

On Passives

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I

Since Chomsky (1970) advocated the “lexicalist” position concerning the so-called “derived nominals,” much attention has been paid to the functions of two rule types in a grammar—transformational rules and lexical rules. Chomsky was mainly concerned with the consequences of the lexical approach for the syntactic component of the grammar and implied the possibility and desirability of reformulating the Nominalization rule as a lexical redundancy rule.

Another transformation whose possibility of being reformulated as a lexical redundancy rule is proposed is the passive rule. In the earliest generative transformational grammar, a passive transformation was well motivated because it not only simplified the phrase structure grammar but also accounted for the relationship between active and passive sentences. In the revised theory of Katz-Postal (1964) and Chomsky (1965), the active and passive sentences came to have distinct underlying structures, though identical in most respects. Their treatment of passives was motivated by the fact that verbs that can undergo passivization are restricted to those verbs which take manner adverbials freely. Chomsky (1970) and Emonds (1976) underwent further modification in the formulation of the passive transformation. About the same time as the revision of the passive transformation, Hasegawa (1968) and Robin Lakoff (1971) proposed somewhat different analyses of passive constructions employing no so-called passive transformation, without involving a unique process of inverting the subject NP and the object NP. Langacker and Munro (1975) explored passivization as a universal phenomenon and regarded passive as a

cluster of syntactic/semantic properties. They even claimed that passive sentences are basically impersonal. The transformational approach to passives was challenged by Freidin (1975), Bresan (1976) and partly by wasow (1977). Freidin extended Chomsky's treatment of derivational morphology of derived nominals in the lexicon to passive predicates as well. They are moving toward the direction of reducing lexically governed and structure-preserving rules to lexical redundancy rules. They reject the assumption that the active-passive relation is structural in nature and insist on capturing the active-passive relation in the lexicon without a passive transformation. In this paper are examined the previous treatments of passive constructions as well as the nature and functions of passives.

II

Through previous studies of passive constructions in English and in many other languages of the world, several syntactic and semantic properties of passivization have been pointed out. Here are some of the aspects and basic functions of passivization.

First, why do we passivize a sentence? If we assume that passivization is a universal phenomenon, what is the characterization of the passive situation? Can we specify any semantic aspects of passivization? When one idea can be expressed in two different ways, what motivates the choice of one form before the other? Generally speaking, something or some action happens to the object in question. The passive sentences describe a relationship between an event and a participant in it. The action, the event or the state befalls the participant, either animate or inanimate, and the participant is affected by its occurrence in some way or other. It is to be noted that it is not an agency but something that happens to the logical object that is focused in the passive sentences. Therefore an agent may, but need not, be expressed. Agentless passives occur very frequently where the performer of the action is not of interest. In fact, it has

been pointed out that many languages in the world allow agentless passives only.¹

A second characteristic of passive constructions is that the auxiliary verbs in passive sentences seem to be quite similar in many languages of the world. The auxiliary verb chosen for the passive construction is in most cases a variant of *be* or *have* (or *get*). Langacker and Munro, for example, describe that the auxiliary verb *be* is involved in Uto-Aztecian passives just like in English, saying that the reconstruction of a PUA morpheme *ti 'be' can be equated with the first syllable of the passive-impersonal suffix *ti-wa (798). The similarity of the auxiliary verbs does not seem to be just a matter of coincidence. We may say that the choice of a particular group of auxiliary verbs is not without reason. This fact naturally leads to the analysis of passives in which the auxiliary verb is treated as a predicate with real semantic content rather than as a semantically empty marker to be inserted transformationally.

Another property of passives, which is syntactic, is that they are not likely to appear in imperative constructions. The sentences, for example, "Be taken to the hospital by your mother," "Be admired by your friends" are unnatural. Although the relationship between an action and its participants is essentially the same in active and passive sentences, the latter make an assertion of existence. They rather state the existence of a relationship between an action and the participant affected by it. That only a certain group of auxiliary verbs that denotes existence-like quality rather than the quality of activity appears in passives may support the claim that the passives are semantically stative rather than active. This in turn accounts for the difficulty of passive sentences appearing in imperative constructions.

