

Views on Grammatical Voice from and for the '90s

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1. Henry Sweet on Voice. I am delighted to have been given an opportunity to address a conference on the theme of "Looking Toward the 90s", as it provides me an excuse (presuming I need one) to discuss the work of Henry Sweet, whose monumental A New English Grammar (NEG) appeared in that decade, Part I in 1891 and Part II in 1898. The references following the quotations below are to section numbers. Sweet's work and also that of Otto Jespersen on grammatical voice provide a useful background to current discussions of the problem of that topic.

Sweet defined 'voice' as follows:¹

- (1) By voice we mean different grammatical ways of expressing the relation between a transitive verb and its subject and object. The two chief voices are the active (he saw) and the passive (he was seen). (311)

Sweet had nothing further to say about the active voice. Concerning the passive voice, he went on to say:

- (2) The passive voice ... is a grammatical device for (a) bringing the object of a transitive verb into prominence by making it the subject of the sentence, and (b) getting rid of the necessity of naming the subject of a transitive verb. (313)

He also noted that some languages have other voices beside the active and passive:

- (3) Some languages, such as Greek, have a reflexive or middle voice ... in which the action of the verb is referred back to the subject in various ways. (316)

Sweet contrasted passive voice, which he considered a formal grammatical device for making the object of a transitive verb its subject, with the direct manifestation of the object of a transitive verb as its subject. In the latter case, he classified the verb as 'passival':

- (4) Transitive verbs are sometimes used without an object-word for a different reason, namely that their grammatical subject is logically their direct object, as in the book sells well, meat will not keep in hot weather, the subject not being expressed because of its indefiniteness. We call sells and keep in such constructions passival verbs.

This inversion of the relations between subject and object is also expressed by a definite grammatical form called the **passive voice** (311). (249)

That is to say, the "inversion of the relations between subject and object" may either be a formal grammatical property of a sentence type, or a property of a verb.

The contrast between a formal property of a sentence type and a property of a verb may also be found across languages. He noted that while English lacks a middle (or reflexive) voice construction, it does have reflexive verbs, which are intransitive, and for which the action of the verb is referred back to the subject, as in the middle voice:

- (5) In such a sentence as he contradicts himself, we have a transitive verb followed by a reflexive pronoun in the object-relation. So also in to wash oneself, to keep oneself in the background. But in to wash in cold water, to keep in the background, to keep quiet, the reflexivity is not expressed by any pronoun, but is implied in the verb itself, which is thus changed from a transitive into an intransitive reflexive verb.

Some languages have special inflections or other formal marks to show when a verb is used in a reflexive sense, such as the Greek 'middle voice' (316). (254)

A similar class of verbs in English are the 'reciprocal verbs':

- (6) In such sentences as they fought each other, they fought one another, we quarreled with each other, we have the combination of a verb with a reciprocal pronoun. If these pronouns are dropped, and the idea of reciprocity is implied in the verb itself, it becomes a **reciprocal** verb, a transitive verb becoming intransitive at the same time. Fight and quarrel are reciprocal verbs in such sentences as those two dogs always fight when they meet; we quarreled, and made it up again. (256)

In an interesting passage, Sweet noted that a reflexive construction in some languages is sometimes used with with a passive interpretation like that of English passival verbs.

- (7) In some languages the combination of a transitive verb with a reflexive pronoun is used passivally. Thus in French, se vend, literally 'sells itself,' is used to mean 'is sold,' being thus equivalent to sells in the book sells well. (255)

Finally, Sweet pointed out a few other cases in English in which an active form of a verb is sometimes used with a passive interpretation.

