

# **The Passive**

## **A Comparative Linguistic Analysis**

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**Anna Siewierska**



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I would like to dedicate this book to  
my parents, Jadwiga and Henryk Siewierscy.

## PREFACE

This book is a revised version of my Monash University M.A. thesis written in 1979. The work was motivated by the general interest in typological studies prevalent at that time. It does not therefore purport to illustrate the problems relating to passive occurrence in any individual language or suggest how the passive should be handled within particular grammatical frameworks. Rather it sets out to exemplify the range of structures which have been called passive and the problems which these structures pose for a unified definition of the passive.

I have not altered the basic structure of the original thesis, although I have included in the discussion the more recent works on the passive. The only major revision is the addition of chapter seven on the pragmatics of the passive where the discussion is mostly confined to European languages.

There are a number of people who have been of great assistance to me in the writing of the original thesis and the preparation of this book. I am particularly indebted to Barry Blake for his constant help and guidance over a long period. It will be obvious from what follows how much I have benefited from his expertise in the field of typological studies. Special thanks are also due to Bernard Comrie for commenting on earlier drafts and suggesting that I prepare a revised version of the thesis and to my friend and colleague Keith Allan for his continual help and encouragement. I would also like to express my gratitude to all the members of the Linguistic Department at Monash University past and present who provided me with helpful comments and moral support, namely Göran Hammarström, John Platt, Peter Paul, Graham Mallinson, Ian R. Smith, Stephen R. Johnson, Stephen Paterson, Christopher

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Anna Siewierska

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

A	transitive subject
abl	ablative
abs	absolute
acc	accusative
act	active/actor
al	allative
an	animate
ant	anterior
a/p	antipassive
aor	aojist
apl	applicative
appl	applied
art	article
asp	aspect
aux	auxiliary
ben	benefactive
cau	causative
cho	chômeur
cl	class
cl. int	clause introducer
clf	classifier
comp	complementizer
compl	completive
D	dummy/determiner
dat	dative
dec	declarative
det	determiner
erg	ergative
excl	exclusive
f	feminine
foc	focus
fut	future
gen	genitive
gl	goal
hyp	hypothetical
imp	impersonal/imperative



# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

inan	inanimate
ind	indicative
inf	infinitive
inst	instrumental
intr	intransitive
loc	locative
m	masculine
man	manner
n	neuter
N	noun
nom	nominative
NP	noun phrase
obl	oblique
P	direct object/preposition/predicate
part	participle
partit	partitive
p. part	past participle
pass	passive
pass. part	passive participle
perf	perfective
pl	plural
poss	possessive
PP	prepositional phrase
pres	present
prog	progressive
prop	proper
purp	purposive
refl	reflexive
RG	relational grammar
S	intransitive subject
s	singular
t	tense
t/asp	tense/aspect
top	topic
tr	transitive
V	verb
vb.m	verb marker
VP	verb phrase
1	first person / subject
2	second person / direct object
3	third person / indirect object
*	ungrammatical
!	ungrammatical in the relevant sense
?	of doubtful grammaticality or acceptability
>	takes precedence over
∅	zero (form)
-	morpheme boundary, boundary between glosses
:	joins elements of a gloss

# CONTENTS

Editorial Statement	
Preface	
List of Abbreviations and Symbols	

1.	INTRODUCTION	1
1.0	General Aims	1
1.1	The Passive	2
1.1.1	Different Types of Passive Constructions	2
1.1.2	The Passive and Models of Grammar	4
1.2	Transitivity and the Passive	8
1.2.1	Transitivity and Morpho-syntax	9
1.2.2	Transitivity and Discourse	15
1.3	Language Universals	19
1.3.1	Subject/Object vs S,A,P	19
1.3.2	Transitivity and Ergativity	20
1.3.3	The Passive	23
	Footnotes	23
2.	THE PERSONAL PASSIVE	28
2.0	Introduction	28
2.1	Properties of the Personal Passive	28
2.1.1	The Active Counterpart	30
2.1.2	The Passive as an Agentless Construction	35
2.1.3	Word Order and Morphological Marking	39
2.2	Transitivity and the Personal Passive	44
2.2.1	Transitive or Intransitive	47
2.2.2	The Personal Passive and Intransitive Clauses	64
2.3	Some Tentative Conclusions	75
2.4	The Passive in Philippine Languages	79

