

On the Passivization Possibilities of the Prepositional Object in English*

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Goh, Gwang-Yoon. 2001. *On the Passivization Possibilities of the Prepositional Object in English*. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics* 1-2, 211-225. The prepositional object (PO) of an active sentence in English can sometimes be passivized, becoming the subject of the corresponding passive sentence. In particular, the verb (V) and preposition (P) in the English prepositional passive (P-Passive) are assumed to be reanalyzed to form a single structural unit, giving the status of a verbal object to the PO to be passivized. However, not every V+P sequence can undergo reanalysis, permitting the passivization of POs. Thus, we have to explain what licenses the reanalysis of V and P, resulting in an acceptable P-Passive sentence. In this paper, I will identify the factors which determine the passivization possibilities of POs and explain how they interact with one another. The results of this study will illustrate how formal and functional factors work together to form a major syntactic construction and to determine its grammaticality and acceptability.

1. Introduction¹⁾

The prepositional passive (P-Passive) is a syntactic construction in which the object of a preposition in an active sentence becomes the subject of the corresponding passive sentence, as in (1). The verb (V) and preposition (P) of prepositional verbs in the passive are believed to be reanalyzed to form a single

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¹V = verb; P = preposition; P-Passive = prepositional passive; PO = prepositional object; PP = prepositional phrase.

cohesive unit which cannot be broken up by other material. Thus, the sentence in (2b) is ungrammatical or only marginally acceptable.

- (1) a. The lawyer looked closely into the document.
 b. The document was closely looked into by the lawyer.
- (2) a. The committee agreed unanimously on the resolution.
 b. *The resolution was agreed unanimously on by the committee.

This syntactic pattern in English is very conspicuous from a synchronic standpoint as well as from a diachronic standpoint.²⁾ This is mainly because the P-Passive is crosslinguistically very rare and its acceptability is determined not only by syntactic factors but also by various non-syntactic factors. Thus, the P-Passive in contemporary English has attracted considerable attention from many scholars, producing a great number of analyses from various theoretical frameworks, including traditional grammar, generative linguistics, and functional linguistics.

In particular, although there are many combinations of V and P which regularly allow the passivization of the PO, as in (3), not all V and P combinations permit the P-Passive, as we can see in (4). Here, we should ask what distinguishes between the two groups of V+P sequences with regard to the passivization possibilities of the PO.

- (3) a. Our help was asked for.
 b. His house was broken into last night.
 c. The problem has already been dealt with.
 d. His sacrifice was thanked for by many people.

²This type of passive is not attested in Old English and began to first appear in the Middle English period (Denison 1993).

- (4) a. *The Capitol was gathered near by a crowd of people last Saturday.
b. *Many years were slept for by all the people in Sleeping Beauty's palace.
c. *The hot sun was played under by the children all the afternoon.
d. *That big old tree was bowed before by many people in the town.

Furthermore, even the V+P combinations which are normally not passive-permitting can sometimes allow the passivization of POs under certain special circumstances, as we can see in (5b) and (6b), thereby causing the two examples of each pair in (5) and (6) to differ in acceptability although they have exactly the same V+P combination, respectively.

- (5) a. *New York was slept in.
b. The bed was slept in.
- (6) a. *This statue was stood beside by John.
b. No statue should be stood beside in this park.

Note that there is little or no possibility of (morpho)syntactic difference between the two instances of each V+P sequence in (5) and (6). This means that the given difference in grammaticality is difficult to explain properly only by means of any characteristics of the V+P sequences involved. Therefore, we should ask what makes the P-Passive possible even with those V+P combinations which are normally not passive-permitting. This question, along with the first question above, makes us wonder what really determines the passivization possibilities of POs.

2. Previous Studies³⁾

Then, why is it that only some groups of V-P sequences or prepositional structures permit the P-Passive? Most generative linguists have claimed that it is because only passive-permitting prepositional structures allow the reanalysis of the given V and P into a complex verb, a process which is necessary for the passivization of the PO.⁴⁾ Thus, many people have tried to explain the conditions under which V and P can be reanalyzed making the passivization of the PO possible, and most proposals can be classified into the following two types, which are closely related to each other.