Not every verb can undergo passivization. There seem universally to be certain groups of verbs that cannot be passivized.

(1) a. John resembles my brother.

*My brother is resembled by John.

b. The book cost ten dollars.

*Ten dollars were cost by the book.

c. John had a new car.

*A new car was had by John.

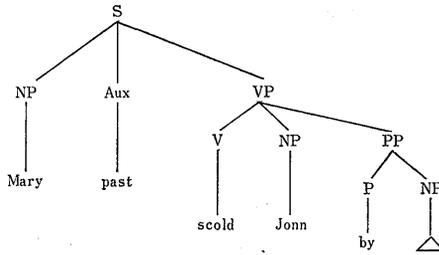
What is a lexical property of those verbs which are unable to passivize? As mentioned above, the general semantic property of passive constructions seems to be that something or some state happens to the object in question. The object in question is either affected by the action or acquires some characteristic as a result of the action. However, as is shown in (1), *something* cannot happen to the object because the state resulted from that something already exists. In other words, the basic identity and characteristic of the object in question cannot be affected by the verbs. The inability of symmetric predicates (e. g., resemble, marry), measure verbs (e. g., cost, last, weigh) and verbs of possession (e. g., have, possess) to passivize may be a universal phenomenon, for they would violate the first semantic property mentioned above if passivized.

III

Now with the above-mentioned basic functions of passive constructions in mind, I would like to make a rough sketch of transformational analyses of passives proposed so far.

Since Chomsky's original analysis of passives in 1957, it has been assumed that by postulating the passive transformation we can capture significant structural and functional generalizations about pairs of active and passive sentences. Among those generalizations are the same selectional restrictions held for passive sentences as for active sentences, some specific restrictions on the appearance of the passive auxiliary *be + en*, and the relevance of grammatical relations for semantic interpretation. Thus, in the revised version of Chomsky and Emonds, for example, the underlying structure of "John was scolded by Mary" is (2).

(2)



The passive is derived from the active (in essence) by the two distinct transformational operations: (i) Agent Postposing moves the subject NP into a dummy position in the *by* phrase, and (ii) NP Preposing moves the direct object NP into the subject position and simultaneously inserts *be en* before V. This treatment has the following characteristics: (i) unlike the traditional one-rule analysis of passives, this analysis involves two distinct transformational operations, and (ii) *be en* is transformationally inserted.

One of the merits of this revised passive transformation is the division of the passive rule into two operations. Whether one rule that moves two NP's or two rules that move one NP apiece are involved in the process of passivization has been one of the problems concerning the proper formulation of the passive rule. The superiority of the two-step derivation of the passive over the traditional one-rule analysis concerns the derivation of truncated passives. The previous treatment of passives without the agent phrase was to derive them by a transformation of indefinite agent deletion. However, this treatment is dubious for some reasons. First, this treatment would predict the sentences in (3) are synonymous as those in (4). (Examples are from Freidin (1975 : 387))

- (3) a. John wants to be left alone in his room.
- b. Jane was elected president of the club.
- c. The compound was oxidized.
- (4) a. John wants to be left alone in his room by someone.
- b. Jane was elected president of the club by someone.
- c. The compound was oxidized by something.

The prediction is of course wrong. The more plausible sources of the sentences in (3) will be (5).

- (5) a. John wants to be left alone in his room by everyone.
- b. Jane was elected president of the club by a majority of the member.
- c. The compound was oxidized by air.

