Passive Constructions in English and Korean

: A Cross-linguistic analysis

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Abstract

English passive voice is considered as the transformed version of the active voice with similar meaning by Korean students. Many students are used to acquiring the simple passive construction correctly at the time the passive is introduced. Korean students are taught to be careful about choosing the correct tense and form of be verb suitable for the new subject of the passive. However, most of the students do not know the exact differences between passive and active voice in the usage and meaning. It is necessary to recognize when to use active voice or passive voice appropriately for a sentence and to know what the real differences of active and passive sentences are. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the characteristics of passive voice, and the differences between passive and active voices syntactically and semantically. Next, most languages have means of shifting focus in a sentence. I'll investigate the Korean passive voice and try to examine the differences of English and Korean passive voices in terms of form and meaning.

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Passive in English

Passive: Form and Structure

A simple passive form involves the auxiliary be or get verb plus the -ed form of a lexical verb and by the insertion of the preposition by followed by an NP complement.

1a. Tom broke the window.
   \[S \quad V \quad O\]
   1b. The window was broken by Tom.
   \[S' \quad \text{be+-ed} \quad \text{by+agent}\]

Most passives are agent-less. So no intransitive verb has passive form because there is no object in the intransitive verb sentence.

2a. Water flows slowly.

\[\rightarrow\]

2b. *_______ is flowed by the water slowly.

As Huddleston (1993) points out these names are based on the role of the subject-referent in clauses expressing and action: it will normally be the actor, or active participant, in the unmarked version, and the patient, or passive participant, in the marked version (p. 438).

On the other hand, some transitive verbs do not allow passive form. There may be three main reasons for this: a verb may be symmetrical, it may refer to a static relation, or it may inherently focus on the subject (Dixon, 2005, p. 361).

3a. Mary resembles John.

3b. John resembles Mary.
Either of the roles may be placed in subject slot, and so there is no possible need for a passive construction.

→

3c. *John is resembled by Mary

Next, some English verbs indicating a static relationship between two things, like contain, cost, weigh and last also resist being a passive construction. These words specify a relationship and lack of a passive like symmetric verbs, for example contain.

4a. This carton contains pineapple juice.

→

4b. *Pineapple juice is contained by this carton.

Also, active clauses with indefinite or generic objects do not be passives.

5a. Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet.

→

5b. Romeo and Juliet was written by Shakespeare.

5c. Shakespeare wrote plays.

5d. #Plays were written by Shakespeare.

The sentence (5d) is semantically odd, questionable.

Also, we cannot make passive clauses like Ed liked/ wanted/ hated Liz to accompany them.

6. Liz was liked/ wanted/ hated by Ed to accompany them. (adapted from Huddleston, 1984, p. 439).

“The constituent structure of the active is somewhat unclear, so that it is arguable whether Liz is in fact an object” (Huddleston, 1984, p. 439).
There are some differences of meaning between active and passive constructions. As Bolinger puts it: “We can say George turned the pages or The pages were turned by George; something happens to the pages in the process. But when we say George turned the corner we cannot say *The corner was turned by George--the corner is not affected, it is only where George was at the time” (as cited in Dixon, 2005, p. 353). The more affected an object is, the more likely it is that the clause will be passive.

**Passive: Meaning and Use**

Dixon (2005) confirmed that “Some passives have a clearly mentioned agent; however, most passive in formal written English, more than 80 per cent of passives are agent-less” (p. 353). There are several reasons why English passive sentences omittted agent. The passive one is free not to encode information that would have to be encoded in the active (Huddleston, 1984, p. 446). Some native speakers prefer passive voice when they want to avoid their responsibility.

7a. The specimens were examined spectroscopically.

7b. The delay in attending to this matter is regretted (adapted from Huddleston, 1984) 

According to Huddleston (1984), agent-less passive is very common not only in scientific writing but also in many other contexts like letters from government, because the public servant’s identity typically not be revealed (p. 447).

