

Passive Construction in English and Russian

— Contrast & Congruence —

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1. Perspective and problem

The transformational formula of English passivization is set up in a following way with varying modifications of category symbols and their sequences but with no fundamental changes in its configurations.

NP Aux Vt NP x—Np Aux be En Vt by NP X

(John admires sincerity. — *Sincerity is admired by John.)

This scheme of Chomsky's earliest (1957) passivization¹⁾ is remedied in his later version (1965)²⁾ so that he meets and surmounts the difficulties with the so-called middle verbs on one hand and with the restriction on the verbs which do not take adverbs of manners (manner adverbials) on the other.

The middle verbs, which Lees named,³⁾ are those verbs with following NPs which do not undergo passive transformations. They are such verbs as *marry* (in the sense of 'John marries Mary'), *fit* (The suit fits me) and *weigh* (The car weighs two tons), and we can easily find that passive constructions with these verbs are invariably unacceptable to the native speaker of English. (*John was married by Mary. *I am fitted by the suit. *Two tons is weighed by this car.)

Chomsky in his *Aspects* (1965) maintains that 'if passivization is determined by a manner adverbial the verbs in the rule below can be intransitive as well as transitive.'

Every one saw John. — John was seen by everyone.

Everyone looks up to John. — John is looked up to by everyone.

Manner—by passive

Np-Aux V.....NP.....by passive

But a recent trend in transformational studies is for choosing a different term for this phenomena of passivization. However I would like to use the term 'passives' or 'passivization' in this contrastive study of Russian and English passive construction, (since the terms passives or/and passivization are self-explanatory.)

1. *Syntactic Structures*, 1957, p.43

2. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, The M. I. T. Press, 1965, p.103 & 104.

3. *The Grammar of English Nominalization*, Mouton, 1966, p.8.

4. Chomsky, *Aspects*, 1965, p.103.

5. *Dictionary of Linguistics*, Kenkyu-sha, 1971, s.v. "passive."

This is a brief and broad attempt at passivization within the framework of the above rules of transformation which have been exploited originally with English in mind.

2. Russian active and passive construction—considered and contrasted

In Russian there are 3 categories of voice in verbs⁶⁾. 1. Transitive *vs* intransitives 2. passive-active 3. reflexive

And there are 2 ways of forming active-passive polarity in Russian which make use of 2 passive-active and reflexive voices of verbs.

First the most analogous counterpart of Russian passives to English ones is as follows :

Eta kartina pimana znamenitjm hudožnikom⁷⁾ (2.1)

(That picture is painted by a famous artist)

The verb used here is perfect verb and the agent of the action is expressed by instrumental case.

More examples follows :

Dom bjl pastroen rabočimi. (2.2)

(The house is built by the workers.)

Peterburg postroen Petrom Velikim. (Peterburg was built by Peter the Great.)

To be precise here the verb of perfect aspect appears in the short form, and as is seen from (3) this types of sentences are semantically ambiguous whether they express the action by the agent or the result of that action, that is the state achieved by that action⁸⁾.

Second the passivization peculiar to Russian with no counterpart of English is done by the use of reflexive verbs which are formed from imperfect verbs by the addition of *sja* particle to the base form of the same.

Dom stroitsja (stroilsja, buget stroitsja.)

*The house built itself (The house is built, was built, will be built.)

Tovarj otpravljajutsja. (the goods are sent.)

Zvuki geljatsja na glasnje i soglasnje. (Sounds are divided into vowels and consonants.)

However I hasten to add that on scrutiny we can find in English such sentences as have reflexive-passive meaning though the verb forms are in active voice.

The book sells well.

This is what Jespersen called in his *Modern English Grammar* (vol, 3) activo-

6. *Grammatika sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo jazjka* Shvedoba, N. Yu. (ed.), 1970, p.350.

7. Erich Berneker, *Russische Grammatik*, Berlin, 1947, p.155.

8. 'Es kann auch ein Zustand ausgedrückt werden, der durch den vollzug einer passivhandlung erreicht wurde bzw. erricht werden wird.' (Taucher & Kirchbaum, *Grammatik der russischen Sprache*, Volk und Wissen Volkseigener, 1962, p.332.)

passive voice⁹). More examples of the sentences of this sort follow:

More important still, it drinks well.

In Boston, steak retailed at a 2 pound.

