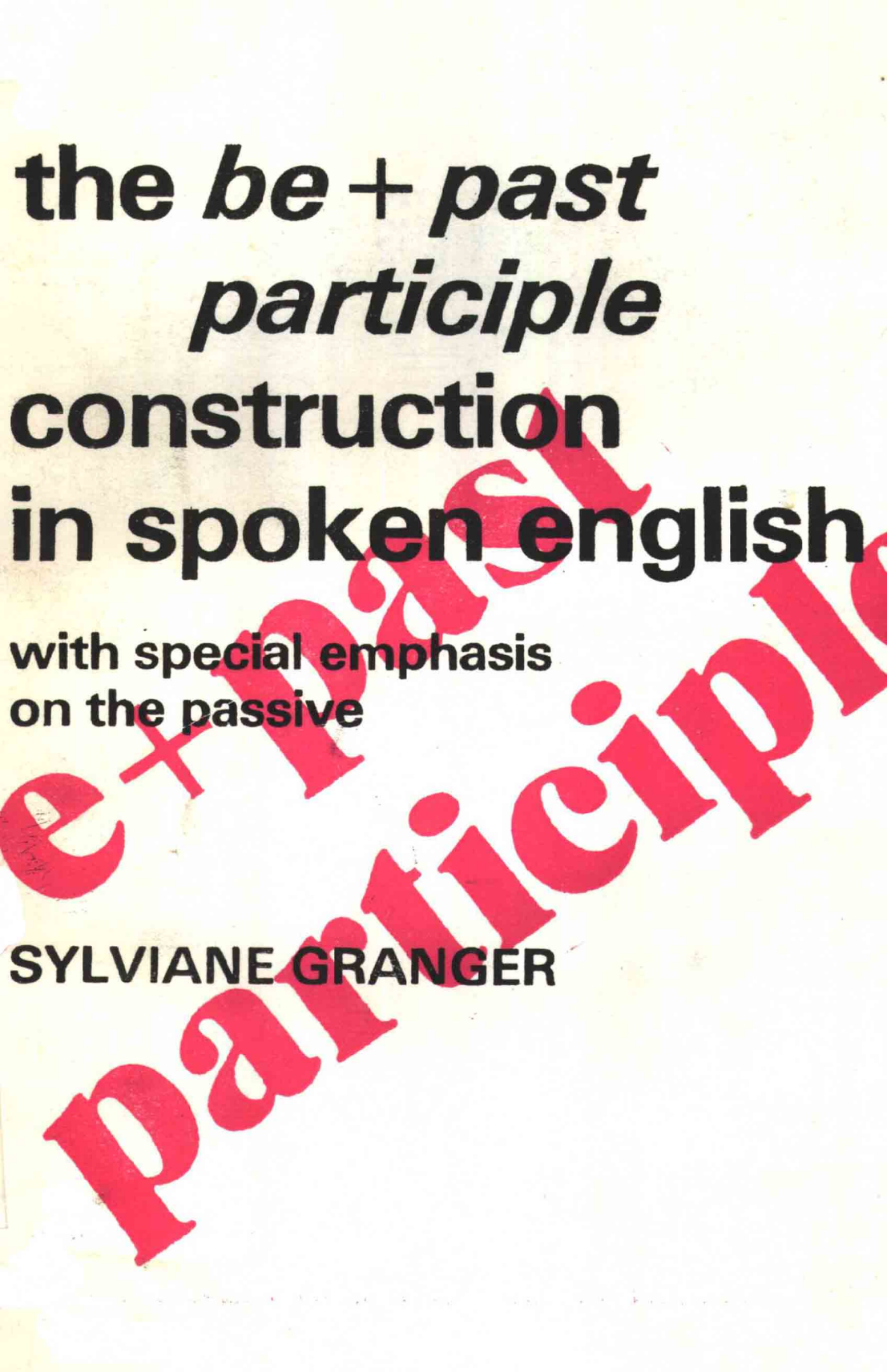
the *be* + *past participle* construction in spoken english

with special emphasis on the passive

SYLVIANE GRANGER



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THE *BE + PAST PARTICIPLE* CONSTRUCTION IN SPOKEN ENGLISH

WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE PASSIVE

SYLVIANE GRANGER

Department of English
The Catholic University of Louvain
Louvain-la-Neuve
Belgium

