

PROS AND CONS OF THE ENGLISH VOICE¹

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Abstract

The present contribution is intended to offer a few glimpses of the English Voice, with a major focus in the first section on the mediopassive and the various labels attached to it².

Section Two takes the reader to coreferentiality and the vexed problem of English reflexives.

It is as late as Section Three that the English Passive finally looms as large as ever. Here three issues are being addressed: the distinct functions of the passive participle – identical in structure to the perfect participle; the role of agent by-phrases, which have been lately promoted from peripheral constituents to active participants in verb complementation; semantic-pragmatic conditions accounting for ellipsis of the agent in passive constructions.

The final section features the grammatical device ‘promotion to subject’ as a semantic rival of the canonical passive, while charting their main diverging contextually-based trends.

Rezumat

În articol, autoarea abordează unele aspecte ale diatezei verbelor din limba engleză. În cercetare, dânsa pornește de la valorile gramaticale și stilistice ale mediopasivului în această limbă, ca, mai apoi, să analizeze coreferențialitatea și pronumele reflexive din ea. Doar în partea a treia a articolului, autoarea cercetează diateza pasivă a verbelor englezești prin abordarea (1) funcțiilor distinctive ale participiului pasiv, care este identic ca structură cu participiul perfect, adică participiul trecut II; (2) complementului de agent, conceput ca complement central și nu doar periferic în limba engleză; (3) condițiilor semantico-pragmatice care justifică omiterea agentului în construcțiile pasive din această limbă.

In Trask’s wide-ranging and forward-looking „Language and Linguistics” voice is briefly defined as “the grammatical category governing the way the subject of a sentence is related to the action of the verb”³. The British linguist further subdivides English voice simply into *active* (“the subject typically expresses an agent, and the direct object expresses a patient”⁴) and *passive* (“the subject is typically a patient and an oblique object, if present, expresses an agent”⁵).

Other languages boast additional voices, for the rendition of which protean English has recourse to more or less original means, as indicated below.

1. Mediopassive

(also *middle*, or *patient-subject construction*): “a construction in which an intrinsically transitive verb is construed intransitively with a patient at subject and receives a passive interpretation”⁶, e.g.:

„The concert tickets cost too much and *sold* badly.”

„This fabric doesn’t *wash* well.”

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²Dixon, 1992; Trask, 1993.

³Trask, 2007, p. 319.

⁴Trask, 1993, p. 299.

⁵*ibidem*.

⁶Trask, 1993, p. 170; Trask, 1993, p. 203.

Only a minority of English verbs (called *labile* verbs⁷) are available for this idiosyncratic pattern, which is therefore best regarded as a lexical, not as a syntactic one (cf reflexive passive in German and Spanish: „Das Buch *liest sich* schnell“ and „Se les *acusó*“, pseudoreflexive constructions in Italian: „Qui *si parla* inglese“, or the impersonal reflexive in Romanian: „Cartea *se citește ușor*“).

1.1.1. Pros and Cons

Some linguists tend to attach to constructions of the type discussed above the label *ergative*.⁸ Voicing, as usual, a quite distinct opinion from that of his fellow linguists, Dixon⁹ views such patterns as end products of a syntactic process called ‘promotion to subject’, i.e. a process by which some noun phrase (the direct object, in our particular case) is moved from a lower- to a higher-ranking position within the relational hierarchy (here, to subject, during passivisation).

On the other hand, the Australian linguist regards application of the term ‘ergative’ to the English examples above as “misconceived” for three main reasons.¹⁰

- a) Promotion to subject is usually available for O NPs (i.e. NPs, of which the deep-structure direct object has become the surface-structure subject, e.g. „The veal cuts easily“, but has been shown to be equally available from a peripheral NP such as *the new knife*, as exemplified by „The new knife cuts the veal easily“¹¹.
- b) Promotion to subject has not been shown to induce a change in the transitivity pattern of a sentence. Thus, if a noun phrase other than object is promoted to subject, then the object may be kept on (as is in fact *the veal* in the above example).
- c) The label ‘ergative’ is as a rule used of a linguistic system where A (i.e. the transitive subject) is marked in a distinctive way (by ergative case), thus keeping it separate from S (intransitive subject) and O (transitive object), which are marked in the same way (by absolutive case). Chopping logic even further, passive S does correspond to O, so the conclusion becomes evident that, for consistency’s sake at least, linguists labelling *Sports cars sell quickly* as ‘ergative’ should apply the same label to the passive „Sports cars are sold quickly“, where S can definitely be traced back to O¹².