Other verbs which form activo-passives are *bake, compare, cook, feel, tear, wash* etc.

3. Passivization in Russian—preliminaries—

I would like to make an attempt at the formulation of the first way of forming passives in Russian because as stated above they bear close resemblance to English passives in form and contents.

In Russian as in English we posit that all the elements of meaning in passive sentences are expressed in the active (simple-declarative sentence) and from which passive sentences are derived by structural (=configurational) change only. let us recall our formula for English passives and rehearse what is involved in that change.¹⁰

NP AUx Vt Np X—NP Aux be En Vt by NP x

My sister writes this letter—This letter is written by my sister. (Eto pis'mo napisano moei sestroj (passive))

In terms of English sentences given as an illustration for the passive transformation:

a. The object noun phrase ('the letter') moves around and replaces the subject noun phrase ('my sister'). The latter, in turn, takes the place of by-NP.

b. If any auxiliaries occur in the active they are carried over to the passive unaltered.

(The workers *will* build a house—A house *will be* built by the workers.)

c. Part of the verb BE is introduced. If there is an auxiliary which has been brought over from the active, BE occur after it, according to the following selection plan.

i. After have, has or had, it takes the form *been*

ii. After am, is, are, was, were, be or been, it takes the form *being*.

iii. After will or any other modal auxiliary it takes the form *be*

iv. If there is no auxiliary brought over from the active form, the part of BE now introduced will show tense and number indication (and person where the subject is a pronoun.) (The bus *is* started by the conductor. *us*. The bus was started by the conductor.)

V. The part of BE mentioned in iii and iv will in every case be followed by the

9. 'Our concern is not with a special class of verbs, but with a special use of a great many verbs under special conditions. The peculiarity of this use consists in the passive meaning to be attributed here to the active verb, which is thus notionally passive though formally active.' ('The meat cooks all the better if you cook it slow. p. 348.) (Jespersen, *Modern English Grammar* rep. 1954, p.350.)

10. N. R. Cattell, *The New English Grammar*, The MIT press, 1969, p.67.

past participle of the some verbs that occurred in the active sentence.

As is stated earlier we have in Russian two ways of forming passive sentences from their active base sentences. The first is by the use of short forms of past participle of perfect verbs with or without the appropriate form of *bjt'*.¹¹⁾ Hence the difference in the use of *Be* on one hand and the difference in NP in the transform on the other. In Russian where noun system remains highly synthetic the subject noun phrase takes the form of instrumental case¹²⁾ when it is moved around to the end of the passive transform with no preceding preposition -s.

4. Therefore the formula for passivization for Russian sentences under consideration is supposed to take the following configuration of symbols:

Np Aux Vt Np X—NP Aux (be) En Vt Np instr. X

Stugentj izutsili russkij jazjk—Russkij jazjk izutsen stgentami. (Students have learned Russian—Russian has been learned by students.)

When the optional *Be* is chosen Russian passives with the past participle of perfect verbs follow: *Be (bjt')* will show tense, number and person *plus gender*.¹³⁾ Examples of *Be* optional taken follow:

Russkij jazjk bjl izutsen stgentami. (Russian language was learned by the students.)

Russkij jazjk buget izutsen stgentami. (Russian language will be studied by the students.)

As mentioned in the last paragraph Russian BE shows gender of the subject noun, and this is peculiar to Russian passives. The following active-passive pair will illustrate the point.

Oxotnik ub'et ptitsu—Ptsitsa *ubita* oxotnikom.

(A hunter kills a bird—A bird is killed by a hunter)

5. We said earlier that verbs of imperfect form their active-passive contrast with *vs.* without *-sja* post particle, which make a reflexive form out of a base form.

The passivization of this type in its formal configuration has no counterparts in English, though Jespersen's activo-passive voice of verbs are semantically similar to this type of Russian passives.

A tentative formula for passivization of this type of Russian active-passive construction follows.

NP Aux Vt NP X—NP Aux Vt Sja Np instr. X

Illustrative sentences for the formula are:

11. 'La forme courte du participe est employée sans auxiliaire, au passé et au futur, avec le verbe auxiliaire *bjt'* au passé ou au futur.' (N. Potapva, *Le Russe*, 1961, p.404.)

