

# On the Importance of the Semantic Aspect in Teaching Voice: a Cognitive Perspective<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

At Japanese senior and junior high schools, changing the voice seems to be taught rather systematically, based on school grammar. For instance, consider the following sentences:

(1) a. He likes the baseball player.

b. The baseball player is liked by him.

When introducing how to make the passive counterpart for (1a), Japanese teachers tend to tell students to move a subject (*He*) to an object position, and move an object (*the baseball player*) to a subject position. Then, students are instructed to change a verb to the passive participle form (*liked*), adding a proper be-verb, which in this case is *is*, before the past participle verb. Lastly, students need to put the preposition *by* before an objective form of an agent, namely *him* in this case. Consequently the appropriate passive sentence for (1a) can be made like (1b).

Thus, at schools, the change of voice is taught mainly from a syntactic point of view. On the other hand, the semantic difference between an active-passive pair is not generally taught with great emphasis. This may be because this teaching method makes students understand the passive construction more easily. However, as Yoshihiko Ikegami (1991) claims, when a passive sentence is used, there is some reason for its use, such as the focus on a subject of a passive sentence, a situation or context, a writing style, and so forth.

In this essay I would like to propose the importance of the semantic aspect as well as the syntactic aspect in teaching the voice from

a cognitive linguistic<sup>2</sup> perspective. Since the use of passives is sometimes necessary, one needs to indicate the situation in which they are used. In section 2 dealing with the English passive construction in comparison with the active construction, I will show some instances where the passive construction cannot fully be explained from the formal point of view alone. In section 3 I will reemphasize the importance of the meaning, investigating several properties of the English middle construction.

## 2. The Passive Construction

### 2. 1. The Semantic Difference between the Active and Passive Construction

At schools, the passive construction tends to be taught systematically: in other words, students need to learn how to make the passive construction whereas almost all of them do not know that there is a semantic difference between an active-passive pair. However, as often claimed, the meaning of a passive sentence is not exactly the same as the active meaning<sup>3</sup>. See the following instances:

(2) a. Beavers build dams.

b. Dams are built by beavers.

Syntactically, sentence (2b) is the passive equivalent for (2a); however, the meanings between the two sentences are quite different. Sentence (2b) does not necessarily express the same situation expressed by sentence (2a); that is, *beavers* actually *build* dams, but *dams* are not always built by *beavers*. The scope of expression between the two sentences is different. Hence some passive sentences do

not have the same meaning as their active counterparts: to teach changing the voice while ignoring the semantic aspect, therefore, is not a good method.

Now consider the following active-passive pair sentences.

- (3) a. Everyone in this room speaks two languages.  
b. Two languages are spoken by everyone in this room.

(Paul Kiparsky and Carol Kiparsky  
1970: 326)

Sentence (3b) is syntactically the passive counterpart of sentence (3a); however, these sentences are not exactly the same in their meanings, though they are an active-passive pair. According to Kiparsky and Kiparsky (1970: 326), there are semantic differences such that the “indefinite noun phrase *two languages* are understood as referring to specific objects when placed initially (“there are two languages such that...”.)” That is, one is not concerned with what *two languages* are referring to in sentence (3a), whereas *two languages* become more specific in using sentence (3b). This can be explained from a cognitive perspective. The word in a subject position attracts much cognitive focus<sup>4</sup>, for in many cases subjects are associated with a theme referred to in prior sentences.

## 2. 2. Subjects in the Passive Construction

Comparing the passive construction with the active construction, the active construction is a more normal or unmarked expression than the passive construction (cf. Ikegami 1991: 32); in other words, using the passive construction means that there is some necessity to use it. For instance, take a look at the sentences below:

- (4) a. ? This bed was slept in by John.  
b. This bed was slept in by Napoleon.  
c. This bed was slept in by nobody.

(Ikegami 1991: 87-8)

- (5) a. \*The capital is often visited by me.  
b. The capital is often visited by many tourists every year.  
(6) a. \*The Army was deserted by John.  
b. The Army was deserted by its commander-in-chief.

