

The Purpose of the Passive

by Virginia French Allen

"In general, we can say that a person uses the passive when he does not consider the agent especially important and does not wish to call attention to the agent." (*Using English: Your Second Language*, p. 58)

Published in 1973, the above remark represents what has long been said about the use of the passive. The point was made more recently in James E. Redden's article, "On Analyzing and Teaching the English Passive" (*SPEAQ Journal*, 3: 34:102): "In other words, when the logical object of a verb and what happens to it are the center or focus of attention, a passive will be used to describe the logical object and what happens to it."

Whatever else may have changed in the teaching of grammar, students are still being given much the same impression of the purpose of the passive. They are told that it highlights an action and the receiver of the action, diverting attention from the action's agent.

How accurate is that impression? Consider the following passive sentences from a newspaper, the *Boulder Daily Camera* of December 12, 1980:

- (1) The U.S. Board on Geographic Names Thursday postponed a decision until its June meeting on whether to rename the peak in Alaska "denali," the name it was given long ago by native Indians, because

[Query: Is the giving of the name really considered more important here than the identity of the givers?]

- (2) The mayor called the remark "an insensitive colloquialism — the kind of remark that might have been used 20 years ago by some racists, and some who might not be."

[Query: Was the passive used here because the speaker did *not* wish

to call attention to those using the "insensitive colloquialism"?)]

- (3) After Mrs. Faus died, the property was owned by the Blackmarr family, which also owned a furniture store for many years.

[Query: Was the passive used because the reporter did *not* consider the owner's name important?]

- (4) It was purchased by the First Methodist Church in 1959.

[Query: Did the use of the passive really diminish the role of the church in that transaction? Compare the active version of the sentence: The First Methodist Church purchased it in 1959.]

Such examples raise questions about the customary explanation of the passive. Often, it seems, passive sentences with *by* do not indeed divert attention from the agents of actions. What then do they do? Another sentence from the *Daily Camera* offers a clue:

- (5) She was attended by her sister-in-law, Mrs. Jeffrey Bauer, who wore an empire gown of cranberry jersey and carried chrysanthemums, carnations, and snapdragons.

If students are asked to convert this into an active sentence, one purpose of the passive should become clear. There is just too much information about the agent of this action to be stuffed into subject position. When the agent is put into a *by* phrase, however, the subject can be closely followed by a predicate verb (*She was attended*) — a favored arrangement for English sentences. Then the copious details related to the agent of the action can be spread over the open spaces beyond the verb. That seems a plausible reason for choosing the passive in the phrasing of Example 5. In that sentence, the bride and what happened to

her are certainly not the center or focus of attention; the sister-in-law clearly is.

A comparable motive may be at work in the choice of passive for the following sentence, where it would have been awkward to say enough about the agent of the action within the space normal for subject territory:

- (6) The foundation was set up by the popular pianist, Liberace, who dazzles audiences with candelabras, glittering jackets and keyboard acrobatics.

It would be hard to deny that the agent (the person who set up the foundation) is the center of interest here. Putting him into a *by* phrase does nothing to dim the spotlight. On the contrary, the passive construction provides open space in which to elaborate upon him.

In a sentence from "Letters to the Editor," we see similar use of post-verb territory for saying all that needs to be said about the agent of the action:

- (7) The day after his 11th birthday one of your *Daily Camera* carrier's bicycle was stolen from his home — along with the bicycle of his friend — by thieves who entered our courtyard after dark.

Here the passive does little or nothing to divert attention from the perpetrators of the theft. It may even be that the passive directs attention to them. The end-position of the *by* phrase makes it possible to write of them at some length, in the 7-word segment: *thieves who entered our courtyard after dark*.

Examples like the foregoing also show how suspense can be produced by the passive, since the passive can delay delivery of wanted information. Suspense, of course, accounts for the use of inversion in periodic sentences, like "In the beginning was the Word" and "Underneath are the everlasting arms." In the periodic sentence, the writer withholds until the end of the clause an element essential to the sense. And so, in a slightly different fashion, does end-placement enhance dramatic effect in aphorisms like Hawthorne's "Life is made

up of marble and mud" and Shaw's "In the end there is only thought."

Quite possibly, *regard for the power of sentence-final position* is what often leads writers to choose the passive. Consider the following from Dear Abby:

- (8) Not only does her beloved husband die a lingering death with cancer, she's spied upon by a nosy, suspicious, uncharitable neighbor.

This example shows how passives offer possibilities for using the powerful end-position of an English sentence. See how the colorful indignation of Abby fades in this active version: . . . *a nosy, suspicious, uncharitable neighbor spies upon her*.

Not that passives are always, under all circumstances, better than active sentences! (Unfortunately that is the message students

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often think they are getting from lessons on passive transformations.) On the other hand, it is equally misleading to assert that active sentences are always clearer and stronger than their passive counterparts, as gurus of "plain talk" frequently claim.

It appears that the passive serves a number of purposes. Obviously the passive is the option to use when one cannot or should not or need not state the agent. In such a sentence, with no agent expressed, attention is naturally focused on the action itself, and on its receiver.

But that is not the only purpose of the passive.

When the *by*-phrase passive is used, perhaps it is to provide variety, a passive counterpoint to a series of active sentences. Or the passive is chosen for its effect on sentence cadence; a more pleasing arrangement of syllables may result. Contexts

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needed for illustrating those reasons would be too lengthy for our present space.

The examples we have examined, however, suggest the following:

Sometimes the active option is rejected because much needs to be said about the agent—more than can comfortably fit before the verb. In a passive sentence, the agent (in post-verb *by*-phrase) can be treated at length.

The writer may wish to delay stating the agent as long as possible. A *by*-phrase at the end of the sentence can serve this purpose.

Like the inversion that characterizes periodic sentences, the shifting of agent to end-position in passives is a means of creating suspense.

Since the end of a sentence is often marked by pitch-change and strong stress, a writer may draw attention to the agent through use of the passive. The *by*-phrase is placed where the major stress falls.

Such points, among others, deserve to be mentioned when the purpose of the passive is discussed.