On Passive Nominals in English*

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Some deverbal nouns allow a passive form, as do their corresponding verbs, while some do not allow that form even if the verbs from which they are derived can appear in passive sentences.

(1)   a.   the city's destruction by the enemy

        b.   The city was destroyed by the enemy.

(2)   a.   *the book's criticism by John (cf. John's criticism of the book)

        b.   The book was criticized by John.

Anderson (1979) tries to account for the contrast shown in (1a) and (2a) by positing a semantic constraint -- the 'affectedness' constraint, which says that an 'affected' object can occupy the specifier position of an NP. As she points out, the concept of 'affectedness' is so vague that it is not clear what it is. In attempting to give a clear definition to this concept, Fellbaum (1987) and Tenny (1987) call attention to what aspectual interpretation the complex of a verb and its direct object (or a derived noun and its direct object) makes. They propose that if the event described by a verb phrase includes an end point, the noun derived from the verb allows the passive form. This means that a passive nominal necessarily receives a perfective (or delimited) interpretation.

Taylor (1994) argues that topicality has an effect on the word order in a nominal headed by a derived noun.[1] An NP which is already given in a discourse tends to occupy the prenominal position. Interestingly, NPs the form of which is ruled out by the 'affectedness' constraint can be in that position. (See (3b-c).)

Furthermore, Taylor gives an example in which a passive nominal does not have a perfective reading (see note 11 in Taylor (1994)), which calls into question the validity of the 'affectedness' constraint. Thus, some questions arise: Can topicality explain all of the passive nominal phenomena? Does the grammar really need a rule like the 'affectedness' constraint?

To answer these questions, let us consider the following paradigm:

(3)   a.   the recollection of the event

        b.   *the event's recollection

     c.   Concerning those events$_i$, their$_i$ recollection still frightens me.

We cannot give a full explanation to this paradigm by means of either the 'affectedness' constraint or topicality. The 'affectedness' constraint can account for the contrast between (3a) and (3b), while it overlooks the contrast between (3a) and (3c). On the other hand, by using topicality we can explain the contrast between (3b) and (3c), but cannot explain that between (3a) and (3b). We seem to need both the 'affectedness' constraint and topicality to give a full explanation of the facts as shown by the paradigm in (3). Moreover, given that topicality is a pragmatic notion, not a semantic one, it is not surprising that it is compatible with the 'affectedness' constraint.

We have evidence to support our position stated above. Nakau (1989-1990: 11) observes an interesting pair of facts, where an active nominal can appear but its corresponding passive one cannot:

    (4)   a.   The destruction of Carthage was done by Rome.

             b.   *Carthage's destruction was done by Rome.

In (4a) the subject position of the predicate *was done by Rome* is filled with a nominal with an activity (or non-perfective) reading, that is, a nominal with an active form. Passive nominals, which have a perfective reading, are incompatible with this predicate, as is illustrated in (4b). With this contrast in mind, consider:[2]

    (5)   a.   [Speaking of Carthage] Its destruction was {?done/carried out} by Rome.

             b.   Concerning north African ancient cities, only Carthage's destruction was {done/carried out} by Rome.

Whereas both of the subject NPs in (5) have a non-delimited (or activity) reading, their surface forms are like passive nominals. This gap between the form and the meaning gives a sound basis for our statement that both the 'affectedness' constraint and topicality are necessary. In (5a) the possessive NP is a pronoun, which serves as an old information already given in the discourse. This means that the pronoun is a nominal with high topicality. The more topical an NP is, the more likely it is to occupy the prenominal position. Thus, it is not surprising that the theme NP is preposed. The other example in (5) shows the same point. In the phrase headed by *concerning*, the set of cities imaginable is severely restricted. After introducing the very limited set, the city Carthage is easy to identify because most people know that it was in north

Africa. In this sense, *Carthage* is a topical entity. Thus, it is in the prenominal position, though the meaning is not that which is specific to the passive nominal, i.e., a perfective reading.

To conclude, a theme NP with high topicality tends to occupy the specifier position of the passive nominal. This does not mean, however, that the meaning specific to the passive nominal, i.e., a perfective reading, cannot be overridden by such a pragmatic factor. It is necessary to distinguish the 'affectedness' constraint from topicality.

Notes

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1 Taylor does not think that topicality alone is sufficient to account for passive nominals, as well as other nominals with possessive NPs.

2 The judgments of the examples in (5) are due to Robyne Tiedeman. For him, the contrast between (4a) and (4b) is not clear. In fact, he marks (4a) with one question mark and (4b) with two. However, we have got consistent results from his judgments through our experiments tried upon him several times. Note also that, for him, (5b) with *done* is not perfect, though it seems to him to be somewhat better than (4b).

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