

Toward a Semantic Approach to the English Passive:  
On the Basis of the Speaker's Conceptualization\*

Mika Okuyama

0. Introduction

Since Bolinger's (1975) analysis, many linguists have been analyzing passives in terms of our (the speaker's) conceptual content.<sup>1</sup> In such studies, the passive is assumed to be one of the grammatical codings which reflect the speaker's subjective conceptualization of events or situations in the world. In this paper, following the assumption that the speaker's conceptualization is involved in passives, I will provide a semantic condition for passivizability in order to make clear the nature of passivizability which is responsible for the judgment of the acceptability of passive sentences.

1. The Speaker's Conceptualization in Passives

Before presenting a semantic condition for passivizability, we will see the motivation to assume that the speaker's conceptualization is involved in passive sentences.

It can be said that the subject NP in passives undergoes change of the state because of an action denoted by the verb, whether the passive in question is processual or statal.

Consider the following examples:<sup>2</sup>

- (1) a. The town was destroyed house by house.  
b. The town was totally destroyed.

What is designated in (1a) is the process in which the state of *the town* was changing every moment. On the other hand, (1b) describes a changed state of *the town* as a result of a certain action or event of destruction. In spite of the

descriptive difference between (1a) and (1b), the subject NP *the town* in both sentences undergoes a certain change. Thus we can assume that the meaning of passives can be characterized in terms of "change of state".

Based on this assumption, we can easily explain the following contrast:

(2) a. \*The corner was turned by George.

b. The page was turned by George.

(Bolinger 1975)

(2a) depicts no change of the state of *the corner*; George's turning the corner does not give rise to any significant change of *the corner*. On the other hand, in (2b) the state of *the page* changed objectively or visibly because of George's turning it (e.g. the page went from right side to left side). Thus the sentence in (2b) is acceptable, while the one in (2a) is not.

By the same token, we can predict the unacceptability of the following sentence:

(3) \*The bed was slept in by Tom.

The bed is a place in which we sleep. So *the bed* in (3) undergoes no objective or visible change of its state just because Tom slept in it; Tom's sleeping in the bed does not give rise to any significant change of the bed. Thus the sentence is unacceptable.

Interestingly enough, however, the following example is perfectly acceptable, contrary to our expectation:

(4) The bed was slept in by Napoleon.

For the same reason as (3), we can say that *the bed* in (4) also undergoes no objective change of its state. If so, why

is the sentence perfectly acceptable? We can solve this dilemma by assuming that what changes in (4) is the speaker's conception of *the bed* but not *the bed* itself. That is, *the bed* is subjectively construed as having changed in some way or other. Thus, the sentence in (4) is acceptable just because of this invisible change of *the bed*; i.e. the change of the speaker's conception of it.

The contrast in acceptability between (3) and (4) gives evidence that we must consider the speaker's conceptualization in analyzing passives.<sup>3</sup> In the next section, presenting a semantic condition for passivizability, I will explain why *the bed* in (4), not the one in (3), can be construed as having changed and observe how it changes in the speaker's conceptualization.

## 2. A Condition for Passivizability

In this section, I will provide a semantic condition for passivizability which is responsible for the judgment of the acceptability of passives.

Let us here return to the problem which has been left unsolved in the previous section, that is, the problem of how *the bed* in (4) can be construed as having changed. Compare (3) with (4) again, which are repeated here as (5a) and (5b), respectively:

- (5) a. \*The bed was slept in by Tom.  
 b. The bed was slept in by Napoleon.

The difference in acceptability shown in (5) is due to the difference between Tom as an ordinary person and Napoleon as a VIP in history. More specifically, in (5b) *the bed* can be construed as having a certain value by virtue of the fact that *Napoleon*, who was a famous person, slept in it. On the other hand, such a value cannot be seen in *the bed* in (5a) just because of an ordinary person's (Tom's) sleeping in it. Due

to such a value given to *the bed* because of Napoleon's sleeping in it, it can be distinguished as a special bed from other normal or ordinary ones. That is, the fact that *Napoleon* slept in *the bed* causes the change of the speaker's conception of it; *the bed* in (5b) cannot be lumped together with other normal beds in the speaker's conceptualization because the speaker conceives of it as a special bed distinct from other ones. In this respect, we can say that *the bed* in (5b) changes from normal or ordinary bed to a special one with a certain value in the speaker's conceptualization. Thus the example in (5b), but not in (5a), implies "change of state" which is the notion characterizing the meaning of passives. Hence the perfect acceptability of (5b).

The same is true of the following contrast:

- (6) a. \*The Pacific has been sailed twice by the  
Kon-Tiki.  
b. The Pacific has been sailed by the mightiest  
fleets in history.

