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The Prepositional Passive in English

A semantic-syntactic analysis,
with a lexicon of prepositional verbs

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E. C.-K.

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ABBREVIATIONS, SYMBOLS AND TYPOGRAPHICAL CONVENTIONS

PPP	prepositional passive
NP	noun phrase
VP	verb phrase
Aux	auxiliary
V	verb
K	case
Ag	Agentive
Bas Goal	Basic Goal
Ben	Benefactive
Com	Comitative
Dir	Direction
E-p Goal	Ending-point Goal
Exp	Experiencer
Ext	Extent
Instr	Instrument
Loc	Location
Man	Manner
Obj	Objective
Pat	Patient
Reas	Reason
Rep	Replative
Sour	Source
Stim	Stimulus
Targ Goal	Target Goal
Vol	Volitive
A.E.	American English
B.E.	British English
U	upper-class usage
Fr	French
Ger	German
Lat	Latin
G	given
N	new
p	passivizable
np	non-passivizable
*	unacceptable
?	of doubtful acceptability, or informant unable to decide
'	stressed word
=	equivalent in meaning to
()	active example
()'	passive example
(a)	paraphrases
(b)	
(.1)	different contextualizations
(.2)	
(i)	alternate readings
(ii)	

Examples are numbered anew in each chapter. Cross-references can be found in the lexicon.

FOREWORD

The discovery of the so-called prepositional passive in English is an occasion of surprise and delight for most foreign students of English. The majority are unaware that such a grammatically unorthodox structure is not only tolerated but used freely by native speakers of English. In fact, the prepositional passive lends a good deal of relish to ordinary speech. Take, for example, the added effect produced by passivizations such as:

How many times have I told you that I don't like being spat at?

Near the cart was a cow waiting patiently to be rained on

This lamppost is smelled at by all the dogs who go by

The foreign learner's delight at the creative power behind this structure, however, may soon give way to despair as the veritable jungle of seemingly contradictory facts (for, need it be added, not all combinations of verb + preposition + noun allow the passive), and at the quasi-total lack of rules for use of the structure. Consider, for instance, the following from the standpoint of an unsuspecting foreign learner:

Someone slept in this bed

Someone slept near this bed

Who but the happy few (or native speakers) would guess that *This bed was slept in* is acceptable English, whereas *This bed was slept near* is at best a highly suspect, if not completely unacceptable sentence in the English language?

The present study is intended to fill the gap in English grammar which the prepositional passive has formed until now. It provides the foreign student or teacher of English (as well as other interested linguists) with a more theoretical survey of the aspects involved in the prepositional passive and *ipso facto* with guidelines for its use, in addition to containing a rather complete survey of prepositional verbs in English, illustrated in sample contexts and classified as basically passivizable or not.

Traditional grammarians, to the extent that they were aware of the phenomenon, described the prepositional passive in terms of 'cohesion' -- a rather hazy concept when applied to grammar, as there are no independent, reliable criteria

for determining its presence or absence. More modern approaches to grammar, however, hardly represent an improvement over the traditional cohesionists. Neither transformational generative grammar nor case grammar has so far devised a set of rules which could adequately explain the phenomenon. This is partly due to the fact that the necessary fieldwork, close study of a corpus of material, has been neglected until now.

But if all previous approaches have shared in a common lack of knowledge, they have also shared in a common methodological shortcoming: the prepositional passive has been viewed in terms of one (usually syntactic) dimension. Unidimensionality is undoubtedly admirable, indeed desirable in many areas of scientific investigation. It is doubtful, however, whether it has any real application with regard to the description of natural language.

The present study does not provide a formalized answer to the problem of the prepositional passive. Instead, it contains a detailed analysis of the phenomenon, based on an extensive corpus of data, in the light of modern linguistic theory. This is a first necessary step in the direction of developing a formalized system for the production and comprehension of English sentences. In fact, the results may even contribute to determining exactly what kind of system must be developed in order to account for the empirical data.