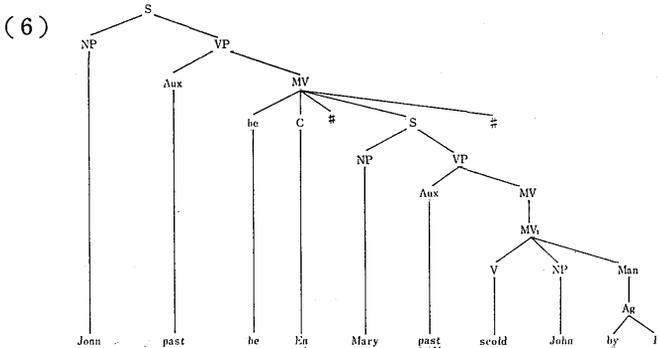
Another reason for doubting the agent deletion transformation is related to language acquisition. It seems that no evidence has been given so far that the passives with agent phrases are acquired by children before truncated passives. Rather the case is reverse. If we assume, as in the derivational theory of complexity, that the psychological complexity in understanding and producing sentences has to do with the number of transformations, the derivation of agentless passives by the application of the agent deletion rule would be dubious. In the framework that derives the passive through two transformational operations, the agentless passives have no underlying subjects but they have empty subjects. Since the *by* phrase is an optional constituent, it does not have to appear in every sentence. If an unexpanded dummy NP appears as the subject of a verb that is to be passivized, the NP preposing will obligatorily apply. Apart from the validity of the derivational theory of complexity, the analysis of agentless passives in this framework can avoid the awkwardness caused by the presence of the agent deletion transformation.

Recent examination of various languages in the world has shown that many of them allow agentless passives only. Concerning English passives too, Jespersen (1933 : 121) says, "...over 70 percent of passive sentences found in English literature contain no mention of the active subject." These facts may imply that passives without agent *by* phrase are unmarked passive sentences whereas those with specified agent phrase are marked ones. If so, the one-rule analysis in which the *by* phrase is regarded as an inherent part of every passive construction cannot capture this generalization. The derivation of short passives from the full passives by means of the deletion rule would

imply the opposit. The passive transformation involving two-step process, on the other hand, is at least free from such implication.

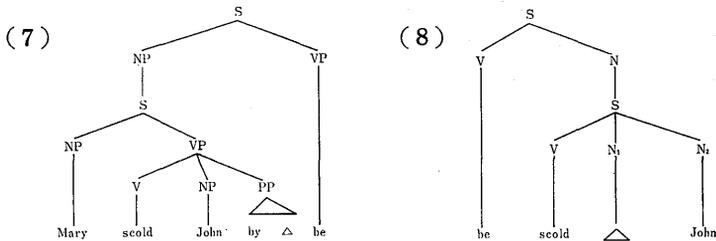
R. Lakoff (1971 : 159) observes that *be*-passive rather often appears to mark the logical subject as the bearer of new information. Now what we should keep in mind is that, in order for the logical subject to become the bearer of new information, it is necessary for the old bearer of new information to stop bearing it—namely, the logical object must cease to be the bearer of new information. Generally the order of constituents in a sentence is related or rather determined by the amount of new infomation they convey and the constituents bearing old information tend to come at the beginning of the sentence and those conveying new information at the end. Thus it seems that the intrinsic part of passivization is the logical object's becoming non-bearer of new information, syntactically it means the logical object's becoming the subject, rather than the logical subject's becoming the bearer of new information, namely its appearance in the *by* phrase at the end. It is quite reasonable, therefore, not to consider *by* phrase as an obligatory constituent of the passive construction. The two-rule passive transformation is well-motivated in this respect.

Alternative analyses consider the passive a significant change in meaning and focuses on the prominence of the object noun phrase. More importance is given to the manner in which the passive focuses upon the object NP. Hasegawa proposes the following underlying structure for "John was scolded by Mary."



The passive sentence is derived by the operations of three transformations:² (i) Tag (the agentive rule) replaces the dummy symbol of the agentive phrase with the subject of the embedded S (John past be En # past scold John by Mary #), (ii) Tvc (the verbal complement rule) substitutes the complementizer *En* for the Aux of the embedded S (John past be # En scold John by Mary #), and (iii) Terase (the equi-NP erasure rule) deletes the object of the embedded phrase on identity with the subject of the matrix sentence (John past be En scold by Mary). Hasegawa's analysis has two characteristics: (i) the sentence which will undergo passivization is embedded as an object complement of the verb *be*, and (ii) *be* exists in the deep structure, not transformationally inserted, and it is regarded as a main verb taking a complement clause.