- (8) The simple infinitive and supine are primarily active, but there is also a passival supine, as in this house is to let. (322)
- (9) The definite active forms are occasionally used in a passive sense: that house has been building a long time | there is an answer waiting = '... being waited for'. This is the result of the Modern English gerunds having originally been abstract nouns (1257), which, of course, are neutral as regards the distinctions of voice. (2312)

In summary, Sweet reserved the term 'voice' for classifying sentence types containing transitive verbs, and in particular contrasted passive voice, which is a device for making the object of a transitive verb its subject and for enabling the subject not to be expressed (though it may be expressed), with a variety of 'passival' verb types, such as passival verbs and passival supines. In the latter case, the logical object simply is the subject, and the logical subject is not expressed.

2. **Otto Jespersen on Active and Passive.** Jespersen did not use the term 'voice' in his seven-volume work A Modern English Grammar (MEG), which appeared over the forty-year span from 1909 to 1949. Rather, he used the terms 'active' and 'passive' either alone or as a modifier of 'verb' or of 'form'. The references following the quotations below are to volumes, sections and subsections.

Jespersen's definition of 'active' and 'passive' differs somewhat from Sweet's account in (1):

- (10) In a great many cases the same idea may be expressed in two different ways, called the active and the passive. By this means two principals may change places, so that what is the object in the active is made the subject in the passive; what is the subject in the active, is in Modern English passive sentences generally added by means of by (the "converted subject"); for instance: Cats eat rats (active) = rats are eaten by cats (passive). It will be seen that the passive verb in English always has an auxiliary verb (is, sometimes gets, etc.) (II, 1.64)

By focusing on the semantic equivalence of the active and passive construction when the logical subject of the passive is expressed, Jespersen does not (at least in this passage) take cognizance of the point made by Sweet, namely that the logical subject of the passive does not have to be expressed.

Jespersen disagreed with Sweet's account of sentences of the type the book sells well, arguing as follows:

- (11) How are we to account for [the] phenomenon [of the active-passive use of some verbs]? Sweet NEG § 249 calls such verbs passival and says that "their grammatical subject is logically their direct object... the subject not being expressed because of its indefiniteness", but this evidently is neither a good description nor an explanation of the phenomenon: how is it that here subject and object seem confused, while it is utterly impossible to say, e.g. his words believe meaning "they believe his words", no matter how indefinite the subject is? Nor is there any occasion to create a new term passival verbs: our concern is not with a special class of verbs ... but with a special use of a great many verbs under special conditions.

- The peculiarity of this use consists in the passive meaning to be attributed here to the active verb, which is thus notionally passive though formally active. (II, 16.8_a)
- (12) When we say "his novels sell very well", we think to some extent of the books as active themselves, as the cause of the extensive sale, while we are not thinking so much of the activity of the bookseller. The sentence therefore is descriptive of something that is felt as characteristic of the subject, and therefore the verb generally requires some descriptive adjective or adverb Very often the pseudo-activity of the subject is shown by the use of the verb will, especially in the negative form: the figures will not add, (II, 16.8_a)

In (11), Jespersen contended that sentences of the type the book sells well constitute a construction rather than the projection of a lexical type. He characterized the construction as "notionally passive" because the logical object of the verb is the subject, and "formally active" because the verb lacks passive morphology. His claim in (12) that the subject is thought of as "to some extent ... active" in relation to the verb suggests that the construction could be analyzed as notionally middle rather than as notionally passive. However, he construed this activity as figurative rather than as literal; otherwise, he would not have described it as a "pseudo-activity". We return to the analysis of this sentence type in section 4.

3. Commentary on Sweet and Jespersen on Active and Passive. Both Sweet and Jespersen applied the terms 'active' and 'passive', and related terms, in two ways, one having to do with grammatical form and the other with grammatical function. In NEG, Sweet used the expressions 'active', 'passive' and 'middle' together with 'voice' when he had in mind grammatical form, and used other locutions such as 'passive sense' and 'passival verb', when he had in mind a grammatical function to which the form did not correspond. Jespersen, on the other hand, did not use the term 'voice' in MEG,

but his use of 'passive verb' and 'passive form' for example, corresponds to Sweet's use of 'passive voice'. Jespersen's phrase 'passive meaning' corresponds to Sweet's 'passive sense'.