(Yasui 1989: 138-9)

The description that *This bed* was slept in only by an ordinary person, *John*, gives unnatural feelings, like in (4a). However, as in (4b), the fact that *This bed* was slept in by Napoleon, a famous person, gives it special significance, which makes this sentence sound natural. Similarly, if some property of the subject *This bed* is described by explaining that *This bed* was slept in by nobody, the sentence is accepted, like (4c). This consideration shows that if the property denoted by the subject entity is stressed enough, the sentence sounds acceptable. Similarly, in (5a) the property of the subject is not described well by stating that it is visited only by an ordinary person. On the other hand, as in (5b), if the property of *The capital* is expressed in more detail, the acceptability rises. In the same way, the description (6b) expresses the property of *The Army* better than that of (6a). Hence, the acceptability of sentences with subjects whose properties are well-described such as (4b), (4c), (5b) and (6b) is comparatively high. On the other hand, the counterparts of the sentences in (4-6), which are shown below as (7-9), are all acceptable:

- (7) a. John slept in this bed.  
b. Napoleon slept in this bed.  
c. Nobody slept in this bed.  
(8) a. I often visit the capital.  
b. Many tourists often visit the capital every year.  
(9) a. John deserted the Army.  
b. The commander-in-chief deserted the Army.

From these examples, it becomes clear that

in using the passive construction, some necessity, reason, or situation for its use exist.

### 2. 3. Teaching the Passive Construction

As seen in 2.1 and 2.2, it becomes clear that the meaning of a passive sentence is not always the same as its active counterpart. There are various reasons to use more special and marked passive sentences rather than active ones.

Consequently, it is necessary to give students a natural situation in which a passive sentence is used. Instructors should avoid teaching the passive construction too systematically, quite independent from a situation or context<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. The Middle Construction

The middle construction in the sense of this paper is like ones below:

- (10) a. This book sells well.  
b. This fabric washes easily.

Thus, the form is active, but the meaning is passive. For example, while the active construction is used from a syntactic view, the subject *This book* itself does not sell, but *This book* is sold by someone. Such sentences are called the middle construction<sup>6</sup>.

In Modern English, there is no middle marker that shows the middle construction syntactically, like the French *se*. Consequently, it is difficult to show one sentence as the middle construction, and to teach this construction from a syntactic view alone. In this section, I will emphasize the importance of teaching the middle construction with a semantic perspective by giving examples.

#### 3. 1. Middle Verbs<sup>7</sup>

In the middle construction, generally, transitive verbs are intransitively used. That is, transitive verbs, which essentially need an object, are used as if they were intransitive verbs. See below:

- (11) a. This vinyl floor {lays/\*lies} in a few hours.

- b. These mosquitoes {kill/\*die} only with a special spray.

(Christiane Fellbaum 1986: 2)

Since the middle verbs do not have an established intransitive usage, they are acceptably used in the middle construction by using an adverbial, implying an understood agent<sup>8</sup>, and raising transitivity<sup>9</sup>. Table 1 below summarizes the middle verbs:

Middle Verbs
ergative verbs, act, adapt, add up, adjust, anneal, assemble, astonish, bake, baptize, blow, bribe, broil, button, cancel, cast, catch, chew, circulate, clean, compare, compose, construe, convert, convince, cook, cover, crush, cut, dance, decipher, develop, dice, digest, discourage, draw, dribble, drink, end, exchange, fasten, feel, fish, fix, fold away, fold up, freeze, frighten, frustrate, fry, grind, handle, hook, hurt, intimidate, iron, kill, knot, launder, lay, let, lift out, listen, mold, mulch, nail, pack (up), paint, peel, photograph, plant, play, plug in (to), polish, press, print, proofread, pull out, put up, read, recycle, refrigerate, rent, ride, rhyme, roast, row, rub, saw, scale, scan, scare, screen, seduce, sell, serve, shift, ship, show, slice, smoke, solve, spoil, spray, stain, steer, steam, strike, surprise, swallow, take, teach, televise, train, transcribe, transfer, translate, transport, transplant, transpose, trim, type, wash, wax, wipe (up), write, etc.

