

On Passives Occurring in Newspaper Headlines

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the passive voice as it occurs in newspaper headlines. The passive voice is often used in headlines in order to highlight the objectivity of a newspaper article. As headlines must be as short as possible, *by*-phrases of agents are omitted as redundant. Declerck (1991) proposes six factors to pick out a passive construction: (1) indefinite or vague agents, (2) self-evident agents, (3) emphasized agents, (4) converted agents, (5) information principle and theme continuity, and (6) heavier agents, which influence or determine the choice of a passive construction. In addition to those mentioned above, three more passive structures can be seen in headlines: (7) participial adjectives expressing feelings, (8) passives using verbs other than *be*, and (9) sentences beginning with past participles. In this paper, passives are classified and analyzed according to these nine factors.

1. Introduction

Newspaper articles are composed of reverse triangle or pyramid structures that are organized and presented from the order of their importance. A headline is placed at the beginning of an article and followed by a lead, a compact and clear explanation of the headline. The body of the article, which includes a more detailed explanation of the story, succeeds the lead. It is often said that newspaper articles must be concise, concrete, and correct. Because of restrictions on space and content, brevity is a crucial element and determines whether the reader can obtain a vivid impression from and be intrigued by the article. Needless to say, a headline plays an indispensable role in initiating the interest of the reader in the article.

Not only is the headline meant to attract readers' attention to the article; it is also imperative that it transmits an image of objectivity. The passive voice is used in order to raise this quality. In this paper, research is presented to classify and analyze the function of the passive voice in headlines. Declerck's (1991) method of analysis of the passive voice is very useful. He proposes six factors that influence or determine the choice of a passive construction: (1) A passive construction may be preferred when the

active alternative would involve the use of an indefinite or vague subject. (2) A passive construction will be used if the speaker prefers not to mention the agent. (3) Conversely, a passive can be used to put emphasis on the agent. (4) A passive construction will be used when the speaker is interested in what happened to NP₂ (which means the object of an active sentence) rather than in what NP₁ (which means the subject of an active sentence) did. Therefore, the objects of actives become subjects in passives. (5) The choice of an active or passive construction may be determined by the principle which is often referred to as the information principle. Another illustration of this general tendency is the principle of theme (topic) continuity. (6) Using a passive construction can also be the result of the speaker's tendency to put 'heavier' agents at the end of the clause.

(1) This church was built around 870 AD.

(2) All necessary information will be sent to you.

(3) The order to arrest the leader of the opposition was given by the Prime Minister himself.

(4) The escaped leopard was caught again two hours later.

(5) a. A goal has just been scored by Bill.

b. The Pope arrived in Madrid this morning and was immediately besieged by reporters.

(6) I was surprised by John's decision to join the army. (Declerck, 1991: 211–213)

In addition to the six items analyzed by Declerck, we can find the following three additional passive structures in the headlines of newspapers.

(7) Iraqi governor disappointed with GSDF (The Japan Times, July 14, '04)

(8) Diagrams help equity investment pro when words get jumbled (ibid. April 26, '04)

(9) Blown away by bad hair day (The Weekend Australian, Feb 21–22, '04)

The above-mentioned characteristics of the passive voice are summed up as follows: (1) indefinite or vague agents, (2) self-evident agents, (3) emphasized agents, (4) converted agents, (5) information principle and theme continuity, (6) heavier agents, (7) participial adjectives expressing feelings, (8) passives using verbs other than *be*, and (9) sentences beginning with past participles. In this paper, passives are classified according to these nine factors.

2. Indefinite or vague agents

When the active subject is unknown or vague, the passive can be used instead. As brevity is required in headlines, the shorter the headlines are, the easier it is to attract the reader's attention. In fact, according to Quirk *et al.* (1985), approximately four out of five English passive sentences have no expressed agent. This omission occurs especially when the agent is irrelevant or unknown. This passive structure is suitable for getting rid of ambiguous or uncertain information. In the case of criminal reportage, where all of the facts are often yet to be uncovered, victims are characteristically used as topics. These types of past participles are *killed* (10)~(11), *injured* (12)~(13), *abducted* (14)~(15), *assassinated* (16), *gunned* (17), *stolen* (18), and *freed* (19).