12. 'Zur bezeichnung des Urhebers der Handlung in Passiv-Konstruktionen.' (V. Netschnajewa, *Schwierigkeiten der Russischen Sprache*, p.119.)

13. 'Rabota *bjla* bjpolnena. (Die Arbeit war ausgeführt worden.) V. Netschnajewa, *ibid.*, p.225 (Italics mine)

Studentj izutsayut russkij jazjk—Russkij jazjik izyutsaettsja stgentami. (Students learn Russian—Russian is being learned by students.)

Stugentj izuytsali russkij jazjk—Russkij jazjk izutsalsja stgentami. (Students learned Russian—Russian was learned by students.)

Professor čitaet lektsiyu—Lektsija čitaetsja

professorom (A professor reads a lecture—A lecture is read by a professor.)

Lampa osveschaet komnaty—Kommnata osveschaetsja

lampoj (A Lamp light a room—A room is lighted by a lamp.)

Učenik reschaet zadaču.—Zadača reschaetsja učnikom.

(A Student solves a problem—A problem is solved by a student.)

Kolxozniki obrabayut polja—Polja obrabayutsja kolxoznikami. (The kolxosfarmers cultivate the fields.—The fields are cultivated by the kolxosfarmers.)

There are, however, three restrictions on this type of Russian passivization. The subject noun phrase must be inanimate; the predicate main verb must be in 3rd person and the 2nd NP must be in instrumental case¹⁴. The last restriction is also applied to the 'analytic form' of passivization studied in Section 4. (Eta kartina narisovana neizvestnjm xudodznikom. —this picture is (has been) drawn by an unknown artist.) When these 3 restrictions are incorporated into the above passivization formula in terms of features, the formula would present itself as follows:

Np Aux Vt Nj X—NP (inanimate) Aux Vt sja (3rd person) NP instr. X.

6. When the 3 restrictions enumerated above are placed on passive sentences in Russian, there must be some way out to express passive meaning when 1st and/or 2nd person are involved. This is done by impersonal construction and therefore is not within the scope of this paper. But just for reference and also for the hope that some day some underlying structural congruence might be found for passive and impersonal construction, I gave a couple of examples with no attempt at generalization.

Menja uprekayut ((people) reproach me.)

Vac uvedžayut. ((people) admire you.)

Here pronouns of 1st & 2nd person are in accusative and verbs are in 3rd person plural form.

7. The common characteristics to 2 types of passivization in Russian is a variant word-order which is most probably unacceptable in English passives except in a far-fetched context.

In English we are not allowed to say 'Is being built a big town.' or 'Has been constructed a big town.' In Russian this word-order is of commonest device in passive construction:

Stroitsja bol'shoj gorod (*Is being built a big town.)

Poctroen bol'shoj gorod (*Has been built a big town.)

14. Tauscher & Kirchbaum, *Gramm. der russ. Spr.*, 1962, p. 278.

Resume

Our task here is to make a tentative first-order construct¹⁵⁾ of a linguistic phenomena called passivization in Russian in reference to that in English within the framework of generative transformational analysis.

English is a target language to which many attempts of transformational passivization have already been made with varying successes and elaboration. However, none have been made in the sphere of Russian to my knowledge.

In Russian there are two ways of forming passives from a kernel base (simple declarative) sentence.

A tentative transformational formula for the first type is

Np Aux Vt Np X—Np Aux (be) En Vt Np instr.

(Devushka moe't bel'e v gorjačej voga/The girl washes clothes in hot water. /- Bel'e moetsja devushkoj v goljačej voge. /Clothes are washed by the girl in a hot water. /)

The similarity between Russian and English lies in the general configuration of passivization formula, and the dissimilarity is in the instrumental case form of the NP in the passive transform.

The 2nd type of passivization in Russian is peculiar to the language, though there are such verbs as activo-passive voice verbs which seems to be of semantical equivalence to the type.

A tentative formulation for this type of Russian passivization follow:

NP Aux Vt NP X—NP (inanimate) Aux Vt sja (3rd person) Np instr. X.

(Zvuk povtorjaetsja exom/Sound is repeated by echo.)

word-order in this type of passivization in Russian can take the form of **Aux Vt sja (3rd person) Np (inanimate).**

15. Noam Chomsky, "The formal nature of language," in Harold Hungerford *et. al.* (eds.), *English Linguistics: An Introductory Reader*, 1970, p. 112.