

The Passive Situation

Noriko Ue

I

The passive construction, which is one of the most controversial topics in the literature of generative transformational grammar, has been discussed and examined from three different angles: from syntactic viewpoint, from semantic viewpoint, and from functional sentence perspective. Syntactically speaking, the active vs. passive relation in English is characterized in terms of post-posing of the pre-verbal NP and preposing of the post-verbal NP. In other words, the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the corresponding passive sentence and the subject of the active sentence, if it is overtly expressed, appears as the object of the preposition *by*. The postulation of a higher underlying verb BE by Hasegawa (1968) and R. Lakoff (1971) is an attempt to capture the meaning difference between passive sentences and their corresponding active sentences as well as an attempt to give justification and/or motivation for passive transformation. The passive construction can be viewed in terms of semantic notions such as Agent, Theme (Object), etc. Fillmore (1968: 37-40) suggests that the passive sentence is the result of nonnormal choice of subject, that is, when non-Agentive NP is chosen as a subject. Jackendoff (1972) proposes 'Thematic Hierarchy Condition' for an acceptable passive. In either of the analyses, passives involve the removal of the Agentive NP from the subject position and thus the subject in the passive sentence is represented no longer as 'acting' but as 'being acted upon.' Discourse influences also play important roles in determining the choice of passive sentences over active sentences. It is a natural linguistic phenomenon to present a sentence in such a way in which a thematic element is placed at the beginning. Passive constructions become obligatory because of the natural development of the discourse. It is an undeniable fact that discourse factors interact with syntax.

There are close ties between the levels of syntax, semantics, and functional sentence perspective, but in this paper I will limit myself to examining and understanding the semantics of the passive and the characteristics of the passive situation. What is the passive? What is the essence of the passive and what is the *raison d'être* for the passive?

II

Sentences (1) and (2) are typically analyzed as passives in which the logical subject, whether it is overtly expressed or just understood, is considered to play the role of Agent and the logical object, the role of Theme.

- (1) John was beaten by Tom.

- (2) The murderer was caught yesterday.

The passive sentences have generally been studied in relation to their corresponding active sentences, and thus the Agentive NP *Tom* in (1) and the unspecified Agent in (2) are originally active subjects. The attention to this active-passive relationship has naturally led to the hypothesis that 'the purpose of the passive is (in part) to background a relatively "agent-like" participant' (Kirsner 1977). The passive is thought to be a device to avoid mentioning an agent as the superficial subject of a sentence which functions as a topic of the sentence. In other words, if a sentence has an agentive subject, it safely, though not without exception, guarantees that it will have a corresponding passive sentence. Jackendoff (1972 : 42) puts Agent in the highest in the hierarchy of thematic relations and sets up the Thematic Hierarchy Condition (THC) on the application of the passive : The passive *by*-phrase must be higher on the Thematic Hierarchy than the derived subject. The Thematic Hierarchy set up by Jackendoff is as follows :

1. Agent
2. Location, Source, Goal
3. Theme

According to the THC, sentences (3b) and (4b) are predicted to be acceptable and unacceptable respectively.

- (3) a. John hit the car with a crash.
- b. The car was hit by John.
- (4) a. Bill weighed two hundred pounds.
- b. *Two hundred pounds are weighed by Bill. (from Jackendoff)

(3b) is the passive of the agentive reading of (3a) with *John* as Agent and *the car* as Theme. The nonagentive reading of (3a) in which *John* is interpreted as Theme cannot have a passive form because it would violate the THC.¹ Sentence (4a) has a verb of measurement and since the measure phrase is an expression of location on the scale of value measured, the subject *Bill* is Theme, for its location is being asserted. Thus (4b) is unacceptable because the *by*-phrase, being Theme, is lower on the Thematic Hierarchy than the derived subject *two hundred pounds*, which is Location.