However, how are we to construe the phrases 'passive sense' and 'passive meaning' if the "same idea" (cf. 10) is expressed by the active and passive forms of a sentence? I suggest that these phrases are intended by Sweet and Jespersen to be understood as applying in situations in which the subject of a verb is to be analyzed as its logical object and there are no "special inflections or other formal marks" that show that this is the case.

Clearly, both Sweet and Jespersen take for granted that one can identify the logical relations that hold between a verb and its subject. Otherwise, how would one know when an expression has passive meaning in the absence of formal indication of its status? Compare the examples (a) that chef slices beautifully and (b) that salami slices beautifully. The most natural interpretation of (a) is that it has active meaning with an understood object, and of (b) that it has passive meaning with an understood subject. The opposite interpretations are, however, possible; i.e., both sentences are ambiguous. We arrive at these interpretations from our understanding of the relations that chefs and salami may bear to the act of slicing, and of our understanding of the contribution of the adverb beautifully. If the subject is understood as carrying out the action of slicing some unspecified object in a beautiful manner, then the interpretation is 'active'. If, on the other hand, the subject is understood as undergoing the action of slicing, with the action being understood as happening in a beautiful manner, the interpretation is 'passive'.

4. The Mapping of Thematic Relations onto Grammatical Relations. Sweet and Jespersen's ideas concerning active and passive meaning can be understood in contemporary terms as having to do with the mapping of thematic onto grammatical relations. Thematic relations can be grouped into types, of which I distinguish three: **affector**, **affectee** and **neutral**. A bearer of thematic relations may bear any one of these alone, or a combination of one affector and one affectee relation, or a combination of two neutral relations. We have then the five cases in (13).

- (13) a. affector only
 b. affectee only
 c. both affector and affectee
 d. neutral only
 e. doubly neutral

In this paper, I consider just the first three cases.² If the bearers of these thematic relation types are mapped onto the subject relation, we would be tempted to call the first mapping 'active', the second 'passive' and the third 'middle'.³ However, in considering the mapping of thematic relations onto grammatical

relations, it is important to consider how each of the arguments of a given predicational element is mapped. In the case of the mapping of bearers of the types in (13a) and (13c), the terms 'active' and 'middle' are satisfactory enough; however, in the case of the mapping of bearers of the type in (13b), the term 'passive' is too specific. We follow Sweet in applying the term 'passive' to the mapping of an affectee onto the subject relation and the mapping of an affector onto an optional oblique relation. Following a suggestion of Eloise Jelinek, I call the class of mappings of a bearer of an affectee-only relation onto the subject relation 'nonactive', and distinguish the four subtypes of nonactive mappings in (14) depending on whether or not there is an affector argument, and if there is whether it may be mapped, and if it may be mapped, whether it is optionally or obligatorily mapped.⁴

- (14) A nonactive mapping is:
- a. **inverse**, if there is an affector argument which is obligatorily mapped onto a direct nonsubject relation, as in the Navajo bi-construction;
 - b. **passive**, if there is an affector argument which is optionally mapped onto an oblique relation, as in the English passive construction;
 - c. **impersonal**, if there is an understood affector argument which is obligatorily not expressed, as in the English constructions exemplified by the salami slices easily;⁵
 - d. **unaccusative**, if there is no affector argument, as in the English intransitive constructions exemplified by the chef died, the book sold.⁶

With this more detailed breakdown of nonactive mappings into subtypes, we see that Sweet's passival verbs are to be analyzed as those that participate in the impersonal mapping.⁷ We answer Jespersen's objections to Sweet's analysis by maintaining that the mapping potentials of predicates must ultimately be lexically specified, though many of those potentials doubtless are consequences of other lexical properties.⁸ Jespersen's observation that the sentence *his words believe is ungrammatical in English in fact does not even bear on Sweet's claim that there is a class of passival verbs in English. What Jespersen's example shows is that English believe does not permit the unaccusative mapping, and the explanation for this fact is presumably that believe requires an affector argument. What is not so easily explained is why believe belongs to the class of verbs that also does not permit the impersonal mapping; that is, why *his words believe easily and *it believes easily that the earth is flat are also ungrammatical.

