

THE FUNCTIONAL EFFECT OF AGENT RETENTION IN ENGLISH PASSIVES: AN EXAMINATION OF THE INFORMATIVENESS CONDITION

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I. INTRODUCTION

Different treatments of passives in English have concentrated on providing an account of this particularly interesting construction from diverse frames of reference. There are formal (e.g. Quirk et. al., 1979), semantic (e.g. Keenan, 1985), and functional analyses (e.g. Riddle & Sheintuch, 1983). One feature of passives that formal analyses apparently have taken for granted has to do with the *by* phrase or agent role. In most formal and semantic accounts it is argued that the topicalizing function of passives may have a concomitant formal effect on the agent, and, thus, authors claim that the agent is generally optional. The agent is deleted, such accounts argue, because it is associated with actives where the performer is unimportant.

The motivation for this paper comes from the need to try to fill what I consider to be a gap in comprehensive accounts of English passives. In the first part of this paper, I concentrate on a brief discussion of topics on passives on which there is general agreement. In discussing these accounts, I examine some of the instances in a limited corpus of passives collected for the purpose of this paper. It will be seen that agentful passives generally conform to the claims of the formal approaches. In the second part of the paper, I offer a discussion of other instances of agentful passives in the corpus with the purpose of trying to obtain a limited number of generalizations to account for agent retention in English passives. It can be seen that there are some formal, semantic, and discourse factors that explain why the agent is necessarily (and sometimes obligatorily) retained in English agentful passives. I conclude the paper with a brief overview of such conditions and generalizations.

II. TREATMENTS OF PASSIVES

Several accounts of the passive construction in English define it in terms of relationships with active sentences. Quirk et. al. (1979 p.160) and Svartvik

(1966 p.162), for example, see passives as constructions where an action is referred to indirectly; one in which the receiver of the action is the grammatical subject, and the original "doer" of the action is the grammatical object of the preposition *by*. They propose an active-passive correspondence, and they agree that such correspondence can be characterized as a rearrangement of elements: "...a) the active subject becomes the passive AGENT; b) the active object becomes the passive subject..." (Quirk et. al., 1979 p.160). This correspondence can be clearly seen in 1:

1. Grew was killed by British soldiers during an ambush. (Indianapolis Star, 10-12-90, p.6A)

Where *Grew* can be reconstructed as the active object in 2:

2. British soldiers killed Grew in an ambush.

The discussion on the characteristics of passives becomes more interesting when semantic correspondences and functional features are analyzed. An interesting approach to these is proposed by Keenan (1985) who argues that, functionally speaking, passives may be considered foregrounding constructions compared to their corresponding actives. Creider (1979 p.3) characterizes passives as one of a series of movement rules in English where topicalization is achieved. In a construction like:

3. 4,000 signatures were given by Ball State students to the seven TFP representatives on campus. (Daily News, 10-11-90, p.1),

the NP *4,000 signatures* has been moved to a topic position, and the agent, *Ball State students*, has been placed in a focal position. The context where this news appears shows that the reporter wants to emphasize the fact that a large number of signatures have been collected to joint petitions to free Lithuania from Soviet control, and he does this at the expense of relegating the agent to a secondary, non-topical position.

In contrast with the notions of topic and focus, role prominence is another approach to account for passive

constructions. In analyzing pseudo-passives in English, Riddle and Sheintuch (1983 p.546) propose to consider passives in terms of role prominence. They argue that a previous analysis of prominence by Schachter can be extended to a difficult set of examples of passives in English: pseudo-passives. They claim that role prominence is the single, crucial condition on the occurrence of any NP as a passive subject. In 4 below:

4. "When my ablutions were completed, I was put into clean linen of the stiffest character,...., and was trussed up in my tightest and fearfulest suit." (Riddle and Sheintuch, cited from Dickens, 1983 p.546),

the authors argue that the narrator plays the most prominent role in the passage and that he is trying to focus the reader's attention on him "in terms of what he is experiencing rather than on the person who is doing something to him" (Riddle & Sheintuch, 1983 p.547).

It is interesting to note that role prominence is more clearly perceived in passives where the agent is not expressed, but it is obscured a little when agentful passives are analyzed:

5. ...unless those who speak are understood by those who hear, the game goes wrong (Lee, 1978 p.2).

In the above, I notice a special equilibrium concerning role prominence. It seems that both the subject NP those who speak and the agent NP those who hear receive an equal weight and the attention of the reader can be equally focused on either of them.