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INTRODUCTION

The reason why this book does not bear the title The Passive in Spoken English is that 'passive' has become a near-vacuous term. Basically it is either defined semantically or formally. If it is used as a semantic notion, it refers to all structures in which the subject functions as 'undergoer' or 'sufferer', i.e. cases such as **He had his hair cut, He found himself menaced, He was/got killed in the war, The bread is hardly eatable, etc.** If one adopts this semantic definition, it seems to me that there are almost no limits to the kind of structure one can incorporate. There are no a priori reasons why one should exclude cases such as **He suffered a lot of pain** or **He got the sack.** When 'passive' is defined formally, it either refers to all **be** (or **get, feel, become...**) **+ past participle** constructions or only to a subset of these. In order to delimit passive structures, linguists use a whole array of criteria which are kept rather vague and are generally open to criticism. Needless to say, linguists differ greatly in the exact composition of the subset of structures to which they will assign the label 'passive'. As a consequence, different books or articles entitled The Passive in English may turn out to deal with totally different structures. For this reason, I have chosen the title The **be + past participle** Construction in English, thus avoiding any confusion. On the basis of structural, lexical and semantic criteria I have broken down this structure into seven categories, only one of which is called **passive.** Throughout this study the term **passive** is thus kept in its traditional meaning, i.e. it refers to **be + past participle** structures which stand in alternation with a semantically equivalent active structure, such as **John was arrested (by the police)/Someone** (or **The police**) **arrested John.**

The present study is corpus based. It is hence primarily a study of language in use, language in context. In this connection I am totally at one with GREGORY & CARROLL (1978,97-98) when they assert that "any model of linguistic competence that takes a desituationalized view of language activity is that much impoverished". It is not a question of rejecting the notion of competence but rather of viewing language both as "a manifestation of competence and an instance of performance" (ibid.). The context in which the **be + past participle** construction is analysed is spoken English. Indeed, though an impressive number of articles and books have been devoted to this structure (and to the passive, in particular), linguists have always based their analyses on written data.

This book comprises four main parts:

1) A **survey** of the different approaches to the passive, which is the type of **be + past participle** construction that has received the greatest coverage in all linguistic trends.

2) A brief account of the **methodology** underlying this study as well as a description of the body of **material** on which it is based.

3) A detailed investigation of the categories of **be + past participle** and their distribution across the 32 spoken 'texts' that make up our corpus.

4) A functional analysis of the **passive** with special emphasis on its stylistic function, i.e. on the situational factors that favour or disfavour the use of passive structures.

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CHAPTER 1

THE PASSIVE VOICE

Whilst considerably diverging as to the modes of analysis of the passive voice, linguists tend to agree (often implicitly) as to its definition. The following description of voice put forward by PENCE & EMERY (1963,42-43) provides a useful frame of reference: "Voice is that property of a verb which makes clear whether the subject of the verb performs the action or receives the action described by the verb. If the subject performs the action (or is in the state or condition) described by the verb, the verb is said to be in the active voice. If the subject receives the action, the verb is said to be in the passive voice (...). The passive voice employs the auxiliary verb **be** combined, in any of its forms, with the past participle of the notional verb." In this description we find the two elements which are inherent in practically all definitions of the passive voice: the relationship with the active and the use of a special form: **be + past participle** (hereafter **be Ved**). The relationship can be described in terms of meaning, structure and/or function and linguists can be differentiated on the basis of the type of relationship they recognize. Other forms are sometimes mentioned alongside the **be Ved** form: **get/become Ved (He got killed in the war)**, the so-called medio-passive (**This shirt washes easily**), the causative construction (**I had my hair cut yesterday**), etc. Although these constructions may be said to fill a function similar to that of the **be Ved** form, they involve specific problems which I do not intend to enter into in this study.[1] Moreover, the **be Ved** form is so complex that one is entitled to restrict oneself to it. The question of its ambiguity will not be dealt with in this chapter because in most treatments of the passive voice this question is not even tackled. An exception will be made for traditional grammarians who devote an important part of their analysis to this problem.

