

GRAMMARIANS, THE VOICE (OF PASSIVITY), AND LINGUISTIC REALITY

Curtis W. Hayes
University of Nebraska, Lincoln

and

Robert R. Beck
Wisconsin State College, River Falls

Since about World War I, the passive voice has been loathed by most assemblers and editors of American English stylebooks, or, as we coached by them to say in a firmer, more assertive voice: since about World War I, most assemblers and editors of American English stylebooks have loathed the passive voice.¹ Sheridan Baker (THE PRACTICAL STYLIST, New York, 1962) is representative of his fellow advisors who produced the shelves of stylebooks in the 808 section of the library. He exhorts us "to avoid the passive voice, because [it] drones like nothing under the sun, bringing active English to a standstill." He does concede that there are instances when we can use the passive with impunity: e.g., to give "mere variety", and to vary the "emphasis." Perhaps, too, he says, the meaning of a sentence might "demand" the passive voice: "The agent may be better undercover -- insignificant, or unknown, or mysterious: moreover, you may sometimes need the passive voice to place your true subject, the hero of the piece, where you can modify him conveniently: "Joe was hit by John, who, in spite of all ..."(27). Although there may be times when the "rhetoric" of the sentence calls for the passive, he nonetheless advises his reader to "avoid it if you can [because] it is wordy and unclear [and it] puts excess words in a sentence"(28).

Still another popular and widely used test is THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White (New York, 1959), presently in use at our universities and popular throughout the nation as well. Macmillan's editors found a marketable item indeed when they had E.B. White revive Professor Strunk's little book, first published in 1919.

In his "Introduction" White says of his former teacher's original book: "It is a forty-three page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English. Its vigor is unimpaired, and for sheer pith ... it probably sets a record"(vii).

In the text, Rule 11 commands: "Put statements in positive form"(14), and such fierce devotion to a strenuous, bold, athletic idiolect intermittently marks THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE. The book contains much good sense for the beginning writer, be he in good physical shape and not given to introspection, self-doubt, and qualifying statements. However, several passages will reveal that athletic cleanliness is not always next to accuracy. Professor Strunk says: "If every word or device that achieves currency were immediately authenticated, simply on the grounds of popularity, the language would be as chaotic as a ball game with no foul

lines"(42). And White: "Anglo-Saxon is a livelier tongue than Latin, so use Anglo-Saxon words"(63). In such a work, the passive voice is as suspect as a longhair at a Rotarian meeting.

Rule 10 says: "Use the active voice" because the active voice is "usually more direct and vigorous than the passive"(13). Two examples are used:

I shall always remember my first visit to Boston
My first visit to Boston will always be remembered by me

The latter sentence, say the authors, "is less direct, less bold, and less concise. The habitual use of the passive voice ... makes for forcible writing"(13). Yet, concede the authors -- in one sentence in one and a half pages of discussion -- the passive voice is "frequently convenient and sometimes necessary"(13).

Like most of the contemporary producers of such handbooks, it seems to us that Baker, Strunk and White have confused one of the possible semantic components of the word "passive" (Passive = a cultural undesirable ideal for the American psyche, especially the Cornell graduate) with its use as an abstraction, a grammatical term which should have no psychic or cultural overtones (the term "gender" is not likely to be treated in so confused a way because its ridiculousness would be immediately apparent). Nevertheless, many authors of recent handbooks assume that the user of the passive voice practices masochism or harbors admiration for Henry James and ballet, and violently despises Ernest Hemingway and John F. Kennedy, or, in Professor Strunk's pithier days, Theodore Roosevelt.²

While the statements of Baker, White and Strunk certainly do not stand alone, let us for the moment leave the stylebook writers and turn to the matter of style, returning later to our concern with the passive. Seymour Chatman, linguist-rhetorician, has pointed to the term style as a particular source of confusion and even of embarrassment, because, he says, "style" has reflected so many shades of meaning.³ Chatman derives from this obfuscation two definitions of style pertinent to our discussion: Style may mean that authors exhibit certain idiosyncratic patterns in their work. Stylistic "tics" manifest themselves in the works of Hemingway, James, Samuel Johnson and Edward Gibbon, enabling the reader to readily identify them. Moreover, our perception of these traits permits us to say that Jones writes like Hemingway or Smith writes like James, meaning that Jones and Smith reflect in their own writing some of the same stylistic mannerisms as these two well-known authors.