What Jackendoff's THC implies is that the less agent-like the backgrounded logical subjects are, the greater will be the possibility of the passive sentences being unacceptable. When the NP in *by*-phrase is Agent, it is an acceptable passive whereas it is unacceptable if the NP in *by*-phrase is Theme. The use of the passive seems to be more felicitous the more agent-like the logical subject is. Observe the following :

- (5) a. Many people imitate President Ford.
- b. President Ford is imitated by many people.
- (6) a. Many people know President Ford.
- b. ? President Ford is known by many people.
- (7) a. Many people resemble President Ford.
- b. *President Ford is resembled by many people. (from Kirsner)

Imitate involves more action than *know* ; *know* involves more action than *resemble*.² Thus *many people* in (5) is more of an agent than in (6) ; *many people* in (6) is more

of an agent than in (7).

However, we cannot, of course, say that the subject NP which is to be backgrounded cannot be non-Agent ; in fact, we can find acceptable passive sentences with various kinds of non-agentive NPs in *by*-phrases.

- (8) a. Harry regards Bill as pompous.
b. Bill is regarded by Harry as pompous.
- (9) a. The estate agent has already sold the house.
b. The house has already been sold by the estate agent.
- (10) a. The police kept the jewels.
b. The jewels were kept by the police.

In (8b), *Bill* is Theme and *Harry* is Goal (Jackendoff 1972 : 45). *The estate agent* in (9a) is Agent and it is also Source. *The house* is Theme, which passes from the estate agent's possession to another's. The sentences in (10) involve possessional location (Ibid : 30), and *the jewels* is Theme and *the police* is Location.

The fact that not only Agent NPs but also Location, Source, or Goal can be backgrounded to form passives seems to cast doubt on the hypothesis that the purpose of the passive is to background and remove the agent from the subject position. Here I would like to refer to some of the interesting examples that Bolinger (1974) gives. He examines the passive of prepositional verbs and tries to define the factors which mainly determine whether a passive will be acceptable or not.

- (11) a. The boy walked under the bridge.
b. *The bridge was walked under by the boy.
c. Generations of lovers have walked under the bridge.
d. This bridge has been walked under by generations of lovers.
- (12) a. The train approached me.
b. *I was approached by the train.
c. The stranger approached me.
d. I was approached by the stranger.
- (13) a. My brother has lived in Chicago.
b. *Chicago has been lived in by my brother.
c. Several famous personages have lived in the house.
d. The house has been lived in by several famous personages.

Bolinger explains that there is conceptually some difference between (a) sentences and (c) sentences in each pair. The former express purely spatial or existential relationship ; that is, *the boy*, *the train*, and *my brother* are the things or persons that are merely located with reference to *the bridge*, *I*, and *Chicago* respectively. On the other hand, the latter show that the subject NPs are conceived to be true patients that are genuinely affected by the action of the verbs (67). This semantic contrast results in the difference of their acceptability. The true-patient-like character of the subject NP suggested by Bolinger seems to be a very significant notion when we consider the semantics of passives as well as the purpose of the passive. In fact, patient-hood-ness of the passive subject is closely related to agentivity or potency of the active subject. To say that the purpose of the passive is to background an agent NP from the subject

position of a sentence implies, viewed from the other angle, saying that the purpose of the passive is to foreground a non-agent NP into the subject position. As the THC predicts, the most normal passive will have Theme (patient in the sense of Bolinger) as its subject and the more true-patient-like the subject NP is, the more acceptable the passive will be.

The significance of true-patient-hood-ness of the passive subject, rather than that of agentivity of the logical subject of the passive sentence, becomes clearer when we pay attention to the fact that the agentive *by*-phrase is quite often not mentioned. The existence of so many agentless passives seems to suggest the marginality of agent and the nonmarginality of patient term in the passive.

III

Keeping in mind the patient-like-ness of the subject NP and its nonmarginality, I would like to consider the passive not simply as a derivation of the active but in its own right. In order to investigate the semantic *raison d'être* of the passive, it seems necessary to attempt to characterize the passive construction first of all. What is the essential meaning and use of the passive construction?

