

Title	Reference-point structure in English passive constructions: a study of passivization from a cognitive point of view
Sub Title	英語受動構文にみられる参照点構造：認知論的アプローチによる受動化に関する一考察
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学藝文学会
Publication year	2003
Jtitle	藝文研究 (The geibun-kenkyu : journal of arts and letters). Vol.85, (2003. 12) ,p.127(126)- 139(114)
JaLC DOI	
Abstract	
Notes	
Genre	Journal Article
URL	<a href="https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00850001-0139">https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AN00072643-00850001-0139</a>

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# Reference-Point Structure in English Passive Constructions:

A Study of Passivization from a Cognitive Point of View\*

Maki Sudo

## 1. Introduction

Passivization is a manipulation that makes active sentences such as (1a) into passive sentences such as (1b). Observe the following pair of sentences:

- (1) a. Tom kicked the ball.  
b. The ball was kicked by Tom.

(1b) is the passive counterpart of (1a), and logically (that is, when viewed as an objective state of things) has the same meaning as (1a). However, the two sentences are different obviously in their respective focuses: in (1a), the agent *Tom* is focused on while in (1b) the patient *the ball*.<sup>(1)</sup> This structural correspondence does not always hold, because not all the events and states that can be expressed in transitive sentences can be converted into the passive by focusing on the patient, as seen in (2) and (3) below:

- (2) \*\$20 is cost by the book.  
(3) ?This bed was slept in by John.<sup>(2)</sup>

The acceptability difference shown in the above pairs of sentences such as (2) and (3) results from the fact that passivizability is not based on the syntactic basis alone but on the cognitive/semantic basis of “the change of the (semantic) content the object has” (hereafter “the change of the object”) proposed by Nishimura (1996): in the active counterpart, by the act of the agent (the subject) the patient (the object) is given the change of the place/state.<sup>(3)</sup> However, there exist some counterexamples to this crucial factor in passivization, and so in order to cope with this problem, this paper suggests that the way the counterexamples and the passive based on “the change of the object”<sup>(4)</sup> are related to each other, which becomes clear in terms of the reference-point structure by adding a viewpoint of the pragmatic function of “the maintenance of the discourse topic”.

## 2. Cognitive Basis of the English Passive: “Change of Object”

The fact that (4a) is acceptable while (4b) is not can be explained in terms of the cognitive basis of the English passive, that is, “the change of the object”<sup>(5)</sup>:

- (4) a. London is visited by many Japanese tourists every year.
- b. \*London was visited by Mary yesterday.
- c. \*\$20 is cost by the book. (=2)

In (4a), if many tourists visit London every year, the city would undergo some change to a new state, i.e. a tourist city. In contrast, the active counterpart of (4b) merely describes the fact that Mary visits London, so it is difficult to imagine that London undergoes any change. Similarly in (4c), the subject does not cause the object to undergo a change at all in the active counterpart; it merely describes a relation between the subject and the

object. Therefore, it cannot be passivized.

As well as the normal passives, the pseudo-passives such as (5a-b) can also be explained on the basis of “the change of the object”<sup>(6)</sup>:

- (5) a. ?This bed was slept in by John. (=3)  
b. This bed was slept in by Napoleon.

(5a) is less acceptable in that, because an ordinary person such as John sleeps in the bed, the bed would not undergo any change. On the other hand, if the agent is historically famous like Napoleon, the bed will undergo a change in its state from a common bed to a historically famous and significant bed. In other words, an abstract change, i.e. the acquisition of special value, makes (5b) acceptable.

Furthermore, Nishimura (1996) explains why the by-phrase that denotes the agent is often omitted in the passive in terms of focusing on “the change of the object” as in (6a-b):

- (6) a. The office was moved from Osaka to Tokyo.  
b. This bed has been slept in. (Nishimura 1996: 81)

In (6a) “the change of the place”, that is, the movement of the office from Osaka to Tokyo is focused on, and in (6b) “the change of the state” – a physical and concrete one – that is, a trace of someone sleeping in the bed.

### 3. The Problem with “Change of Object”

Certainly the cognitive basis of “the change of the object” can deal with the acceptability of a wide range of the single-verb passives and the pseudo-passives. However, as for some passives such as the following examples, the acceptability is difficult to explain in terms of “the change of the

object”:

- (7) a. The second one is followed by the third, the fourth, . . . .  
b. The numbers on the license plate are preceded by a letter.  
(LDCE)

Both (7a) and (7b) merely describe the relation of “order” between or among the participants, and in their active counterparts it is difficult to suppose that the referent of each object undergoes a change.