First, Chomsky (1965), van Riemsdijk (1978), and many others claimed that the PO can be passivized only when the PP

³Examples of studies in generative linguistics that (formally or informally) invoke some kind of mechanism of reanalysis in order to explain the P-Passive include the following: Postal (1971:213-218), Chomsky (1975:242, fn.43; 1981:123; 292-300, 1986:201), Van Riemsdijk (1978:218-26), Williams (1980:204), Bach (1980:307, 323-324), Hornstein & Weinberg (1981), Radford (1981:346-348; 1988:427-432), Hoekstra (1984:135), Kayne (1984:XII, 45, 65, 82, 114-116, 123), Keyser & Roeper (1984:399), Marantz (1984:286), Levin & Rappaport (1986:650, fn.30), Roberts (1987:19, 135), Baker, Johnson & Roberts (1989:235, fn), Fellbaum & Zribi-Hertz (1989:45), and Lasnik & Saito (1992:206, fn.1).

On the other hand, there have not been many serious studies about the P-Passive in non-derivational generative linguistics. For examples of non-derivational or lexicalist approaches to the P-Passive, see Bresnan (1982), Postal (1986), Zwicky (1987), and Grover (1995). They propose a treatment of the English P-Passive within the Lexical-Functional Grammar, Arc Pair Grammar, Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar, and Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, respectively.

⁴Van Riemsdijk (1978) first proposed the mechanism of reanalysis formally by adopting Chomsky's (1965, 1974) idea. Although it has widely been assumed that the reanalysis hypothesis has been or at least could be given a coherent explanation within the Government-Binding theory, no such account has been formally presented so far. More importantly, there is good reason to believe that such an assumption has no reasonable ground. See Baltin & Postal (1996:135-143).

containing the PO is subcategorized or c-commanded by the given verb. Second, Chomsky (1977), Riemsdijk & Williams (1986), and many others claimed that the passivization of the PO is allowed only when V and P form a semantic unit or a natural predicate, which can often be expressed by a single word, as we can see in (7a). Thus, the ungrammaticality of such an example as **Many years were slept for* in (7b) can be attributed to the fact that the combination of V and P involved (i.e., *sleep for*), does not make a semantic unit or a natural predicate.

- (7) a. account for = explain; call for = require;
 care for = tend; look into = examine, etc.
 b. **Many years were slept for*. < sleep for = ??

However, even though these syntactic and lexico-semantic factors may distinguish so-called (regularly) reanalyzable and passive-permitting V+P sequences from non-passive-permitting ones, as in (3) and (4), there are still many V+P sequences such as *sleep in* and *sit beside* that cannot be considered reanalyzable by themselves but occasionally permit the passivization of the PO in certain special situations, as in (5) and (6). Since these V+P sequences do not appear to involve a complement PP or to form a semantic unit, the acceptability of the P-Passive examples which involve them cannot be properly explained by the syntactic or lexico-semantic factors discussed above. This means that what really determines the passivization possibilities in the P-Passive has yet to be explained.

In the remainder of this paper, I will show that for a complete account of the passivization possibilities in the English P-Passive, we need both formal and functional factors. In particular, based on insights from many traditional and functional studies, I will argue for the following three factors:

complementhood of PPs, affectedness, and characterization.

3. Factors Which Determine the Acceptability of the Prepositional Passive

3.1. Formal Factor(s)

As is well known, there are certain groups of V+P sequences which can regularly permit the passivization of the relevant PO. For example, the POs of such V+P sequences as *account for*, *care for*, and *look into* can invariably be passivized, as in (8).

- (8) a. Our final decision about this issue will be accounted for by the chairman.
b. The farm was cared for by his wife when he was away.
c. The city's accounts must be looked into by an independent financial controller.

Note that the passivization possibilities of the PO here are determined mainly by the given V+P sequences, regardless of other functional factors which may be involved. In this connection, many studies in traditional grammar including Bolinger (1975, 1977) claim or suggest that these V+P sequences which permit the PO to be passivized perform the same function as single verbs.⁵⁾ This idea among traditional grammarians is (implicitly) continued by most studies in generative linguistics, as we have already considered. Thus, following the general assumption in traditional grammar and generative linguistics, I will define these V+P sequences as prepositional verbs which form semantic units or natural predicates. Syntactically, the

⁵Examples of such studies are Mincoff (1958), Svartvik (1966), Hudson (1967), and Labov (1972).

simplex verbs of these reanalyzable V+P sequences are assumed to take a complement PP which is subcategorized by the verbs.

