CONSTRAINTS BETWEEN PASSIVE SUBJECTS AND AGENTS[*]

Evelyn N Ransom
Eastern Illinois University

The passive voice has often been maligned by traditionalists
as "weak" and "unemphatic" - a construction to be avoided   Trans-
formationalists have usually elevated it to the status of a stylis-
tic variant of the active voice - derived from the active deep
structure by an optional rule   Neither of these approaches acknowl-
edges that there are clear-cut cases of both acceptable and unac-
ceptable passives along with varying degrees in between, forming a
squish

In this paper, I will discuss only one of the reasons for the
varying degrees of acceptability   namely that passives are more
acceptable if their subjects are more important than their agents,
and less acceptable if they are less important

I will try to avoid discussing another important reason, which
involves the way that the discourse topic affects the passive sen-
tence   Instead, I will try to examine the sentences in isolation,
disregarding the fact that each of these sentences could become
more acceptable in certain contexts, and thus, in isolation, cannot
be considered totally unacceptable

I will also avoid discussing the use of passives in technical
or formal discourse, where there is more tolerance for slightly un-
acceptable passives in order to achieve a more impersonal effect
The judgments of acceptability will be based on an informal style
of discourse

Finally, I will avoid discussing the effect of the verb type
on the degrees of acceptability   I have used only verbs that could
give an acceptable passive, but I have divided them into three
classes   The first class contains action verbs which describe
something happening to the passive subject, so that one can say
"What happened to Gerald was that he was attacked by women " Verbs
of this type form the optimal passive and are the main ones I used
for determining the constraints between passive subjects and agents
The second class consists of action verbs which do not describe
anything happening to the passive subject, like describe, refer,
and build, so that one cannot say "What happened to Gerald was that
he was described by women," at least in any literal sense of the
word described   These verbs do not have all of the constraints

394

that the first class has, possibly because of their frequent use in
formal discourse, which, as pointed out above, is more tolerant of
slightly unacceptable passives The third class contains nonaction
verbs like <u>hate,</u> <u>trust,</u> and <u>see.</u> These also do not describe any-
thing happening to the passive subject, so that one cannot say
"What happened to Gerald was that he was hated by women " Although
verbs of this class can form acceptable passives, they do not, in
most dialects, form the most optimally acceptable ones Neverthe-
less, they do follow the same constraints as those in the first
class

     In order to show that the passive subjects should be more and
not less important than their agents, I will begin by pointing out
two respects in which they can be important The first involves
the definiteness and specificity of the noun phrase, and the second
involves the humanness and animacy of the noun phrase

I   The Definiteness and Specificity Constraint

     The constraint on definiteness and specificity in noun phrases
is basically a constraint on the degree of referential information
present in the noun phrase For simplicity, I will distinguish
only three degrees of referential information [1]

     Noun phrases which have the highest degree of referential in-
formation are <u>definite-specific</u> noun phrases This type can con-
sist of proper names, like "Squeaky", common nouns with the deter-
miners <u>the,</u> <u>this,</u> <u>that,</u> <u>these,</u> or <u>those,</u> like "this woman", or
personal pronouns like <u>she,</u> <u>he,</u> or <u>it</u> In these noun phrases, the
reference of the noun is known by the speaker and, the speaker
presupposes, by the hearer, either because of previous knowledge,
previously mentioned information, or information present in the
speech situation Thus the sentence "The assassin sat in this
chair" is acceptable only if both the speaker and the hearer share
knowledge about an assassin and both can see the chair referred to

     The next lowest degree of referential information in in
<u>indefinite-specific</u> noun phrases This type can consist of common
nouns with the determiners <u>a(n)</u> or <u>some,</u> like "a woman", or the
indefinite pronouns <u>someone</u> or <u>something</u> In these, the reference
of the noun is known by the speaker, but the speaker has no presup-
positions as to whether the hearer knows or not In the sentence
"An assassin aimed a gun at the president," the speaker has pre-
vious knowledge of an assassin and a gun, but the hearer is not
expected to The reference may be quite specific in the mind of

the speaker, as in "I married someone from my hometown," or it may be barely specific, as in "I heard someone come in "