Table 1

However, the judgment of whether a given verb is a middle verb itself is ambiguous. The determination of a middle verb cannot unitarily be done, so the judgment must include semantic elements such as the context used to express the middle sentence. See the examples below:

- (12) a. \*This applesauce will *eat* rapidly.  
b. Keep these pills away from the baby. They're powerful, but they *eat* like they were candy.  
c. A: What shall I have for lunch, an apple or grapefruit?  
B: Since you only have five minutes, take an apple. It *eats* more rapidly than a grapefruit.

(Jeanne Van Oosten 1977: 462-3;

the italics are by the author)  
 (13) a. \*? This corner sells well.

b. [conversation between the staff in a bookshop on a book that is newly published]

A: Which corner shall we use to display the book?

B: I think, ... That corner sells well. It's far better than this one.

(Yoshimura 2001: 191)

Looking only at (12a), one will understand that the verb *eat* is a non-middle verb, which cannot be used in the middle construction. However, when a certain context is given to the sentence, the verb *eat* can be used in the middle construction and thus accepted as a middle verb as in (12b, c). That is, the sentences in (12) show that it cannot always be said that "the verb *eat* is a non-middle verb" as a rule. In (13a), the verb *sell*, which is often used as a prototypical middle verb (cf. Kazumi Taniguchi 1995), cannot be figured out in a sentence like (13a): however, when some context like (13b) is given to the sentence, it becomes acceptable. Consequently, the middle verbs given in Table 1 are summarized for the sake of convenience: note that the line between a middle verb and a non-middle verb is not absolute at all.

Thus, in the English middle, which does not have a middle marker, the condition to be the middle construction can vary according not only to the semantics of the verbs but also to the context and situation involved. One cannot understand only from the form of sentences.

### 3. 2. The Property Sentence

English middle sentences describe the property of the subject (cf. Yoshimura 1995). For example, in (10a) the property of *This book* is described: the main point of (10a) is that "whoever sells *This book*, or wherever *This book* is sold, *This book* sells well anyway". The seller and the place to sell do not matter in (10a). Only the property of *This book* is

important: owing to the good property of *This book*, *This book* sells well. To show that the middle construction is a property sentence, consider the following examples:

(14) a. This dress buttons.

b. ?? This dress fastens.

(Sarah Fagan 1988: 201)

(15) The clothes wash with no trouble because

a. ... They're machine-washable.

b. \*... I have a lot of time.

(Van Oosten 1977: 460)

As for (14b), since dresses are generally fastened, it is difficult to consider that this sentence refers to the property of *This dress*. On the other hand, if one describes a dress which is fastened with buttons (not with a zipper) like (14a), this sentence would describe the property of *This dress*. Thus, (14a) is acceptable whereas (14b) is not, although they have the same subject and the same syntactic form. Accordingly, to make (14b) acceptable, one must add some information to express the property of *This dress* as in (16):

(16) a. This dress won't fasten.

b. This dress fastens easily.

The sentences in (16) describe the property of *This dress*, and thus, the acceptability for these is high compared with (14a).

As for (15), if one adds the subordinate clause such as (a), then the property of *The clothes* is expressed. If, on the other hand, (b) is added to the main clause, then the sentence describes the personal reason for *I*: therefore, only (15b) is unacceptable. Thus, for understanding and acceptably judging the middle construction, general common sense and both encyclopedic and grammatical knowledge are necessary.

### 3. 3. Teaching the Middle Construction

As discussed so far in this section, although many middle constructions have the form [Subject + Verb + Adverb], it is impossible to

judge if those sentences are the acceptable middle or not. Taking into consideration their meanings, contexts, situations, experiences, and so on, one needs to learn the middle construction.

