A Title Was Written By the Author
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Assignment Description: Research a controversial topic related to grammar, find contemporary research on it, and react thoughtfully to that research. The assignment was completed for Dr. Keith Lloyd’s Fundamentals of English Grammar.

A short conversation was heard in a park:
“The ball was kicked by Jack.”
“What! The ball kicked Jack?”
“Wait what, no Jack kicked the ball.”

What happened here? Where did the confusion enter between the two characters? It begins with the difference in sentence structure. The two sentences interacting in this conversation are active and passive. In the active sentence, the subject is completing the action, e.g. “Jack kicked the ball.” In passive sentence, as its name implies, the object is acted upon. The confusion enters the conversation when the second character mistakes the object, the ball, as the subject. It’s a slight mistake and one easily corrected but occurring on a daily basis. Writers and journalist are using passive sentences to describe violent acts. When they do this, they change the emphasis of the sentence and influence the way readers view the object. This small conversation in the park has now reached a larger audience with implications much worse than simple confusion. Through the structure of the passive sentence, unconscious harmful ideas are transmitted.

To understand the full implications of a passive sentence, the sentence itself needs to be defined. A passive sentence is the rearrangement of a transitive verb type sentence which occurs over a course of three different steps. First, the direct object of the sentence is switched with the subject. The verb phrase then becomes BE + [past participle]. Finally, a by preposition phrase is added (Morenberg 299). Following these steps, the sentence “The baby hit the cat” is transformed into “The cat was hit by the baby.” The main idea of the sentence has been preserved but the information has been moved around. Therefore, in terms of information, an active sentence and passive sentence remain the same. There has been some suggestion that the mind processes passive differently from active sentences or that the structure disrupts our chain of thought and requires more effort. According to Armstrong and Dienes’s “Subliminal Understanding of Active versus Passive Sentences,” the ability to process an active and passive sentence does remain the same (47). The authors, over a series of three experiments, discovered the brain unconsciously understand the basic meaning of both sentences. In their experiments, participants saw a sentence for a brief second describing a character’s action in the active or passive and then asked to choose a matching picture from two choices. Beyond chance expectations, they choose correctly (Armstrong and Dienes 44). The authors discovered the brain’s ability to process word combinations went beyond what was consciously aware of seeing. We are able to recognize and understand the information in either its active form or passive form. How then could a simple rearrangement of a sentence transmit detrimental ideas? What is the significant difference from an active sentence that changes the way information is processed? One difference lies in the amount of time it took to reach the same conclusion. Over the course of the three experiments, the passive sentence always took the participant a longer time to comprehend (43). This feature remains at the surface syntactic feature but its casual reading still affects
comprehension of and memory for language as seen later.

David R. Olson and Nikola Filby also explore these very questions in “On the comprehension of active and passive sentences.” The results of their five experiments produced a different facet to the answer – it is all about context. They found that a person would answer a prompt correctly if the information was stated in the same verb type. Essentially if the answer was originally written in the passive, it would be easier to answer with a passive question and vice versa (Olson and Filby 376). It complements Armstrong and Dienes claim that active and passive are easily understood unconsciously. As long as it remains within the same context, no additional time is needed to understand the sentence. Olson and Filby also discovered the passive sentences do not necessarily need the additional steps of reconstruction of the active sentence to be understood. The sentence simply has to remain within the context of passive to comprehend without the reconstruction of the basic structure (379). As seen in one aspect of their experiments, it is harder to comprehend a passive sentence when it is moved out of context. In three of their experiments, they asked participants to read an active sentence and then label two preceding passive sentences as either true or false. They found, on average, the false sentence took longer than the true sentences to verify. For example, the experiment used the active sentence, “the car hit the truck” (364). It was followed by the two sentences, “The truck was hit by the car” and “The car was hit by the truck.” (364). The context, on a surface level, would suggested the second sentence matches the active sentence. The order is the same; the car appears first to be followed by the truck. The false passive appears to resemble the active sentences when in reality it does not. The results of their test resembles the confusion in the introduction. Time is needed to answer the questions correctly, something lacking in that conversation.