The comparison with the causative situation seems to make it easier for us to observe the passive situation. The causative situation is the one which involves an agent's or causer's causation of the occurrence of an event. When an event comes from Y and if the source Y is an animate being (typically a human being), we can naturally interpret the situation as 'Y brings about the event X.' In other words, Y causes X, which is the causative situation. Thus the occurrence of the event X is wholly dependent on the causer Y. Y is what is called an agent who works upon X. On the other hand, we can think of the situation in which the event X comes or happens to Y. When the goal Y is typically a human being, the situation can be interpreted as 'Y receives or gets X.' When Y gets the event X, it is naturally influenced or acted upon, or affected by the event. This is a typical passive situation. The causative situation and the passive situation are, in fact, closely related; they are on the same scale. The one concerns the source-event relation; the other the event-goal relation.

When we look into the characterizations of the passive situation more closely, we will notice three important things. First, viewed from the above mentioned direction, what can be thought of as a passive situation will turn out to be wider than has generally been thought of. The passive situation is defined as the one in which an event or a state of affairs comes to exist from an external source and a person is inevitably affected by that external force, cause or agency. It implies that the person is unself-controllably involved in the situation. The person unvolitionally participates in the situation. Here we must notice that the person can be involved in and affected by the event in two ways: he may be involved in the event directly or indirectly. When his involvement is direct, it can be physical. When his participation is rather indirect, it is likely to be psychological or mental. According to the characterization

given in the previous paragraph, either of the two should be qualified as a passive situation.

The second point is closely related to the first point. When a person is physically and directly involved in and affected by the content of the event that happens to him, he is an obligatory element in the event described. He is one of the acting participants of the event. On the other hand, when he is indirectly and psychologically involved, he may be either in the event or outside the event. The action described in the event may occur without the actual presence of the person in it, but it may bring some effect on him.

The third point is the optionality of the mentioning of the source of the event. Since the main characterization of a passive situation is the event-goal relation, where the event comes from does not matter much. It is possible to say a person X brings about an event Y to a person Z, but it is not always necessary. The essential point of the passive is the presence of an entity's inevitable receiving of the event.

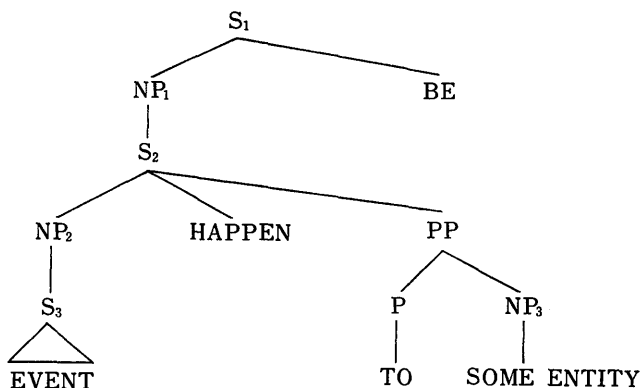
IV

- (14) a. The little boy was scolded bitterly by the teacher.
- b. He was given this puppy by a farmer who he happened to meet at the station.
- c. Two of his friends were killed.
- d. These stairs have been run up so much that the carpet is threadbare. (Bolinger)
- (15) a. John had a painting stolen (from his private collection). (Dieterich)
- b. I had my train of thought interrupted by a knock at the door. (Egawa)
- c. John had a stranger kiss him on Main Street. (Dietrich)
- d. There is nothing that exasperates the wife of a literary man more than to have another woman tell her flattering things about him. (Yamakawa)
- e. She had the baby crying all night.
- f. Marge's car broke down on me. (Menn)
 Every three years he's raised the rent on us. (Curme)
 My plants are dying on me. (Curme)

Sentences in (14) are traditionally called *be*-passives and they have been the chief object of study in the past. Although their passive meaning has been pointed out in traditional grammar books, sentences in (15) have been in most cases excluded in the generative transformational account of passive constructions. Makino (1973) suggests very convincingly that *have* expressions as in (15) are also to be considered as passive sentences. His arguments are based on the Japanese passive constructions but it is shown that they are perfectly applicable to the English passive constructions. I found his argument very sound, for it reflects the deeper semantic aspects of the passive mentioned above. In what follows I will argue for his hypothesis clarifying the differences between the regular *be*-passives and the *have*-passives as well as their similarities.

