

ZERO-ANAPHORA OF THE ENGLISH PASSIVE

by
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English passives have been a subject of continuing interest in various fields of linguistics. However, the role of the agent, which is often considered a mere optional extra because it is syntactically deletable, has received surprisingly little attention, let alone the role of the unexpressed agent. This paper calls this view into question. It shows that even when the agent is left unsaid, it may play an important role in making the discourse coherent. In other words, the paper shows that a syntactically unencoded element may play a significant role in pragmatic analyses.

1. Introduction

Almost all previous studies of English passives include a discussion of agentless passives, but none of them, to the best of my knowledge, has ever related the use of agentless passives to a discussion of discourse topics. The purpose of this paper is to shed light on a role of the unexpressed agent of the English passive, namely, the discourse-topic-maintaining role.

'Topic' is one of the terms in linguistic literature that is widely used without proper definition or justification. Some linguists such as Hannay (1985) and Schlobinski and Schütze-Coburn (1992) use the term 'topic' and 'theme' interchangeably.¹ Others such as Li and Thompson (1976) and Foley and Van Valin (1984, 1985) use 'topic' to refer to a clause-external or peripheral element used in association with the syntactic operation 'topicalization'. On the other hand, in Dik (1978, 1985) it is the 'theme' that is clause-external and 'topic' is a clause-internal element. Dik makes a clear distinction between 'topic' and 'theme' and he demonstrates this distinction by showing a sentence that has both theme and topic such as the following:

- (1) As for Paris, the Eiffel Tower is really spectacular. (Dik 1978:141)

For him, 'as for Paris' is the 'theme' and 'the Eiffel Tower' is the 'topic'. Givón also distinguishes between 'topic' and 'theme' but in a different way from Dik's distinction. Givón notes:

- (2) ...it [topic] is the participant most closely associated with the higher-level 'theme' of the paragraph and finally, it is the participant most likely to be coded as the primary topic – or grammatical subject – of the vast majority of sequentially-ordered clauses/sentences comprising the thematic paragraph. (Givón 1983:8)

A particular problem with the term 'topic' is thus that different authors draw no consistent distinction between a topic conceived as a linguistic unit (such as a noun phrase) and a topic in the ordinary sense of what a text is about. This paper distinguishes between a 'sentence topic' in the first sense and a 'discourse topic' in the second. In some examples the distinction between these two is clear. Consider the following example from a newspaper:

- (3) As another part of the former communist bloc crumbles along destabilising ethnic lines, the New Year's Eve celebrations in Prague and Bratislava will be tinged by fears for an uncertain future and regrets at the passing of Czechoslovakia. (The Daily Telegraph, 20 Dec, 1992)

At the sentence level, the topic could be 'the New Year's Eve celebrations in Prague', but at the discourse level, the topic is what is said in the by-phrase of the passive, because this particular newspaper article is about 'fears for an uncertain future in Czechoslovakia'. I will employ the notion 'discourse topic' and not 'sentence topic' in our discussion of the topic function of the unexpressed agent, while the term 'discourse topic' is used in the sense of what a text is about. This 'aboutness' criterion is suggested by some linguists. For instance, Brown and Yule note:

- (4) We are primarily interested in the general pretheoretical notion of 'topic' as 'what is being talked about' in a conversation. (Brown and Yule 1983:71)

Dik notes:

- (5) Topicality characterizes those entities 'about' which information is provided or requested in the discourse. (Dik 1989:266)

Here we must note that 'aboutness' is not always associated with sentence-initial elements. Consider the following example given by Van Dijk:

- (6) Note that this textual approach to the problem of sentential topics does not always guarantee that the subject of a sentence is automatically the topic of the sentence, even in normal ordering. After the question 'What happened to the jewels?' we may have

They were stolen by a customer

where the topic function is indeed assigned to the first noun phrase (subject), but we may also have a sentence like

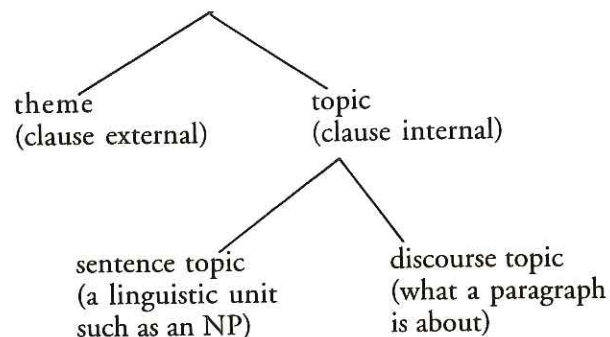
Peter has sold them to a diamond merchant from Antwerp

where the topic is assigned to the predicate noun phrase 'them', although according to some theories of topics the phrase 'Peter' would be assigned topic function. (Van Dijk 1977:120)