3.2. Affectedness

In addition to those regularly passive-permitting prepositional verbs, there are many other V+P sequences that can result in acceptable examples of the P-Passive, although they do not involve a complement PP and therefore normally do not permit the passivization of the relevant POs. Consider the examples in (9)-(12):

- (9) a. ??This road was driven on by him.
b. This road has been driven on so much that there are many dents and broken pieces of asphalt everywhere.
- (10) a. *The bridge was walked under by a dog.
b. The bridge has been walked under by generations of lovers. (Bolinger 1975:69)
- (11) a. *London was slept in by the businessman last night.
b. Clearly, this bed was slept in by a huge guy last night.
- (12) a. *The lake was camped beside by my sister.
b. This lake is not to be camped beside by anybody!
(Bolinger 1975:69)

The two examples of each pair in (9) through (12) have exactly the same V+P sequence with the same syntactic (and semantic) status but they are different in their acceptability. In particular, the (b)-sentences are acceptable even though the V+P sequences they contain are difficult to regard as forming natural predicates or semantic units and the PP in each sentence seems

to be an adjunct rather than a complement of the given verb. Thus, the acceptability of these (b)-sentences cannot be explained by such formal (i.e., syntactic or lexico-semantic) conditions as natural predicates, semantic units, or complementhood. This strongly suggests that there are certain functional factors involved in these examples of the P-Passive.

One of the best known functional concepts for explaining the passive is affectedness. This concept or a similar one has been employed by many scholars including Bolinger (1975) and Davison (1980) in order to account for the passivization possibilities not only of the P-Passive but also of the ordinary passive involving a simple transitive verb.⁶ Note that the subject of each acceptable (b)-sentence in (9) through (12) can be considered to be highly affected by the action described in the rest of the sentence. For example, whereas this road in (9a) is difficult to consider to have been affected by the action which describes a single action of driving by him, this road in (9b) can easily be assigned a high degree of affectedness because a great amount of driving on the road is normally expected to have heavily affected the road, as described in the latter part of the sentence. Similarly, although there is no observable effects on this lake yet, this lake in (12b) can be easily connected to affectedness because camping in (12b), unlike the camping by my sister in (12a), can be viewed as harming the lake. In this way, the acceptability of the (b)-sentences in (9) through (12) can be explained by the concept of affectedness.

3.3. Characterization

Although the notion of affectedness can explain a wide range of examples of the P-Passive, there are still many other

⁶For more examples of such studies, see Riddle et al. (1977), Sinha (1978), Kuroda (1979), Huddleston (1984:441), Quirk et al. (1985:1164-1165), etc.

examples of the P-Passive which are difficult to account for even by means of this functional concept. Some such examples are given in (13) through (15):

- (13) a. *Seoul was walked around by his father.
b. Rome can be walked around in a day.
- (14) a. *The hotel was stayed in by my sister.
b. Hotels are to be stayed in.
- (15) a. *The stone was stumbled over by Mary.
b. The stone will be stumbled over if it's not moved.
(Takami 1992:115)

It seems that the ungrammaticality of the (a)-sentences above can be explained by the notion of affectedness because all the PPs involved (i.e., *around Seoul*, *in the hotel*, and *over the stone*) are adjunct PPs rather than complement PPs and represent spatiality, but not patients affected. Since the subject in each (a)-sentence cannot be considered affected in any significant way, all the (a)-sentences, which do not contain a complement PP, would turn out to be unacceptable. Note, however, that all the (b)-sentences in (13) through (15) are perfectly acceptable although they are virtually the same as the (a)-sentences in the syntax and semantics of the PPs and the verbs involved. Since affectedness is difficult to assign to the passive subject in the (b)-sentences, a proposal based on the notion of affectedness would incorrectly predict that they are ungrammatical or unacceptable. Thus, the grammaticality of the (b)-sentences suggests that there are other functional factors which, along with affectedness, determine the acceptability of the P-Passive.