Considering the semantic characterizations of the passive situation, I propose that the regular *be*-passive have the following underlying structure in the deepest level.

(16)



If I use Fillmore's (1971) case roles, NP₁ and NP₂ would be assigned O (Object) and NP₃, G (Goal). The underlying structure (16) expresses that the event (NP₁) in which the event (NP₂) happens to or befalls NP₃ (G) comes to exist. The abstract verbs HAPPEN and BE are postulated to reflect this situation. It is also to be noted that the abstract verb HAPPEN implies that the event (NP₂) is not intended by NP₃; the action expressed in the event is not agentively undertaken by NP₃. The event merely happens to the goal-assigned NP₃ from outside. The postulation of BE also implies that the passive in essence has much existential character. Taking (14a) as an example and plugging it into (16), we will get the following semantic representation :

(17) [[the teacher scold the little boy]_{s3} HAPPEN to the little boy]_{s2} BE

The little boy (NP₃ with Goal role) is directly influenced by the event S₃; thus S₃ is required to have non-agentive NP which is identical with NP₃.

The deep underlying structure of the passive expressed in (16) seems to explain naturally the nonexistence of the passive sentences with particular classes of verbs, such as *have*, *lack*, *cost*, *resemble*, *equal*, *suffice*, *last*, *suit*, *weigh*, *befall*, etc.³

(18) Mr. Smith has/ lacks money.

*Money is had/lacked by Mr. Smith.

(19) The book cost one thousand yen.

*One thousand yen was cost by the book.

(20) Bad luck befell the poor woman.

*The poor woman was befallen by bad luck.

(21) The boy met the teacher on the way.

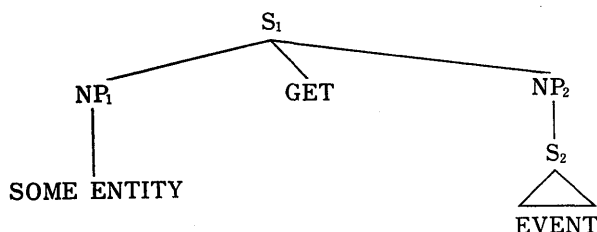
*The teacher was met by the boy on the way.

(18) and (19) can actually be considered as a kind of existential expressions. (18) expresses the existence/nonexistence of money : money *is* or *is not* at Mr. Smith. (19) expresses the existence of the book on the scale of value being measured (Jackendoff 1972 : 44). In (20), as the verb *befall* literally suggests, bad luck comes to exist in the poor woman. All these verbs of so-called possession and measurement are existential expressions in essence ; thus it means they are already passives semantically. Hence there is no ground for the passive situation to occur. The propositional con-

tent 'Mr. Smith has money' does not have to come to exist because it is already existent in Mr. Smith. The sentence (21) also violates the necessary condition for the passive situation to occur. In the passive the existence of an event or a state must be evoked by an entity which is different from the one identified as NP₃. A passive situation is, as it were, a one-way phenomenon. However, the boy's meeting the teacher necessarily means the teacher's meeting the boy. So-called symmetric predicates are disqualified as passivizable verbs in this respect.

The deepest underlying structure of the passive being (16), I would suggest the following structure (22) be derived when the situation is viewed from the viewpoint of the argument named Goal.

(22)



The subject NP₁, which has the role G,⁴ is now the entity which gets (in the sense of 'receive') the situation identified by the proposition S₂. Thus the derived representation of (17) plugged into (22) is as follows :

(23) the little boy GET [the teacher scold the little boy]_{s2}.