The lowest degree of referential information is found in nondefinite-nonspecific noun phrases   These can take common nouns with the determiners a(n), any, or some, like "any woman", or the indefinite pronouns someone, something, anyone, anything In these, the noun has no reference in the real world, for either the speaker or the hearer. In the sentence "Any woman can assassinate a president," there is no previous knowledge or mention of a woman or a president, by the speaker or the hearer

These three types of noun phrases differ in the amount of referential information provided   On the basis of these differences, I have ranked them on the Definiteness-Specificity Hierarchy, from here on referred to as the D-S Hierarchy

The Definiteness-Specificity Hierarchy [D-S]

    ı   Definite-Specific NP
   ıı   Nondefinite-Specific NP
  III   Nondefinite-Nonspecific NP

This heirarchy participates in the constraint between passive subjects and agents   A passive sentence will be shown to be less acceptable if its passive subject is lower on the D-S Hierarchy than its agent, and more acceptable if it is as high or higher

First, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are the highest noun phrases on the D-S Hierarchy, those that are definite-specific [d-s]   Regardless of whether the agents are definite-specific [d-2], nondefinite-specific [nd-s], nondefinite-nonspecific [nd-ns], or have been omitted as a result of Indefinite Agent Deletion (as I have shown by the parentheses), the passive subject will never be lower on the hierarchy than its agent, and thus each passive sentence will be acceptable

		I	II	III
1	The president was attacked/criticized/hated by that woman [d-s]			
2	The president was attacked/criticized hated by a woman [nd-s]			
3	The president was attacked/criticized/hated (by someone) [nd-s]			

<div align="center">I   II   III</div>

4   The president may be attacked/criticized/hated by any
    woman [nd-ns]
5   The president may be attacked/criticized/hated (by
    anyone)[nd-ns]

Next, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are second
to highest on the D-S Hierarchy, those that are nondefinite-
specific [nd-s]   When their agents are as high on the hierarchy
as they (=[nd-s]), or lower on the hierarchy (=[nd-ns]), the sen-
tences are acceptable

<div align="center">I   II   III</div>

6   An assassin was grabbed/described/noticed by a by-
    stander [nd-s]
7   An assassin was grabbed/described/noticed (by someone)
    [nd-s]
8.   An assassin may be grabbed by a bystander [nd-ns]
9.   An assassin may be grabbed (by anyone) [nd-ns]

But when the agents are higher on the hierarchy (=[d-s]), the sen-
tences are less acceptable

10.   ?An assassin was grabbed/described/noticed by that
     bystander [d-s]

Finally, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are
lowest on the D-S Hierarchy, those that are nondefinite-nonspeci-
fic [nd-ns]   When their agents are equally as low on the hierarchy
(=[nd-ns]), or when the agent has been deleted by Indefinite Agent
Deletion, regardless of the specificity of the agent before it was
deleted, the sentences are acceptable

11.   Anyone could be shot/accused/doubted by a woman [nd-ns]
12.   Anyone could be shot/accused/doubted (by anyone) [nd-ns]
13.   Anyone could have been shot/accused/doubted (by someone)
     [nd-s]

However, when the agents are higher on the D-S Hierarchy than the
passive subject (=[d-s] or [nd-s]), the sentences are less ac-
ceptable

14.   ?Anyone could have been shot/accused/doubted by that
     woman [d-s]
15   ?Anyone could have been shot/accused/doubted by a cer-
     tain woman [nd-s]

From the preceding sentences, one can see that passives are less acceptable if their agents are higher on the D-S Hierarchy than they. The passive subject must be as high on the hierarchy as the agent, or higher, this constraint can be formulated as follows