#### 4. The Passives as Maintenance of Discourse Topic

It is problematic to explain the acceptability of the passives we have seen in Section 3 in terms of “the change of the object”. So I suggest a solution to this problem by arguing that it is necessary to explain their acceptability at the level of discourse<sup>(7)</sup>, that is, in terms of the pragmatic function of maintaining the topic<sup>(8)</sup> in discourse.<sup>(9)</sup> Observe the following example (italics mine):

- (8) (After a theory is presented.) There is much evidence which supports this theory. First of all . . . . Secondly, . . . . *The second one is followed by the third, the fourth, . . . .*

With respect to the passive in (8), as we have seen in (7a), the acceptability cannot be dealt with at the sentence level, but can be handled by the pragmatic function of maintaining the topicality of the preceding sentence, *the second evidence* as the subject at the level of discourse.<sup>(10)</sup> Also in (9a-c), passivization results from this function (italics mine):

- (9) a. Her husband oddly, however, kept his place without appar-

ently measuring these results. As he had been amused at her intensity, so *he wasn't uplifted by her relief; his interest might in fact have been enlisted than he allowed*. 'Do you mean,' he presently asked, 'that he had already forgot about Charlotte?' (*The Golden Bowl*)

- b. He'd have had people to be nice to him to show him round. If he'd been introduced properly and decently to army life, *he would not have been followed by press photographers and press reporters*. (LLC)
- c. I may have got a nought wrong but I don't think I have – I don't think it was a hundred and fifty thousand I'm pretty sure it was fifteen thousand – and I know of various long standing organizations in universities not here that are in for stuff cos *I've I've been approached*. So I should I I would have been very surprised really if you had got a a British Academy award. (op.cit.)

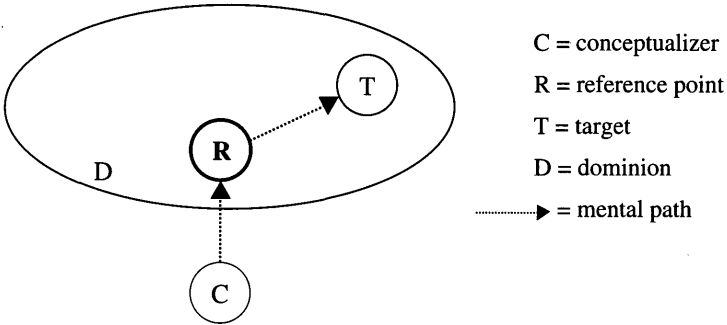
In (9a), the discourse topic is *he (her husband)* in that it is repeated as the subject throughout the discourse, and *he* in (9b) and *I* in (9c), for the same reason as (9a). Thus, passivization occurs in order to maintain their subject's status as topic.<sup>(11)</sup>

## 5. The Link between “Change of Object” and Maintenance of Discourse Topic

So far, we have seen the passives based on “the change of the object” at the level of sentence and those based on the maintenance of the discourse topic at the level of discourse. I argue then that the English passives constitute a cognitive network based on the reference-point structure.

### 5.1 Reference-Point Structure

The reference-point ability discussed in Langacker (1993) refers to the ability to use the mark (a reference point) in order that we point to something, and is considered as a basic cognitive ability of human beings. The reference-point ability is illustrated in Figure 1 below:



(Langacker 1993: 6)

Figure 1

According to Langacker, C indicates the conceptualizer (the speaker/the hearer), R the reference point, T the target, that is, the entity actually pointed to through R. The dotted arrow is the mental path C follows in order to reach T. D, the dominion, is the conceptual region to which R is directly accessible, i.e. “the class of potential targets” (Langacker 1993: 6). And C establishes mental contact with T through R which has cognitive salience for both the speaker and the hearer. In this framework, cognitive salience is intrinsically or contextually determined. In *the cat’s fleas*, for example, *the cat* that has cognitive salience as R designates the invisible fleas in the cat as T.