(Bolinger 1975)

As we can expect, the difference in acceptability between (6a) and (6b) is due to the difference between a mere raft called *the Kon-Tiki* and *the mightiest fleets in history*. In (6b) we can conceive that *the Pacific* has a historical value because of the fact that *the mightiest fleets in history* sailed it. On the other hand, in *the Pacific* in (6a) we cannot see such a value just because of a mere raft's sailing it. *The Pacific* in (6b) is viewed as a distinct one from its normal state in the speaker's conceptualization, because of the value attached to it. In this respect, we can say that *the Pacific* in (6b) changes from the normal one to the special one with such a value in the speaker's conceptualization. Thus the sentence in (6b) is acceptable, while (6a) is unacceptable because (6a) describes no value or special

character of the referent of the subject NP.

Here I provide the following hypothesis as a semantic condition for passivizability:

(7) *A Semantic Condition for Passivizability*  
(henceforth the Passivizability Condition)

A passive sentence is acceptable if the subject NP is described as having a special characteristic; due to this special characteristic, the referent of the subject NP changes from normal to special in the speaker's conceptualization.

In the speaker's mind, the referent of the subject NP is subjectively viewed as having a special characteristic, compared to its normal state or other normal members of the category it belongs to. In this point, the subject NP changes from normal to special in the speaker's conceptualization. Therefore, the whole description of passives serves to show that the subject NP must be something special.

In the next section, we will see that a wide variety of passives are appropriately accounted for by the Passivizability Condition.

### 3. Analysis

We assume that factors which cause the change of the speaker's conception and thus meet the Passivizability Condition can, for the purpose of discussion, be divided into subcases. Among them are the following three; (i) affectedness, (ii) distinctiveness and (iii) unexpectedness. We will examine these in turn.

#### 3.1. Affectedness

First of all, we examine the factor of affectedness in the light of the Passivizability Condition.<sup>4</sup> In this type of factor, the subject NP is construed as being affected and as

a true patient of an action denoted by the verb. That is, the state of the subject NP is changed objectively.

Consider the following examples:

- (8) a. \*The stairs were run up by Jane.  
 b. The stairs have been run up so much that the carpet is threadbare. (Bolinger 1975)

In (8b) the objective change of the state of *the stairs* is clearly described by the expression the carpet is threadbare. In virtue of this objective change, we can say that *the stairs* have a special characteristic in the sense that *the stairs* after the action of running up cannot be identified with what it was before the action. On the other hand, in (8a) we cannot recognize such an objective change in the state of *the stairs* just because of Jane's running up it. In this sense, (8a) does not express something special of *the stairs*. Thus only (8b), satisfying the Passivizability Condition, is acceptable.

Observe the following sentences:

- (9) a. \*The store was entered by the two customers.  
 b. The store was entered by the two thieves. (Bolinger 1975)

(9a) does not express something special of *the store*, for it describes only a daily occurrence of *the store*. (9b), however, implies a change of the state of *the store* by virtue of the thieves; i.e. it was ransacked. In this respect, *the store* can be construed as a special store because we cannot identify the store before the thieves' entering it with the one after the happening. Hence the acceptability of (9b), meeting the Passivizability Condition.



world. Because of these special characters, *the city* in (11b) and *the capital* in (12b) are distinguished from other normal cities and capitals, respectively, in the speaker's conceptualization. In this point, both of the (b) sentences can satisfy the Passivizability Condition. Hence their acceptability.

Recall that the example in (2a), which is repeated here as (13a), is unacceptable because of the fact that it describes only normal or ordinary character of *the corner*. However, if the description of the whole sentence serves to characterize the subject NP *the corner* as a distinct one from other corners, the sentence become acceptable:

- (13) a. \*The corner was turned by George. (=2a)  
 b. The corner was turned by Kennedy's car just before he was shot.

*The corner* in (13b) is described as a distinct one from other corners in that *the corner* in (13b) is the stage of the assassination of Kennedy. This contrast shown in (13) confirms that our assumption discussed so far is plausible.

### 3.3. Unexpectedness

In this subsection, we will see some cases where our (the speaker's) expectation that we normally have with respect to an entity denoted by the subject NP is betrayed in some sense or other. Look at the following examples:

- (14) a. \*Intersection No.33 was gone through.  
 b. Intersection No.33 has not been gone through.  
 (Bolinger 1975)
- (15) a. \*The lake was camped beside by my sister.  
 b. The lake is not to be camped beside by anybody.  
 (Bolinger 1975)

We know that an intersection is a place which we go through and a lake is a place where we can camp. That is, these are normal properties of intersections and lakes respectively. Thus the above (a) sentences describe no special character of the subject NP. On the other hand, in the (b) sentences, our expectation about the intersection and the lake is betrayed, because they have something special different from our expectation. Thus, satisfying the Passivizability Condition, the (b) sentences in (14)-(15) are acceptable.