# CONTENTS

2.4.1	The Structure of the Philippine Clause	79
2.4.2	Passive or Active	82
	Footnotes	86
3.	IMPERSONAL PASSIVES	93
3.0	General Remarks	93
3.1	Characteristics of Impersonal Passives	96
3.1.1	Impersonal Passives and Transitivity	96
3.1.2	The Agent of Impersonal Passives	100
3.2	The Subject of Impersonal Passives	101
3.2.1	The Subjectless Analysis	102
3.2.2	Dummy Subjects	108
3.2.3	Indefinite Active Subjects	112
3.3	The Impersonal Passive: Promotion vs Demotion	117
	Footnotes	124
4.	THE PERIPHRASTIC PASSIVE	126
4.0	Introduction	126
4.1	The Passive Auxiliary	128
4.1.1	Different Auxiliary Verbs	129
4.2	The Be-Passive as a Stative Construction	139
4.2.1	The Complex Sentence Analysis	140
4.2.2	The Adjectival Analysis	145
4.3	The Passive in South-East Asian Languages	149
4.3.1	The Direct Passive	149
4.3.2	The Indirect Passive	154
	Footnotes	159
5.	THE REFLEXIVE PASSIVE	162
5.0	General Comments	162
5.1	Reflexive Passives and Other Constructions	164
5.1.1	Personal Reflexive Passives	165
5.1.2	Impersonal Reflexive Passives	173
5.2	Reflexive vs Plain Passives	180
	Footnotes	184
6.	EXCEPTIONS TO THE PASSIVE	186
6.0	Introduction	186
6.1	Exceptions to the Passive and Pragmatics	187

## CONTENTS

6.1.1	The Personal Passive	188
6.1.2	The Impersonal Passive	197
6.1.3	Coreferentiality	205
6.2	Exceptions to the Passive in Relational Grammar	209
	Footnotes	216
7.	THE PRAGMATICS OF THE PASSIVE	217
7.0	Introduction	217
7.1	Topicalization	218
7.1.1	The Passive and Given/New Order	223
7.1.2	Topicalization and Initial Position	231
7.2	The Passive and Impersonalization	237
7.2.1	Indefinite Human Agents and the Passive	238
	Footnotes	251
8.	SUMMARY	255
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	263
	INDEX OF LANGUAGES	288
	INDEX OF NAMES	292
	INDEX OF TERMS	297

## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.0 General Aims

Within the last ten years a significant amount of work has been carried out on cross-language morpho-syntactic variation, particularly case marking, word order, relativization, causativization and topicalization strategies. Studies in this area have revealed that well documented language phenomena have not, in fact, been sufficiently researched and many of the properties traditionally associated with these phenomena may not hold cross-linguistically. The passive is a case in point.

The analysis of the various constructions referred to in the literature as *passive* leads to the conclusion that there is not even one single property which all these constructions have in common. In order to determine the cross-language characteristic of passive clauses and examine the relationship between the passive and other related structures, we will survey a wide variety of constructions called passive from many different languages.

The passive constructions discussed will be classified along three parameters: personal/impersonal, periphrastic/synthetic and plain/reflexive. This classification of passive clauses is based on their morpho-syntactic properties i.e. verbal marking, case marking and presence or absence of an overt subject. Various other classifications based on different properties of passive clauses have been used in the literature. For instance, passives have been grouped into stative and nonstative on the basis of whether they involve a state or an action. This is primarily a semantic division. However, it may be also reflected in the syntax. In addition, passives have been classified into agentive, quasi-agentive and agentless in terms of whether they can

## INTRODUCTION

or cannot occur with an agent.

The discussion of the passive will be aimed at determining what, in fact, constitutes a passive. We hope to demonstrate that the existing definitions are too broad, in the sense that they encompass too diverse a range of structures or conversely too narrow a range and thus exclude constructions of a similar type. Therefore, a compromise solution will be attempted which entails restricting the term *passive* in a way that enables a definition to be made.

In view of the fact that the term *passive* is primarily associated with the personal passive, chapter two will be devoted to a survey of the properties of the personal passive. Chapter three will deal with the more controversial impersonal passive. In chapter four the periphrastic passive will be discussed in the context of the status of the passive auxiliary and past participle. Chapter five will be devoted to the reflexive passive with special emphasis on the problem of distinguishing reflexive passives from other constructions containing a reflexive morpheme. In chapter six attempts at handling exceptions to the passive in terms of the notions *activity*, *result*, and *volition* will be evaluated. The final chapter will centre on the two main pragmatic functions of the passive, namely topicalization and impersonalization.

The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with presenting the different types of passive clauses to be discussed, briefly outlining the controversy over how passive clauses should be treated in a grammar, introducing the problem of the relation between the passive and transitivity, and finally evaluating the status of the passive and transitivity as language universals.