The number of articles and books devoted to the passive voice is impressive. I thus had no choice but to extract from this enormous bibliography the essential tendencies, concentrating on the most influential viewpoints, which are not necessarily the most interesting ones, at least in my opinion, and on the most interesting viewpoints, which have not necessarily created a great stir. As a consequence, this survey is both selective and subjective. In view of the fact that SVARTVIK (1966) and STEIN (1979) provide excellent descriptions of the various passive structures in English, I have taken it upon myself to lay greater emphasis on the functional than on the descriptive aspect of the passive voice. Throughout this survey I have also attempted to place the various treatments of the passive voice in a more general framework, that of the evolution of present-day linguistics.

1.1. DESCRIPTIVE APPROACHES

The common denominator of the approaches set out below is that they are primarily concerned with the description of the passive voice. At the centre of interest lie, among others, the following questions: Is the passive to be described in relation to the active? If the answer is affirmative, what is the nature of this relationship? What are the different passive structures possible in English? What are the verbs or constructions that cannot be passivized? If the question of the function of the passive is touched on, this is only done secondarily. With the exception of some linguists, mainly traditionalists, this question is not investigated, often not even raised. Even if semantics plays a part in some of these approaches, it seems to me that we are nevertheless entitled to say that they are mostly formal. Indeed, semantics may help the linguist to discover the factors accounting for the grammaticality or ungrammaticality of one or another passive form (see Chapter 1.1.4.), but it says nothing about the reasons why a passive construction has been chosen in the first place.

1.1.1. Traditional.

1.1.1.1. Structuro-semantic correlation

For traditional grammarians, the active-passive relationship takes the form of a correlation of both structure and meaning. Thus, SWEET (1891,112), dealing with the sentence **The dog killed the rat**, gives the following comment: "We may wish to make the object-word **rat** into the subject-word of the sentence. This we do by changing the active form **killed** into the corresponding passive form **was killed: The rat was killed.** The original subject is added, if necessary, by means of the preposition **by: The rat was killed by the dog.** In this sentence **rat** is the inverted object and **by the dog** the inverted subject." Passive sentences are hence clearly described in terms of their active counterpart; the terms 'inverted subject' and 'inverted object' are very significant in this respect. Various traditionalists follow these lines of analysis, among others POUTSMA (1914-29,2.2,93): "The logical object of a sentence may be made its grammatical subject" and JESPERSEN (1909-49,3,299): "What in the active is an object, is made the subject in the passive".

It must be pointed out that the correlation traditionalists have in mind can in no way be regarded as an absolute correlation: the existence of an active construction does not necessarily imply the existence of a passive construction and vice versa. These grammars abound in examples of passives without actives and, above all, of actives without passives. Concerning the latter, a distinction can be made between clear-cut cases bound to an item and much more complex cases which are structure-bound. In the first case we are dealing with a closed category of verbs (a) or verbal phrases (b) which can in no way be passivized. A sample of these cases is listed below:

(a) to resemble
to suit
to have (= to possess)
to own
to possess
to lack
to cost
to weigh
to last

(b) to change colour
to lose courage
to keep guard
to take leave

In the second case, we are concerned with the impossibility of some verbs being used in one or another passive structure. This category can be illustrated by the following examples, where some passive structures are shown to be possible in some cases (1 & 2), impossible in others (1' & 2').

(1) The island **cannot be walked across** in an hour.

(1') *The road **was gone across.**

(2) The child **will be taken care of.**
Care **will be taken** of the child.

