The Origin of the English Passive Construction*

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Lee, In (1995). **The Origin of the English Passive Construction.** *Linguistics vol. 3.* This paper is concerned with the development of the passive constructions in ModE. After reviewing the definition of 'voice' in the IE languages, it is found that there were two types of passives in OE: periphrastic passives and impersonal passives. It is also found that there are two contradictory opinions concerning when the periphrastic passive construction first appeared in English. If we define the English passive as a construction consisting of a non-agent subject, *be* + PP, and an optional agent phrase, then it can be argued that English passives started with the periphrastic passives and that they had developed already in OE.

1. Introduction

According to Baldi (1983), the following IE languages have voice systems marked by their verb morphology. In Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek, there are three voices: active, middle, and passive. Hittite has two voices, the active and the mediopassive, and employs a periphrastic passive with *es* 'be'. Tocharian has verbal distinction between active and mediopassive. Old Irish has fully developed active and passive voices. Gothic shows significant remnants of the mediopassive voice in the form of a passive.

It seems that the classical IE languages (and perhaps PIE, too) distinguish voices by means of the verbal inflection. From the Hittite voice system, we might assume that a periphrastic passive construction developed as early as the inflectional distinction of voices. Here we are faced with the following

two questions: (i) What are the distinctions among passive, middle, and mediopassive? (ii) What is the origin of the passive construction in ModE? It is a challenging project to pursue a comparative and historical study of the passive construction in the IE languages; however, it is beyond my control because of time limit and aproject of this magnitude is beyond the scope of this paper. Thus I will restrict my concern to the development of the English passive.

2. Definition of mediopassive, middle, and passive

Even though my concern is restricted to the English language, it is not easy to answer the question of what we mean by 'passive'. Let us begin with the definition of the term 'voice'. Lyons (1968: 371f) gives us the following explanation:

> The term 'voice' (Latin *voix*) was originally used by Roman grammarians in two distinguishable, but related, senses: (i) In the sense of 'sound' (as used in the 'pronunciation' of human language: translating the Greek term *phone*), especially of the 'sounds' produced by the vibration of the 'vocal cords': hence the term 'vowel' (from Latin *sonus vocalis*, 'a sound produced with voice', via OFr. *vouel*). (ii) Of the 'form' of a word (that is, what it 'sounded' like) as opposed to its 'meaning' (. . .). The first of these two senses is still current in linguistics in the distinction between voiced and voiceless 'sounds' (. . .). In the second sense, 'voice' has disappeared from modern linguistic theory. Instead, the term has developed a third sense, derived from (ii) above, in which it refers to the active and passive 'forms' of the verb.

However, Jespersen (1924; reprinted in 1968) considers the term 'voice' as a misnomer; he prefers to use the term 'turn' as in 'active turn' vs. 'passive turn'. Lyons (ibid.) also points out that some linguists prefer to use the term 'diathesis', which is the traditional Greek term for 'voice' as a category of the verb.

First of all, let us consider the term 'mediopassive'. Baldi (1977: 224, fn. 6) defines mediopassive as the verb form that embraces the notion of middle and passive, and argues that 'PIE had no distinct passive, but rather a mediopassive.' Lightfoot (1979) also observes that 'most reconstructions of PIE contain a set of verbal desinences called mediopassives, but no endings

specifically for the passive voice . . .'

Now consider the definition of 'middle'. Lightfoot (ibid.: 241) introduces Pānini's terminology: "Pānini called the middle *atmane padam* 'the expression for oneself', as opposed to the active, which was *parasmai padam* 'the expression for another'." Lyons (ibid.: 373) gives us a similar definition: "The implications of the middle (when it is in opposition with the active) are that the 'action' or 'state' affects the subject of the verb or his interests. One class of sentences that fall within the scope of this notion are reflexive sentences."

Here we might raise a new question: What was the actual distinction of voices in Sanskrit, Latin, and Greek? In other words, was it a three-way opposition? It seems to me that there might have been only two morphologically distinct forms; what we name them is nothing but a matter of nomenclature. Concerning the opposition of voice in Greek, for example, Lyons (ibid.: 373) proposes one of active vs. middle, while Lightfoot (ibid.: 241) names it the active vs. mediopassive opposition. The passive might be of notional category.