Similar analyses are proposed by R. Lakoff and Langacker-Munro. Lakoff proposes (7) as the structure for *be*-passives.³ Assuming that passivization is one of the universal phenomena with cross-linguistic significance, Langacker and Munro proposes the underlying structure somewhat like (8).⁴



The characteristics of Lakoff's analysis are (i) that the passivized clause originates as a subject complement of the verb *be*, and (2) that *be* originates in the deep structure as the higher verb. It is apparently the existential verb. In Langacker and Munro, the passive sentence is derived when the direct object N_s is substituted for the unspecified subject N_i⁵ and appears as the surface subject of the verb. The lower verb will function as the main-clause predicate and *be* will be reduced to the status of an auxiliary verb in English (or a passive

suffix in other languages). Their analysis has the following properties : (i) the sentence to undergo passivization is embedded as a subject complement clause of the predicate *be*, (ii) *be* is regarded as a stative-existential predicate, (iii) the underlying subject is unspecified, and (iv) no agentive *by*-phrase is posited as an inherent part of the passive construction (when it appears, it will have an external source, e. g., derived from a conjunct).

The analyses proposed by Hasegawa, Lakoff, and Langacker-Munro make similar claims in their underlying structures of passive sentences. The presence of *be* as a main verb in the deep structure focuses on the stative quality of the passive. Existence or stative quality is more naturally expressed by *be* than *do* which focuses on activity or agency. The synonymy of passive auxiliary verbs in many languages of the world will support the presence of *be* in the deep structure. In the other transformational analysis, *be* is inserted transformationally for purely grammatical purposes and its status is left unexplained.

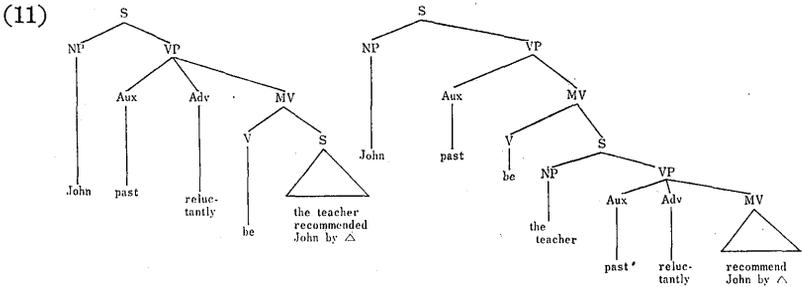
Secondly, the underlying structures of passives in these analyses contain a sentential complement embedded either as a subject or as an object of the higher verb *be*. Not only in the position of the embedded S but also in some other minor respects do their underlying structures differ. However, the major similarity is the embedding of an active sentence beneath the higher verb *be*. What kind of advantages does this underlying representation for passive sentences have? I would like to point out that Hasegawa's underlying representation, especially, works well in two points.

Certain attitudinal adverbials behave differently in active sentences and their corresponding passive sentences. The (a) sentences below are unambiguous while the (b) sentences are ambiguous.

- (9) a. The teacher recommended John reluctantly.
- b. John was recommended by the teacher reluctantly.
- (10) a. The policeman shot John intentionally.
- b. John was shot by the policeman intentionally.

In the (a) sentences, the only interpretation we get is that it was

the teacher and the policeman who acted reluctantly and intentionally. On the other hand, we can interpret the (b) sentences in two ways according as who acted reluctantly, the teacher or John, in (9b), and according as who acted intentionally, the policeman or John, in (10b). Though the preferred interpretation attributes the reluctance and intention to the surface subject (i.e., the teacher and the policeman), it is possible to attribute them to the logical subject. Contrary to the absence of ambiguity in the (a) sentences, the (b) sentences are more clearly ambiguous. Now if we adopt Hasegawa's underlying representation, we can account for the ambiguity. The deep structures of the two readings of the (9b) sentence will be as follows (irrelevant details omitted):



Adv originates as a VP constituent either in the main clause or in the lower S, which will account for the two possible readings of the (b) sentences.