More examples are given below:

- (16) a. \*The office was worked in.  
       b. The office has never been worked in before.
- (17) a. \*This pen was written with.  
       b. This pen has never been written with.

(Takami 1989)

While in both of the (a) sentences the subject NPs cannot be taken to be described as having something special, the (b) sentences in (16) and (17) describe special characters of *the office* and *the pen*, respectively, which are different from what we normally take them to be under our common knowledge; i.e. the office is a place where we work and the pen is a thing with which we write something. Hence the (b) sentences in (16)-(17) can satisfy the Passivizability Condition, while the (a) sentences cannot.

The assumption we have seen in this subsection is confirmed by the following contrast:

- (18) a. \*The store was entered by two customers. (= (9a))  
       b. The store has never been entered by anyone.

Recall that the example in (9a), which is repeated here as (18a), is unacceptable because it does not express something special of *the store* but only a normal property of it. If

some special description is added to *the store*, we may predict that the sentence in question is improved. As the example in (18b) shows, our prediction is right; in (18b), *the store* is described as having a special character which is different from our common knowledge of a store. The contrast in (18) confirms that our assumption is on the right track.

To sum up, in this section, we have seen that the Passivizability Condition can account for a variety of passive sentences appropriately.

#### 4. Adverbs and Modals in Passives

As the following examples show, there are some cases where some kind of adverbs and modals serve to license passives:

- (19) a. \*John's lecture was listened to by his students.  
 b. John's lecture was listened carefully/  
 attentively to by his students.

(Takami 1989)

- (20) a. \*Children under ten years old are travelled  
 with by their parents.  
 b. Children under ten years old must be travelled  
 with by their parents. (Takami 1989)

In this section, I will explain the examples such as (19)-(20) in terms of the Passivizability Condition.

Following Endo (1985), I assume here that adverbs and modals can function as what he calls "property triggers", which serve to specify a certain property or character attributable to the subject NP.<sup>6</sup> Based on this assumption, we can say that in passives a certain property or character of the subject NP can be also specified by adverbs and modals. In addition, what we should take into consideration here is that adverbs and modals can function as expressing explicitly the way in which the speaker conceives the referent of the

subject NP. From these functions of adverbs and modals, we can conclude that by using adverbs or modals, the speaker can subjectively represent a certain character of the subject NP as a distinct one from other characters of the subject NP. In other words, adverbs and modals function as triggers to represent some property or character of the referent of the subject NP as something special according to the speaker's conception of the referent. We can say that the Passivizability Condition is satisfied in this way.

Keeping this fact in mind, let us return to the example of (19), in which adverbs such as carefully and attentively play a central role in licensing the passive. As expected easily, the unacceptability of (19a) comes from the fact that (19a) does not describe something special but only a normal character of lectures; i.e. lectures are what students listen to. On the other hand, if it is true that the adverbs in (19b) function as property triggers, a certain character of *John's lecture* can be specified distinctively; for example, the speaker may conceive of his lecture as an attractive one. In this point, *John's lecture* is taken to be something special. Hence the acceptability of (19b), meeting the Passivizability Condition.

In (20), the modal must licenses the passive to be acceptable. The description of the subject NP in (20a) serves to represent only one of normal characters of it rather than a special character. On the other hand, in (20b) if modals are property triggers, a certain character of the subject *children under ten years old* can be specified as a special character; for example, it is dangerous for children under ten years old to travel alone. In this point, the Passivizability Condition is satisfied and thus (20b) is acceptable.

Let us examine here whether our observation discussed in this section (i.e. some kinds of adverbs and modals serve to license passives) is on the right track. Look at the

following sentences, which are unacceptable because of the fact that they represent no special character of the subject NPs, respectively:

(21) \*The room was walked through by the boy. (= (10a))

(22) \*The destination was arrived at by Tom by five o'clock.

Along our line of analysis, we can say that the examples in (21) and (22) become acceptable if some adverbs or modals are added to them. Look at the following sentences:

(23) The room was walked through only by the boy.

(24) (?)The destination must be arrived at by Tom by five o'clock.

As (23) and (24) show, the sentences in (21) and (22) are permitted or (at least) improved because of adding the adverb only and the modal must. More specifically, in (23) some character of the subject NP *the room* can be specified as something special by virtue of the adverb only; e.g. no one but the boy can walk through the room. And also in (24) some special implication of the destination can be emerged because of the modal must; e.g. arriving at the destination may be Tom's duty. Thus the contrasts shown in (21)-(24) confirm that our analysis is correct.

To sum up, we have seen that adverbs and modals serve to license passives in the sense that they distinctively specify a certain character of the subject NP, in light of the speaker's conception of the subject NP.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on the assumption that the speaker's conception

of the world is involved in passives, I have provided the Passivizability Condition which is responsible for the judgment of the acceptability of passive sentences. The analysis of passives based on the Passivizability Condition shows that considering our (the speaker's) conceptualization enables us to account for various examples of passives.