1 Traditional definition

1.1 The first question to which we must address ourselves is the one inevitably asked by laymen and all but a handful of professionals: What is the prepositional passive? According to a traditional handbook of English grammar (Scheurweghs 1959:16):

Some verbs are used with a preposition and a noun in such a way that they resemble a transitive verb with its direct object; the noun is called *the prepositional object*... The prepositional object can become the subject of a verb in the passive to which the preposition remains attached.

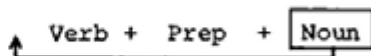
Scheurweghs' examples include: *Alcuin's counsel was acted upon immediately*, *A theatrical licence was not applied for*. . . *Any allegation against me can be disposed of*, *Two soldiers can be fired on in the darkness*, etc.

1.2 This description of the prepositional passive (henceforth PPP) is typical of that given by most traditional grammarians. But in fact it makes a number of tacit assumptions which are by no means proven fact:

- a) The PPP is a deviant of the passive proper. Thus, so this view of the PPP goes, many (transitive) verbs combine with nouns directly and their direct objects can become the subjects of passive sentences:



However, some (intransitive) verbs combine with a preposition and a noun and these prepositional objects can also become the subjects of passive sentences:



- b) Both the PPP and the passive proper are, according to this definition, purely syntactic (indeed, surface syntactic) phenomena. The terms *verb*, *noun*, *preposition* refer to surface syntactic categories and the passive is described as an operation which modifies the position of these categories in surface syntactic structure.

- c) The PPP, as well as the passive proper, is the converse of the active. That is, it can be derived simply by interchanging the nouns in the active. This definition assumes that every passive sentence has an active equivalent; priority is thus accorded the active.

1.3 These assumptions, however, appear overhasty, if not unjustified in light of the fact that:

- a) The deviancy claim makes two further assumptions, namely: (i) the PPP differs from the passive proper only in the presence of the preposition, and (ii) the PPP is subject to the same constraints as the passive proper. However, (i) is based on superficial and imperfect knowledge of the phenomenon, and (ii) is vacuous, since the constraints operant on the passive itself are scarcely known. In fact, assumption (ii) can be readily disproved by attempting to passivize all occurrences of verb + preposition + noun which do not disqualify due to known constraints on the passive proper. In contrast to the small set of 'transitive' verb + noun combinations which do not passivize, there are any number of verb + preposition + noun combinations which do not allow the noun to become the subject of a passive sentence.
- b) As even Jespersen (1924:165) was well aware, it is possible to distinguish a "syntactic" and a "notional" passive:

Whether a verb is *syntactically* active or passive depends on its form alone; but the same idea may be expressed sometimes by an active, sometimes by a passive form.

That is, Jespersen continues, there are syntactic passives which are also notional passives, such as *Jill is loved by Jack*. However, some syntactic actives may be notionally passive, such as *The book sells well*. Jespersen does not elaborate on what criteria determine notional passivity. His primary concern is syntactic, as evidenced by the fact that he ultimately restricts the term *passive* to a syntactic configuration [calling other candidates "instances of notional passive unexpressed in form" (1924:166)]. However, one of the most important insights to come from recent developments in linguistic theory is that semantic considerations cannot be categorically excluded at a syntactic level without loss of descriptive adequacy. There have recently been a number of proposals which make a systematic attempt to incorporate seman-

tic notions into the treatment of the passive.¹ Regardless of the merits or demerits of these various theories, they all reflect the realization that many linguistic phenomena can only be insufficiently explained on syntactic grounds alone. Indeed, the PPP itself is precisely one of these phenomena. If we apply the syntactic criterion of 'transitivity' (or presence of a direct object) in order to account for passivization, we must deny its existence altogether. And if we acknowledge its existence as an exception, we cannot account for the fact that only some verb + preposition + noun combinations can be passivized, nor can we account for which ones passivize and which ones do not.