The second point that will support Hasegawa's analysis concerns passives with reflexives. It has been observed that reflexive passives with ordinary stress are ill-formed:

- (12) a. John praised himself.
- b. *John was praised by himself.

This cannot be accounted for by ordering reflexive before passive, for the result we would get is by far the worse as in (13).

- (13) *Himself was praised by John.

Postal (1971) proposes to account for these facts by means of the

corresponding active sentences express. Chomsky-Emonds' treatment and Hasegawa-Lakoff-Langacker-Munro's treatments differ in their ways of identifying this *something*.

IV

It has been pointed out by Freidin and Bresnan that it is feasible to express the generalizations captured by the passive transformation equally well by lexical rules (Freidin) or by both lexical rules and rules of semantic composition (Bresnan).⁶ They argue that the surface structures of passives can be generated in the base and therefore the so-called transformation is not necessary.

The arguments for eliminating the passive transformation from the transformational component rest on several observations. First, some verbs cannot undergo passivization. Not all verbs followed by NP can be passivized and it seems that whether the passive transformation can apply or not depends on the lexical property of the main verb of the sentence. Passivization is "lexically governed" (Bresnan) and should rather be treated as a lexical property of verbs by means of a lexical redundancy rule.

Secondly, the passive transformation results in a structure which can be generated by means of the rules of the base. It is what Emonds calls a structure-preserving rule. The passive transformation moves NP constituents into the positions which are already provided by the phrase structure rules. According to the lexicalist position, transformations distort the basic structural patterns of the language and result in structures ungenerable in the base (e. g., Question Movement Transformation).⁷

Another supporting argument for the reanalysis of passivization as a nontransformational rule is that the assumption that the grammatical relations obtained in the deep structure relate to the meaning of the sentence is not valid. The important function of the passive transformation has been supposed to associate the underlying gram-

verbs that cannot undergo passivization by using the rule-feature [-Passive] (G. Lakoff (1970)), for example, has been criticized by the lexicalist advocates as an ad-hoc device. They claim that lexical rules, different from transformational rules, allow idiosyncratic and unsystematic exceptions, and thus if passivization is treated as a lexical rule, a lexical item incapable of passivization is quite normal. However, are the unpassivable verbs so unsystematic and idiosyncratic? This seems to be the question worth considering. Not all verbs followed by NP can undergo passivization, but it seems also true that the verbs that cannot be passivized consist of a small group of verbs with quite systematic characters in common. They are semantically somewhat similar to the verb *be*, which presupposes the existence of the relationship between an event and its participant. They cannot at least take manner adverbials which describe the manner of activity (not every verb that cannot accompany manner adverbials cannot be passivized, though), nor can they undergo action nominalization as in “*John’s having of a new car.” If they are systematic exceptions to passivization rather than purely lexical idiosyncratic exceptions, we may, as is implied by Wasow (1977), for example, appeal to some kind of general rules of semantic interpretation which will filter out the ungrammatical passive sentences of this group by assigning no reading to them. The lexical treatment as is proposed by Freidin, however, implies that they are rather unsystematic exceptions, and thus it does not explain their systematic inability to passivize, either.

The passive predicates are generated as adjectives in the base and the passive *be* is treated as a main verb in the lexical analysis proposed by Freidin. However, the analysis of the passive predicates as adjectives has some serious problems. The first is the problem concerning double-object verbs.¹⁰ In fact, Freidin notices this problem, saying this might be the most serious drawback to his analysis (401).

(17) The girl was offered a gold watch.

If the passive predicate *offered* is an adjective, phrase structure rules

would have to allow AP to have an optional NP after the constituent A, which is obviously wrong.

(18) *The girl was conscious the fact.

(19) The girl was conscious of the fact.

The adjective cannot appear before NP without a preposition.

The second problem involves complements. The sentences with NP or AP complements have well-formed corresponding passive counterparts.

(20) a. The teacher considered him a genius.

b. He was considered a genius by the teacher.

(21) a. John found Tom very agreeable.

b. Tom was found very agreeable by John.