#### NOTES

\*This is a slightly revised version of part of my BA thesis submitted to the University of Tsukuba in December 1990. I am grateful to Minoru Nakau and Yukio Hirose for their valuable suggestions at the earlier stage of this paper. I am especially indebted to Nobuhiro Kaga, Shinsuke Honma, Manabu Hashimoto, Masaharu Shimada and Mikinari Matsuoka for their valuable comments and suggestions. My thanks also go to Ronald Craig and Roger Martin, who kindly acted as informants. Finally special thanks to Hidehito Hoshi for his encouragement. Needless to say, all remaining inadequacies are my own.

<sup>1</sup> As far as I know, it is sure that Bolinger's (1975) analysis sheds light on the fact that the speaker's conceptualization is involved in passives, though he does not clearly refer to this fact in his paper. For other analyses in light of our conceptual content of passives, see Langacker (1982) and Rice (1987).

<sup>2</sup> Nakau (1986b) argues that passives are classified into processual and statal. (1a) is a processual passive because of the expression house by house, while (1b) is a statal passive because of the adverb totally.

<sup>3</sup> From Kuno's (1978) analysis, we can obtain further evidence for the speaker's conceptualization. Kuno argues that the speaker's viewpoint (or the speaker's conceptualiza-

tion in my analysis), which is compared to a camera angle, is placed on the side of the referent of the subject NP. See Kuno (1978) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>4</sup> Bolinger (1975) analyzes passives in terms of the notion of affectedness. This notion seems to involve both visible (objective) change and invisible change (the change of the speaker's conception in my analysis). In this paper, however, affectedness is treated simply as depicting the entity's objective change as a result of some action denoted by the verb.

<sup>5</sup> The examples in (5b) and (6b) belong to the distinctiveness type in the sense that, because of the value given to the subject NP, the subject NP has a special character distinct from other members of the category the referent of the subject NP belongs to.

<sup>6</sup> Endo (1985) points out that functions of adverbs and modals in passives are parallel to that of adverbs and modals in the middle construction, in which some property of the subject NP must be represented. The following examples are noted by Endo:

- (i) a. \*The first chapter reads.  
 b. The first chapter reads well.  
 c. The first chapter will read.

Based on this observation, Endo argues as follows; In (ib) and (ic), because of the adverb well and the modal will, the sentences are licensed; it can be said that adverbs and modals serve to represent the property of the subject in the middle construction. Thus he calls this function of adverbs and modals "property triggers". For a detailed discussion, see Endo (1985).

## REFERENCES

- Bolinger, D. (1975) "On the Passive in English," *LAUCUS* 1, 51-80.
- Chappell, H. (1980) "Is the *Get*-passive Adversative?," *Papers in Linguistics* 13, 411-451.
- Davison, A. (1986) "Peculiar Passives," in Yasui, M. (ed.) (1986), *Kaigai Eigogaku Ronsou*, 217-250.  
[first printed in *Language* 56, 42-66, (1980)]
- Dixon, R. M. W. (1991) *A New Approach to English Grammar, on Semantic Principles*. Oxford University Press.
- Endo, Y. (1985) "On English Passives," *Tsukuba English Studies* 3, 169-180.
- Hudson, R. (1989) "English Passives, Grammatical Relations and Default Inheritance," *Lingua* 79, 17-48.
- Kirsner, R. S. (1977) "On the Passive of Sensory Verb Complement Sentences," *Linguistic Inquiry* 8, 173-179.
- Kuno, S. (1978) *Danwa no bunpou*. Taishukan.
- Langacker, R. W. (1982) "Space Grammar, Analysability, and the English Passive," *Language* 58, 22-80.
- Nakau, M. (1986a) "Imiron no genri (22) - dousashu to kouisha," *The Raising Generation* 132-1, 26-28.
- . (1986b) "Imiron no genri (23) - mohaya kouikemi wa nai," *The Raising Generation* 132-2, 34-36.
- Okuyama, M. (1990) *On the Meaning and Use of Passives in English*. Unpublished BA thesis, University of Tsukuba.
- Rice, S. (1987) "Towards a Transitive Prototype: Evidence from Some Atypical English Passives," *BLS* 13, 422-434.
- Stanley, J. (1975) "Passive Motivation," *Foundation of Language* 13, 25-39.
- Takami, K. (1989) "Gizijudoubun ni tsuite," *The Raising Generation* 135-6, 21-23.
- Yasui, I. (1983) "Eigo no judoubun ni tsuite," *Gengo Bunka Ronshu* 15, 69-89. University of Tsukuba.

Yasui, M. (1978) "Eigo no judoubun ni tsuite," *Bungei Gengo Kenkyu* 3, 1-30. University of Tsukuba.

Doctoral Program in Literature and Linguistics  
University of Tsukuba