A second sense of style, according to Chatman (who cites John Middleton Murray), is "technique of expression" or "the power of lucid exposition of a sequence of ideas." This sense differs from style as idiosyncratic traits in that a critic may impart value or lack of value to the way in which a particular passage is written. He may say, for instance, that Hemingway's style is bad or good, that James' style is better or worse, and perhaps that Lawrence's style is best or worst. This sense of value is most common in books which purport to teach pitfalls to avoid in writing, and is central to the arguments of

Baker, Strunk and White, when they state rather unequivocally that active sentences are better than passive sentences, that the active voice is "usually" more direct and vigorous than the passive, that the passive "liquidates and buries the active individual"--in short, that the passive is a mark of inelegant writing.

It seems to us that to adjudicate against the use of the passive so vehemently is to conceal a basic grammatical fact: that the passive may in certain contexts be obligatory, that an obligation may lead to habit. What is interesting in Baker, White and Strunk's discussion of the passive is not their resistance (although it is striking) to its use but the admission that it may occasionally be employed (indeed we find it used in the very stylebooks which we have examined). Even the newer stylebooks appear to counter what we feel to be intuitive linguistic judgment. It is therefore our thesis that generative grammar may offer some insight into the notion of obligatory voice. Especially revealing is the claim of the generative grammarians that the passive is derived, through a complex algebra, from the active (SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES) or that the active and the passive are related (ASPECTS OF THE THEORY OF SYNTAX). That is, the passive is realized if a certain optional marker has been chosen in the base component. But only recently has generative grammar offered any insight into why the active, or the passive, might be preferred.

The concept of optionality is a curious one since there are other choices that could be made in the base component to derive WHAT HIT THE MAN, WHO DID THE BALL HIT, DID THE BALL HIT THE MAN, AND THE BALL DIDN'T HIT THE MAN. There are contexts in which these derivations would be appropriate, but there appear to be no contexts (other than the ones alluded to in the traditional stylebooks) which would call for the use of the passive. In other words, it would appear that we are never forced to say, or write, THE MAN WAS HIT BY THE BALL. Yet there may be an appropriate context which would force its use. That is, rather than to posit that the passive is always optional (stylistic perhaps), it may be more revealing to indicate those contexts where the passive is obligatory. For proof, let us examine a feature of the style of Edward Gibbon.

One of the most revered writers of the 18th century, admired as much for the way he wrote as for what he said, and given to the prolific use of the passive voice, was Edward Gibbon, one of several authors of that same era to make frequent use of the passive. It may have indeed seemed strange to Baker, Strunk and White, that Gibbon employed the passive voice as much as he did; and we might wonder, therefore, whether these legislators of style would judge Gibbon's style as inelegant. But as we all "know" to turn Gibbon's sentences into their active counterparts most certainly would destroy some, if not all, of the uniqueness which we customarily associate with his style. We might not recognize Gibbon since his use of the passive is one stylistic mannerism to which we react.

If the passive voice is a mark of Gibbon's style, we might then say that his use of the passive was conditioned stylistically, that he chose to write in the passive for no other reason than he preferred

it. But even if we accept this as being stylistically pertinent, there is still another reason which could have obligated Gibbon to employ the passive. If we can demonstrate that Gibbon was forced in predictable contexts to employ the passive, then it may be possible to submit that Gibbon was given a set, a predilection for the passive, which served to control his linguistic behavior, thus his style. That is, when faced with the option of choosing the active or the passive he may have, because of this set, opted more often than not for the passive. An obligatory rather than an optional process, we hold, may lead to habitual behavior: and habitual and recurrent use of the passive voice is what we have in Gibbon. Let us now examine this hypothesis.

The passive may be employed by users of the language to reduce complexity, or, as D. Terence Langendoen puts it, to "render otherwise inaccessible deep structures accessible," meaning, simply, turning an "unreadable" but grammatical sentence into a "readable" one.⁴ Complexity is a difficult notion to measure, but all language users have a sense which enables them to perceive complexity. Readers, for example, are able to perceive that Henry James' literary style is more complex than Faulkner's, Faulkner's more complex than Hemingway's, Hemingway's more complex than the "Dick and Jane" reading series.

Though Gibbon's style has been labeled as complex, there has been little understanding, in literary theory, concerning the nature or the attributes which contribute to its complexity. And even more, there has been no machinery, until just recently, which could be employed to measure complexity.