### 5.2 Reference-Point Structure in English Passive Constructions

Figure 2 shows the reference-point structure of the passive based on “the

change of the object”:

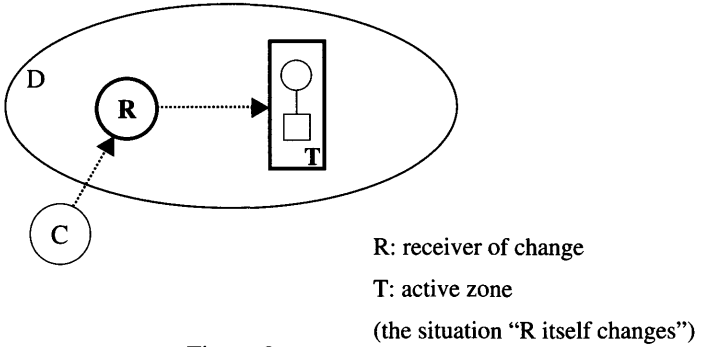


Figure 2

In the passive describing the change of the object’s place or state at the sentence level, its subject, that is, the receiver of the change serves as R for the situation in which R itself changes in order to designate “the active-zone” (Langacker: 1987), which is the part directly involved in the situation of “change”. This is because the receiver of the change of state or place is cognitively salient. Observe the following examples:

- (10) a. The intruder was killed by Mary.
- b. The ball was kicked by the child.

In (10a), *the intruder* as R designates the active-zone as T in which the change of the intruder’s state from life to death takes place. Similarly in (10b), *the ball* serves as R for the active-zone as T in which the movement of the ball takes place.

Figure 3, on the other hand, shows the reference-point structure of the passive based on the maintenance of the discourse topic:



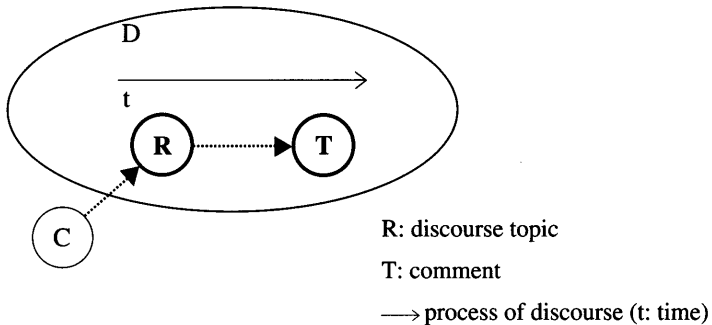


Figure 3

In the passive at the discourse level, the subject is the discourse topic, which serves as R specifying the rest of the sentence which constitutes the comment (T): the part in which something is said about the topic.<sup>(12)</sup> Consider the following examples again:

- (11) a. I may have got a nought wrong but I don't think I have – I don't think it was a hundred and fifty thousand I'm pretty sure it was fifteen thousand – and I know of various long standing organizations in universities not here that are in for stuff cos *I've I've been approached*. So I should I I would have been very surprised really if you had got a a British Academy award. (=9c)
- b. (After a theory is presented.) There is much evidence which supports this theory. First of all . . . . Secondly, . . . . *The second one is followed by the third, the fourth, . . . .* (=8)

In (11a), the subject which is the discourse topic *I* serves as R; it is repeated as the subject through the whole of the discourse, so the conceptualizer (i.e. the speaker) is likely to give cognitive salience to it, and desig-

nates the comment *have been approached* as T. Similarly in (11b), *the second one* (=evidence) as the subject is repeated in order to maintain the topicality of the second evidence, so it is conceivable that the conceptualizer gives cognitive salience to it. Hence the second one serves as R for the comment *is followed by the third, the fourth, . . .* as T.

### 5.3 Relationship between Two Reference-Point Structures of the Passive

Table 1 shows the relationship between the reference-point structure of the passive at the level of discourse and the one at the level of sentence:

<b>Discourse Level</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicate</b>
	<b>Reference Point as Topic</b>	<b>Target as Comment</b>
<b>Sentence Level</b>	<b>Subject</b>	<b>Predicate</b>
	<b>Reference Point as Receiver of the Change</b>	<b>Target as Change Itself</b>

Table 1

As we see from the Table, the latter structure is part of the former. Observe the following example:

(12) ?The bridge was crossed by John.