Finally, let us take into account the definition of the term 'passive'. Jespersen (ibid.: 165) proposes to distinguish between syntactic and notional categories. He says:

> We may speak of 'active' and 'passive' . . . only in case of a transposition of the relation of the subject (and object if there is one) to the verb itself. . . Thus, if we take two sentences *he sells the book* and *the book sells well*, we must say that the active form *sells* in the former is a notional active, and in the latter a notional passive because what in one is the object in the other is the subject.

Lyons (ibid.: 372) defines 'passive' as "signifying the *state* of 'being acted upon' or 'suffering the effects of the action.'"

Since 1957 linguists have been concerned with the generation of passive sentences. In the literature of relational grammar, passivization is defined as a relational network that promotes the direct object (or theme, or patient) to the subject. In the literature of transformational grammar, passivization has been differently treated as the theory develops. In classic theory such as Chomsky (1957), the passive rule involves one deep structure sentence only with an exchange of the positions of subject and object. Thus, passive sentences derive from their corresponding active sentences. However,

whether the corresponding active and passive sentences have the same D-Structure has been a controversial issue. In current theory such as Government and Binding (GB) Theory, passivization is considered as involving an NP movement that moves the direct object NP in the D-Structure to the base-generated empty subject position. On the other hand, Bresnan (1982) argues for a lexical theory of passivization: passivization is not a syntactic rule but a lexical rule. Each grammatical theory has its own explanation.

3. English Passive

In the previous section, it is shown that we have difficulty in defining terms related to voices. In order to define the passive in English, let us consider the following:

(1) (a) The city was destroyed by the enemy.
    (b) The city was destroyed.
    (c) Syntax books read easily.
    (d) I'm finished.
    (e) Jesus was born.
    (f) He's got married.
    (g) The work is to be done at once.
    (h) The church was given $5,000.
    (i) The bed was slept in.

Sentence (a) is considered as a prototypical passive construction; it includes a non-agent subject, a predicate consisting of *be* + PP, and an agent NP followed by a preposition *by*. The agent phrase in passive is optional, but when it is deleted, the sentence is ambiguous. For example, sentence (b) is construed either as 'the state of the city affected by the verb' or as 'the assumed agent's action upon the city'. Sentence (c) is an example of what Jespersen called notional passive. The subject of the sentence is construed as the underlying object of the verb *read*, but the verb itself is active in form. This type of passive is not productive in ModE. Sentence (d) includes a verb in passive form, but the subject cannot be interpreted as the underlying object of the verb *finish*. Thus this sentence might be called 'adjectival passive'. Sentence (e) consists of a non-agent subject and a passive verb; however, unlike typical passive sentences such as (a), the optional agent is never followed by the verb. This sentence may also be considered an 'adjectival passive'. In sentence (f), the verb *get* is used instead of *be* as an

auxiliary verb. This is a recently developed passive construction. In sentence (g), the passive verb is preceded by an infinitival preposition *to*. Sentence (h) is an example of passive, but the subject is not a direct object of the verb but an indirect object. Finally, in sentence (i) the subject is not an underlying direct object of the verb but an object of the preposition *in*. Like sentence (f), sentence (i) is a very recently developed passive construction.

We may classify passives into two group: syntactic vs. lexical passives, or syntactic vs. notional passives, or simple vs. periphrastic passives. In this paper a passive construction in English refers to a periphrastic passive, that is, a sentence including a non-agent subject and a predicate consisting of *be* + PP.

Now let us consider how the English passive construction has developed. Did OE employ the verbal inflection to distinguish voices? What is the origin of the periphrastic passive in ModE? Frary (1929: 9) describes the development of the passive in the Germanic languages as follows:

> Already in Indo-European [footnote omitted], there were both simple forms and periphrastic forms, the simple having grown out of an older reflexive form, as the Greek middle and the Latin deponent, while the periphrastic was modeled after the predicate adjective construction. The individual Germanic dialects differ in their retention of these Indo-European elements and in the introduction of new ones. The simple passive is retained throughout the present tense in Gothic, though simplified, while the isolated forms *heiti* [footnote omitted] 'he is called' and *hatte* are found in Old Icelandic and Old English, respectively. Even in Gothic, however, the periphrastic passive is also used in the present [footnote omitted], and it is the prevailing form in all the Germanic languages.