Now let us turn to the *have* constructions and *on NP* expressions in (15). Before getting into the sentences in (15), I would like to refer to some of the characteristics of the *have* constructions in general. *Have* constructions can be either causative or passive in meaning.⁵ But whether they have passive or causative meaning, they seem to have the following characteristics :

(i) The subject NPs must be human.

(23) What I said { ^{made}
*_{had} } her cry.

My need for cigaretts { ^{made}
*_{had} } the maid go to the store for a pack.

(Talmy) (causative implication)

(24) *The door had a knob broken.

I had a leg broken. (passive implication)

(ii) The *have* expressions imply indirectness.

(25) a. He threatened Mary and { ^{made}
got
?*_{had} } her { ^φ
to
φ } clean the room.

b. I got the squirrel to leave its tree (by fanning smoke in its eyes).

*I had the squirrel leave its tree. (Talmy)

c. I made / *had the plate slide across the table (by throwing a stick at it).

(Talmy) (causative implication)

(26) a. My purse was stolen.

b. I had my purse stolen.

- c. Bad things happened to him regularly by chance.
- d. He had bad things happening to him regularly by chance.

(passive implication)

Productive causative forms generally express directive causative situation which involves the causee as a volitional (agentive) entity and the causer as an agent giving directions to the causee (Shibatani 1976 : 32). However, *have* causative seems to be used for noncoercive causation, which is different from, for example, *make* causative which involves more coercion (Shibatani 1973 : 335). A greater degree of coercion implies a greater degree of working on the part of a causer upon a causee, more direct involvement in the action ; sometimes it becomes like a manipulative causation. Contrast between directness and indirectness can be seen in (25). Where causation is meant to be immediately directed at the causee and performed by the causer in person as in (25a), *have* is inadequate. This indirectness of *have* has much to do with the obligatoriness of the agent NP as the underlying subject of the post-*have* complement. Nonagentive entity or agentive entity which is not sentient cannot be the subject of the complement.⁶

Indirect aspect of the *have* expressions can be seen in their passive use, too. (26b) and (26d) imply (26a) and (26c) respectively ; however, an extra participant is introduced in (26b, d). (26a) and (26c) are rather neutral in expression ; action or the event itself is focussed. On the other hand, in (26b) and (26d), a greater interest is given to the indirect involvement of the extra participant (i. e. the subject NP) in the described event. *My purse* is directly involved in the act of stealing but since *I* is the possessor of the purse, *I* is inevitably involved in the event that befalls his possession. Likewise, (26d) focusses the influence of the event on the additional participant more than the happening of bad events. We must notice that even if the underlying subjects of the *have* complements have indefinite articles as in (27) (=15a) and (28), they are understood as *John's painting* and *John's brother*.

(27) John had a painting stolen.

(28) John had a brother drafted into the army.

Indirect involvement of the *have* expressions requires us to interpret the possessor of a painting and a brother to be *John*. The unacceptability of the following also confirms indirect aspect of the *have* constructions.

(29) *I had myself scolded by the teacher.

The sentence implies *myself* is directly involved in the act of scolding and yet it implies at the same time *I* is indirectly involved, which is clearly contradictory.

Paying attention to the above mentioned semantic features of *have* expressions, let us turn to the examples in (15) again. Compared with the following general *be*-passives, (15a, b, c) have some psychological implications on the subject *John* and *I*.

(30) His painting was stolen.

(31) My train of thought was interrupted by a knock at the door.

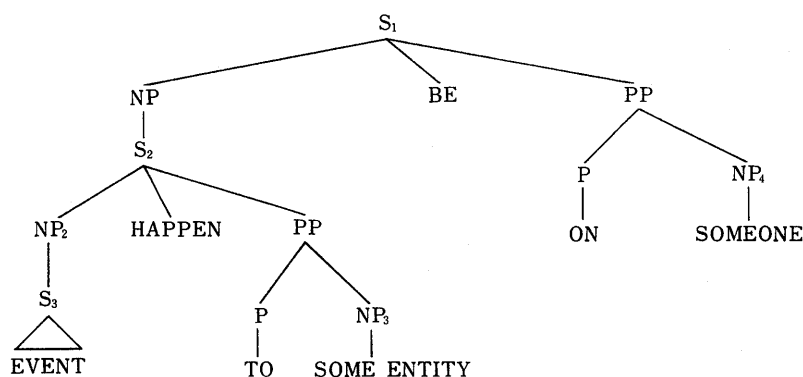
(32) John was kissed by a stranger on Main Street.