Van Dijk thus suggests that 'aboutness' can be held by a element in any position of the clause, but no one has yet related 'aboutness' to the agent of the passive. We will consider some cases in which the unexpressed agent of the English passive conveys discourse 'aboutness'. We must add that the term 'discourse' refers to any length of text, as suggested by Dik as follows:

- (7) The notion of Discourse-Topic should thus be interpreted relative to the stretch of discourse (book, chapter, section, paragraph, and ultimately the individual clause) under consideration. (Dik 1989:267)

In this paper, I will deal with a paragraph as a discourse unit. In order to clarify in what sense the term 'discourse topic' is used in this paper, I would like to add the following diagram:

(8) *diagram 1:*

2. Jespersen's example

Let us have a close look at one of the examples found in Jespersen's (1924) accounts of English passives. He notes that one of the reasons for the use of the passive is that 'the active subject is self-evident from the context', and he gives the following example:

- (9) She told me that her master had dismissed her. No reason had been assigned; no objection had been made to her conduct. She had been forbidden to appeal to her mistress, etc. (Jespersen 1924:167)

In this example, as Jespersen notes, the active subject is self-evident from the context. If the agent was expressed, the passage would be:

- (10) She told me that her master had dismissed her. No reason had been assigned by her master (or by him); no objection had been made by him to her conduct. She had been forbidden by him to appeal to her mistress, etc.

For the first two passives in Jespersen's original version, we can only discuss the discourse topic in terms of a proposition.² For instance, the sentence 'no reason had been assigned by her master' is not about what is represented as the subject 'no reason', but rather it is about a certain conduct of 'her master'. Likewise, the sentence 'no objection had been made to her conduct' is not about 'no objection' but again,

it is about the conduct of 'her master'. If we look at the third passive sentence 'She had been forbidden to appeal to her mistress' in isolation, it could be said that the sentence topic is 'she' and that the discourse topic of the passage in which this sentence appears might also be 'she'. However, if we look at a broader context, it is clear that the passage is not about 'she', but rather about 'her master's unfair dismissal'. We can say, therefore, that the unexpressed agent 'her master' constitutes a part of the discourse topic of this passage. How this can be achieved will be made clearer if a specific context such as the following is given:

- (11) A friend of mine was always complaining how difficult her master was. She said she could never understand him. The other day she said her master had finally dismissed her. No reason had been assigned; no objection had been made to her conduct. She had been forbidden to appeal to her mistress, etc.

In (11) it is clearer that the passage is about 'her master's conduct'. 'Her master', which is represented by the unexpressed agent of each passive sentence, constitutes an important part of the discourse topic, which could be expressed by 'her master's conduct', or more precisely 'her master's unfair dismissal' or 'her master's unscrupulous behavior'. Jespersen's example shows that the English passive without agent can function as a means for maintaining discourse-topic continuity.

3. A recent example

The following example is an extract from an article in a journal which deals with recent crimes committed by a Japanese sect called Aum Supreme Truth (Aum S.T.). The whole article is about this sect, and the following paragraph is about their activities; yet there is no mention of this sect at all in this paragraph:

- (12) However, the main bulk of work was carried out in Japan itself. Many tons of reagents for manufacturing of poisonous gases were bought via dummy firms. ... Radio-controlled mini-helicopters were also purchased in order to disperse gases and bacteria in the atmosphere. Research in the synthesis of sarin and other gases was carried out practically for 24 hours a

day in the main research laboratory hidden behind the altar of raging Shiva in the main complex by Mount Fuji. (New Times International, January 1996).³

If the agent was added to each passive, it would be 'by Aum S.T.' or 'by the members of Aum S.T.'. It is this unexpressed agent that represents the discourse-topic of this paragraph and also of the whole article. Without this assumed topic, the discourse in (12) would not be coherent, because the subjects of the passives, which are listed below for the sake of clarification, do not have clear semantic relations:

- (13) (a) the main bulk of work
- (b) Many tons of reagents for manufacturing of poisonous gases
- (c) Radio-controlled mini-helicopters
- (d) Research in the synthesis of sarin and other gases

Thus, like in Jespersen's example cited earlier, in example (12) it is the unexpressed agent that links each sentence and gives the paragraph topic-continuity. In other words, the unexpressed agent contributes to the coherence of the paragraph, in which each sentence is not overtly connected.