4. Passive constructions in Old English

According to Frary (1929), Quirk and Wrenn (1965), Strang (1970), Traugott (1972), Allen (1980), and Mitchell and Robinson (1982), there was only one verb that preserved an inflectional passive in OE: *hatte* 'is called' or 'was called'.[1] These linguists agree that for the rest of verbs, the notional passive was expressed in one of two principal ways: (i) a copula verb with the past participle, or (ii) the indefinite pronoun *man* with the ordinary active verb form. In the periphrastic passive were used two auxiliaries:

beon/wesan and *weorðan*. Thus, Traugott (ibid.: 82) defines the passive in OE as 'a construction in which the Agent is introduced by the preposition *fram* or *Durh* (that is, is nonsubjectivalized) and in which one of the passive auxiliary *beo-* + PP, *wes-* + PP, or *weorð-* + PP is present.' In order to show the existence of the periphrastic passive, let me recapitulate the following examples from Allen (ibid.: 68f).[2]

(2) [= her 96]
    Dys is durh God gedon
    (This is through God done
    = This is done through (i.e. by) God). Alc. P. III. 34

(3) [= her 97]
    Durh daes waeteres styrunge waes eac getacnod daes Haelendes drowung
    (Through the water's stirring was also betokened the Savior's passion
    = The Savior's passion was also betokened
    through the stirring of the water). Alc. P. II. 130

(4) [= her 99]
    Da weard him gebroht to sum witseoc man
    (Then was him brought to some madman
    = Then a madman was brought to him). Alc. P. IV. 3

From the above-mentioned references, we find that there were two types of passive constructions in OE: periphrastic passives and impersonal passives. Whether the impersonal passives are passives per se is another question, though. OE has no inflectional voice distinction except in *hatte* .

On the contrary, Lightfoot (ibid.: 274) points out that 'dynamic passives of the form *be* + past participle are very rare in OE and not common in ME.' Based on his distinction between lexical passives (or adjectival passives) and transformational passives, he argues:

> before that time all the occurring passive forms had the
> properties and distribution of adjectives and were properly
> relatable to a corresponding active by a lexical rule, and . . . the
> non-adjectival passives were introduced simultaneously during
> the period 1450-1550. (p. 279)

To support his argument, he points out that the 'indirect passive' whose subject corresponds to the indirect object of an active verb appears during this period. Jespersen (1965: 299) also expresses a similar opinion: 'what in the active is an object, is made the subject in the passive . . . This is the rule from the ME period . . .' According to Lightfoot (1979) and Jespersen (1965), transformational passives did not appear until the late ME or the early ModE period.

Here we are faced with a contradiction concerning when the passive construction first appeared. However, if we define the English passive as a construction consisting of a non-agent subject, *be* + PP, and an optional agent phrase, then OE obviously had passive constructions, whatever we name them. The next question is: Is the periphrastic passive in OE a relic of its parent language or a complete innovation? This will be my future project to study.

5. Conclusion

I began this paper by questioning the origin of the English passive. I then attempted to clarify the meaning of the terms related to voices. I also explored two contradictory opinions concerning when the periphrastic passives first appeared in English. Finally in the preceding section, I concluded that English passives started with the periphrastic passives and that these periphrastic passives developed already in OE. But I could not deal with the relation between English periphrastic passives and the development of passives in Germanic or other IE languages.

Notes

*In this paper I will use the following abbreviations: IE or Indo-European, PIE for Proto-Indo-European, OFr. for Old French, OE for Old English, ME for Middle English, ModE for Modern English, NP for Noun Phrase, and PP for Past Participle.

1. This gloss is due to Mitchell and Robinson (1982).
2. The examples and translation into ModE are all hers. However, the explanation of her abbreviations for the original references is necessary: Alc. P. refers to Pope's edition of Ælfric's *homilies;* roman numerals refer to the number of *homily,* and arabic numerals stand for line numbers.

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