Victor Yngve addresses himself to the nature of complexity in his paper, "A Model and An Hypothesis for Language Structure."⁵ He points to the obvious fact that memory is finite, the limitation of which can be measured, and rehearses psychologists' researches that the mind is able to memorize a series of random digits or nonsense words only up to a specified point, plus or minus two. Some can remember more, others less, but eventually, even for those who have better memories, a point is reached, beyond which accurate memorization is impossible.⁶

While Yngve equates depth of structure with an increase of random items to be memorized, he also submits that the number of clauses or sentences placed within another sentence may increase complexity--but only if these structures are inserted in a specific way. Center embedding, as contrasted to right or left branching, tends to increase complexity, while right-branching tends to decrease complexity. Rules are available (by now you know that one of them is the passive transformation) for the language user which serve to decrease complexity by shifting center-embedded constituents to the right. The passive serves to decrease complexity by shifting the logical subject, and its modifiers, to the right; center-embedded constituents become right-embedded constituents. For instance, the sentence, THIS IS THE MALT THAT THE RAT THAT THE CAT THAT THE DOG WORRIED KILLED ATE, is unintelligible because there are too many center-embedded structures. It can be made intelligible if the passive voice is used: THIS IS THE MALT THAT WAS EATEN BY THE RAT THAT WAS KILLED BY THE CAT THAT WAS WORRIED BY THE DOG.

Gibbon's prose is heavily embedded, yet remains readable, because he employs the passive voice. Most of Gibbon's sentences are marked by the passive (68 percent in one study)⁷, yet not all of his sentences are marked with the obligatory passive. Most of them, we would venture, are optional, just as THE BEER WAS DRUNK BY THE STUDENTS reflects the optional use of the passive. We submit, however, that Gibbon's ubiquitous use of the passive may partially be explained by his obligatory use of it elsewhere. A habit may be ingrained through force. We have time here for only one example:⁸

THEIR DISCONTENTS WERE SECRETLY FOMENTED BY LAETUS, THEIR PRAEFECT, WHO FOUND, WHEN IT WAS TOO LATE, THAT HIS NEW EMPEROR WOULD REWARD A SERVANT BUT WOULD NOT BE RULED BY A FAVOURITE.

The sentence is intelligible, since the sentences which are embedded, and the logical subject, have been shifted to the right. But if we were to employ the active, then the sentence becomes more difficult:

LAETUS, THEIR PRAEFECT, WHO FOUND, WHEN IT WAS TOO LATE, THAT HIS NEW EMPEROR WOULD REWARD A SERVANT, BUT WOULD NOT BE RULED BY A FAVOURITE, FOMENTED THEIR DISCONTENTS.

The reason for this difficulty is obvious: the main sentence has been interrupted after the subject-noun, LAETUS, and before the main predicate, FOMENTED. . . , by structures which are center-embedded, forcing the reader to "hold in memory the still unresolved portion of one constituent while he is processing another."⁹

It is not difficult to see that the popular stylebooks are mistaken (they misrepresent the facts), yet they do leave themselves an out--as when Baker says that the active is preferable unless it is more convenient to place the subject where it can be modified, an implicit recognition that the passive is obligatory when a sentence becomes too deep. Stylebooks such as these--unfortunately they abound in freshman composition courses--remind us that writing all too often is a mere exercise, constrained by rules, with subject matter taking the hindmost. Good writers are not constrained by artificial prescriptive rules, and are still admired, even by those who teach writing; but here too there is an out--we tend to call it "poetic license." No native speaker, we believe, actually feels that the active voice is firmer, more assertive, or even stronger than the passive, that Gibbon and other users of the passive (including, by the way, Samuel Johnson) would be judged better writers if they had confined themselves to the active.¹⁰ To maintain Gibbon is less the artist because of the passive is to misunderstand the power of Gibbon's message or to miss completely the beauty of his language.

The adjunction against the passive, similar to adjunctions which prohibit a multitude of other supposedly "incorrect" practices, will remain as long as there are stylebooks which do not take into account the way that language really works, perhaps even the way that writers write.

Finally, a theory of style which purports to explain an author's idiosyncratic use of language, one whose aim is to reveal and explicate the intricacies of belles-lettres, should be based upon a viable theory of language, a theory which reveals the knowledge which a writer brings to bear when he employs the language. We suggest here that generative grammar can lend some insight into this one aspect of literary style. Style is reflected in the idiosyncratic, sometimes peculiar, manner in which an author employs the resources of his language.¹¹ And it is occasionally maintained that style is choice. Yet we have seen that Gibbon did not always control an idiosyncratic attribute. Strictly speaking, only in those contexts where the choice between active and passive was optional, may we say that the passive reflects a stylistic choice. Yet what is important--and what we have attempted to demonstrate--is that a later choice may be controlled by a previous obligation.