- c) A certain amount of evidence has emerged in the recent past which suggests that viewing the passive as the converse of the active does not do full justice to the linguistic data. According to Langacker/Munro (1975:796), for instance, passives are in at least two non-related languages basically impersonal constructions, i. e. they express facts about an object but do not necessarily relate these facts to an agent (1975:821). Even in English, it is doubtful whether all so-called 'truncated' passives, i. e. those without a *by*-phrase, can be adequately derived from active sentences with unspecified agents (cf Freidin 1975: 386f, Haiman 1976:20f).²

1 Chlododovič and Mel'cuk (cf Pilch 1975:104f) extend the term *passive* to all configurations of patient in subject position and agent in object position (as well as to those in which one or the other is lacking), thus including *methinks* and *This house is now renting* as well as the usual *Jack was killed by John* (see also Helbig 1975:271ff). In Fillmore's case grammar (1968b, 1971a) the passive is associated with the selection of a certain deep case as surface subject. Gary and Keenan (1977:95ff) propose a similar approach to the passive within the framework of relational grammar.

2 Cf also Bresnan 1978:20f, who proposes to represent the passive as a one-place quantified relation of the form $\exists x(x \text{ eats } y)$.

1.4 These considerations have influenced the present study in a number of ways. We too shall define the PPP syntactically as a construction of the form:

$$\text{NP} + \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{can} \\ \text{must} \\ \text{will} \\ \emptyset \\ \vdots \end{array} \right\} + \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{be} \\ \text{get} \end{array} \right\} + \text{---en} + \text{Prep (+by NP)}^3$$

However, our study will concentrate especially on the semantics of this syntactic construction. Furthermore, we have made a conscious effort during the course of the investigation to treat questions of PPP relation to the passive proper and to the active as unresolved problems. Once the PPP is better understood, we can turn our attention to some of the more basic issues involved, e. g.:

- a) How does the PPP relate to the passive proper? Do the restrictions known to operate on the passive proper also apply to it? What additional constraints apply?
- b) How does the PPP relate to the active? Should it be considered a derivative of the active? What grounds do we have for treating it as a converse of the active?
- c) What consequences does a theory of the PPP have for modern linguistic theory in general?

3 Although the *by*-phrase is optional, its potential occurrence has the effect of excluding so-called 'statal passives' from this definition of the PPP. Jespersen (1931:98) illustrates these with *His bills are paid* ('so he owes nothing now') vs *His bills are paid* ('regularly every month'). Only the latter 'actional' type will be considered here.

2 Survey of past treatment

The problems connected with the PPP can best be demonstrated by a critical analysis of how the phenomenon has been handled in grammar until now.

2.1 Traditional grammar

2.1.1 O. Jespersen (1928:273) advocates a distinction between the "adverbial" and the "prepositional" nature of the particle in combinations of the form verb + particle + object. For example, in *I couldn't get in a word*, *in* can be shown to be an "adverb", whereas in *I couldn't get in the box*, *in* is a "preposition". According to Jespersen, the distinction is one of "sound... and... meaning". "Sound" undoubtedly refers to the fact that *get in* in the former example would be stressed *gét in*, whereas in the latter the stress would be *gét in*.⁴ How "meaning" is to serve as a criterion, however, is somewhat less clear, - nor does Jespersen elucidate the matter more than to say "The meaning is undoubtedly adverbial in..." (1928:274). In cases where "meaning" is not decisive, he continues, word order is to serve as a criterion. Thus:

- (1) a. The river passes by a small village
 b. The river passes by it
 c.*The river passes a small village by
 d.*The river passes it by
- (2) a. I cannot pass by the matter without making a protest
 b.*I cannot pass by it without ...
 c. I cannot pass the matter by without ...
 d. I cannot pass it by without ...

The particle *by* in (2) is an "adverb", as it can occur after the object (and indeed must, if the object is a pronoun). In (1) *by* is a "prepositional" particle. It cannot be placed after the object (even if the latter is a pronoun) and is "felt as more closely connected with the preceding verb than with the following object" (1928:276). Regardless of whether one accepts the somewhat intuitive criterion of "meaning" (actually word order is a much surer test), Jespersen's distinction between "preposition" and "adverb" is a basic one, which is upheld in most subsequent grammars (albeit under different terminology: *prepositional verb* or *verb + preposition* vs *phrasal verb*).