2. Reflexive

Reflexive is “a construction in which two noun phrases are understood as having the same referent”¹³. I have given so much space to the Passive in the present chapter because reflexivity is considered by most theorists of English grammar as a property characterizing pronouns

⁷cf. Trask, 1993, p. 152.

⁸Cf. Trask, 1993, p. 93: “A name sometimes given to the transitive pattern exemplified by the sentence *She opened the door*, as compared with the intransitive *The door opened*, or to the subject NP in the transitive construction, reflecting the observation that the patient NP *the door* functions indifferently as intransitive subject or as transitive object, with no change in the morphology of the verb or of the NP, much as happens regularly in morphologically ergative languages [...]”.

⁹Dixon, 1992.

¹⁰Trask seems to voice similar doubts in this respect, if for rather different reasons: “This usage effectively equates ergatives with (a subclass of ?) causatives; its utility is debatable, since the pattern is far from being fully productive in English: while a number of verbs participate in it (*dry, collapse, fly, drown*) some other show lexical suppletion (*die/kill, fall/drop, recover/cure*) and still others require various complex expressions (*get lost/lose, be born/bear, blush/make...blush, exist/bring...into existence*)” (Trask, 1993, p. 92).

¹¹cf. Dixon, 1992, p. 323.

¹²*ibidem*.

¹³Trask, 1993, p. 233.

rather than verbs. Thus, in his most discerning and erudite approach to “Grammatical Terms in Linguistics”, Trask lists only *reflexive pronoun* as a distinct morphological subclass and no *reflexive verb*¹⁴. Likewise, in examples like “Did he hurt *himself* when he fell?”, “Buy *yourself* some shoes”, “She distinguished *herself* in the debate”, the label ‘reflexive’ is attached to the English pronouns accompanying certain verbs and not to the verbs as such. Two particular patterns are most apt to catch one’s eye in the above subcategory, namely:

(a) *reflexive absolute transitive*: “the construction in which an intrinsically transitive verb is construed intransitively with a reflexive sense”¹⁵, e.g. “He undressed, I have been washing”.

(b) *reflexive-patient-subject-construction*: “the construction in which a transitive verb has a patient as its subject and a stressed reflexive pronoun as its object: „This car practically drives itself”¹⁶.

Whereas some verbs blatantly discourage coreferentiality, others simply cannot do without it when construed in a different meaning or forced to take on additional constituents. Such is the case with *think* as accompanied by a *to* - complement in „And I *thought to myself*: “What a wonderful world!”.

In his ambitious and extensive account of English Grammar, „A New Approach“, Dixon employs the label ‘reflexive/reflexivized causative’ for word strings such as „Just *sit yourself down here*“, which speakers often use “to achieve a casual informal style” in place of the less “chatty and friendly [...] plain intransitive *Just sit down here*”¹⁷. As an added incentive, some verbs possessed of a primary concrete meaning (especially those including the features [+space, +direction] in their semantic diagram) can even undergo metaphorical extension when taking a reflexive object (cf. Dixon, *ib.*), as exemplified in „I couldn’t *bring myself* to tell her the bad news” [=I couldn’t bear to tell her], „*Pull yourself together!*” [=control your feelings, stop acting like a baby], „I know it was a dishonest thing to do, but *put yourself in my place/my position*” [=imagine being me].

3. The Passive

Trask defines the prototypical passive as “A construction in which an intrinsically transitive verb is construed in such a way that its underlying object appears as its surface subject, its underlying subject being either absent (a ‘short passive’) or expressed as an oblique NP (a ‘long passive’, or ‘passive-with-agent’), the construction usually being overtly marked in some way to show its passive character”¹⁸.

The switch-over from active to passive involves insertion of the copula-like *be* immediately before the head of the verb phrase, followed by the past participle of the main verb (also called ‘-ed or -en participle’).

