.

As for *possess*, Wasow only gives examples of affixation but does not refer to the passivizability of *possess* at all:

(17) possessor, possession, possessive, repossess, etc. (ibid.)

It is therefore not clear whether he regards the verb as passivizable or not. However, it may safely be predicted from Wasow's theory that *possess* is passivizable, since it is compatible with affixation, as shown in (17).

2.2 Kageyama (1996, 1997)

Kageyama (1997) argues that the contrast between *have* and *own* in passivizability can be accounted for in terms of whether they have corresponding *-er* nominals. According to Rappaport Hovav and Levin (1992), if a verb allows *-er* suffixation, it has an external argument. Following their theory, Kageyama argues that the presence or absence of the corresponding *-er* nominal is closely related to the difference in passivization and tries to explain the unpassivizability of *have* and the passivizability of *own*:

- (18) a. owner / *haver
 b. A huge old house is {owned / *had} by the Irish doctor.

(Kageyama (1997:50))

(18a) shows that the suffix *-er* can attach to *own*, while it cannot to *have*. Thus *have* does not have an external argument, while *own* does. This difference explains why *have* is unpassivizable, while *own* is passivizable; the difference in passivizability can be attributed to the presence or absence of an external argument.³

It should be noted here that Kageyama (1996) either does not mention the passivizability of *possess* at all. Even in Kageyama (1997), he does not give any passive sentences with *possess*; he merely notes the fact that *possess*, like *own*, can undergo *-er* suffixation. As in the case of Wasow, it is unclear whether he takes *possess* as passivizable or not. However, it may safely be predicted from Kageyama's theory that *possess* is passivizable, since it is compatible with *-er* affixation.

³ The same is true of the passivizability of unaccusative verbs. They are known to be the ones that cannot be passivized. The unpassivizability of unaccusatives can also be accounted for by the same mechanism; they do not take external arguments (cf. Perlmutter and Postal (1984)).

2.3 Pinker(1989)

Pinker (1989) accounts for the passivizability of verbs of possession on the basis of an implication carried by alienable possession. In order to have a general picture of uses of verbs of possession, let us begin by examining the following sentences, which are cited from Nakau (1998:84):

- (19) a. Beth {possesses/owns} the doll.
 b. This car {possesses/*owns} a very powerful engine.

Possessive relations are of two types: alienable and inalienable possession. The former case is illustrated by (19a), which conveys the idea of *the doll* being in Beth's possession. Importantly, an item such as *the doll* can be separated from its owner by a certain activity such as buying or borrowing. In this possessive relation, there is no difference between *own* and *possess*. Things are a little more complicated when we speak of cases like (19b). The possessive relation between *this car* and *a very powerful engine* is referred to as an inalienable one in the sense that the powerful engine is assumed to be an integral part of the car. Such an inalienable possessive relation cannot be described by *own* as shown in (19b). In sum, *possess* can express both alienable and inalienable possessive relations, while *own* can denote only the former.⁴

Having observed the usages of *possess* and *own*, let us now move on to Pinker's analysis. Pinker (1989) points out an implication of alienable possession as follows:

- (20) [A]n alienably possessed object is construable as having an inherent tendency to move away from the owner, but the owner exerts a stronger opposing force keeping it with him allowing him to do with it what he pleases.(Pinker (1984:145))

He claims that there is a correlation between the passivizability of verbs of possession and the implication carried by alienable possession. Alienable possession has such an implication that the possessee is separable from the owner and it follows that the owner would try to keep it with him as much as possible in order not to lose it. If so, the alienable relation between the owner and possessee is considered to be a quasi agent-patient relation. For this

⁴ *Have* is the most flexible verb of the three in that in addition to inalienable and alienable possessive relations, it can also describe a locational relation between two entities:

(i) The table {has/*possesses/*owns} some maps on it. (Nakau (1998:86))

reason, *own* is regarded as passivizable.

Extending his proposal, it is predicted that *possess* should also be passivizable when alienable possession is expressed, but it cannot when inalienable possession is expressed.