In general, passive constructions have been associated with agent omission in English. Authors claim that "unlike the active subject, the agent by phrase is generally optional" (Quirk et. al., 1979 p.164). It is even claimed that 4 out of 5 passives have no expressed agent and it is proposed that the agent may be omitted since the passive is generally associated with actives where the performer is unimportant (Leech & Svartvik, 1975 p.259).

Although the terminology may be misleading, I will adopt Keenan's (1985 p.261) characterization of agents for the purposes of this paper: "In general, an agent phrase will be an NP (with or without adpositions) which functions as the semantic but not the syntactic subject of a verb in an expression derived from that verb (or verb phrase)." Within this frame of reference all NPs in agentful passives behaving as performers,

instrumentals and even experiencers will be referred to as agents.

Most of the accounts of English passives that I have reviewed for this paper assume "agent deletion" to be an almost inherent property of passives. Although some authors acknowledge that the agent is not always optional, they do not provide an explanation for this apparent anomaly in their treatments.

In what follows, I will concentrate on trying to answer the question of what are some formal, semantic and discourse factors that account for the overt expression of the agent in passive constructions in English. The discussion is intended as a tentative generalization concerning the central question of the effects of agent retention in English passives.

III. AN ANALYSIS OF AGENTFUL PASSIVES

Several counts of English passives have reported that in corpuses of this construction 80 percent or more are agentless (Svartvik, 1966 p.141; Jespersen, 1933 p.121). This can be easily explained by the fact that the agent is understood or easily recoverable. For example, sentence 6:

6. The exams have been graded.

occurs when the agent is understood, i.e., the teacher or the teacher's assistant. But what about the remaining 20 percent of English passives where the agent is retained? Why is the agent by phrase kept in these passives? I examined a number of agentful passive constructions in written discourse and found that agent retention can be explained by the following generalization:

agents are retained, that is, they are overtly expressed in English passives, to fulfill the functional effect of providing important information in the discourse. Sometimes the retention of the agent is apparently obligatory (or necessary, at least), but this phenomenon seems to relate to factors other than "the informativeness condition." These include lexical restrictions and other formal factors such as reductions in the structure containing the passive construction. Besides associating with the informativeness condition, optional retention of the agent relates to other discourse factors such as unexpectedness, indefiniteness, and instrumentality of such agents. In what follows I will discuss each of the cases in the above generalization.

A. Important Information Provision (and necessary agent retention)

Analyzing the data, I found a group of passives where the retention of the agent seems to be obligatory. Most of these constructions become unacceptable if the agent is omitted:

7. A sign made by the Lesbian and Gay student association was defaced (Daily News, 10-18-90, p.1).
8. A sign made was defaced.

We notice that sentence 7 becomes unacceptable when the agent is deleted because it is left informationally incomplete and, as a result, there seems to be a contradiction of terms in it.

The discourse sensitivity of agentful passives in relation to information gap filling can also be seen in 9 and 10 where it would be awkward to delete the by phrases:

9. ...he was the pilot of a plane owned by William Heiss (Muncie Star, 10-19-90, p 3).
10. The President, badly bloodied by the budget turmoil,... (Daily News, 10-10-90, p 1)

The sentences that are left after an experimental deletion of the agents would be unacceptable basically for pragmatic reasons. Observe that both would be violations of Grice's cooperative principle. Sentence 9 without an agent would violate the maxim of quantity in that it would provide more information than necessary: we can assume that planes are always owned. Similarly, without an agent, sentence 10 would violate the maxim of quantity too, but in this case the sentence would provide less information than necessary, and it would be acceptable only if "bloodied" were taken literally.

There is an interesting formal aspect to note in the examples cited up to now: in some cases we can observe a reduced relative clause in the passive phrase: a plane owned, a president bloodied, a sign made. Observe that owned, bloodied, and made are postmodifiers functioning in non-finite clauses equivalent to relative clauses. This could be an indication that relative clause formation and the reduction of the passive may have a parallel effect of forcing the retention of the agent.

Consistent with our initial claim that agents are retained for information gap filling purposes, we find

an interesting subgroup of passives in the data displaying a common feature: the agent is provided in newspaper headlines. Sentence 11 below is a typical example of such a subgroup:

11. Individual beaten by excise impostors (Daily News, 10-9-90, p.2).

An interesting feature of headlines in newspapers seems to be that they provide information in a "fractured way". Several things can be fractured, i.e., omitted, except crucial components of the information unit. Syntactically speaking the agent is not required, but the informativeness feature of headlines constitutes a contextual constraint for agent retention.