4. Contrastive examples

In order to have a better understanding of the type of passive under consideration, it will be helpful to set up a contrast with our examples. The following is taken from Van Dijk:

- (14) I bought this typewriter in New York. New York is a large city in the USA. Large cities often have serious financial problems (Van Dijk 1977:149)

As for this example, Van Dijk explains, 'Sequences of this type may perhaps be said to be linearly coherent, but at another level of comprehension they do not make sense owing to the lack of a specific

topic of conversation.' His example, thus, shows a linguistic phenomenon which is the opposite of that illustrated by Jespersen and also by the article on Aum S.T. In Jespersen's example, for instance, each sentence is linked by the unexpressed entity, that is 'her master', which is understood to be the discourse topic or at least a part of the discourse topic. In other words, in spite of the fact that there are no overt expressions that serve to link the sentences, the whole discourse is connected adequately. On the other hand, in Van Dijk's example there are overt expressions that link each sentence, yet the whole discourse is inconsistent because there is no element, expressed or unexpressed, that represents the discourse topic. A similar example to Van Dijk's is given by Wikborg:

- (15) Stockholm is built on a series of islands. Stockholm has more people from Norrland than Norrland itself has. Stockholm has a serious drug problem. Stockholm is a beautiful city. In center city [sic] the number of offices far exceed the number of apartments. (Wikborg 1985:116)

Each sentence in this passage shares the same overt topic, that is Stockholm, yet there is not the same sense of connectedness between each sentence as there was in our examples with unexpressed agents that represent the topic of the passage. As for the above example, Wikborg (1985:116) notes, 'a sequence of sentences does not have discourse character unless the propositions it expresses are perceived as being subordinate to a larger or governing one'. Although neither Van Dijk nor Wikborg refers to roles of passive sentences in their accounts of the examples cited above, their examples thus show a striking contrast with our examples of agentless passive. Linguists such as Enkvist (1978) and Baker (1992) explain the linguistic phenomenon, pointed out by Van Dijk (1977) and Wikborg (1985) above, in terms of 'coherence' and 'cohesion'.⁴ Enkvist gives the following passage as an example of a highly cohesive text which is nevertheless not coherent:

- (16) I bought a Ford. The car in which President Wilson rode down the Champs Elysees was black. Black English has been widely discussed. The discussions between the presidents ended last week. A week has seven days. Every day I feed my cat. Cats

have four legs. The cat is on the mat. Mat has three letters.
(Enkvist 1978b:110-1)

The distinction between 'cohesion' and 'coherence' is explained by Baker (1992) as follows

- (17) In the case of cohesion, stretches of language are connected to each other by virtue of lexical and grammatical dependencies. In the case of coherence, they are connected by virtue of conceptual or meaning dependencies as perceived by the language users. (Baker 1992:218)

As for Enkvist's example above, Baker (1992:219) suggests, 'what actually gives texture to a stretch of language is not the presence of cohesive markers but our ability to recognize underlying semantic relations which establish continuity of sense'.

We can thus say that the passages given by Van Dijk, Wikborg, and Enkvist are examples that are cohesive but not coherent, because they do not have underlying semantic relations which establish what Baker calls 'continuity of sense'. On the other hand, in spite of the absence of cohesive markers, our examples of the passive without agent are nevertheless understood to be coherent. This is because these passages have elements that establish continuity of sense throughout. What I want to emphasize here is that in this case the elements that establish continuity of sense throughout are the unexpressed agents of the passives. In other words, the agents that are syntactically left out are nevertheless present pragmatically and they play a significant role in making the discourse coherent. We may call this particular role of the unexpressed agent a discourse-topic-maintaining role, and we have seen that this role is discussed at the level of coherence as opposed to cohesion.

5. Zero anaphora

Here we attempt to apply the notion of 'zero anaphora' proposed by Givón (1983) to our discussion of agentless passives. Givón notes that the notion of 'zero anaphora' can be used only when the topic/referent is a semantic argument of the predicate of the clause (1983:14) and his example of 'zero anaphora' is as follows:

- (18) ... (he came in) and \emptyset sat down... (Givón 1983:6)

We cannot use 'zero anaphora' in our discussion in exactly the same sense as Givón suggests, for two reasons. Firstly, as we saw earlier, Givón uses the term 'topic' as a sentence topic that is, as he notes (1983:3), most likely to be coded as grammatical subject, and therefore differs from our 'topic' that refers to a discourse topic, which can be the agent of the passive. Secondly, an unexpressed agent, which is our main concern, is not a semantic argument of the predicate of the clause. Nevertheless, the notion of 'zero anaphora' will be useful in our discussion and I will try to extend this notion to include unexpressed agents of the passive. I posit that we can regard our earlier examples from Jespersen (1924) and from a recent article on a cult as examples of 'zero anaphora'. For instance, in each of the following passives the unexpressed agent can be considered anaphoric:

- (19) The main bulk of work was carried out
in Japan itself
- Many tons of reagents for manufacturing
poisonous gases were bought via dummy
firms
- Radio-controlled mini-helicopters were
also purchased
- Research in the synthesis of sarin and
other gases was carried out practically
for 24 hours a day
- } (by the members
of Aum S.T.)