2.4 Summary

We have reviewed four previous approaches to the passivizability of verbs of possession, which is summarized into the following table:

- | | | |
|------|--|---------------------------------------|
| (21) | unpassivizable verb / passivizable verb | |
| a. | have, possess / own | (Dixon, Palmer, Quirk et al., Lakoff) |
| b. | have / possess, own | (Wasow, Kageyama) |
| c. | have, possess (inalienable) / possess (alienable), own | (Pinker) |

There is no disagreement among these researchers on the passivizability of *have* and *own*: *own* can be passivized, while *have* cannot. As for *possess*, however, they disagree sharply with each other.

In the following section, we will consider whether these views on the passivizability of *possess* are correct or not by examining attested data and point out inadequacies of them.

3. The Passive of *Possess* and *Own*

3.1 The Passive of *Possess*

3.1.1 Attested Data

Let us begin this section by observing the following data.

- (22) a. ... the following books are of quite fundamental value and should be possessed by every student of local matters:
- b. ... by far the most powerful fleet hitherto possessed by any State.

(British National Corpus (BNC))

These examples express alienable possession: a possessee such as a *book* and a *fleet* can be separable from the possessor. Note that there are also passives where the other kind of possession, namely an inalienable one, is expressed:

- (23) a. The herding, hunting, guarding, group companionship and communication possessed by the wolf and many wild dogs of today....
- b. A certain degree of learning ability is inherently possessed by all living creatures.

- c. We believe that the language learning facility possessed by normally hearing children is also possessed by hearing-impaired children.
- d. There is a curious facility possessed by some writers, often those not of the first rank, which consists of an ability to create characters who step out of the surroundings in which they occur and enter the popular imagination.
- e. Society itself is losing out when the skills possessed by older workers are ignored.
- f. Perhaps the greatest quality characteristic possessed by vines grown in Champagne is the ability to produce ripe grapes with a relatively high degree of acidity.
- g. Franklin Delano Roosevelt centralized political power in the executive branch of the government to ensure that there was a competing power to that possessed by the economic elite.

(BNC)

In these examples, the passive subject is something such as quality or inherent property, which belongs to the referent of the *by*-phrase. For example, *The herding, hunting, guarding, group companionship and communication* in (23a) is characteristics of *the wolf and many wild dogs of today*. In other words, the passives express inalienable possession.

It can be concluded then that *possess* is a passivizable verb and both alienable and inalienable possession can be expressed by passives of *possess*. This conclusion further suggests that the passivization of *possess* has not been treated appropriately in the literature.

Firstly, the attested data do not pose a problem to Wasow (1980) and Kageyama (1996,1997); they take *possess* as passivizable, which is compatible with the data. Secondly, Lakoff (1970), Palmer (1974), Quirk et al. (1985) and Dixon (1991) regard *possess* as unpassivizable, which is contrary to the fact. Finally, turning to Pinker (1989), though there are some data in favor of his analysis, his theory does not offer a whole picture of the passivization of *possess*. Recall the implication of alienable possession proposed by Pinker (1989): alienable possession has an implication of agent-patient relation between possessor and possessee. The data where alienable possession is expressed is compatible with his reference to the implication of alienable possession. Given his analysis, however, it should be expected that the passive of *possess* is acceptable only when alienable possession is expressed,

and that it is not when inalienable possession is described. An examination of attested data, however, proves the very contrary.

Thus some previous approaches cannot account for the passivizability of *possess* properly. *Possess* is passivizable and passives of *possess* can express not only alienable but also inalienable possession.

3.1.2 *Division of Labor*

As we have already observed in the previous section, *possess* can be passivized irrespective of whether alienable or inalienable possession is described. It should be noted, however, that most passives of *possess* from corpus denote inalienable possession. In comparison with them, the examples of the passive of *possess* expressing alienable possession are rare. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to find examples of this sort:

(24) The land is possessed by John.

My informant pointed out that *possess* in (24) is more natural in the context of a burglar trying to take the land; the meaning of *possess* in (24) does not express pure possession (i.e. John's possession of the land) but has an agentive flavor, and is paraphrasable into "grabbing hold of." The informant also mentioned that *own* is more suitable for this sentence in order to express pure possession. To put it differently, *possess* seems to have difficulties in expressing alienable possession in the passive. Thus passives of *possess* have strong bias toward expressing inalienable possession, although they can in principle express either inalienable or alienable possession.