I am aware that the middle construction is taken as a question of entrance examinations to universities. In teaching the middle construction at schools, I propose that it is significant for instructors to show the natural situation or context to be used in addition to the form. By giving the natural situation, students will also learn when to properly use, which in my opinion shows the true speaking ability.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper I have developed some considerations on the teaching method regarding the semantic aspect, dealing with English passive construction and middle construction from a cognitive perspective. In section 2, I indicated the semantic importance in teaching by illustrating that the passive meaning is not always the same as the active counterpart. In section 3, I discussed several properties of the English middle construction. Although the sentence or verb form is the same, the acceptability varies in terms of the meanings, situations or contexts: therefore, it is imperative to teach the middle construction with the proper situation.

In summation, it is crucial that teachers present natural situations to most effectively teach changes of voice in middle and passive sentences. For that, they must study enough to be able to judge the natural situation and whether a given middle sentence is acceptable or not.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This paper cannot be completed without valuable comments and suggestions by Professor Teruhiro Ishiguro of Tokushima

Bunri University, who was an advisor when I was an undergraduate and graduate student at Doshisha University. I would like to express my deep gratitude to him. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Assistant Language Teacher at Inatori High School in Shizuoka, David Neil Sullivan, who kindly edited the English in this paper. All inadequacies and errors, of course, are mine.

<sup>2</sup> As for the basic paradigm of cognitive linguistics, see Ronald W. Langacker (1987, 1991), George Lakoff (1987), Seisaku Kawakami (1996), Masa-aki Yasmanashi (1995, 2000), or Kimihiro Yoshimura (1995).

<sup>3</sup> This was explained by Professor Masa-aki Tatsuki in his English Linguistic Class at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan, in November 1999. Furthermore, the cognitive linguistics, represented by George Lakoff and Ronald W. Langacker takes this truck, too. One of the basic paradigms of cognitive linguistics is “different forms, different meanings” (Ikegami (1999)). In active sentences, a subject has a cognitive focus, which is called as trajector, and an object is understood as a kind of a mark, which is called as landmark in the cognitive linguistics framework: on the other hand, in passive sentences, the figure-ground relation becomes the opposite.

<sup>4</sup> This is asserted by many linguists, such as Otto Jespersen (1924), Ikegami (1991), and Minoru Yasui (1989).

<sup>5</sup> Note, however, that I think it is also important to teach some sort of schema of the passive construction, namely be-verb + past participle form of verb. This is because the solid form relation exists between active-passive pairs, and students will learn passives easily. The effectiveness on the schema teaching is discussed in Fujii (2004).

<sup>6</sup> There are a lot of names referring to these sentences other than the “middle construction”, such as the “middle voice”, the “patient-subject construction”, the “derived intransitive construction”, the “pseudo-passive”, and the like. For more details regarding the name of this construction, see Fujii (2002).

<sup>7</sup> The middle verb in this paper means a verb that can be used in the middle construction. In this respect, the middle verb used in Minoru Yasui (1989) is different from mine. The middle verb in his sense foregrounds a property that it can take an object but cannot be made into a passive sentence, such as *have*,

*cost*, and *weigh*.

<sup>8</sup> The idea of an “understood agent” means an agent that is not overtly expressed but one can feel the existence of the agent. For more details, see Fujii (2002, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> Transitivity in this paper is the idea of how much an agent is involved in a patient by means of the actions. If an agent greatly affects a patient in terms of some actions (e.g. *He hit me.*), one can say that transitivity of the sentence is high. On the other hand, if an agent does not influence a patient or if an agent is not expressed (e.g. *The glass broke.*), the sentence’s transitivity can be said to be low.

Note that the decision whether transitivity is high or low is never done absolutely but only relatively. Accordingly, it cannot absolutely be said that transitivity of the intransitive construction is always low and that of the transitive construction is always high. Transitivity must be construed relatively.

Note also that the concept of transitivity is essentially different from the idea of transitivity within the framework of Systemic Functional Grammar. The idea of transitivity used in this essay is showed more in detail in Joan Hopper and Sandra A. Thompson (1980).

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