

On ‘the by phrase’ of passive sentences in English

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Introduction

The *by* phrases of passive sentences have long been viewed as adjuncts. Therefore, the phrases have not been one of the core ingredients of the passive from the very beginning of the traditional descriptive studies. *By* is originally an adverb and which become a locative preposition indicating ‘nearness’ or ‘direction’, as in *She lives by the river*. It seems to be true that there are a lot of examples from corpus in which it has been shown that most passives (80% or more) occur without the agent phrase. While passives with the *by* agent phrase are in a minority, the subject is an obligatory element because of a clausal construction in which English, every clause has an overt subject (Anja Waner 2009). Syntactically, the *by* phrase behaves like an adjunct, but semantically, it is an argument of the verb. The theta-role of the *by*-phrase is identical to that of the external argument in the active (Roberts 1987; Wyngaerd 1988), i.e. often, but not always, an agent which is the thematic role describing a human instigator of an event. This may be true that *by* is one of the most prominent markers of the passive construction.

According to the linking rules that map arguments from semantic to syntactic structure (Pinker 1989; Grimshaw 1990; Levin and Rappaport Hovav 2005) the external argument, although not necessarily an agent, is always higher on the Thematic Hierarchy than any other argument of the verb. This means that in the passive the *by*-phrase is “more agentive” (Pinker, Lebeaux and Frost 1987: 228) than the subject phrase (Thematic Hierarchy Condition, Jackendoff 1972). (Underlined by H.T) (Anja Waner 2009).

Therefore, we discuss whether the *by* phrase is a core ingredient in passive sentences or just an adjunct as could have been seen in traditional studies. In this paper, we will look at 1. the role of an agent in passive sentences without *by*-phrase, 2. demotion of the agent, 3. three interconnected motivations for choosing the long passive (the passive with *by*-phrase) and 4. an implicit agent in the passive sentence.

1. Situations without *by*-phrases

I have already mentioned that the corpus says that most passives (80% or more) occur without *by* phrases. It may trigger one of the interpretation that the *by* phrases are

adjuncts. First of all, We take a look at the situations without the *by*-phrases in passive sentences that we will clarify them in one or another way without the *by*-phrase in passive sentences.

Sentence (1) is an active sentence in which *The people* is an agent NP. On the other hand, sentence(2) is a passive counterpart of (2).

(1) *The people reelected George Washington for a second term in 1792.* (Active, Agent=The people) (Folse 1999: 243) (Blankets mine)

(2) *George Washington was reelected for a second term in 1792.* (Passive) (Folse 1999: 243)

In (2), *the people* does not occur because it is well known that the people elect the president, i.e, the people is an implicit agent. *The people* is not new information for us. Therefore, sentence (3) is unconventional, if we add *by the people* to (2)

(3) ? *President Washington was reelected by the people for a second term in 1792.* (Folse 2009: 245)

In regard to the *by* phrases, Folse (2009: 244-245) says in his article that ‘You should not name the agent when it is not new information or when the agent is not important’. Moreover, Hands (2011: 406) describes the situation without *by + agent* phrase in passive sentence as follows;

a. because you do not know who or what the performer(agent) is

(4) *He’ s almost certainly been delayed.*

(5) *The fence between the two properties had been removed.* (Blankets mine)

b. because it is not important who or what the performer is

(6) *I was told that it would be perfectly quiet.*

(7) *Such items should be carefully packed in boxes.*

c. because it is obvious who or what the performer is

(8) She found that she wasn’t being paid the same salary as him.. . . the number of children who have been vaccinated against measles.

d. because the performer has already been mentioned

(9) *His pictures of dogs were drawn with great humor.*

(10) *The government responded quickly, and new measures were passed which strengthened their powers.*

e. because people in general are the performers.

(11) *Both of these books can be obtained from the public library.*

(12) *It is very strange and has never been clearly explained.*

f. because you do not want to say who performed an action, or you want to distance yourself from your own action.

(13) *The original has been destroyed.*

(14) *I've been told you wished to see me.*

In short, when we use the passive sentence, there are some preferences with respect to the agent who or which is unknown, not important, not a bit obvious, in general or has been already said. In all descriptions, agents are not focal elements in information structure. Since the *by*-phrase mostly tends to be an receptor of an agent, a frequency of using the passive sentence with the *by*-phrase is lower percentages. According to Leech (2001: 6) and Biber et al(2002: 167)'s corpus, the passive sentence without the *by* phrase i.e. a short passive is used 6 times more than passive sentences with the *by*-phrase i.e the long passive sentence.

