

On the Passive Nominal: Its Semantic Conditions and Pragmatic Triggers

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This study argues that the event described by the passive nominal, a kind of nominalization, is construed in terms of the object NP, and that contextual information has to do with every use of the passive nominal. These two points follow from discourse properties of the possessive NPs of noun phrases, which are pointed out by Taylor (1994) and Deane (1987).

Taylor (1994) and Deane (1987) observe that the prenominal genitive position of noun phrases, including passive nominals, tends to be occupied by topical entities. Example (1) confirms their observations. Consider:

- (1) With Anderson free, the harrowing tales that were once too risky to tell for fear of bringing harm to the remaining Western hostages may now be told. . . . But *Anderson's release last week* seemed to. . . . (TIME 12/16/1991; Italics are mine.)

Since it is given in the introductory comment in (1), the name *Anderson* serves as a topical element. (Taylor does not suppose that topicality is determined only by discourse familiarity. His system is more complicated.) The possessive NP of the noun phrase, including the passive nominal, as argued in Taylor (1994), has the function of facilitating the identification of the following head noun, and hence serves as a reference point (cf. Langacker (1991)). In general, linguistic expressions that are identified as reference points are, by definition, topical in a given context. With passive nominals, contextual information makes the object entities topical, and hence they occupy the prenominal position. In the sense that the object entities facilitate the identification of the following head nouns, the events described by passive nominals are construed in terms of the topical object entities (cf. Langacker (1987) and Jackendoff (1990, 1991)).

To make it easier to understand the construal of the passive nominal, we informally schematize it as (2b). Compare it with (2a), which represents a typical model of transmission of force from one entity to another.



In (2b) the heavy line shows the high topicality of the object entity; the parts with the broken lines are less topical.

Using the schema in (2b), we can explain why passive nominals, unlike the corresponding active nominals, cannot take a durational *in*-phrase, as given in (3):

- (3) a. the construction of the building in three weeks
b. * the building's construction in three weeks (Grimshaw (1990: 83))

The incompatibility of passive nominals with this prepositional phrase would pose a problem to aspectual approaches of Tenny (1987) and Fellbaum (1987). Their approaches account for the contrast, for instance, between *the city's destruction* and **the cliff's avoidance* by means of a condition based on delimitedness. If the event described by the complex of a verb and its direct object includes an end-point, the noun derived from the verb can be in the passive form, and hence the passive nominal receives a delimited reading. It is generally assumed that the *in*-phrase can appear with verb phrases (or the corresponding noun phrases) which denote delimited events. If so, it would not be surprising that passive nominals could take the *in*-phrase.

The durational *in*-phrase measures a period of time from a certain point to the end-point. In (2a) this phrase measures the length of part of process between a certain point on the arrow and the end-point, represented by the right circle. In (2b) there is no part measured by the *in*-phrase. The *in*-phrase therefore has difficulty in appearing with passive nominals.

The object entities of passive nominals, which occupy the prenominal genitive position, are regarded as topical entities, as pointed out by Taylor and Deane. This suggests that passive nominals are context-dependent. In fact a number of examples need contextual information to work as natural English expressions. Thus, topicality substantively influences the formation of passive nominals, though we need lexical/semantic conditions which discriminate between *the city's destruction* and **the cliff's avoidance*. One might say that topicality is not so powerful as to determine the actual use of the passive nominal, because previous studies have given us a lot of examples of passive nominals without any contextual information. In those cases, too, hearers, it seems, invoke the necessary context for the identification of passive nominals. Topicality triggers the formation of passive nominals in actual use.

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