5. **Principles Relating Mapping and Voice in English.** In English, the use of passive voice is restricted to clauses with passive

mapping and conversely.⁹ Putting this in the form of a principle of grammar, we have:

(15) Passive voice is used if and only if the mapping is passive.

If every clause type has voice, then we conclude that in English, active voice is used whenever the mapping is defined for English and is not passive.¹⁰ That is:

(16) Active voice is used if and only if the mapping is defined for the language and is not passive.

Principle (15) straightforwardly accounts for the ungrammaticality of sentences such as *100 kilos were weighed by the chef, on the interpretation in which the chef's weight was determined, since the voice is passive but the mapping is neutral. However, the account of the ungrammaticality of unemphatic passive sentences with reflexive or reciprocal by-phrases, such as *they were washed by themselves / one another¹¹ rests on a subtlety. Since the oblique object in such examples corresponds to a bearer of combined affector and affectee relations, the mapping is not passive, the passive mapping being defined as providing for an optional oblique affector-only argument. A similar account can be given for the ungrammaticality of the sentence *their hands were washed by them (with their and them coreferential).

Principle (15) also entails that what is often referred to as the experiencer thematic relation is sometimes to be considered an affector relation and sometimes an affectee. For example, both (a) the chef enjoyed the wine and (b) the wine pleased the chef, have passive voice counterparts, namely (c) the wine was enjoyed (by the chef) and (d) the chef was pleased (by the wine). By principle (15), the mapping in (c) and (d) must be passive. Hence in (c) and ceteris paribus in (a), the chef must correspond to the bearer of an affector role; but in (d) and ceteris paribus in (b), the chef must correspond to the bearer of an affectee role. Thus, the grammatical subjects of active-voice psych-predicates such as please correspond to affectors, just as do the grammatical subjects of active-voice nonpsych-predicates such as enjoy.

6. Other Principles Relating Mapping and Voice. In languages which distinguish among active, middle and passive voices, principle (15) appears to remain intact. The fact that in many such languages middle voice is used when the mapping is impersonal (cf. 7) is not a counterexample, since the passive mapping is distinct from (albeit closely related to) the impersonal mapping. What would be a counterexample to (15) is the use of passive voice when the mapping is impersonal. Such a situation would be hard to verify, since the only difference between the passive mapping and the impersonal mapping in that case would be the optional occur-

rence vs. the obligatory nonoccurrence of a term corresponding to the affector.

As English, as Sweet analyzes it, shows, middle mapping is possible without middle voice being available. However, the devices that are available for expressing middle mapping in languages which lack middle voice are restricted, being limited to the expression of reflexive and reciprocal relations. Middle mapping that is expressed by middle voice permits relations that are neither strictly reflexive nor strictly reciprocal, as in the French example les femmes se libèrent, which could be used to describe a situation in which two of the women in question are liberating each other and the third is liberating herself. As noted in Langendoen (1978), there is a dialect in English in which the sentence the women are liberating themselves can be understood exactly as the corresponding French example, in which case, we should conclude that this dialect of English, at least, has middle voice, and the reflexive pronoun is part of the construction.

The principles that govern the mapping domains for active and middle voices are not yet entirely clear to me.¹² The following principle, however, may well be correct.

(17) If the mapping is middle, then the voice is middle.

A principle corresponding to (17) for active mapping and voice does not appear to hold in general, since there are languages in which middle voice is idiosyncratically used in situations where the mapping appears to be active. However, active mapping does appear to be used invariably with both the unaccusative and the neutral mapping. Hence:

(18) If the mapping is unaccusative or neutral, then the voice is active.