2. The Demotion of the Agent

There are also consensuses with respect to the agent among some major grammars. For instance, Biber *et al* (2002: 166) says 'They [Passive verb phrases] reduce the importance of the agent of an action...' and this corresponds with the idea of Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1999: 347) description of 'the defocusing the agent'. They also assume that the description is a core meaning of the passive. On the other hand, if 'the focusing' is a key-term on the passive, Hands (2011: 406) says with respect to using passive sentences instead of active ones as below:

You could report the same event by using an active form of a verb, as in *The dog has eaten our dinner* or by using a passive form of a verb, as in *Our dinner has been eaten by the dog*, depending on whether you wanted to focus on *the dog* or *your dinner*.

Hands (2011: 406)

Also, Folse (1999: 243-244) has explained the subject in an active sentence with 'Topic'.

(15) *The people of France gave the Statue of Liberty to the United States.*

(16) *Leonardo da Vinci painted the famous Mona Lisa.*

(17) *We will make a decision about our trip soon.*

(18) *The people reelected George Washington for a second term in 1792.*

(19) *The Statue of Liberty was given to the United States by the people of France.*

(20) *The famous Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo da Vinci.*

(21) *A decision about our trip will be made soon.*

(22) *George Washington was reelected for a second term in 1792.*

Between the passive and the active, the agent is represented in a different way. According to Folse (1999: 243-244), the most important topic is 'the person or thing

that is doing the action (the “doer” of the action)’ in the active sentence examples (15)-(18), and these underlined subjects are ‘the agent of the action’. On the other hand, in the passive examples (19)-(22), these underlines are not ‘agent of the action’ rather ‘the person or thing that receives the action of the verb’. In other words, the most prominent argument(agent) is not realized in the syntactically most prominent position. The passive therefore is a good choice if the identity of the agent is not known, not considered important, or if it is not to be revealed (Jespersen 1927: 167; Thompson 1987: 497).

Again and again, Corpus coming from Biber et al. (1999:938-941) confirm that most of the passives are actually short passives (without *by*-phrase).

(23) *“People want to be heard”*, Mr. Gray says, *“and when they realize they are being heard, they are being empowered and will be more willing to find solutions”*. (FROWN; A13)

(24) *This paper summarizes his account of authority n educational relationships. ...Next, the paper explores the rather neglected topics of parental authority. ...It is argued that the authority of the parent is in important respects different from the authority standardly ascribed to the teacher.* (JME 21)

(Anja Waner 2009)

For example, in (23) the identity of the person who listens to the concerns of the generic subject, *people*, does not matter, therefore, the agent need not be expressed. In (24), the sentence has the different situation: This is taken from a scholarly journal. To link an idea to a specific author is important in this genre. In the context of the abstract it is clear that the agents of *argue* are the authors of the paper. Otherwise, in the subordinate clause, the adverb *standardly* is added to rule out the interpretation that the implicit agent of *ascribed* is constructed as coreferent with authors of the article. The authors put forwards a specific argument and point out the newness of the argument. As a conclusion of these two examples,

(25) It does not matter to explicate the exact identity of the agent.

(26) The first passive (*It is argued...*): It is possible to infer the identity of the agent through familiarity with genre conventions.

The second passive (*ascribed*): The generic character of the agent is expressed through the adverb *standardly*.

By contrast, in the following examples the identity of the agent is important and it cannot be inferred from context.

(27) *Even Boris Yeltsin himself has yet to cooperate with giving up the president’s special files. These archives were created by dictator Joseph Stalin who assiduously gathered*

compromising material on his opposition and colleagues. (FROWN:A08)

(28) *Not that the images don't have real effects: a homemade video of a black motorist being beaten by police succeeded in burning down a sizable part of Los Angeles.*
(FROWN;A12)

(Anja Waner 2009)

In (28), *a black motorist* was beaten not just by anybody, but by police officers. In (27), the fact is that the archives in question were created by Joseph Stalin himself. The identity of the archive creator cannot be inferred from the context, which makes the by-phrase that focus of the sentence (Lambrecht 1994: 207). Anja Waner (2009) has said that “The right periphery of the sentence is not just a common position to accommodate new information, it is also the preferred position for a “heavy” phrase (principle of end-weight)” . According to the Biber et al. (2003), this principle and the other two principles motivate choosing the long passive. In the following section, we will look at these three principles on the basis of Biber et al (2003).

3. Three Major Rules

Rule 1: The information-flow principle.

The long passive is chosen to accord with the information-flow principle: the preference for presenting new information at the end of a clause. This means that given information (information already shared by the writer and the reader, often because of previous mention) is placed before new information.

Rule 2: The end-weight principle.

The long passive is chosen to accord with the end-weight principle. This means that a ‘heavier’ (or more lengthy) element of the clause, in this case the agent, is placed at the end, where it does not hold up the processing of the rest of the clause.

Rule 3: The end-focus principle.

The long passive is chosen to place initial emphasis on an element of the clause which is the topic, or theme, of the current discourse.

(Biber et al 2003;169)

Example (29) I and II illustrate all three of these principles.