However, adjectives can take neither NP complements nor AP complements.

(22) *The girl was happy a teacher.

(23) *The girl was eager helpful.

We could assume that (20b), (21b), (22) and (23) have the underlying structures (24), (25), (26) and (27) respectively and that the passive sentences (20b) and (21b) derive through the application of To-be deletion.

(24) He was considered to be a genius by the teacher.

(25) Tom was found to be very agreeable by John.

(26) The girl was happy to be a teacher.

(27) The girl was eager to be helpful.

If so, we would still have to account for the fact that To-be deletion applies only to the passive predicates and that it cannot apply to the adjectives. Moreover, we will see a further inadequacy of this treatment when we consider the sentences with the following VP complements.

(28) a. I found the boy playing outside.

b. The boy was found playing outside.

(29) *The boy was enthusiastic watching the baseball game.¹¹

As is shown in (29), adjectives cannot be followed by *ing* VP complements whereas the passive sentence with *ing* VP complements are perfectly grammatical. Thus the passive predicates involving complements behave very differently from the adjectives. If we derive (20b), (21b) and (28b) transformationally, we can naturally account for the different behaviors between the passive constructions and the adjective phrases. The transformational account can capture the significant generalizations that the lexical treatment of passives does not capture.

V

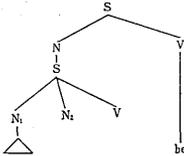
The passive construction has been one of the oldest and most controversial topics since the earliest framework of transformational grammar. It has been investigated from different angles—structurally or semantically, independently of, or with reference to, other constructions, or even cross-linguistically. Some interesting properties of passivization became clear to us which may help to account for the unanswered questions such as the status of the passive auxiliary verb *be* or the optionality of the agent phrase.

Concerning the formulation of the passive rule, two major approaches have been proposed. The so-called passive transformation rule has been widely accepted because it can avoid inelegant duplications and can capture significant generalizations about the relationship between active and passive sentences. The treatments of passives within the transformational approach differ from one another. However, they agree in the sense that they all derive passive sentences by means of transformational rules; passive sentences are not derived purely by phrase structure rules alone. Compared with other syntactic phenomena, the passive construction seems to be a very promising candidate for the lexical treatment. However, the reformulation of the passive transformational rule as a lexical rule and generation of the passive predicates as adjectives in the phrase structure rules misses the significant syntactic generalizations which the transforma-

tional account can express. There does not seem to be sufficient reason or motivation for rejecting the transformational derivation of passives.

NOTES

1. Haiman, 1976.
2. For independent motivations of these rules (except T_{sg}), see Hasegawa, 1968, ch. 4.
3. Lakoff makes no mention of the agent phrase in the tree. However, since she says that the derivation involves the switching of the subject and object, the *by*-phrase cannot have an external source. I tentatively postulated an agent phrase as a constituent of VP in the embedded sentence.
4. Langacker proposes the basic underlying structure for passives in Mojave and Uto-Aztecan as follows:



Since Mojave and Uto-Aztecan are verb-final languages, he uses verb-final structures. I use the verb-initial structure for English following what is suggested in p. 793 and p. 817. He implies that he will have a similar underlying structure with Lakoff's if his analysis is applied to English except that the lower subject will be unspecified. However, he says that the linear order of constituents may be considered arbitrary.

5. "An unspecified subject" is defined as "one whose existence is semantically implied, but which is identified by neither reference nor lexical content (p. 791).
6. According to the lexical interpretive model of transformational grammar proposed by Bresnan, the component of semantics consists of functional composition rules which apply to deep structure and surface interpretive rules which apply to surface structure.
7. See Bresnan (1976) for details.
8. Freidin follows Gruber's idea of semantic functions.
9. Freidin further proposes to state the selectional restrictions in terms of semantic functions rather than syntactic categories (p. 396).
10. This problem eventually leads Wasow to proposing two types of passives—lexical and transformational.
11. I consider that the following examples of adjectives derive by the application of right dislocation.
 - (i) It is nice seeing you.
 - (ii) It would be fun, visiting foreign countries.

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