(12) is less acceptable at the sentence level. On the other hand, if we imagine the context in which John is the hero of a story, it is predictable that

(12) is acceptable; it is conceivable that the bridge will undergo a change to a significantly different state because of John's special feature. Hence discourse serves not only to explain the acceptability of the passives on the basis of the maintenance of the discourse topic, but also to make acceptable the passive that has less acceptability at the sentence level alone on the basis of "the change of the object". That is, when the sentence level and the discourse level are in conflict, discourse has priority in deciding the acceptability of the passive.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

English passivization obtains when the subject in the active causes the object to undergo a change of a new place/state ("the change of the object") or the status as topic that the object in the active has is maintained at the level of discourse. This semantic basis and the pragmatic function of the passive are reflected in our cognitive abilities that give cognitive salience to the change in the former,<sup>(13)</sup> and the discourse topic in the latter. Considering the examples shown in this paper inquiring into the essentials of the passive, we need to wonder why the conceptualizer intentionally chooses to use the passive rather than the active in his/her expression. Thus, the cognitive approach to the passive in this paper represents a theoretical foundation that explicates how our cognitive abilities combine the conceptualizer (the speaker) with passivizability.

### Notes

- \* \*This paper is a revised version of the presentation of the 27th Annual Meeting of the Kansai Linguistic Society held at Momoyama Gakuin University on October 26-27, 2002.
- (1) The approach to the English passives in this paper is based on cognitive orientation to language, the symbolic view of grammar (e.g. Langacker 1990); each grammatical unit is taken as a symbol pairing form and meaning, and

thus grammatical relations such as a subject and an object can also be defined in terms of meaning. (Cf. also Lakoff 1977 and Hopper & Thompson 1980.) According to Taylor (1995), the properties of the transitive construction are, in general, two participants (the agent and the patient), their individuation, the agent's responsibility for the event, the agent's volition, the inanimate patient, the change of the patient, the punctual event, the agent's physical contact with the patient, the adversative relationship between the agent and the patient and the real event.

- (2) In this paper, a sentence with the combination of an intransitive verb and a preposition - such as *walk under* and *sleep in* - is treated as a marginal member of the prototypical transitive construction such as *The child kicked the ball*.
- (3) Bolinger (1975, 1977) states that the crucial factor in passivization is the concept of "affectedness" the object undergoes. However, Sudo (2001) argues that the cognitive view of "the change of the object" proposed by Nishimura (1996) expands "affectedness" which Bolinger does not make clear.
- (4) In this paper, unless particularly specified, the pseudo-passive constructions are included in the passive constructions.
- (5) The passive constructions are paid attention to, in the first place, within the framework of generative grammar proposed by Chomsky. However, its view of the passive is regularization of the structural correspondence to the active counterpart and, in principle, cannot explain the case in which the acceptability depends on the noun phrase in the by-phrase.
- (6) Takami (1992, 1995, 1997) proposes a functional restriction on the English pseudo-passive ("enduring characterization", "habitual characterization" and "temporal characterization"). However, Sudo (2000) and Sudo (2001) regard the characteristic of the subject in the pseudo-passives as the change the object undergoes as a result of subject's action in their active counterparts. Thus the acceptability of the pseudo-passives can be dealt with by "the change of the object", as well as the normal passives.
- (7) In this paper, discourse refers to a group which consists of more than two sentences.
- (8) Topic refers to the part which designates a person or idea in a sentence and where they are talked about.
- (9) The pragmatic function of maintaining the discourse topic plays an essential role in the cohesion of discourse.
- (10) For further discussion on the relationship between the pragmatic functions

and passivization, see Siewierska (1984) and Van Oosten (1984).

- (11) In English sentences, a topic usually corresponds to a subject, and a comment to a predicate; for example, in *Hillary is a doctor*, *Hillary* is the subject and the topic, and *is a doctor* is the predicate and the comment, which, however, is not always the case; a topic can be indicated by a special marking or positioning such as (*As for*) *the journey*, *we will decide that later* and *The journey we will decide later*.
- (12) Langacker (1991), as for the topic construction such as *Sakana wa tai ga oisii* (op.cit.: 314), refers to the topic *sakana* as “subjective reference point”, and states that the hearer establishes mental contact with the subject *tai* and the profiled relationship *tai ga oisii*.
- (13) According to Comrie (1989), Nivkh naturally topicalizes Patient in the resultative construction in order to express the change of the state in P, which supports the reflection of our cognitive faculty of giving cognitive salience to the change.

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