Jespersen's treatment of this type of structure with regard to passivization is,

4 The difference is especially noticeable in the passive:
Not a word could be gót in
The box could not be gót in
 For a more detailed description, see Strang (1962,²1969:178).

however, somewhat less satisfactory. The PPP construction, he asserts, may be called a "correlate" of the prepositional particle construction mentioned above, as "in both we see that the particle has greater cohesion with the verb than with what (in the active) is the object either of the particle alone (preposition) or of the whole phrase" (1928:313). This statement is confusing at the least, if not misleading. The temptation is great on the part of the reader to expect a correlation between prepositional particle and the possibility of passivization, as in both constructions there is, according to Jespersen, a high degree of cohesion between verb and particle. This is, however, not necessarily the case, as the following passivization test demonstrates:

- (1)' *A small village is passed by ...
- (2)' The matter cannot be passed by ...

In (1)' *by* would be classified as a "preposition" and yet a passive is not possible, whereas in (2)' *by* is an "adverb" and yet passivization is acceptable. Although it may be argued that Jespersen never intended to assert that there is such a correlation, the fact is that his statements, because they are cursory and vague, do not clearly exclude this interpretation.

In short, in dealing with the PPP it is essential to remember that there are two separate and independent issues involved: (a) the distinction between phrasal and prepositional verb, and (b) the possibility of a passive construction. The latter is of interest only for prepositional verbs, as *all* phrasal verbs, provided they occur with an object at all, can normally be passivized:

- (3) He looked the word up
- (3)' The word was looked up ...
- (4) He took the picture down
- (4)' The picture was taken down ...
- (5) He turned the light out
- (5)' The light was turned out ...

2.1.2 H. Poutsma (1926:31ff) gives a more detailed and in many ways more satisfactory treatment of the subject. Although some of his explanations may prove to be insufficient on closer look, modern linguistic research on the passive has in fact hardly advanced beyond a reformulation of many of his observations.

Like Jespersen, Poutsma also distinguishes between adverb and preposition, with the important difference, however, that for Poutsma "prepositional object" and "adverbial adjunct" are subcategories of the structure verb + immovable

particle + noun.⁵ Thus, Poutsma separates phrasal verbs from prepositional verbs at the outset. The existence of two subcategories for the latter makes clear the fact that only some and not all prepositional verbs allow passivization.

For Poutsma, a prepositional object (as opposed to an adverbial 'adjunct') is characterized by the following three criteria:

- (i) the modifier is felt to be a "necessary complement" to the verb, e. g. *He looked at the sky*
- (ii) the preposition is "distinctly vague in meaning", e. g. *This does not tally with your former statement*
- (iii) the preposition is "intimately connected with the governing verb", forming a kind of unit, as can be seen from simplex equivalents in the same or in some cognate language, e. g. *to impose upon a person* = 'to deceive a person'

In contrast, there is, according to Poutsma, little coalescing between an adverbial 'adjunct' and the verb:

- (6) *He lay on the floor*
- (7) *He chuckled for pleasure*

However, there are exceptions, Poutsma points out. The sentence

- (8) *Late at night he arrived at his destination*

satisfies the above criteria - and yet the verb-modifier cannot be considered a prepositional object, because "the thing for which the noun in question stands is not felt to be a secondary participant in the action expressed by the verb" (1926:31).

Furthermore, sentences such as

- (9) *He has slept in this bed*

do not seem to satisfy condition (iii) that the preposition be intimately connected with the governing verb, nor condition (ii) that the preposition be vague in meaning. Yet, according to Poutsma, the verb-modifier here should be considered a prepositional object, as substantiated by the following two facts:

⁵ Note that Poutsma does not distinguish here between adverbials which *must* appear after the verb ('complements') and adverbials which may be left out ('adjuncts'). The latter term covers both varieties.

