

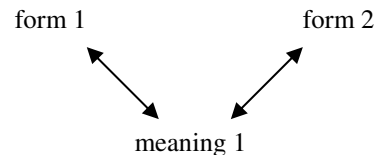
## Week 9: The passive: form(s) and function(s)

### 1. Recap

- grammatical structure not entirely abstract and arbitrary but motivated by cognitive structure
- e.g. correspondence participants in an event → number of complements of a verb
- generally: difference in structure → difference in meaning (Bolinger 1977)
- active vs. passive (§2), types of English passives *be* vs. *get* (§3)

### 2. Active voice vs. passive voice

- SYNONYMY



- some examples to consider:

- organic vs. natural
- healthy vs. wholesome
- kill vs. cause to die

- true synonymy would imply that the words are always interchangeable, i.e. in all contexts → generally, the semantic difference can be found by testing the appropriateness of the “synonymous” words in different contexts:

- the natural habitat of the polar bear vs. \*the organic habitat of the polar bear
- I'm feeling healthy today vs. \*I'm feeling wholesome today
- I caused the bulldog to die on Sunday by poisoning it on Saturday vs. \*I killed the bulldog on Sunday by poisoning it on Saturday.

- sometimes difference more subtle:

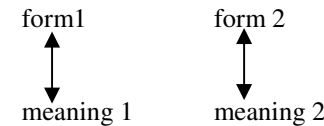
- (7) at any rate, in any case, anyway, anyways, anyhow

- consider the following contextualisation:

- (8) No doubt many people would regard the account given above as a travesty of Marx's views, but at any rate / \*anyways / \*\*anyhoo that was Marxism as I received it.

→ formality/register (also regional variation)

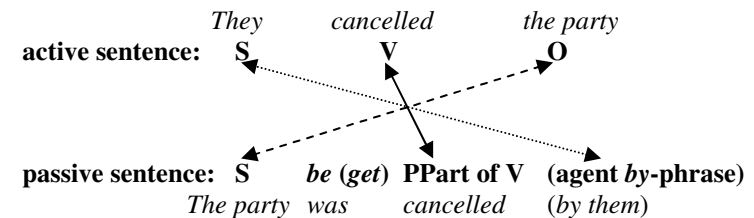
- true synonymy is (as good as) non-existent (there are difficult cases, e.g. *nonetheless* vs. *nevertheless*; *gadget* vs. *device*)



- the argument in cognitive linguistics is that isomorphism is motivated by ECONOMY → why have two (or more) forms stored as part of our linguistic knowledge if they mean *exactly* the same?
- the notion of (partial) synonymy does not only apply to single words, but also to constructions, see e.g. (3) above
- now consider the meaning of:

- They cancelled the birthday party for Becky Pritchard.
- The birthday party for Becky Pritchard was cancelled (by them).

- structure of a passive clause:



- important to distinguish between passive participles and past participles → (11)

(11)



→ *stoned* not a passive participle because a *by*-phrase can't be added (e.g. *\*Fun to get stoned by grass*); also *very* can be inserted before *stoned*, suggesting that it's really an adjective

- in some traditional schools of thought in syntax passive clauses were seen as TRANSFORMATIONS of active clauses but this fails to explain why the two voice constructions should have different meanings (see again e.g. (9) vs. (10), the latter is are not simply a structural variant of the former); in addition, it is psychologically highly implausible that in producing a sentence such as (10) speakers actually *derive* it from (9)
- structural (syntactic) difference → semantic difference
- consider also:

(12) The shopping must be done.

(13) You must do the shopping.

- function of the passive according to Dixon (1991:299-302):

- avoid mentioning the subject (i.e. of the corresponding active sentence), specifically because:
  - the speaker doesn't know the identity of the subject

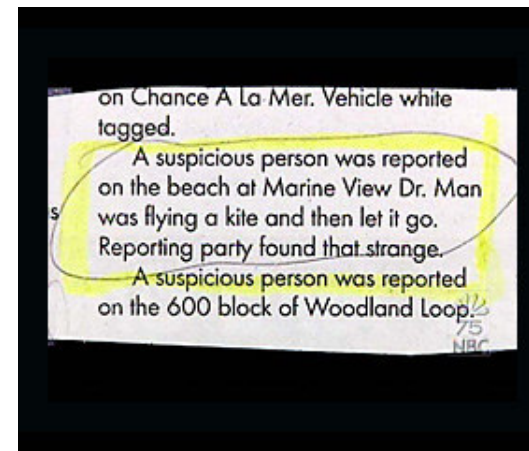
- the speaker doesn't want to reveal the identity of the subject (maybe for reasons of politeness)
- the identity of the subject is very obvious from the context
- the identity of the subject not considered important

- focus on the object rather than on the subject (i.e. of the corresponding active sentence)
- focus on the result of the activity

→ foregrounding vs. backgrounding (week 8)

- the use of the passive isn't necessarily due to only one single factor → often a *combination* of factors
- in ex. (10) the subject may be obvious and unimportant at the same time, and the speaker may want to focus on the object
- note also that the active sentence subject, *they*, is rather vague (cf. e.g. *Jack and Jill*) → the vaguer the subject (agent), the more speakers are inclined to use a passive (cf. Dixon's referentiality hierarchy (1991:300-1) for a more elaborate discussion of this effect)
- passive frequent in newspaper headlines and articles:

(14)



- the characteristics of the passive outlined above help explain this → *was reported ... by whom??* → anonymity of the "reporting party"
- Dixon identifies some additional factors, not so much related to (de-)emphasising certain aspects of the situation portrayed by the sentence but rather to the organisation of the wider discourse, in particular, to what is the

TOPIC (the most salient participant being talked about in the discourse) at the moment when the sentence is uttered:

- subject → topic
- passive can be used to get the topic into subject position:

(15)

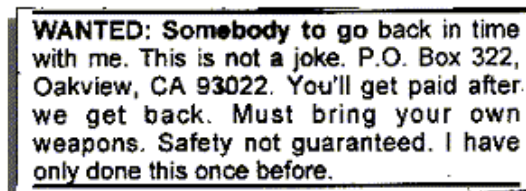


→ his left earlobe ... it was bitten off (not: a suspect bit it off)  
 → a suspect ... AMT was arrested (...) and charged (not: The police arrested AMT...)  
 → Officer BL ... he was released (not: The doctors released Officer BL)  
 NB 1: once again, some other factors are involved as well, e.g. it's obvious that it was the police who arrested AMT  
 NB 2: in the headline the passive auxiliary *be* is omitted; this is frequently done in headlines → brevity

### 3. *Be*-passive vs. *get*-passive

- *be* is the most common auxiliary of the passive, but now consider:

(16)



- does (16) mean exactly the same as (17)?

(17) You'll be paid after we get back.

[*G*et is often used when the speaker wishes to imply that the state which the passive subject (...) is in, is not due just to the transitive subject [i.e. the subject of the corresponding active sentence, WBH], or to the result of chance, but may in some be due to the behaviour of this passive subject (Dixon 1991:302)

- works quite well for examples such as (16) but not always:

(18) Mrs Blackmer: I came here to thank you. It was my little girl that *got killed* with that bomb. (*The Untouchables*)

(19) ...my little girl *was killed*...

- the *get*-passive is sometimes analysed as being associated with ADVERSATIVE meaning, i.e. the subject somehow *suffers* from the event described by the passive participle

### 4. Passivisability: syntactic transitivity vs. semantic transitivity

- so far we've seen that passive clauses correspond to active clauses with objects, so-called TRANSITIVE clauses (cf. the notion of mono-/di-transitive verbs → week 7)
- but not all transitive active sentences have passive counterparts:

(20) Your friend the time traveller has a seriously disturbed mind.

(21) \*A seriously disturbed mind is had by your friend.

- (20) is transitive (object *a seriously disturbed mind*) but doesn't have a corresponding passive → (21)
- in order to explain why certain verbs allow passivisation while others don't, even if they take object complements, we need to look at the *semantics* of the situation portrayed
- Hopper & Thompson (1980): differentiate between *syntactic* transitivity and *semantic* transitivity (see also Dixon 1991:305ff):

- synt transitivity → presence or absence of an object in a clause
- sem transitivity → has to do with nature of the event and determines to what extent it's possible to passivise a clause

- semantically highly transitive clause → portrays a situation where there is some sort of interaction between two human — or at least animate participants — that involves the transmission of force, and clearly affects the object:

(22) I killed your friend the time traveller.

(23) Your friend the time traveller was killed by me.

→ in (20) there is no transmission of force, and the object isn't animate either,  
 → it's low in terms of semantic transitivity → unsurprising that it doesn't passivise

## 5. Concluding remarks

- the active vs. passive contrast is yet another example of how grammatical structure is motivated by cognitive structure → formally different ways of describing events to reflect different ways in which we think about events
- English has 2 passive constructions, one using the passive auxiliary *be*, the other based on *get*; again, the difference in form goes hand in hand with a difference in meaning
- whether a clause is passivisable or not isn't simply a matter of its syntactic properties (i.e. whether the verb has an object or not) but very much has to do with the kind of situation the clause portrays: the higher the degree of semantic transitivity, the higher the chance that the sentence can be passivised

### References

- Bolinger, Dwight. 1977. *The form of language*. London: Longmans. [Classic reference on the relation between structure and meaning in language. A bit advanced for the purposes of 203 though.]
- Börjars, Kersti & Kate Burridge. 2001. *Introducing English grammar*. London: Arnold. [Not very much information, but some useful discussion on pp. 256-7, 294; for trees see pp. 178-80. The *get*-passive is ignored.]
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1991. *A new approach to English grammar, on semantic principles*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, Ch. 9.**
- Givón, Talmy. 1993. *English grammar: a function-based introduction*. Vols. I, II. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. [Has various useful but scattered bits of information about the passive, consult the index.]
- Hopper, Paul J. and Sandra A. Thompson. 1980. Transitivity in grammar and discourse. *Language* 56:251-99. [A very important study on transitivity. A bit advanced for this module except perhaps if you're doing the coursework question on the passive. And if you're a masochist.]