B. Additional Discourse factors (and optional agent retention)

1. Agent is a proper name

A large number of agentful passives in the data contain a proper name in the by phrase. In my estimation these agents are retained because of their importance. The agents are simply too important to be omitted. For example, in a case cited earlier in this paper,

Grew was killed by British soldiers during an ambush (Indianapolis Star, 10-12-90, p 6A).

the writer is telling about the death and burial of Irish Republican Army gunman Desmond Grew. The news concerns the death of Grew specifically, but given the fact that Grew was not accidentally killed, information about the killers is to be provided: the agent British soldiers is kept due to its importance for information purposes.

This characteristic recurs in other examples in the data in sentences that are linked to legalistic matters where it is necessary to hold somebody responsible for something. In reports about car accidents, thefts, killings, law suits, and even war, the information concerning the performer of the action is extremely important and, thus, the agent is retained:

12. ...we see in Kuwait unprecedented acts of brutality inflicted by Iraq (Daily News, 10-17-90, p.4).

2. Inanimate Noun Phrases

Another subgroup of agentful passives contains inanimate NPs in the by phrase. We can note that it is not possible to reconstruct an inanimate NP as an agent

if it were deleted. (In other words, almost all omitted agents get reconstructed as animate NPs). For instance, one does not expect army's efforts to be fueling violence. It is because of its unexpectedness that this phrase is retained as an agent in 13:

13. Thursday's violence was fueled by army efforts to set up a new lookout point in a Gaza Strip refugee camp. (Indianapolis Star, 10-19-90, p.3A)

Similarly, one expects some animate NP to be the agent of a verb like restrict (cf. Policemen restricted admission to the theater). But in 14, age is quite unexpected as an agent, and, therefore, it is retained:

14. Enjoyment of games is not restricted by age. (Wright et. al., 1979 p.2)

3. Indefinite Noun Phrases

Still another subgroup of agentful passives contains indefinite NP's. In this set the speaker or writer is interested in providing the listener or reader with important information, but he leaves some degree of indeterminateness or vagueness by providing an indefinite NP as an agent:

15. The newsletter is published by a private news agency that is close to the highest Shiite Moslem Religious Authority. (Daily News, 10-11-90, p.1)

Here we feel that the writer does not know or does not want to provide the name of the private news agency that publishes the newsletter and, thus, he only suggests the publisher responsible for the publication.

The same occurs in 16 where what seems to be important is not how many accidents have occurred in an intersection but rather the fact that several have occurred before. This is provided as new information by means of an indefinite NP:

16. Those of us who live on the curve at West Jackson St. and Riverside Ave. in West Muncie are increasingly disturbed by a number of accidents at that intersection. (Muncie Star, 9-20-90, p.6C)

4. Instrumentality

There are some additional interesting cases where the agent is retained in agentful passives. A good number of the passives in the data contain an agent which behaves like an instrumental NP. In all these

cases we can restate the by phrase with one containing either with or by means of. For example, in 17:

17. Coach Joe Rogers said he was encouraged by the team's performance and was especially proud of...(Daily News, 10-9-90, p.6)

the team's performance may be analyzed as a force or a means with which the coach is encouraged.

It is interesting to note that the deletion of the "instrumental agent" in general leaves the sentences unacceptable or anomalous to some extent:

18. The information displayed is discussed in the above section.

Informationally speaking, one expects a place where some information is displayed. Not providing the agent of the display leaves the sentence incomplete. In 18, we observe some unacceptability and anomaly in that the context where it was written was meant to provide an agent of an instrumental nature. Therefore, the corresponding agentful sentence becomes fully grammatical and appropriate:

19. The information displayed by these tables is discussed in the above section. (Wimbish, 1986 p.76)

IV. OVERVIEW AND CONCLUSION

Agent retention in English passives can be accounted for with the basic generalization that agents are retained to perform the discourse function of providing important information. There are cases where this information is so crucial that not providing it renders sentences unacceptable or anomalous. When we experimentally delete this apparently obligatory agent, the sentences are left informationally vacuous. There are several instances where formal aspects seem to be related to agent retention. These exhibit dramatic formal reductions: several formal elements may be deleted except the agents, which are kept exclusively for information purposes. There are, additionally, some cases where the agent is not obligatorily but optionally expressed. The functional factors which may account for this retention are the following: a) importance related factors (agent is proper name), b) unexpectedness related factors (agent is inanimate NP), c) vagueness related factors (agent is indefinite NP), and d) instrumentality related factors (agent is instrumental NP).

The observations in this paper have provided an account of some of the discourse factors that seem to govern agent retention in agentful passive constructions. However, there seems to be more that we need to learn about passives in English; in particular we need more information about discourse factors governing the use of this striking and fascinating construction.

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