(10) 2 killed in expressway crash (The Daily Yomiuri, June 6, '04)

(11) 14 killed in India road accident (The Japan Times, July 20, '04)

(12) Earnhardt Jr. injured in accident (ibid. July 21, '04)

(13) Ullrich slightly injured in training crash (The Daily Yomiuri, Aug. 15, '04)

- (14) Man abducted in front of police (The Japan Times, July 20, '04)
 (15) Egyptian envoy abducted in Iraq (ibid. July 26, '04)
 (16) Chechen head assassinated (The Daily Yomiuri, May 10, '04)
 (17) Three gunned down in Kansas (The Japan Times, July 5, '04)
 (18) Stamps, cash stolen from Chiba city hall (The Daily Yomiuri, Aug. 15, '04)
 (19) Missing S. Africa diplomat freed (The Japan Times, May 31, '04)

3. Self-evident agents

This example of the passive voice is most often used where the agent is not mentioned because the reader knows it from the context of the story. As mentioned in section two, it goes without saying that the agent is left out in this case. Above all, headlines must be as short as possible. In the vast majority of headlines, therefore, *by*-phrases of agents are omitted as redundant. The following agents are *NASA* (20), *the courthouse* (21)~(22), *the government* (23)~(24), *the police* (25), *the prison* (26), *Athens Olympic Committee* (27), and so on. We can, therefore, find that most of the agents are authorities and governments, and that their topics are notable persons and things.

- (20) Mercury probe to be launched in August (The Japan Times, July 18, '04)
 (21) 17 sentenced to death for kidnapping (The International Herald Tribune, Aug. 14–15, '04)
 (22) Milosevic's trial postponed until end August due to poor health (The Japan Times, July 19, '04)
 (23) Bird flu reported in 11th Vietnam province (ibid. July 29, '04)
 (24) Hosokawa appointed vice finance minister (The Daily Yomiuri, June 27, '04)
 (25) Teen arrested over ranch murders (The Japan Times, July 10, '04)
 (26) Killer of girl, 14, hanged in India despite appeals (The Daily Yomiuri, Aug. 15, '04)
 (27) Athens athletes may be tested for HGH (The Japan Times, July 30, '04)
 (28) Crucial Italian coalition meet is suspended (ibid. July 14, '04)
 (29) Pig cholera outbreak seen at farm (The Japan Times, July 23, '04)
 (30) Algerian president easily re-elected (ibid. April 11, '04)

4. Emphasized agents

From the information structure's point of view, this construction of the passive sentence is end-focused, which refers to a structure where old information is placed in the topic but the agent is located at the end of a sentence with new information. The agent of a *by*-phrase becomes more important than the topic.

This passive sentence needs the agent of a *by*-phrase, because emphasis is laid on the agent itself. That is to say, if there wasn't an agent of a *by*-phrase in this case, it is probable that the following headlines would not appear in print.

- (31) Killer was obsessed by violent video game (The Times, July 29, '04)
 (32) Planner of attacks was motivated by U.S. support for Israel (ibid. July 25, '04)
 (33) Mitsubishi hit by more truck defects (The Japan Times, July 16, '04)
 (34) Recruit rocked by another stock scandal (ibid. May 31, '04)
 (35) Big Mac cut down to size by fat fear (The Australian, March 5, '04)

- (36) Blair caught short by spy claims (ibid. March 1, '04)
 (37) Tripped up by the old Capone (ibid. Feb. 17, '04)

5. Converted agents

The following sentences (38)~(51) were originally written in the active voice. The objects of active sentences become subjects in passive sentences because they can be effectively used when the readers are interested in what happened to the objects of active sentences rather than in what the subjects of active sentences did.

- (38) In future, organs will be made to order (The Australian, March 5, '04)
 (39) 533-meter tower will be built by 2009 (The Japan Times, July 7, '04)
 (40) Remains of Vietnam soldiers buried (ibid. July 25, '04)
 (41) 1969 moon landing remembered (ibid. July 23, '04)
 (42) Only half Olympic tickets sold (ibid. July 23, '04)
 (43) Singapore foreign workers unpaid (ibid. June 20, '04)
 (44) American beheaded by militants in Iraq (The International Herald Tribune, Sep. 22, '04)

The topics of the following sentences: AIDS (45), Disney (46), Former Enron CEO Lay (47), Mad cow (48), Playboy Harry (49), Fahrenheit 9/11 (50), and Sony-Bertelsmann deal (51) are proper nouns which are very notable and popular in the present society.

- (45) AIDS can be beaten (The Japan Times, July 16, '04)
 (46) Disney sued over 'Lion Sleeps' song (ibid. July 5, '04)
 (47) Former Enron CEO Lay indicted (ibid. July 10, '04)
 (48) Mad cow ruled out in U.S. case (ibid. July 5, '04)
 (49) Playboy Harry grounded (The Sunday Mail, Feb. 22, '04)
 (50) 'Fahrenheit 9/11' will be screened near Bush ranch (The Japan Times, July 27, '04)
 (51) Sony-Bertelsmann deal approved (ibid. July 22, '04)

6. Information principle and theme continuity

The information structure of this type of sentence is constituted of both known information and new information. We usually begin a sentence with a theme which is already known, and put new information in the rheme. The agents in the following sentences (52) ~ (56) are essential because they and the predicative verbs contain new information.