Finally, languages do not appear to permit a true inverse mapping unless they have a particular construction for it. If this construction is called 'inverse voice', then we have:

(19) The mapping is inverse if and only if the voice is inverse.

Note that the form of (19) is just like that of (15). If (15) and (19) are correct, then the existence of both passive mapping and inverse mapping in a language depends on the existence of a particular voice to express it. Without the appropriate voice, the passive and inverse mappings are not found.

Notes

1. For a useful survey of the use of the term 'voice' in traditional and modern grammatical analysis, see Lyons (1968).

2. Neutral thematic relations are borne by arguments of stative relations, as in the chef is tall and the chef weighs a hundred kilos. The combination of two neutral thematic relations is borne by the subject of certain symmetric relations, as in those chefs are similar.

3. The term 'unergative' is sometimes used for a subclass of middle mappings exemplified by the boy leaped.

4. Note that I distinguish between nonactive and neutral as separate types of mappings. Though the mappings of neutral thematic relations are not the topic of this paper, a few remarks concerning them appear at the end of the paper.

5. The name for this mapping should perhaps be elaborated to indicate that a bearer of an affectee relation must appear as subject, to distinguish it from impersonal mappings with empty or expletive subjects and obligatorily understood affector and affectee arguments, or just an obligatorily understood affectee argument. The former mapping appears in many languages, such as German, and the latter mapping occurs in Romani (Dana McDaniel, personal communication). We do not consider these other impersonal type mappings further here.

I reject the term that is most commonly employed for the mapping in contemporary discussions, namely 'middle', because I use that term exclusively in its traditional sense. I do not know who is responsible for introducing the term 'middle' for what I here call 'impersonal', but it apparently arose early in the history of generative grammar.

6. The term 'unaccusative' for this mapping is to be preferred to 'ergative' used by Keyser and Roeper (1984) and Fagan (1988); the latter is actually an excellent synonym for 'active'.

7. The unaccusative and impersonal mappings are sometimes hard to distinguish, and some of the examples that Sweet and Jespersen used to illustrate the impersonal (passival) mapping are properly analyzed as involving the unaccusative mapping, for example the book sells well. The impersonal mapping (pace Fagan 1988; I construe her example this dress buttons as unaccusative rather than impersonal in mapping) in English requires the use of a certain kind of adverbial modifier, which 'introduces', so to speak, the understood affector argument, but not all adverbial modifiers do this successfully, in particular well does not. One that does work successfully is easily.

8. For example, the fact that sell permits the unaccusative mapping (cf. n. 7), as in that painting sold recently, whereas buy does not (cf. *that painting bought recently), can be explained by the fact that a selling event can take place without a seller (as

when one leaves money for a newspaper at a newsstand) whereas a buying event cannot take place without a buyer. The explanation for why certain predicating elements can occur with an impersonal mapping and others cannot is not so easily explained, as is pointed out in the text in connection with the discussion of believe. Interesting discussion of this and related problems can be found in Hale and Keyser (1987) and Fagan (1988).

9. However, passive voice can be used when the subject appears not to bear any thematic relation at all to its predicating element, as in sentences such as the chef is said (by the waiter) to bake excellent pies. The problem here is to show that the mapping is in fact passive. One possibility is to analyze the subject in such cases as an affectee of a complex predicate, in this case say to bake. Another is to alter the definition of the passive mapping, so that the subject may be athematic with respect to its predicate.

10. For example, inverse mapping is not defined for English and hence is not expressed by any voice.

11. These sentences are grammatical if the reflexive or reciprocal expression receives contrastive stress. This can be accounted for by analyzing the subject as corresponding to a bearer of an affectee role only, as in the corresponding cleft sentences: it was themselves / one another they were washed by.

12. See Kemmer (1988) for a thorough discussion of middle voice.

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