Some detrimental feelings, feelings of suffering, irritation, embarrassment, for example, are generally conveyed. In (15d, e), too, 'another woman's telling her flattering things

about him' and 'the baby's crying all night' happened to *the wife* and *she* and this impinges on the personal state of *the wife* and *she*, affecting their psychological state. It is clear by now that the subject of *have* construction is a human entity which experiences the content of the event expressed in the complement and is affected by it psychologically—in most cases, unpleasant feelings. This psychological involvement of the subject NP in the event is nothing but its indirect involvement in the event. Thus we can see that the role of the subject NP is, in Fillmore's case framework, Experiencer. Related to (15a, b, c, d, e) is the *on NP* expression pointed out by Menn (1972). The same situation can be realized at the surface differently as in (15f). The event can appear as subject and the experiencer in an oblique constituent. This construction has essentially the same sense as the other *have* constructions; therefore, semantically, they are passive situations.

The above argument leads me to postulate (33) as the deepest underlying structure of the *have*-passives and *on NP* expressions.

(33)



Like the underlying structure of the regular *be*-passives (i. e. (16)), (33) describes the event's coming into existence with external source. In addition to that, it also denotes the additional entity's (NP₄) emotional or psychological interest in the event. NP₄ is an extra, optionally added, element, which happens to be indirectly involved in the event. Thus it is the person to whose advantage or disadvantage (in most cases, the latter) the event results. This is why Menn (1972) postulates Ethical Dative in the underlying representation. Makino proposes to postulate Dative and Beneficiary to distinguish the feeling of disadvantage from the beneficiary, willing feeling. However, the difference in kind of psychological effect, namely advantage or disadvantage, seems to be a matter of context and of lexical meanings. What is really passive-like character in (33) is the presence of the two semantic primitives—HAPPEN and BE. If we take (15a) as an example, we will get (34) as its underlying representation.

(34) [[someone steal a painting]_{S3} HAPPEN to a painting]_{S2} BE on John

A *painting* is the undergoer of the propositional content (S₃) and *John* is the psychological undergoer of the event.

One thing that we should notice about (33) is that, since the abstract verb HAPPEN is essentially a one-place predicate, the goal NP₃ could be missing. It is possible that an event (S₃) happens without having any specific entity to be directly directed

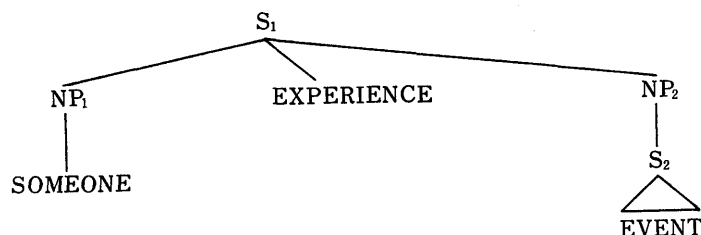
at (i. e. NP₃). But even in such a case the presence of passive morphemes HAPPEN and BE requires the presence of some goal-like entity which is subjected to the propositional content of the event ; thus *on* NP₄ is called for. The following shows such situation.