In this connection, some functionalists such as Kuno (1989) proposed the notion of characterization and claimed that passive

sentences are acceptable if they define or characterize their subjects.⁷ I believe this notion of characterization can be used to explain part of the passivization possibilities in the P-Passive, especially those involved in such examples as (13) through (15), although this concept is not comprehensive enough to explain all the passivization possibilities of the English passive as some functionalists including Kuno (1989) and Takami (1992) assert. Note that each of the (b)-sentences convey something characteristic of its subject, whereas nothing characteristic of the subject is mentioned in the (a)-sentences. That is, unlike the (a)-sentences, the (b)-sentences tell us what kind of place Rome is, what hotels are for, and what kind of stone it is. Thus, the acceptability of such examples as the (b)-sentences in (13), (14) and (15) can be explained by the notion of characterization.

3.4. Complementhood of PP, Affectedness, and Characterization

So far, we have considered two types of functional factors (i.e., affectedness and characterization) which determine the passivization possibilities of the PO. In fact, the notion of characterization can also be applied to many of the P-Passive examples whose grammaticality or acceptability can be explained by the concept of affectedness, as in (16).

- (16) a. This road has been driven on so much that there are many dents and broken pieces of asphalt everywhere.
(= 9b)
- b. The bridge has been walked under by generations of lovers. (= 10b)
- c. Clearly, this bed was slept in by a huge guy last night. (= 11b)
- d. This lake is not to be camped beside by anybody!
(= 12b)

⁷Cureton (1979) proposed a similar concept "quality predication" to explain the English P-Passive.

Note that each sentence in (16) is stating something significant about the character of its subject. That is, this road, the bridge, this bed, and this lake can be considered to be characterized by the given sentences, respectively. Thus, it might appear that the notion of quality predication or characterization is superior to or more comprehensive than the notion of affectedness in accounting for the acceptability of the P-Passive.

However, there is good reason to believe that these two factors, affectedness and characterization, are ultimately complementary although they often overlap in their applicability. Most importantly, there are many examples of the P-Passive whose acceptability is difficult to explain by the notion of characterization. Consider the examples in (17)-(20):

- (17) a. *Tom was slept with by his wife yesterday.
b. Even the queen of England was slept with by James Bond.

- (18) *The stadium was marched through by the children. Every country will be marched through by the Nazi Army in the near future.

- (19) a. *France was slept in by the businessman yesterday.
b. More than one thousand beds were slept in by Napoleon and his mistresses.

- (20) a. *Tucson was flown to by me yesterday.
b. The moon has finally been flown to (by human beings).

Even though each of the (b)-sentences says something about the referent of its subject, the subject of each (b)-sentence can be considered being affected rather than being characterized by the action that is described by the rest of the sentence. In fact, what is characterized in each (b)-sentence seems to be not its subject

but the NP in the *by*-phrase (i.e., the subject of the corresponding active sentence). Thus, the queen of England can be best described as being affected rather than being characterized by the fact of sleeping with James Bond or being slept with by him, whereas the subject of the corresponding active sentence (i.e., James Bond) can be said to be characterized by the given fact.

Another important point is that even though functional factors such as affectedness and characterization can explain the acceptability of many P-Passive sentences including those that involve adjunct PPs, many examples of the P-Passive can be acceptable independently of such functional constraints, contrary to the claims by most functionalists. In fact, it seems that most of the P-Passive examples that involve a complement PP almost always turn out to be grammatical no matter whether or not their subjects can be considered being affected or characterized by the rest of the sentences, as we can see in (21).

- (21) a. More helping hands are being asked for.
 b. All your skill as a teacher is called for in controlling a class.
 c. Every possible solution to the problem was talked about in that meeting.
 d. Rain is now prayed for by many people in the country.

The subject of each sentence in (21) seems to be difficult to view as being genuinely affected or being characterized (by the action described) by the rest of the sentence. Thus, although the sentences could be altered so that their subjects might be assigned a relatively higher or lower degree of affectedness (e.g., (21a) *More helping hands are being asked for urgently right now*), the acceptability of P-Passive sentences involving a prepositional verb does not seem to be significantly influenced by a functional

factor such as affectedness or characterization.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, there are at least three different factors which determine the acceptability of the P-Passive in English: one formal (i.e., syntactic or lexico-semantic) factor and two functional factors. Thus, I propose that the passivization of the PO is licensed if any of the following conditions are satisfied: first, the PP involved is a complement of the given verb (or the V+P sequence is a semantic unit that is listed in the lexicon); second, the passive subject is genuinely affected by the action described by the predicate; and finally the passive subject is characterized by the rest of the sentence.

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