As discussed earlier, it is the unexpressed agent that makes each passive relevant and establishes continuity of sense throughout the paragraph that consists of the four passives listed above.

The above observation does not show conflict with Givón's (1983:16) suggestion that the loss accruing due to efficient processing is to a large extent offset by the omnipresence of the discourse context, referring particularly to: (a) Generically shared knowledge, (b) specifically shared knowledge of the particular discourse, and (c) specifically shared knowledge of the particular speaker and hearer. In our example above, the unexpressed agent that would have been 'the

members of Aum S.T.' is specifically shared knowledge of the particular discourse, that is, an article in a journal, and obviously this zero-coded agent is contextually recoverable. Just as Givón's example in (18) provides coherence within the sentence, I suggest that zero-coding of the agent of the passive can provide coherence across sentence boundaries.

Givón later refers to a case similar to our examples of agentless passive to explain one type of what is called 'the demoting operation' of the passive. He notes:

- (20) In the passive voice, the agent of a semantically-transitive event is demoted from its prototypical topic position. The exact motivation for this demotion – or suppression – of the agent may vary. (Givón 1990:567)

One of the motivations he gives is relevant to our discussion of the unexpressed agent, that is:

- (21) It (the agent) may be anaphorically predictable, as in:

The soldiers invaded the village:
soon the entire place was burned down. (Givón 1990:568)

Although he refers to 'anaphor' to explain the above example, he does not include this type of passive in his discussion of 'zero anaphora'. However, I propose that we should extend Givón's notion of 'zero anaphora' to include zero-coded passive agents that are anaphorically predictable. Doing so, we may say that the agentless passive can function as a device to maintain topic continuity.

The application of the notion 'zero anaphora' to an unexpressed passive agent sheds light on a role of the English passive that cannot be explained in terms of topicalization. In previous studies of the English passive, there has been a strong tendency to relate the passive operation to topicalization. For instance, Givón defines passivization as follows:

- (22) Passivization is the process by which a non-agent is promoted into the role of a main topic of the sentence. (Givón 1979:186)

Topicalization, however, cannot apply to such examples as 'No reason has been assigned (by her master)', discussed in section 2. As for this sentence, it is difficult to say that the sentence is about 'no reason'. Rather, it talks about 'her master' or 'her master's conduct' which is, or a part of which is, represented by the unexpressed agent. Discussion of topicalization is strictly restricted to sentence-level analyses. As for the sentence 'No reason has been assigned', it is topicless at the sentential level and topicalization cannot explain the use of this particular passive. However, when we take into consideration the context in which this passive is used, we can say that the discourse topic that is represented by the unexpressed agent gives this sentence a continuity of sense, although this passive lacks a sentence topic.

6. Conclusion

This paper has shown that among the grammatical devices that help maintain discourse continuity is the passive with unexpressed agent. It was made clear that even when each sentence does not share an element overtly, sentences may be adequately connected if an unexpressed agent represents the discourse topic. We attempted to explain the unexpressed agents of the passive we discussed, as examples of 'zero anaphora', the term originally proposed by Givón (1983). Our discussion of this linguistic phenomenon has drawn attention to a role of unexpressed agents of the passive which we called a discourse-topic-maintaining role. What is important here is that the syntactically unencoded agent can nevertheless make its presence felt pragmatically and that unexpressed agents can make a non-trivial contribution to discourse coherence. In other words, the passive agent that is syntactically deletable and therefore often is considered to be a mere optional element can play a significant role in pragmatic analyses, even where this element is left unsaid.

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Notes

1. Schlobinski & Schütze-Coburn (1992) discuss four different views of 'topic' and the drawbacks of each view: (1) topic as given and/or known information, (2) topic as point of departure of the sentence, (3) topic as the constituent expressing what the sentence is about, and (4) topic as the basis of 'communicative dynamism'.
2. Keenan and Schieffelin (1976:380) note, 'discourse topic is not a simple NP, but a proposition (about which some claim is made or elicited)'. A similar view is expressed by Van Dijk (1977:136). He notes, 'we have reconstructed the notion of topic of (a part of) a discourse as a proposition entailed by the joint set of propositions expressed by the sequence'.
3. New Times International is published semi-monthly by New Times Publishing House in Moscow.
4. Halliday & Hasan (1976) use the term cohesion in the sense of coherence discussed in this section. They note, 'The concept of cohesion accounts for the essential semantic relations whereby any passage of speech or writing is enabled to function as text' (1976:13). Their discussion of the voice is, however, restricted to verbal ellipsis and subject ellipsis, and there is no mention of passive agent ellipsis (1976:182-186).

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