- (52) Philippines not amused by Leno Iraq gangs (The Japan Times, July 19, '04)
 (53) Hand preference may be set by fatal thumb-sucking (ibid. July 30, '04)
 (54) Canadian-Iranian photographer's case abruptly ended by Tehran court (ibid. July 20, '04)
 (55) Defending champ France knocked out by Greece (The Daily Yomiuri, June 27, '04)
 (56) Parmalat debt plan is approved by Italy (The International Herald Tribune, July 22, '04)

According to Declerck's theory of theme continuity (1991: 213), clauses that have the same discourse topic preferably also have the same clause topic, and the clause topic in question is preferably related to the discourse topic.

- (57) European stocks fall, led by travel companies (*The International Herald Tribune*, Oct. 7, '04)
 (58) Such approaches were pursued by the Clinton administration but didn't prevent September 11
 (*The Weekend Australian*, Feb. 28–29, '04)

7. Heavier agents

These types of passives are distinguished by longer agents, which are used in order to place more complex and communicatively important constituents at the ends of sentences. The construction of this sentence is end-focused just as emphasized agents are. This longer and heavier agent has new information. We rarely find this structure in newspaper headlines because it is very long. It is characteristic of these passives that the following *by*-agents come after a relative pronoun *who* (59), a to-infinitive (60)~(61), and a prepositional phrase *rather than* (62).

- (59) ARM and the original Virata were established by people who had worked in the 1980s on the Acorn BBC computer (*The Australian*, Feb. 24, '04)
 (60) Outsourcers are amused by US calls for India to open up its markets (*ibid.* Feb. 24, '04)
 (61) China urged by bank to raise interest rates (*The International Herald Tribune*, Sep. 23, '04)
 (62) A recovery is being powered by private local demand and global exports rather than pump-priming and sales to the US (*The Australian*, March 3, '04)

8. Participial adjectives expressing feelings

Psycho-passives are different from normal passives, because the former has a feature used idiomatically with other prepositions other than *by*-phrases. As these passives are called participial adjectives, they have both participial and adjectival functions. The participial function of psycho-passives is similar to predicative adjectives. The following predicative verbs and prepositions are *disappointed with* (7)', *uninterested in* (63), *amused by* (60)' and *not amused by* (64).

- (7)' Iraqi governor disappointed with GSDF (*The Japan Times*, July 14, '04)
 (63) 52% of young adults uninterested in science, survey shows (*ibid.* April 11, '04)
 (60)' Outsourcers are amused by US calls for India to open up its markets (*The Australian*, Feb. 24, '04)
 (64) Philippines not amused by Leno Iraq gags (*The Japan Times*, July 19, '04)

9. Passives using verbs other than *be*

Passive constructions are also made using *get* and *have*. They, however, have almost the same passive meanings as those using *be*. *Get*+p.p. patterns are dynamic passives, which are different from stative passives. On the other hand, the construction of *have*+O+p.p. takes on the meaning of a result.

- (65) Matchmaking mums get burnt (*The Japan Times*, June 20, '04)
 (66) Shocking truth: women feel the trauma when their partners get zapped
 (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 4, '04)
 (67) UPGRADE: Claudia U'Prichard has had extra security installed at her quilt store
 (*The Sunday Mail*, Feb. 29, '04)

- (68) Under pressure for a shuffle: China's currency has had its ratings raised and Beijing been praised for its commitment to reform
(*The Australian*, Feb. 20, '04)

10. Sentences beginning with past participles

Sentences beginning with past participles are rarely seen outside of headlines. These participles are emphasized at the beginning of sentences. The participles below are followed with *by*-phrases (69), (70), and (37)' and an explanatory sentence (71).

- (69) Buoyed by polls, Bush shows new confidence
(*USA Today*, Sep. 17, '04)
(70) Caught by facts, but PM wins the politics
(*The Australian*, March 3, '04)
(37)' Tripped up by the old Capone
(*ibid.* Feb. 17, '04)
(71) Revealed: Our worst train lines
(*The Sunday Mail*, Feb. 22, '04)

11. Conclusion

Passive structures are suitable for describing information that is neither ambiguous nor uncertain, because passives are used in order to raise an objectivity in headlines. Headlines must be as short as possible. In the vast majority of headlines, therefore, *by*-phrases of agents are omitted as redundant. On the other hand, the construction of the passive sentence with a *by*-phrase is end-focused from the information structure's point of view. New information is placed on longer, heavier, and emphasized agents with *by*-phrases which are, concerning informational ratings, more important than the topic. We can also find additional passive structures, which include psycho-passives, passives using verbs other than *be*, and sentences beginning with past participles. Above all, the last structure can be seen most often in headlines, because it creates a great impact on the reader.

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