The Definiteness-Specificity Constraint

A passive sentence tends to be more acceptable if the passive subject is as high on the Definiteness-Specificity Hierarchy as its agent, or higher   It tends to be less acceptable if the passive subject is lower on the hierarchy than its agent

This constraint reflects the way that speakers of English feel   ʼ about the placement of referential information in a passive sentence   that the passive subject should contain more referential information than the passive agent, since it is the position of most importance

II   The Humanness and Animacy Constraint

The second constraint on passive subjects and agents involves their humanness and animacy   For simplicity, I will distinguish only three levels   human-animate noun phrases, which name or describe human beings, like "Squeaky" or "women", nonhuman-animate noun phrases, which name or describe animals, like "Rover" or "cats", and nonhuman-nonanimate noun phrases, which name or describe things like plants, objects, ideas, or forces, such as "morning glories," "fences," "theories," or "fire "

These three types of nouns vary according to the interest value that a speaker would place on them   Speakers within our ontological framework usually view humans as inherently more interesting and valuable than animals, and animals more so than things   This ranking according to interest value can be represented on the Humanness-Animacy Hierarchy, from here on the H-A Hierarchy

The Humanness-Animacy Hierarchy [H-A]

    1   Human-Animate NP
    11   Nonhuman-Animate NP
    111   Nonhuman-Nonanimate NP

While these relative values hold true in isolation, in context they can shift   Thus if a discourse is about an antique table, a non-human-nonanimate noun phrase, the table is of more interest than the person who carved his initials in it   Nevertheless, it seems generally the case that we are more interested in animate things than nonanimate, and in humans than nonhumans

The H-A Hierarchy participates in the second constraint be-tween passive subjects and agents   Passive sentences will be shown to be less acceptable if their passive subjects are lower on the H-A Hierarchy than their agents   They will be shown to be more ac-ceptable if their passive subjects are as high on the hierarchy as their agent, or higher

First, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are high-est on the H-A Hierarchy, that is human-animate noun phrases [h-a] Regardless of whether the agents are human-animate [h-a], nonhuman-animate [nh-a], nonhuman-nonanimate [nh-na], or deleted by Inde-finite Agent Deletion, the passive subject cannot be lower on the hierarchy than its agent. Consequently, all of these sentences are acceptable

	I	II	III
16	The president was attacked/criticized/hated by the assassin [h-a]		
17	The president was attacked/. . . . /hated by the dog [nh-a]		
18	The president was struck/ . . / .. by lightning [nh-na]		

Next, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are second to highest on the hierarchy, that is nonhuman-animate noun phrases [nh-a]   When their agents are the same rank as they are [nh-a], or a lower rank [nh-na], the sentences are acceptable

	I	II	III
19	This horse was attacked/. . . ../hated by that dog		
20	This horse was struck/... . ../. .. by lightning		

But when the agent is higher on the hierarchy than the subject, the sentences are less acceptable

	I	II	III
21	This horse was attacked/described/hated by that man		

Finally, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are low-est on the H-A Hierarchy, that is nonhuman-nonanimate noun phrases.

When their agents are of the same rank on the hierarchy [nh-na],
the sentences are acceptable

                 I   II   III
22.   This chair was damaged/ .   .   / .   by fire ,

But when their agents are higher on the hierarchy ([h-a] or [nh-a],
the sentences are less acceptable [2]

                 I   II   III
23   ?This chair was damaged/ .   .   /hated by that man
24   ?This chair was damaged/   ./hated by that dog

It is at this point that the Class II verbs do not seem to follow
the constraints observed with the other two classes, and, as men-
tioned earlier, they may be due to the frequent use of these verbs
in formal discourse where slightly less acceptable passives are
tolerated for the sake of a more impersonal tone   Thus the fol-
lowing sentences do not seem as unacceptable with Class II verbs
as they do with the others in (23)

                    II   II   II
23'   This chair was described/referred to/built by that man

     In all of the preceding sentences, the acceptable ones had
passive subjects that were as high on the H-A Hierarchy as their
agents, or higher. Only the less acceptable sentences had passive
subjects that were lower on the hierarchy than their agents   This
second constraint on passives can be worded as follows