Context, therefore, is important to understanding the differences between the ideas underlying active and passive sentences because it emphasizes different parts of the sentence (362). In Olson’s and Filby’s experiment, they asked the participant to find and label either the subject or the object. The questions themselves were “who hit” and “who was hit” (375). The answer to “who hit” was the subject while the answer to “who was hit” was the object. In an active sentence, the first question is easier to identify since the subject is doing the hitting. In a passive sentence, it is the second question that becomes easier to answer since it has the same verb type. If it was reversed, the questions would be harder to answer not only because the context changed but the needed information comes later. This is why the first part of the sentence, whether it is the subject or the object, is emphasized (Henley et al 61). Readers will also wrongly recall the information of an active sentence from a passive sentence. As mentioned previously, an answer will be easily recalled if the question remains in the same verb type. What happens, then, when a person is asked to recall an answer derived from a passive sentence with an active prompt? Mis-recall occurs (62). From the previous example, answering the prompt “who hit” with the previous sentence “the truck was hit by the car” was often answered incorrectly. The participants incorrectly cast the emphasized part of the sentence, the object, over the non-emphasized part, the subject. Therefore choosing a passive sentence, consciously or unconsciously, is choosing to emphasize the object (Olsen 363).
It may not necessarily be detrimental that the focus of the sentence is the object. However in most cases, it is. There a variety of reasons why emphasis on the object is often emphasis on the wrong party. For example, examine the following two sentences:

“In the US a man rapes a woman every 6 minutes.”

“In the US a woman is raped by a man every 6 minutes” (Henley et al 61)

These two sentences could easily be reimagined in the context of a newspaper article. Journalists often choose the second sentence because they can drop, or truncate, the by phrase. It’s important to note that the ability to drop the perpetrator is only available in the passive structure. This is where the harm occurs. By erasing “by a man,” the responsibility of the perpetrator is hidden (61). The emphasis then remains solely on the object, the victim of the crime, to the point it becomes their identity (Katz). For example, the term “battered woman” was derived from the passive sentence “the woman was beaten.” The word beaten was often associated with the word battered and soon writers were using the second word with more frequently. It was shorter and more precise to limit the whole sentence to an adjective. From this shift, the perpetrator has long left the conversation and the victim remains a person in which an events happen to them. Not only has it become their identity, but they have now become passive recipients of an event.

This is when the passive sentence, used in a social context, becomes deadly. Passive has dangerous implications regarding agency. It downplays the role of the perpetrator while assigning blame to the victim. Nancy H. Henley, Michelle Miller, and Jo Anne Beazley experimented to discover the full extent of this phenomenal. They looked at verb types of newspaper articles describing acts of positive, neutral, nonviolent crimes, sexual violence, and nonsexual violence. The newspapers described sexual and nonsexual violence in the passive with more regularity than the other acts. They used this information in a following experiment to see the exact effect the passive voice has on the reader. The participants, after reading select stories, often attributed blame to the victim (Henley et al 80). It should be noted rape myths and gender also influence the passive sentences effect on the participants. Rape myths are based on the basic idea that in a just world a person will get what they deserve. Following this train of thought, the rape victim deserves to be raped because of a previous relationship or their outfit or the amount of alcohol involved or any such variable (Bohner 516). The participants were not only asked to grade the level of blame for the victim but also asked to take a rape myth acceptance test. Males generally score higher on rape myth acceptance tests and were generally found to assign more blame when reading passive sentences. Females, on the other hand, did not. Perhaps, when individuals do not believe rape myths, passive sentences can elicit greater empathy and pity and the emphasis on the object can help to perceive the victim positively (517). An exception proves this idea wrong: female groups did assign blame after multiple exposure to stories using the passive voice (Henley et al 79). Like a cliffside exposed to the relentless ocean, the use of passive sentence can subtly affect even participants more likely to show compassion.