(35) Marge's car broke down on me. (=15 f)

[[Marge's car broke down]_{s3} HAPPEN]_{s2} BE on I

Corresponding to (22), we have the following derived structure of (33) when the human entity which is psychologically influenced (NP₄ in (33)) is fronted :

(36)



NP₁ becomes a possessor of an act, but in this case it does not mean a physical possession but rather psychological and indirect possession. The subject NP₁ is Experiencer, the entity which experiences a psychological event. The abstract verb EXPERIENCE is postulated to imply 'being influenced by what one meets with (pleasant or unpleasant).' The derived representation of (34) in terms of (36) would be

(37) John EXPERIENCE [someone steal a painting]_{s2}

Thus, it follows that, when there is a human entity which psychologically receives (i. e. experiences) the effect of the content of the proposition in which he is involved in some way or other, the English language expresses this situation with *have* or *on NP* constructions.

V

In this paper I have not tried to examine how the semantic underlying structure of the passive is related to the actual surface forms, but have only tried to characterize what semantic elements constitute passive situations. Passive situations describe that an event happens to a person or a thing from some external sources and that entity receives, or is involved in, the situation unintentionally. The event, therefore, is conceived as autonomously occurrent and as happening to the receiver of the action. With this interpretation of the passive, we find that not only regular *be* (and *get*) expressions but also *have* and *on NP* constructions can be regarded as the expressions of passive situations.

NOTES

1. James P. Gee (1974 : 305) expresses doubts on Jackendoff's THC saying that the NPs in the *by*-phrases in the following sentences are Themes but that they are acceptable passive sentences in spite of the violation of the THC.
 - (i) The rocks were hit by the breakers.

- (ii) The shore was touched (lapped, washed) by the breaking waves.
 However, it is quite dubious that *the breakers* and *the breaking waves* are really Themes. Rather they have more of Agent-like character. They cannot be identified as a willful entity which performs an act but they can be identified as entities with such *potency*. They are potentially capable of acting. Thus Jackendoff's THC is not fatally argued against.
2. According to G. Lakoff (1966), *know* is stative because it is not found in progressive, Do-something construction, command imperative, etc. However, *know* can appear in the imperative as in the following:
 - (i) Know the answer by tomorrow.
 This suggests that *know* is less statal than such verbs as *resemble*, for *resemble* cannot pass any of the testings Lakoff gives.
 3. As is well known, when actional aspect is involved, some of these verbs can be passivized.
 - (i) Lunch can be *had* at eleven o'clock.
 (=eaten, taken)
 - (ii) He was *met* by his uncle at the station.
 (=welcomed)
 4. Makino (1973) postulates an abstract verb RECEIVE and associates $\left(\begin{smallmatrix} B \\ D \end{smallmatrix}\right) \text{So O}$ with RECEIVE. Since D in Fillmore (1968) is defined as the case of the animate being affected by the state or action identified by the verb, the assignment of D to NP₂ is inappropriate for the passive sentences with an inanimate object. The modified cases in Fillmore (1971) seem more appropriate.
 5. Dieterich (1975) classifies *have* constructions into agentive *have* constructions and experienter *have* constructions.
 6. Further evidence for the obligatoriness of Agent in the complement of *have* causatives is as follows:
 - (i) I had Mary get a new dress.
 - (ii) I had Mr. Smith marry Ruth.
 - (iii) Mary got a new dress.
 - (iv) Mr. Smith married Ruth
 Although (iii) can mean either "Mary (Agent) obtained a new dress" or "Mary (Goal) received a new dress," (i) has the former interpretation alone. Likewise, (ii) means only "I had Mr. Smith marry Ruth to a certain man."

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Noriko Ue

This is an informal attempt to characterize the passive situation in order to get deeper insights into the grammatical description of the passive constructions in English. The fundamental semantic aspect of the passive situation is an entity's reception of an event and its unself-controllable involvement or participation in the state of affairs. It is suggested that deep morphemes HAPPEN and BE be postulated to reflect this basic meaning of the passive situation. The underlying structure with HAPPEN and BE implies that the event is considered as autonomously occurrent, which explains naturally why the class of unpassivizable verbs is not idiosyncratic. It is also argued that *have* and *on* constructions can represent the passive situation just like *be* constructions, the difference being that the former implies more of an indirect, psychological involvement of the human entity. The deeper understanding of the passive situation will make it possible for us to have a universal characterization of passive constructions.