3.1. The -ed Participle

‘-Ed participle’ is the relatively recent abbreviation – traditional label: ‘past participle’ – for both passive and perfect participles. Though almost always identical in structure, the two English non-finite forms have perfectly distinct functions. Thus, whereas the former serves as the head of a passive verb phrase (“They were *told* about it two days ago”), the latter combines with the auxiliary *have* to form the Perfect (“They *have told* him about it this morning”). However, ambiguity does not rule supreme in all cases, a few verbs showing availability for separate perfect and passive forms with at least some speakers (mainly American English), e.g. “He has been *proven* guilty” vs “They have *proved* him guilty”, “Harrowing pictures of the famine victims have been *shown* in the news report” vs “The news report has *showed* harrowing pictures of the famine victims”.

1.2. The Role of Agent by-phrases

¹⁴cf Trask, 1993, p. 234.

¹⁵Trask, 1993, p. 234.

¹⁶*ibidem*.

¹⁷Dixon, 1992, p. 58.

¹⁸Trask, 1993, p. 201.

As optional constituent, a passive clause may include a *by*-phrase complement which is in fact the entity instigating or performing the action, i.e. the real agent. Passive verb *by*-phrases differ from peripheral adverbials such as *by accident / chance / mistake / request*, etc in that they are much more fastidious about the company they keep or, as grammatical parlance would have it: they place a co-occurrence restriction on the verb. These limitations suggest that such phrases, despite their optionality, are specifiers rather than modifiers and are indeed part of the valency of the individual verb.¹⁹

In other words, passive is to the writer what tonic stress is to the speaker: a signal of marked focus. With the active counterpart almost unanimously viewed as the unmarked clausal message, the “passive voice is *marked*, and it is most typically used either to make the entity undergoing the action the centre of attention, or to remove the entity performing the action (the *agent*) from the sentence altogether”²⁰.

Everything else being equal, speakers have been found to resort to the passive morphological pattern incorporating a *by*-complement mainly when this last constituent provides new information, hence attracting end-focus, e.g. “We were held up *by a traffic jam*”.

Though it is frequently difficult to account for the use of such passives in a principled manner, a further motivation seems to occur when the *by*-complement is rather bulky and placing it in final position is a syntactic constraint deriving from the so-called ‘principle of end-weight’, as exemplified by “The criminals had been caught red-handed by the most bizarre contemporary Sherlock Holmes ever to set foot in that spooky hotel”.

3.3. Agentless or ‘Short’ Passives²¹

Despite its centrality, statistics show that in formal English more than 80 per cent of passives tend to silence the agent, with a significantly higher percentage for colloquial English²². Admittedly, it is often the case that an agent remains unactualized if already implied, e.g. “He did not die a natural death, he was murdered”.

In his excellent study “On voice in the English Verb”, Svartvik chooses to give up rigid traditional views – thus effectively bypassing dichotomous subclassifications of voice – and proposes instead the concept of ‘passive scale’²³. At the top end he places sentences with an agent *by*-phrase, while the opposite pole is occupied by nonagentive clauses which “have a syntagmatic affinity with active equative clauses”²⁴, with agentless passives ranking third (i.e. exactly at midpoint) on Svartvik’s scale. While in this last class the agent is not lexically realized but “it may have direct” agent extension (which is usually animate (“Many varieties of laterals are heard in English” ← “One can hear many varieties of...”²⁵), the relation of nonagentives to the active, Svartvik argues, is much more difficult to reconstruct, as illustrated by “The significance of mystery, however, was lost in *Clarissa*”²⁶, where native speakers vary considerably as to admitting an agent extension.

All in all ellipsis of the agent will normally be resorted to if:

1. The identity of the active subject is not known.
2. Identification of the active subject is considered irrelevant.
3. The identity of the active subject cannot or must not be revealed.

¹⁹Cf. Măciucă, 2000: 35-36 for further details, as well as discussion of the label ‘perfect’ which some linguists seem to favour.

²⁰Trask, 2007, p. 320.

²¹As opposed to ‘Passives-with-Agent’ or ‘Long Passives’ (cf. Trask, 1993, p. 201).

²²cf. Dixon, 1992, p. 298.

²³cf. Svartvik, 1966, p. 156.

²⁴*idem*, p. 138.

²⁵*idem*, p. 134.

²⁶*idem*, p. 137.

4. Identification of the active subject would be tantamount to claiming or assigning responsibility for the action, e.g. „I’m afraid some coffee has been spilt on the rug“.
5. A *get* passive is used instead of the prototypical *be* one, even in the same, colloquial, style²⁷.