According to Dixon (2005)’s explanation about the usage of passive sentences in scientific English, “it avoids bringing in the first person pronoun, An experiment was devised to investigate... rather than I devised an experiment to investigate... This is presumably to give an illusion of total objectivity” (p. 355).

The speakers of passive voice want to focus on the receiver of an action by placing it
subject position and to defocus the agent or causer of the action.

7a. The explosion demolished several houses.

→

7b. Several houses are demolished by the explosion.

Passive users still want to keep cohesion or thematic unity. In a sentence, speakers like to use same subject, instead they change forms from active to passive.

8. I was a young Korean, but I was much respected by the management.

In fact, use of the two voices is motivated by different reasons. One would find a passive in a discourse for which an active voice sentence would not be appropriate. For this reason, we think that it is misleading to student to present the passive as if it were derived from the active voice. “Learning when to use the passive is a challenge to ESL/EFL students, who will tend to over- or under-use it depending on its frequency of occurrence and its functions in their native languages” (Celce-Murcia & Larson Freeman, 1999, p. 555).

**Passive in Korean**

Korean has ways to shift the focus in an utterance, and passive exists to do similarly in English, shifting the focus from the agent of the action to the receiver.

9a. 개가 영미를 쫓아간다.

The dog Youngmi chased.

The dog chased Youngmi.

→

9b. 영미가 개에게 쫓긴다.

Youngmi the dog was chased
Youngmi was chased by the dog.

9c. 개에게 영미가 쫓긴다.
The dog Youngmi chased
Youngmi was chased by the dog.

Korean passive form adds some passive suffixes like ‘이/-히/-리/-기’/(-yi/-hi/-li/-gi-)’. (9b) and (9c) are a little bit different in the sentence structure or passive suffixes, but the meaning is almost same.

Some passive forms don’t have subject--object conversion like English passive form. Korean is not in the subject dominant language category. Korean can make sense without subject, and the position of subject is not so strict like English. The subject and object are changeable in the position, and usually do not have any differences in meaning. The subject omitted sentence has passive meaning in Korean.

10a. Canada에서는 영어와 불어를 쓴다.
in Canada English and French are spoken.

English and French are spoken in Canada.

10b. 이 꽃은 영어로는 뭐라고 부릅니까?
This flower in English what is called
What is this flower called in English?

The passive in English is sometimes expressed in active in Korean. In Korea, passive form and usage are not as common as in English. Rather, some Korean active voice phrases are expressed in English passive.

11a. 신속히 답장을 보내 주시면 감사하겠습니다.
earliest reply send will appreciate
Your earliest reply will be appreciated.

11b. 의사를 당장 불러야지.

A doctor at once call

A doctor must be sent for at once.

However, the opposite expressions occur in some Korean sentences. These Korean passive examples are translated into the English active.

12a. 무엇이 보입니까?

What is seen

Can you see anything?

12b. 아내의 코고는 소리가 들렸다.

wife’s snoring was heard.

He heard his wife snoring.

These Korean sentences have weaker passive characters than English ones, or have difficulty to find corresponding passive voice with each other.

In authentic utterance, the passive usage and meaning are more complicated because the passive is closely related to the affected part, which causes differences in English and Korean passive. In this respect, the corresponding translation of English-Korean, or Korean-English active and passive form should be more cautious.

Conclusion

This paper has examined some issues of English passive voice with the general definition. There is some misunderstanding that passive and active voices are interchangeable. But the use of each voice is motivated by completely different reasons. People use passive to focus on the receiver of action by placing it to subject position. In
addition, the concrete formation that the agent preceded with by has some problems, in fact, only about 15 percent of English passive sentences have the agent. The speakers choose agent-less passive form with intention to avoid their responsibility or to keep subjectivity of utterance.

Further, there are investigations about Korean passive compared with English passive. Comparing Korean and English passive is more complicated because the passive is closely related to the affected part in each language. Using passive should be with deliberation. The ultimate challenge of learning the passive voice is not acquisition of form, but the meaning and use should be weighed equally for the efficient communication.
References