### 1.1. The Passive

#### 1.1.1 Different Type of Passive Constructions

The term *passive* has been used to cover a wide variety of constructions in many different languages. Under the most widely accepted definition of the passive, passive constructions have the following characteristics:

- a) the subject of the passive clause is a direct object in the corresponding active
- b) the subject of the active clause is expressed in the passive in the form of an agentive

## INTRODUCTION

- adjunct or is left unexpressed  
c) the verb is marked passive.

As the above characteristics commonly attributed to passive constructions show, passive constructions have been defined *vis-à-vis* active constructions and thus regarded as a deviation from the syntactic norm. Syntactically they may differ from actives in word order, case marking, verbal morphology and in the appearance of some additional word or particle. Active and passive clauses also typically differ in the pragmatic function of the agent and patient. The agent in the most basic type of active declarative clause is usually the topic i.e. the constituent which states what the clause is primarily about and sets the individual framework within which the sentence holds.<sup>1</sup> In the overwhelming majority of languages it appears in initial position in the clause and in most cases conveys *given* or *old* information. In a typical passive clause on the other hand the patient is the topic while the agent, if present, represents *new* information and bears the main information focus indicated by tonic stress.

Despite the overt differences between actives and passives, both constructions in the majority of instances express the same propositional content. The NPs in the two constructions are generally viewed as having the same semantic roles. Both in (1a) and (1b) below John is the agent and book the patient.

- (1) a. John bought the book.  
b. The book was bought by John.

The term *passive* is not only used for clauses such as (1b) where the subject corresponds to a patient in the active, but also for clauses with subjects corresponding to: recipient, benefactive, source, instrumental, locative, temporal, manner and causal NPs.

Clauses which lack an overt subject, such as the following, from Dutch (2a) (Kirsner 1976) and Ute (3a) (Givón 1981), are called passive too.

- (2) a. Er werd door de vrouw gegild  
there become by the woman scream:p.part  
'There was screaming by the woman'.  
3) a. Tayúci - gyay 'apága - ta - âa  
eloquence - have speak - pass - ant  
'There was eloquent speaking'.

## INTRODUCTION

In the Dutch clause the subject position is occupied by what is commonly known as a dummy pronoun. This dummy pronoun is not present in the corresponding active (2b).

- (2) b. De vrouw glide  
the woman scream:past  
'The woman screamed'.

The Ute clause consists of a verb in the third person singular with an incorporated manner adverb. The closest corresponding active, as in the Dutch example, is an intransitive clause.

- (3) b. Ta' wa' - ci tayuci - gyay 'apaga qa  
man - S/A eloquence - have speak ant  
'The man spoke eloquently'.

In addition, clauses which have no corresponding actives, such as the German (4a) and English (5), are also referred to by some as passive.

- (4) a. Der Tisch ist gedeckt  
the table is lay:p.part  
'The table is laid'.

- (5) John grew more and more frightened.

The German clause (4a) denotes a state, not an action. The English translation does not show this well, for in English a clause similar to (4a) can be interpreted both statively and dynamically. This is not the case in German. (4b) is not the active counterpart of (4a) in German.

- (4) b. Jemand deckte den Tisch  
someone lay:past:3s the table  
'Someone laid the table'.

The above examples of passive clause clearly indicate that there is a significant amount of disagreement over what constitutes a passive. It is thus not surprising that there is a similar disagreement over how passives should be treated in a grammar.

### 1.1.2 The Passive and Different Models of Grammar

Although passive clauses differ from actives both syntactically and pragmatically, the common semantic properties which they display have led linguists



to claim that there is a strong relationship between the two constructions.

The relationship between actives and passives has been widely discussed both in traditional grammar and modern linguistics. However, it was only when language began to be generally viewed in terms of a multi-level theory of clause structure that the expression of the relationship between actives and passives became a major theoretical issue. In fact, the theories of grammar which have dominated linguistics in the last twenty odd years: Transformational Grammar (TG) in its various guises including Relational Grammar (RG) (Perlmutter and Postal 1977, 1978, 1983a,b) and Lexical Functional Grammar (Bresnan 1978, 1982a,b), as well as the particular models of Case Grammar (Fillmore 1968, 1977; J. Anderson 1977; Starosta 1976, 1978) and Functional Grammar, (Dik 1978, 1980) have evolved out of different approaches to passive constructions.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to distinguish between structurally based and relationally based approaches to the passive. Linguists such as Chomsky (1957, 1965, 1973), Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968), Emonds (1972, 1976), Langacker and Munro (1975) and Hoard (1979) who advocate the first approach, maintain that it is possible to relate active and passive clauses in terms of changes induced in their constituent structure i.e. linear order and dominance relations<sup>2</sup>. Under the first version of TG, for example, active and passive clauses such as (1a,b) were assigned distinct structures, namely (1c,d).

(1) c.