(2') He **was lost sight of.**
*Sight **was lost** of him.

Idiosyncrasy accounts for most of these cases, i.e. a given verb **x** systematically rejects a given passive structure **y**; but it does not account for everything: some verbs seem to permit a given passive structure in some cases whilst rejecting it in others (see Chapter 1.1.4. and note 15).

1.1.1.2. One or more passives

Traditionalists are well aware that the **be Ved** form used to construct passive sentences is an ambiguous form. They are faced with two solutions: either they distinguish more than one class of passives or they are led to restrict their definition of the passive

and exclude a certain number of **be Ved** forms from the field so delimited. ONIONS (1971,99) adopts the former solution: "The forms of the passive voice have two distinct meanings: they may express continuous or habitual action (...) or they may express the state resulting from an action". CURME (1931,443) calls these two kinds of passive 'actional' and 'statal' passives and illustrates them respectively with the second and the first use of **was shut** in the sentence **The door was shut at six when I went by, but I don't know when it was shut.** JESPERSEN (1909-49,4,98) makes a similar distinction and introduces the terms 'passives of becoming' and 'passives of being' but he adds that this distinction only holds true in respect of conclusive verbs. [2] Thus, a verb like **pay** can be used in the passive with two meanings: it can refer to the present action as in **His bills are paid regularly every month** (= 'he pays') or to the present result of a past action as in **His bills are paid, so he owes nothing now** (= 'he has paid'). No such ambiguity exists in the case of non-conclusive verbs such as **admire**, e.g. in the sentence **The manager is admired by all his employees.** Grammarians such as POUTSMA (1914-29), ECKERSLEY (1960), ZANDVOORT (1975) and SCHEURWEGHS (1961) adopt the second solution: if a **be Ved** form expresses a state resulting from an action, it is not a passive form but a copula + adjective combination. Hence, the following sentences quoted by ZANDVOORT (1975,49) do not illustrate the passive voice but the predicative use of the past participle in combination with **be:**

(3) The village **was** quite **deserted.**

(4) None of his poems **are preserved.**

(5) I am glad those letters **are written** at last.

C. & J. ECKERSLEY (1960,219) note that the passive may have the same form as **be Ved** used adjectively and illustrate the two cases as follows:

(6) The tree **was uprooted** by the wind. (Passive)

(7) The tree **was uprooted** when we saw it. (**Be Ved**)

1.1.1.3. The function of the passive

When traditionalists hold that actives and passives are related in meaning, they do not mean to say that they are strictly synonymous. The following two passages are very clear on that point: "...it is a mistaken notion that an active sentence and its passive conversion are identical in meaning" (POUTSMA,1914-29,2.2, 102); "...**Tom beats John** (active) and **John is beaten by Tom** (passive) mean essentially the same thing and yet they are not in every respect synonymous, and it is therefore not superfluous for a language to have both turns and thus be able to shift the point of view" (JESPERSEN,1933,120). Traditionalists are thus automatically led to examine the function or 'use' of the passive: if the passive is somehow different from the active, when and why is it used?

As far as **agentless sentences** are concerned, i.e. passive sentences containing no **by**-phrase, this question does not seem too difficult to answer. In such cases, the passive is used because, for some reason or another, the speaker or writer wanted to get rid of the agent. For traditionalists, this constitutes the main reason why the passive is used. Some authors like ZANDVOORT (1975, 53) do not mention any other reason, thus failing to account for agentful sentences (containing a **by**-phrase): "It [the passive] is especially used in sentences in which it is unnecessary or undesirable to mention the agent, though the agent may be expressed by means of an adjunct with **by**". According to JESPERSEN (1933,120-21), this function accounts for the majority of passive sentences in English literature, since over 70 per cent of them are agentless; it can be subcategorized as follows:

(a) The active subject is unknown or cannot easily be stated (8); it presents no interest to the speaker (9).

(8) Her father **was killed** in the Boer war.

(9) The doctor **was sent for.**

(b) The active subject is self-evident from the context:

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