The Humanness-Animacy Constraint

A passive sentence tends to be more acceptable if the
passive subject is as high on the Humanness-Animacy
Hierarchy as its agent, or higher   It tends to be
less acceptable if the passive subject is lower on
the hierarchy than its agent

     Kenneth Hale (1973), has described a similar constraint in
Navaho, involving animacy and passive-like inversion   Sentences
containing the passive-like inversion are acceptable if the pas-
sive subject is animate (thus high on the Interest Hierarchy)
and its agent is either animate (the same rank on the hierarchy)
or nonanimate (lower on the hierarchy)   They are unacceptable
if the passive subject is nonanimate (thus low on the hierarchy)

and its agent is animate (higher on the hierarchy), however they
are also unacceptable if the agent is nonanimate (the same rank
on the hierarchy). Furthermore, the passive-like inversion is
even obligatory for active sentences where the active subject,
i e., the agent, is nonanimate (low on the hierarchy) and the ac-
tive object, i e , the passive subject is animate (high on the
hierarchy), showing that the constraint seems to apply not just
to passive-like inversions in Navaho, but also to active sentences

Thus in English, and it seems in other languages too, the
H-A Constraint reflects the way that speakers feel about the place-
ment of interesting information in a passive sentence. that the
passive subject should contain more interesting information than
the passive agent, since the subject position is most important

III   The Importance Constraint

The D-S and H-A Constraints discussed in the preceding two
sections are really constraints on the importance of information
present in the passive subject relative to that in the agent   A
high amount of referential information is more important than a
low amount, and a high amount of interest value is more important
than a low amount. Thus noun phrases which are highest on both the
D-S and the H-A Hierarchies contain the most important information,
as in a definite-specific, human-animate noun phrase like "Squeaky"
or "that woman " Noun phrases which are lowest on both the D-S
and the H-A Hierarchies contain the lest important information, as
in a nondefinite-nonspecific, nonhuman-nonanimate noun phrase like
"anything" or "any chair " In between these two extremes, one
finds varying degrees of importance

In order to compare the varying degrees of importance and show
how the values of referential information and interest can inter-
act and counterbalance each other, I will use the following device
It is not intended to have any theoretical significance   Points
will be assigned to represent the importance of each noun phrase
The most important noun phrase on the D-S Hierarchy, the definite-
specific noun phrase, will be assigned three points   Similarly,
the most important noun phrase on the H-A Hierarchy, the human-
animate noun phrase, will also be assigned three points. The
second most important noun phrase on the D-S Hierarchy, the non-
definite-specific noun phrase, will be assigned two points, and
that on the H-A Hierarchy, the nonhuman-animate noun phrase, will
also be assigned two points   The least important noun phrase on
the D-S Hierarchy, the nondefinite-nonspecific noun phrase, and

on the H-A Hierarchy, the nonhuman-nonanimate noun phrase, will
each be given one point.

Thus a noun phrase which is definite-specific and human-
animate will consist of a total of six points, the highest number
of points given, reflecting that it would be the most important in
both referential information and interest value. A noun phrase
which is nondefinite-nonspecific and nonhuman-nonanimate will be
given a total of two points, the lowest number of points given (ex-
cept for zero points given to a deleted agent), reflecting that it
would be the least important in both referential information and
interest value. The ranking of these noun phrases along with their
point couns is represented in the following hierarchy, which com-
bines the D-S and the H-A Hierarchies into the Importance Hier-
archy

