

Two Types of Pseudo-Passives

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This study is concerned with pseudo-passives (or prepositional passives), where the object of a preposition, not of a verb, is passivised.

- (1) This office has never been worked in before. (Takami (1992:127))

The purpose of this paper is to show that from an informational viewpoint pseudo-passives are divided into two types and to argue that the Characterization Condition for Pseudo-Passives (henceforth, CCPP), which Takami (1992) proposes, holds true only for one of the two types and therefore is empirically insufficient.

Takami (1992:126) defines the CCPP as follows:

- (2) A pseudo-passive sentence is acceptable if the subject is characterized by the rest of the sentence; namely, if the sentence as a whole serves as a characterization of the subject. Otherwise, it is found unacceptable, or marginal at best.

According to Takami (1992:127), (1) is acceptable because the fact that no one has ever worked in an office appropriately characterizes it; (1) tells us that being completely unused, the office is not an old office but a brand new one. Thus it adequately fulfills the CCPP. Let us proceed to an unacceptable case:

- (3) * The office was worked in. (Takami (1992:89))

Takami (1992:127) gives the following explanation for the unacceptability of (3): The mere fact that someone worked in an office does not suffice to characterize it. (3) therefore fails to fulfill the CCPP, resulting in the unacceptability.

As is easily inferred from the discussion so far, the CCPP seems essentially synonymous with an informational requirement that in a pseudo-passive sentence, the subject be the topic of the sentence, the rest of the sentence be a comment on the topic, and the information conveyed by the comment be rich enough to characterize the topic. If our understanding of the CCPP is on the right track, then the following generalization suggests itself:

- (4) All pseudo-passives are topic-comment sentences.

(1) in fact seems to be interpreted as a topic-comment sentence, conforming to what is predicted by (4), while (3), though also interpreted as a topic-comment sentence, is excluded on the grounds that the comment *was worked in* is not informative enough. Note also that the following generalization automatically follows because topic-comment sentences informationally or functionally contrast with event-reporting sentences in that the latter introduce a sentence as a whole as new information into the universe of discourse:

- (5) There are no pseudo-passives that function as event-reporting sentences.

A closer look, however, reveals that neither (4) nor (5) is borne out at all; there *are* pseudo-passives which function as event-reporting sentences.

A first piece of evidence comes from the fact that there are pseudo-passives which follow the sequence *what happened was that*:

- (6) a. What happened was that an excellent plan was hit upon.
 b. What happened was that a manageress was advertised for immediately.

The *what happened was that* construction literally tells that an event denoted by the clause following the sequence occurred at a certain time in the past. Thus, the function of the construction requires its complement to be interpreted as an event-reporting sentence. The acceptabilities of (6a, b) show that there *are* pseudo-passives which function as event-reporting sentences, which runs counter to the generalizations in (4) and (5) predicted by the CCPP.

Secondly, there are pseudo-passives compatible with the split-subject construction and the *there* construction:

- (7) a. A conclusion was arrived at of the whole affair.
 (cf. A conclusion of the whole affair was arrived at.)
 b. A plan was hit upon for an attack on Taliban.
 (cf. A plan for an attack on Taliban was hit upon.)
 (8) a. There was arrived at a conclusion of the whole affair.
 b. There was hit upon a plan for an attack on Taliban.

What is important here is that the two constructions have one thing in common; namely, “presentation of an entity referred to by the subject NP [or the postposed NP], and hence a situation referred to by the whole sentence for the first time into the universe of discourse (cf. Nakau (1994, 1999)).” Given that the functions of the two constructions are the same in their essentials, the pseudo-passives in (7) and (8) are thought to be event-reporting sentences. Generalizations (4) and (5) wrongly predict that both (7) and (8) would sound unacceptable.

The three cases together show that pseudo-passives *may* function as event-reporting sentences. To summarize what we have seen, pseudo-passives are informationally divided into two types: the topic-comment type and the event-reporting one. The analysis based on the CCPP has the advantage of being able to predict that there are pseudo-passives which function as topic-comment sentences, but it is problematic in that it incorrectly predicts that there are no pseudo-passives which function as event-reporting sentences. Therefore, we conclude that the CCPP is not sufficient enough to capture the whole distribution of pseudo-passives.

SELECTED REFERENCES

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