

Preliminaries to the Re-analysis of the Sinhala Passive

Hemamali Gunasinghe and Joseph F. Kess

University of Victoria

This paper attempts to survey the preliminaries to a re-analysis of the passive in Sinhala. The passive voice is typically a matter of some controversy in traditional grammar and in modern linguistic theory, both of which share the assumption that passive structures are less basic, optional alternants to possible active structures. The passive transformation was one of the earliest to be stated in transformational generative theory, but its status continues to remain uncertain. Indeed, the status of the passive in linguistic theory has been the subject of considerable investigation of late.

According to some, linguistic theory has added little to understanding the underlying psycholinguistic nature of the passive construction. For example, Stanley (1975:25) notes that "historically, the passive voice has been one of the most controversial and problematic constructions in the discussion of English structure, and modern linguistics has added little to our understanding of the meaning and function of the passive." After all, its structure is stated simply enough, but the really interesting questions lie in its possible

semantic or cognitive origins and the stylistic uses to which it may be put. Like R. Lakoff (1971:168), one may ask "why is it so widespread, when it is apparently so useless?" Or even answering a less difficult, though no less important question like "where is it used rather than the active?" is a sufficiently informative task to set. Is it really as Green (1966:4) suggests, simply "an optional stylistic embellishment" or "a linguistic luxury"?

Some do see the passive as simply a stylistic variant, quite unimportant from a production or processing point of view. For example. on the one extreme one finds opinions like those of Evans and Evans (1957) who regard the passive as a sophisticated device that simply marks one as educated. Sledd (1959) also calls attention to its stylistic intent as opposed to its possible processing status when he notes that the choice of the passive is a stylistic determination made for the sake of effective prose. The passive voice has even been viewed as a stylistic device that lends itself to evasive uses, making covert appeals to authority and universal consensus. Jespersen (1924) once gave reasons for the use of the passive voice. While the first two are quite remarkable, the third is most intriguing and the fourth has often been stated by grammarians relying on their own processing intuitions.

- (i) The active subject is unknown or cannot be easily stated.
- (ii) The logical subject is evident (retrievable) from the context.
- (iii) There are special reasons (delicacy, tact) for not mentioning the active subject.

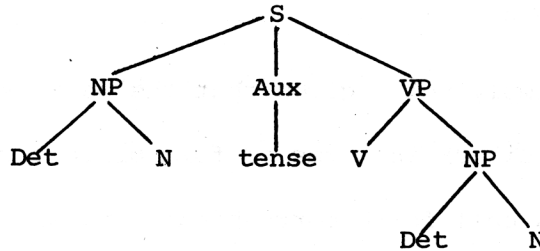
- (iv) Passive rather than the active subject attracts greater interest (or focus).

When one looks at the statistical frequency of the passive in actual speech, one is taken by its relative infrequency as opposed to its expected ubiquity. For example, Goldman-Eisler and Cohen (1970) found that the passive voice occurred only 7 to 10 percent of the time, compared to over 80 percent for the active. Interestingly, they also found that the frequency of the passive increased with educational level and formality of contextual situation.

If one views the passive as a variant form of the active declarative structure, the most obvious syntactic characteristic of the passive voice is the structural change it entails. Essentially, the subject/object exchange is a constant in languages like English, and grammarians differ little on this account. For example, Jespersen's statements are no different than later generativist formulations which number the noun phrases as NP_1 and NP_2 and have them transposed by the appropriate rule. What is different, of course, is the way in which sentence relationships are dealt with in modern linguistic theory. The form or structural essence of the passive, however, remains unchanged; the function or processual nature of the forms remains unclear.

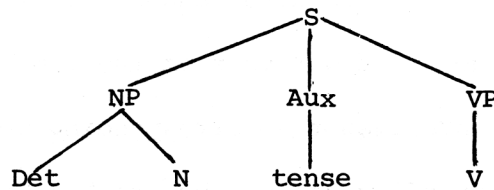
In generative theory, the passive transformation was stated as a reordering rule affecting linearly ordered "P markers". The base was conceived of in transitive terms, with P-markers for sentences like "Charlie opened the door" and "The door opened" looking like (1) and (2) below.

(1)



"Charlie opened the door"

(2)



"The door opened"

Thus, the passive transformation for a sentence pair like (3) and (4) is stated by a simple rule providing the structural description (S.D.) of the active declarative starting point sentence, and transforming it to the structural change (S.C.) which is the passive counterpart to the active sentence. This rule may be stated formulaically as in (5). In other words, to get from (3) to (4) one has, in effect, gone through the steps presented in