The Importance Hierarchy

1	Definite-Specific + Human-Animate NP	3+3=6
11.	Definite-Specific +Nonhuman-Animate NP	3+2=5
	Nondefinite-Specific + Human-Animate NP	2+3=5
111.	Definite-Specific + Nonhuman-Nonanimate NP	3+1=4
	Nondefinite-Specific + Nonhuman-Animate NP	2+2=4
	Nondefinite-Nonspecific + Human-Animate NP	1+3=4
1v	Nondefinite-Specific + Nonhuman-Nonanimate	2+1=3
	Nondefinite-Nonspecific + Nonhuman-Animate	1+2=3
v	Nondefinite-Nonspecific + Nonhuman-Nonanimate	1+1=2
v1	Deleted Agent	0+0=0

Just as the D-S and H-A Hierarchies can be combined into the
Importance Hierarchy, so can the D-S and H-A Constraints be com-
bined into the Importance Constraint Passive sentences will be
shown to be less acceptable when their subjects are less important
than their agents, or put formally, when their subjects are lower
on the Importance Hierarchy than their agents   These sentences
will be more acceptable when their subjects are more important than
their agents, or put formally, when their subjects are higher on
the Importance Hierarchy than their agents

First, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are high-
est on the Importance Hierarchy and whose agents are lowest   These
are the most acceptable passives

25	The president may be attacked (by anyone)	6-0=6
26	The president may be struck by lightning	6-2=4

In (25), the passive subject is definite-specific and human-animate, thus worth 6 points Its agent is deleted, and thus worth 0 points, so that the subject is worth 6 more points in importance than the agent In (26), the same passive subject occurs with a nondefinite-nonspecific and nonhuman-nonanimate agent worth only 2 points, so that the subject is worth 4 points more in importance than the agent

Next, I will show sentences whose passive subjects are lowest on the Importance Hierarchy and whose agents are highest These are the least acceptable passives

27	???A beer can could be crushed by that woman	2-6=-4
28	???A gun can be confiscated by that cop	2-6=-4

In both cases, the passive subject is nondefinite-nonspecific and nonhuman-nonanimate, thus worth only 2 points The agent, however, is definite-specific and human-animate, thus worth 6 points in both cases, so that the subjects are each worth 4 points less than the agents, making them unacceptable

In between, one finds varying degrees of acceptability forming a squish

29	??This can was crushed by that woman	4-6=-2
30	?This can was crushed by a woman	4-5=-1
31	This can could have been crushed by any woman	4-4= 0
32.	+This can was crushed by a car	4-3= 1
33	++This can could have been crushed by a car	4-2= 2

In each case, the passive subject is definite-specific (3 points) and nonhuman-nonanimate (1 point), making 4 points In (29), the agent is definite-specific (3 points) and human-animate (3 points), making 6 points, which is 2 points more than the subject, an is farily unacceptable, but not as unacceptable as in (27) and (28), where the agent was 4 points more than the subject In (30), the agent is nondefinite-specific (2 points) and human-animate (3 points), making 5 points total, which is 1 point more than the subject and thus slightly unacceptable, but less so than in (29)

In (31), one can see a case where the passive subject is lower in interest value than its agent, as represented on the H-A Hierarchy ("can" = 1 point, "woman" = 2 points), which should make the sentence less acceptable. But the passive subject is higher in referential information than its agent, as represented on the D-S

Hierarchy ("this" = 3 points, "any" = 1 point), which compensates
for the low interest value, making the passive subject equal in
importance with the agent, as represented on the Importance Heir-
archy ("this can" = 4 points, "any woman" = 4 points), and thus
the sentence is acceptable

Sentences (32) and (33) both have agents which are lower than
the passive subject and thus are acceptable   In (32), the agent is
nondefinite-specific (2 points) and nonhuman-nonanimate (1 point),
making 3 points, which is 1 point less than the subject and slight-
ly more acceptable than (31)   In (33), the agent is nondefinite-
nonspecific (1 point) and nonhuman-nonanimate (1 point), making 2
points, which is 2 points less than the subject, and thus more ac-
ceptable than (32)