Why is it then that most passives of *possess* express inalienable possession? In this respect, it is important to see that according to Pinker's (1989) view, when a verb expresses alienable possession, be it *own* or *possess*, it would imply an agent-patient relation and hence be more likely to undergo passivization. Verbs in inalienable uses, by contrast, would not undergo passivization as easily, since they do not carry such an implication. Given this, *possess*, expressing alienable possession, should be more likely to be passivized than that of inalienable possession, which is contrary to fact. Thus it is quite mysterious that most passives of *possess* express inalienable possession as we have just seen. In order to answer the question of why most passives of *possess* express inalienable possession, let us compare them with examples of *own*:

- (25) a. The post office was owned by two white-haired sisters.
 b. She was working by night as a disc-jockey at the Pickwick Club, in London, which was owned by actors Anthony Newley and Harry Secombe.

(BNC)

As is clear from these examples, passives of *own* convey the *de jure* relationship between the possessor and possessee. For example, *the post office* and *two white-haired sisters* in (25a) are in a certain legal relationship, which is conceived of as an alienable relation since it is easy to imagine a situation in which other people become the owner of *the post office*. It should be noted that since the active sentences of *own* are restricted to alienable possession as seen in (19), passives of *own* express alienable possession as well. Given Pinker's claim, it might be no wonder that *own* can be passivized. I will return to this issue in the next section.

In light of this, it is reasonable to consider that *possess* and *own* are in complementary distribution when they are used in the passive; the former case takes care of the situations which the latter cannot handle properly. In other words, there is a division of labor between passives of *possess* and *own*. This is the reason why most passives of *possess* express inalienable possession.

3.2 The Passive of Own

In this section, I would like to consider in more detail the question of why the verb *own* can be passivized.

Since stative verbs do not express activities or events, Bolinger's affectedness constraint predicts that they are incompatible with passives. In fact, verbs like *belong to* do not undergo passivization.

- (26) * John is belonged to by the book.

(cf. The book belongs to John.) (Gruber (1997:169))

Notice also that Gruber points out that the passivizability of *belong to* has much to do with the fact that it cannot be used as an appropriate answer to questions like the following:

- (27) How is the book affected? / What is happening to the book?

-----*It belongs to John. (ibid.)

This fact counts as an argument for the stative nature of *belong to*.

Considering this, the passivizability of *own* also seems to be one of the issues that cannot be thought light of. Crucially, closer inspection reveals that *own* is not just a stative verb but makes a certain semantic contribution.

Observe the following examples:

(28) a. How is the book affected? / What is happening to the book?
 -----*John owns it.

b. The book is owned by John. (cf. John owns the book.) (ibid.)

Although *own* cannot be used in the question-answer pair in (28a) and hence is a stative verb, it can be passivized as shown in (28b). Thus the passive of *own* is one of the counterexamples to approaches based on the affectedness constraint (cf. Yasui (1978), Yasui (1983), Kuno (1983, 1989)). This rather unexpected behavior of *own* could not be accounted for as long as it is regarded as a mere stative verb. A closer look, however, reveals that it is possible to take *own* as a verb involving more than pure possession. Specifically, it implies a certain series of process toward the state of possession. And I claim that it is the notion of process that determines the passivizability of *own*.

There are some pieces of evidence in favor of this claim. As a first piece of evidence, we can cite the definition of *own* given in a fine dictionary such as LDCE³:

(29) to have something when it is legally yours, especially because
 you have bought it, been given it, etc. (LDCE³)

The phrases *bought* and *given* indicate that *own* involves the notion of process as well as possession. It may include a certain process, say, negotiation, dealing or the activity of buying, which precedes the state of possession.

Also the assumption that it is possible to regard *own* as a verb involving process in addition to state is supported by the following sentence:

(30) In the course of owning the house, I lost my job, and both my
 husband and I had numerous illnesses and injuries. These
 tragic events eventually lead to the loss of our home due to
 foreclosure.

Phrases such as *in the course of* explicitly describe specific stages leading up to the state of possession of *the house*. The sentence says that the speaker lost employment, and the speaker and her husband got sick during the process of the activities such as dealing or price negotiation, which is prior to the resultant state of owning the house.