Gerd Bohner expanded further on the role of passive and rape myths on the writer. In his experiment, participants were asked to watch a video of a sexual crime and then write a brief news article with a heading. They were presented with either two videos:
two men cornering and raping a woman in an alleyway or a man flirting and then raping a woman in a bar. Bohner predicted the second scenario, the one with higher rape myth details, would have considerably higher use of the passive sentence. In both cases, regardless of the scenario or gender, passive was used extensively compared to other actions in the video (Bohner 524). The correlation between passive and rape myth acceptance was positive but at insignificant levels. However, once the author looked at each scenario separately, there was a noticeable correlation between the two traits. In the second scenario, participants were more likely to assign blame while the insignificant correlation was found in the first scenario (525). Therefore, even if rape myth details are absent, the passive structure is still used to describe violent crimes.

In the two previously mentioned articles, the use of passive have been suggested to be used as a distancing tool. Writers are not assigning blame but rather shielding themselves from the gruesome circumstances. In “Double Standards in Sentence Structure” by Alexandra Frazer and Michelle Miller, they explored this concept. They wanted to determine if authors used passive sentences to seek distance or downplay the role of male perpetrators. Whereas Henley et al looked at an overview of multiple positive and negative acts in newspapers in their experiment, Frazer et al looked specifically at female-on-male and male-on-female violence. If it is true that authors are trying to distances themselves from violent acts, then the use of passive would be equal in both cases – this is not the case. Instead active sentences were used more frequently in the case of female perpetrators while male perpetrators were written in the passive (Frazer and Miller 68). In another experiment, they asked a group of participants to write a brief mock newspaper article with a headline. They were given only the following information: event, victim, perpetrator, weapon, date, and place (Frazer and Miller 67). Once again, passive was used in the case of female-on-male violence, more often but there was also an unexpected side result. In the cases of the female-on-male violence, there was usually a line justifying her actions even though the participants were neither prompted nor given any information. There was no such justification in the reverse (Frazer and Miller 67). People treat domestic violence differently based on gender and their attitudes are revealed at the syntax level.

Even though the previous experiments’ focus was on the passive sentences and gender, they also affect issues of race and status. In the case of race, welfare has become a personal characteristics of young African Britons. The passive sentence steals their identity and leaves them as simple objects upon which circumstances happen to them (Henley et al 63). There is also the case of reporting police shootings. For example, the recent police shootings in Ferguson. In one BBC article, they start with the sentence “a white officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager.” The active sentence is used and blame is clearly associated with the white officer. After this point, the passive sentence is used a total of four times to describe the death of Michael Brown. The phrase “he was shot” is repeated and the by phrase almost always dropped (“Michael Brown…”). The white officer leaves the conversation and agency suddenly becomes unclear. Agency is not only hidden in the in the written word but occurs in the spoken as well. Medical case presentations often used the passive. Language is used to decrease the doctor’s reasonability in decision-makings (Henley et. al 63). When there is suppression, passive sentences are
typically nearby. Linguistic historian Julia Penelope goes so far to claim that the function of the passive sentence is to hide, “English allows us to suppress reference to the agents who commit specific acts, particularly when the speaker-writer wishes to deny or cover up responsibility” (qtd. in Henley et. al 63).

In every single experiment, it has been stated over and over again the use of passive is probably not the intention of the writer. They are not intentionally using the syntax to associate blame with the victim. However, like a person’s tell in poker, it is an unconscious and reliable revealer of the attitudes of the writer’s culture. Writers are not the only ones affected; reader’s perception of the victim changes when read in the passive. Victim’s agencies are dismissed and they are associated with blame while the perpetrator is hidden. Grammar is often dismissed as the pet peeve of the English teacher but it is a powerful force starting at the sentence structure. It has the ability to reveal beliefs and change the way people think. It is also at the sentence structure where change can be made. When faced with a passive sentence, Penelope suggest we automatically respond “by whom?” (81).

Works Cited