Quirk *et alii*, however, think fit to qualify this restriction by tactfully narrowing down the semantic description of agent *by*-phrases allowed to accompany *get* passives to [-animate]²⁸. Hatcher’s in-depth study on *get* and *be* passives is again a bit more restrictive when shifting the limit up to [-human] but only for highly individualized agents²⁹. Thus, in her view, “he got run over by a drunken driver” is perfectly acceptable, while “he got run over by *the* man next door” is semantically deviant³⁰.

An agentless passive is an equally useful device for focusing on some other clause constituent, particularly on those which can only with difficulty receive end focus, such as verbs or prepositional objects/complements, e.g. „So far no winner *had been announced*“, „Senior members of the government *are provided with research assistants*“.

2. Promotion to Subject vs Passivisation: Semantic Differences

While passivisation, Dixon maintains³¹, merely focuses on the object or on how the activity affects the latter – without contributing in any way to the relation between object and verb –, promotion to subject either gives credit to or holds the non-subject NP accountable for the activity’s success or lack of success, respectively. Compare, for instance, “The custard *wasn’t poured* properly”, implying that “the person holding the jug didn’t look to see what they were doing”, with “The custard *doesn’t pour* properly”, where the listener/reader is expected to read into the sentence an additional comment like “it is too thick, and will have to be spooned onto the pie”³².

More importantly even, disambiguation of similar-looking constructions can be successfully effected by applying certain syntactic constraints, such as the one stating that although an object can be kept on when a peripheral noun phrase is promoted to subject, it will most certainly be found to oppose passivisation. Thus, the theoretically acceptable passive “The woolens were washed well (by the Hoovermatic)” – corresponding to “The Hoovermatic washed the woolens well” – could run the risk of being confused with the passive “The woolens were washed well (by Mary) (in the Hoovermatic)” – to be traced back to the active “Mary washed the woolens well (with Softly) (in the Hoovermatic)”.

Now then, since, as indicated above, passivisation in such cases always results in agentless sentences, “The woolens were washed well” – “would then be irretrievably ambiguous, and a listener would not know whether *well* referred to the Agent, the machine, the soap mixture, or what”³³.

While comparing passives with pseudo-passives, Stein³⁴, too, tackles combinations of the type discussed above with the utmost care. Since their linguistic form is active but the meaning is said to be passive, she labels them ‘notional’ passive, as contrasted to the ‘grammatical’ passive, where both meaning and form are passive³⁵. She also seems to agree with Dixon on a further point, namely that notional passives or a rule cannot be expanded by an agent phrase (e.g. **“The wine drinks well by most customers”*). In addition, she aptly remarks that verbs like

²⁷cf. Dixon, 1992, p. 304.

²⁸cf. Quirk *et alii*, 1972, p. 802.

²⁹cf. Hatcher, 1949, p. 435-436.

³⁰*ibidem*.

³¹Dixon, 1992, p. 325.

³²*ibidem*.

³³*ibidem*.

³⁴Stein, 1979.

³⁵cf. Stein, 1979, p. 166.

sell and *wash* make up a distinct class which one can easily tell from *bona fide* active verbs by applying the test of compatibility with modal *can*. Thus a sentence like *"The new Fiat can sell well" is dismissed as deviant for the straightforward reason that modal *can* is already semantically included³⁶.

Notional passive resembles the grammatical one, Stein claims, in that they both avoid mentioning the agent. However, while this is an optional characteristic with the latter, it has been found to be a defining one in the former³⁷. To sum up, in the notional passive "the speaker's grammatical freedom of treating a resultative activity as beginning after the point of its extralinguistic onset [we know from our experience that selling and washing presuppose that same person performs these activities] is lexicalized in an active form"³⁸.

Couching it differently, but clearly holding similar views on the topic, Dixon maintains that promotion to subject, as compared with the passive, is an even more marked construction, to which recourse must be had only when success of an activity can mainly be attributed to the nature of the referent of a non-subject noun phrase. More often than not, "there has to be a contrast involved – some models of car sell quickly and others slowly, some types of woollens wash easily but others don't"³⁹.

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³⁶cf. Stein, 1979, p. 167.

³⁷*ibidem*.

³⁸*ibidem*.

³⁹Dixon, 1992, p. 325.