A third piece of evidence is concerned with the compatibility of *own* with the frame of *how long did it take to_ ...?*, which, presupposing the completion of an event, asks the length of the process prior to the completion of that event: it asks how long a certain process continues until the event is completely done. If a verb is compatible with the question, it can safely be taken as involving the

notion of process. Now consider:

(31) How long did it take to own the house?

According to my informant, *own* is completely compatible with that frame of question as in (31). Thus, it is possible to assume that *own* implies the meaning of process in itself. If *own* were conceived of as a mere stative verb, the sentence (31) would not be acceptable, since stative situations are generally homogeneous and hence have no endpoints. The following contrast in (32) also shows that stative verbs are incompatible with this question:

(32) a. * How long did it take to be asleep?

b. How long did it take to fall asleep?

The question in (32a) is unacceptable since being asleep is just a state, but not a process. On the other hand, (32b) is acceptable because *falling asleep* denotes a change of state.

It should be noted that *possess* can also be used in the frame:

(33) How long did it take to possess the land?

The acceptability shows that *possess* is also able to describe the process prior to the resultant state when it expresses alienable possession. Thus alienable possession, whether it is described by *own* or *possess*, involves the process prior to the resultant state. In short, alienable possession carries not only the notion of possession but also that of process.

Our observations so far suggest that the passive of *own*, where alienable possession is expressed, has such a meaning as process in addition to pure possession. Though passives of *own*, which appears to be a stative verb, count as counterexamples to approaches based on the affectedness constraint, it gives rise to no difficulty with the approach advocated in this paper. With respect to the passivizability of verbs possession, what counts is whether or not their semantics are related to the notion of process: when they imply that notion, they can be passivised, whereas when they do not, they resist passivization. Thus we can say the notion of process plays an important role when we consider whether a passive sentence can be felicitously used or not.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, we have considered the passivizability of verbs of possession, in particular, *own* and *possess*. A closer look at attested data has revealed that some previous studies do not provide a sufficient explanation for passives of *possess*. *Possess* is passivizable and its passives can express either inalienable or alienable possession.

Own and *possess* are passivizable verbs though they are thought to be stative verbs, which are generally conceived to be unpassivizable because of the violation of the affectedness constraint. We have claimed that the reason why most passives of *possess* show a strong tendency to express inalienable possession is the division of labor between the passives of *possess* and *own*. Since passives of *own* express only alienable possession, passives of *possess* are complementarily used to express inalienable possession. We have also claimed that the passivizability of *own* can be reduced to the fact that it describes not only pure possession but also process.

One important issue is left untouched, however. We leave open the question of why the inalienable use of *possess* allows for passivization to begin with. Though passives expressing alienable possession can be readily accounted for in terms of the notion of process, it is uncertain whether the same accounts can be carried over to the inalienable *possess*.

Finally, I would like to point out that our account in this paper can also account for the passivizability of other types of verbs that are very likely to involve the notion of process. Take accomplishment verbs, for instance, which also do not seem to fulfill the affectedness constraint. It has been pointed out (cf. Kuno (1983, 1989), Yasui (1983), Kinsui (1992)) that passives of accomplishment verbs are difficult to account for in terms of the affectedness constraint:

- (34) a. The book was written by Shakespeare.
 b. The hole was dug by the dog.
 c. The picture was painted by IY.

Verbs of creation such as *write*, *dig* and *paint* are generally classified as accomplishment verbs (cf. Vendler (1967), Dowty (1979), Tenny (1994)): the object refers to an entity brought into existence as a result of the action expressed by the verb. For example, in (34a) *the book* is considered to be in existence only after the writing of it has finished. Thus the passive subject of these verbs cannot be viewed as affected by the actions of them. In that way, the acceptability of these passives cannot be explained in terms of the notion of affectedness. It can be speculated that these passives are also accounted for if we take accomplishment verbs as lexicalizing process. This speculation is supported by the following sentence:

- (35) How long did it take to write the book?

Again, the acceptability of (35) suggests that the event described involves process before its completion. Examples like this can provide further support

for the semantic explanation of the passivizability in terms of process. Yet, whether this semantic explanation can be extended to other passives is uncertain at present. The answer to this question must await future research.

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DATA SOURCE

BNC=The British National Corpus [<http://info.ox.ac.uk/bnc/>]

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