(29) *In principle, the passive can be replaced by an active clause with the same meaning.*
<passive>

(30) *In principle, an active clause with the same meaning can replace the passive.*

<active>

The information-flow principle: (29) begins with given information: *the passive* has already been mentioned. In contrast, (30) *an active clause with the same meaning* is new information with the indefinite article *an* and the postmodifying prepositional phrase (*with the same meaning*) which identifies the specific type of ‘active clause’ in question.

The end-weight principle: (29) begins with a short two-word phrase as its subject (*the passive*). It ends with a longer phrase (*an active clause with the same meaning*) as its agent. This situation is reversed in lb.

The end-focus principle: (29) begins with a reference to *the passive*, which is the current topic of the discourse, as shown, for example, by the heading of the section. In (30), the topic would have been placed at the end of the clause.

Biber has also noted that the three principles mentioned above are not strict grammatical rules. Of the first two principles, the information flow principle is more important than the end-weight principle. Thus, it is not too unusual to find examples in which the information flow principle is upheld but the end-weight principle violated.

(31) *That similar relationships occur with these two species under field conditions in Saskatchewan was suggested by Pickford (1960,1966a).*

(Biber et al., 1999)

In (31), the information of the subject in a finite clause is heavy, while the *by*-phrase is not heavy in meaning. On the other hands, the sentence is in line with the information flow principle. The subject sentence relates to the information that has already been mentioned while the agent is introduced as new information. Obviously, choosing the passive over the active here cannot be related to the length or complex of the agent phrase (Anja Waner 2009: 78). Anja (2009) has also said concerning the fact that the short passive is used in the majority of cases.

Actually, the mere fact that most passives occur without a *by*-phrase is an indicator that the length of the phrase that expresses the agent is not always a major concern in choosing the passive over the active.

(Anja 2009)

In Thompson (1978: 501), she observes that the necessity of the passives without *by*-phrase is “obligatory under certain conditions, these having less to do with the structure

of the discourse than with the encoder' s intentions and assessments of the decoder' s inferential". In other words, the passive with *by* phrase keeps up the flow and coherence of the sentence. I have already mentioned about short passives together with Hands' description (2011: 406) that "the agent is unknown, not important, not a bit obvious, people in general or has been already said. In all cases of short passives, these principles do not focus on the agent" . However, following above the condition of Thompson's description (1978: 501), these features of the agent should be modified that "The short passive is used because the agent is not to be mentioned explicitly, either because its identity is unknown, unimportant, or evident from the context" (Anja 2009). This description in Anja (2009) also suggests an implicit existence of the agent rather than a denial of the agent's existence in the passive sentence. The implicit agent must be one of the core ingredients for the passive construction. Therefore we will look at the implicit agent with some instance of passive sentences.

4. Implicit Agent

Look at example (32).

(32) *I left under circumstance of considerable honor. I was given a farewell luncheon by half the staff of the law firm, meaning the lawyers themselves. I was asked to make a speech and I was much applauded.*

(Givon, 1979)

In this example, the people who ask the narrator to give a speech is inferred from the context where the people act as host of the luncheon. Thompson notes that the passive is not "agentless", the agent is simply implicit. The sentence can be paraphrased to the active sentence with the anaphoric *they*.

(33) *I left my job under circumstance of considerable honor. They gave me a farewell luncheon and asked me to make a speech.*

In this active sentence, *they* is an external argument. The external argument is an argument of the verb that does include the subject(David Crystal, 2008). However, even though *they* occupies the subject position, which is associated with the topic of the sentence, its exact identity is not revealed. This position is impossible to be taken up by the agent in both the short or long passives. Anja(2009) says "The short passive allows

for a non-agent to take the position of the topic sentence and for minimizing the visibility of the agent”. Anja also says that the reason for choosing the short passive in academic writings which comes up from the following observation:

“The passive is chosen because it allows for the agent to remain implicit, i.e the authors do not have to refer to themselves explicitly. The point is not so much that a long passive would have been appropriate here (thesis, academic writing, scholarly articles etc...), the point is that the passive allows for a very specific realization (implicit argument) of very specific agent (first person).”

(Anja 2009)

A lot of corpus has shown that the passive with *by* phrase is frequently and normally used in the field of academic writing. This is no surprise because the authors do not have to mention themselves.

Conclusion

So far, we have discussed various aspects of passives in English, beginning with the unsatisfactory description of passives, the differentiation of long and short passives, and syntactic and semantic factors involved in the implicit agents. Through the syntactic and semantic factors, our discussion also extends to the phenomena that could be seen from corpus studies. From our discussion, we could assume that the corpus studies present an unsatisfying evidence to determine that the *by*-phrase is an adjunct because the genre of copula is normally written with the impersonal style.

We also found that the *by* phrase keeps up the flow and coherence of a sentence. From the above discussion, the *by* phrase can be a one of the core ingredients of the passive form, and it would be premature to conclude that the *by* phrase is regarded as just an adjunct.

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