In our discipline, it is sometimes useful, but not entirely satisfying, to examine the nature of an author's prose, but even more revealing and interesting, it seems to us, is an explanation of why an author wrote in a particular way, why he chose a particular sentence type, and why a passage strikes us as idiosyncratic. We would expect that an author noted for long sentences, for complexity of sentence structure, would be forced to use those processes available for reducing complexity. Our analysis, only partially, explains the manner in which the depth of a sentence may be reduced and suggests how an obligatory process could lead to habitual patterning. Habitual and recurrent patterning is, after all, a part of what a definition of style entails.

NOTES

¹We wish to thank Professor John Robert Ross of MIT for his kind reading of our paper. Many of his suggestions have been incorporated into the text.

²For example, see Jan Svartvik's excellent book, *ON VOICE IN THE ENGLISH VERB* (The Hague, 1966), p. 2, where he quotes R.B. McKerrow: "If we were now starting for the first time to construct a grammar of modern English, without knowledge of or reference to the classics, it might never occur to us to postulate a passive voice at all. It seems to me that it is questionable whether in spoken English of today there is really any such thing, and though, as a matter of convenience, it may be well to retain it in our grammars, I doubt whether it ought to occupy quite so prominent a position as it sometimes does."

³COLLEGE COMPOSITION AND COMMUNICATION, XVIII (May 1967), 72-76.

⁴THE STUDY OF SYNTAX (New York, 1969). See Chapter 8, "Why Deep and Surface Structures?", 140-143.

⁵PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY, CIV (October 1960), 444-466.

⁶See also Yngve's paper, "The Depth Hypothesis," PROCEEDINGS OF

SYMPOSIA IN APPLIED MATHEMATICS, XII (1961), 130-139; George A. Miller, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information," THE PSYCHOLOGICAL REVIEW, LXIII (March 1956), 81-97; and George A. Miller and Samuel Isard, "Free Recall of Self-Embedded English Sentences," INFORMATION AND CONTROL, VII (1964), 292-303. Miller and Isard found that self-embedded sentences were more difficult to learn. In their experiment they had subjects attempt to memorize 22-word sentences "which varied in degree of self-embedding." Such sentences "proved more difficult to learn, which is interpreted to mean that our capacity to deal with recursive interruption may be extremely limited."

Another interesting paper, on the same point, is Walter S. Stolz, "A Study of the Ability to Decode Grammatically Novel Sentences," JOURNAL OF VERBAL LEARNING AND VERBAL BEHAVIOUR, VI (1967), 867-873.

Most point out that two center-embedded sentences cause trouble; with three a sentence becomes impossible to understand.

⁷Curtis W. Hayes, "A Transformational-Generative Approach to Style: Samuel Johnson and Edward Gibbon," LANGUAGE AND STYLE, I (Winter 1968), 39-48.

⁸Jan Svartvik does not directly deal with matters of style in his ON VOICE IN THE ENGLISH VERB, but does include several sentences within his corpus which are appropriate to our analysis:

Passive Sentence (Textual Sentence): This has been neatly demonstrated by Grieve and Hey (1938), who showed that benzoic and anthranilic acids do not take part in the Gomberg reaction unless they are first esterified., i.e., converted from molecules which are ionised in aqueous alkaline media, to typical organic esters.

Active Sentence: Grieve and Hey (1938), who showed that benzoic and anthranilic acids do not take part in the Gomberg reaction unless they are first esterified, i.e., converted from molecules which are ionised in aqueous alkaline media, to typical organic esters, have neatly demonstrated this.

Passive Sentence (Textual Sentence): This provisional definition was also favoured by Dewey, who pointed out that so long as our activity glides along smoothly, or as long as we allow our imagination to entertain fancies, there is no reflection.

Active Sentence: Dewey, who pointed out that so long as our activity glides along smoothly, or as long as we allow our imagination to entertain fancies, there is no reflection, favoured this provisional definition.

⁹Miller and Isard, p. 293.

¹⁰As we have been reminded, good style is in part a reflection of a variety of attributes.

¹¹That style is choice is often found in critics' statements that an author has full control over those features which strike the reader as belonging to his style. Richard Ohmann, in his paper "Mentalism in the Study of Literary Language" (forthcoming), points out that style as choice and style as idiosyncratic traits do have some important differences: "The choices that result in a style may or may not strike the writer as choices while he is making them. If he is aware of choosing, his awareness probably extends no farther than the particular passage at hand. Certainly he does not choose an entire style in full consciousness of every structural subtlety it entails. Rather, I imagine, he has an intuition as to how it should sound, what view of things it should reflect, and he writes accordingly."

Would it be possible then (following Ohmann) to submit that Gibbon felt that the passive was an attribute of his style--in the proportion mentioned?