From the preceding examples, one can see that the ranking on
the D-S Hierarchy interacts with the ranking on the H-A Hierarchy
to determine the relative importance of noun phrases, as repre-
sented on the Importance Hierarchy   Thus the D-S Constraint and
the H-A Constraint described in the first two sections can be com-
bined into one constraint on the importance of noun phrases

The Importance Constraint

A passive sentence tends to be less acceptable if the
passive subject is lower on the Importance Hierarchy
than its agent, and more acceptable if it is as high
or higher

IV   Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I have tried to show that passive
sentences vary in acceptability according to the importance of the
passive subject relative to the agent   The importance of each was
described as a combination of their degree of referential informa-
tion, as represented by their definiteness and specificity, and
their degree of interest value, as represented by their humanness
and animacy

These observations allow us to account for cases where people
have thought that passive changes meaning, as in the following
sentences [4]

34   The president believes a woman to make a good leader

35   A woman is believed by the president to make a good leader

The first sentence has both a specific and a nonspecific reading,
but the passive version has only a specific reading   Rather than
see this as evidence that passive changes meaning, one can see it
as an instance of one choosing the least unacceptable readings
Since the passive subject should be higher on the Importance Hier-
archy than the agent, and since the agent ("the president") is
quite high, one would tend to choose the higher reading for the
passive subject ("a woman"), which would be the specific reading
rather than the nonspecific   Furthermore, as the Importance Con-
straint would predict, if the agent is low on the hierarchy, both
readings would be easier to choose

    36   A woman is believed (by someone) to make a good leader
    37   A woman is believed by a psychologist to make a good
          leader

In (36), the agent has been deleted, so that the passive subject
is necessarily higher in importance, whether it has the specific or
the nonspecific reading   In (37), the agent could have either a
specific or a nonspecific reading, and its passive subject can too

    It is not clear how the constraints described in this paper
can be incorporated into any of the current versions of a genera-
tive-transformational grammar   However, it is clear that the con-
straints cannot be made into conditions on the passive rule,
because the constraints would have to apply after agent deletion,
which can only apply after passive   Furthermore, as I have just
started finding out, the constraints described here apply not just
to passives, but also to other transformations that move one noun
over another, as in dative movement ("She gave the assassin to a
policeman"/"*She gave a policeman the assassin") and tough move-
ment ("*A president is easy for Squeaky to assassinate"/"A presi-
dent is easy (for someone) to assassinate"/"A President is easy for
a woman to assassinate")

    So I close this paper with the feeling that a lot more inves-
tigation is needed into constraints between nouns in sentences of
various types, and into the ways that these constraints interact
in discourse with such things as subjects, topics, themes, new
information versus old, focus, and stress patterns

NOTES

*I am grateful to Jerry Morgan for many helpful discussions of this topic

[1]There are different degrees of referential information within each of the three levels described below   Proper nouns like "Squeaky" or "Rover" have more referential information than common nouns like "the woman" or "the dog," and they have more than pro-nouns like "she," "it," "someone," or "anything " Furthermore, the amount of referential information available with common nouns can be increased by the use of descriptive modifiers like "the tall, stately, gray-haired woman" or "the small brown dog "

[2]There are sentences where the passive subject would normally be considered low in interest value and where the agent is famous and would normally be considered extremely high in interest value, which should make the sentence unacceptable, but it isn't

This car was dented by Henry Kissinger/?by John
This fence was damaged by Secretariat/?by that horse
This bed was slept in by Clark Gable/?that man

It is as though the "car," "fence," or "bed" has become famous as a result of its contact with the famous agent.

[3]The "+" mark is used to show degrees of positive acceptabil-ity in the same way that "?" mark is used to show degrees of nega-tive acceptability

[4]Harman (1972)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hale, Kenneth   1973   A Note on Subject-Object Inversion in Navaho
    Issues in Linguistics, ed by B Kachru, et al 300-309
    Urbana   U of Illinois Press

Harman, G   1972. Deep Structure as Logical Form   Semantics of
    Natural Language, ed by D Davidson and G Harman   25-47
    The Netherlands   D Reidel