- (a) the verb + preposition is equivalent to a transitive
verb: *He has slept in this bed* = (Dutch) *Hij heeft dit bed beslapen*
- (b) the noun connected with the preposition can be made the
subject of a passive sentence: *This bed has been slept in*

Note that the former observation demonstrates that *sleep in a bed* fulfils criterion (iii) for prepositional objects. The latter, however, does little more than reveal Poutsma's perhaps unconscious motivation for considering verb-modifiers of this sort as occupying an "intermediate position" (1926:35). It enables him to state as a general rule: Prepositional objects may be made the subject of passive sentences; adverbial 'adjuncts' may not.

It is doubtful, however, whether equivalence to a simplex in the same or in a related language is an adequate criterion for determining what is a prepositional object and therefore whether passivization is possible or not. Poutsma's example *impose upon* = 'deceive', for instance, demonstrates one of the problems involved: the predicate *impose upon* can have several meanings, including 'deceive' (archaic in modern-day English) and 'take advantage of'. If the fact that a simplex equivalent exists for *impose upon* (in its 'deceive' meaning) is taken as a criterion for a prepositional object and consequently for passivizability, does this mean that *impose upon* in its 'take advantage of' meaning is *not* passivizable because 'take advantage of' happens not to be a simplex? (Actually a passive with *impose upon* in this sense is quite common.) Furthermore, how is equivalence to be determined in the first place? How equivalent must the predicates be? And how is the fact to be accounted for that many predicates, such as *stand for* = 'support', *do with* = 'tolerate', etc. have simplex equivalents but cannot be passivized?⁶

- (10) This candidate stands for racial tolerance
- (10)*Racial tolerance is stood for by this candidate
- (11) I can't do with him and his insolence
- (11)*He (and his insolence) can't be done with

6 Of course what Poutsma may be getting at is that the existence of a lexical verb which is syntactically 'transitive' corresponds to deep semantic transitivity. That passivizability depends to a great extent on the latter is precisely what this investigation will show.

As for Poutsma's tacit claim that prepositional objects can be passivized and adverbial 'adjuncts' cannot, the matter does not seem quite as simple if we take a closer look at some of his examples.

The sentence

(12) This does not tally with your former statement

- a sentence in which, according to Poutsma, the verb-modifier is a prepositional object - does not have an acceptable passive in English:

(12)' *Your former statement is not tallied with by this

On the other hand, the verb-modifier in the sample sentence for an adverbial 'adjunct':

(6) He lay on the floor

can be made the subject of quite an adequate passive sentence in English:

(6)' This floor should not be lain on -- it hasn't been swept in weeks

In fact, even Poutsma's argumentation with respect to (8) must be doubted in light of the following acceptable passive (Kruisinga 1911, ⁵1931:312):

(13)' The scene of their exploits was arrived at by way of Gibraltar

Poutsma in fact has fallen victim to some rather circular thinking. He makes a distinction between prepositional object and adverbial 'adjunct' primarily in order to be able to explain which combinations of verb + preposition + noun can be passivized, yet with examples such as *sleep in a bed* he uses the fact that a passive is possible as justification for classifying *bed* as a prepositional object. One wonders why the distinction need be insisted on at all, if it is, as Poutsma himself admits, so "vague and floating" (1926:31), and if it must be abandoned or grossly distorted in order to handle an important part of the data, i. e. those sentences where the prepositional phrase has full locative meaning.

Nevertheless Poutsma's treatment of the PPP - in spite of its inadequacies - has been fundamental to all subsequent discussions of the topic within the framework of traditional grammar (e. g. Curme 1931:113f, Zandvoort 1957, ⁵1969:53f, Scheurweghs 1959:18f, etc.).

2.1.3 J. Svartvik (1966:20f) takes a slightly different approach to the PPP. Rather than treating sentences such as (9) above as exceptions to the rule of 'close association', he proposes to make passivizability the criterion for the distinction between a "prepositional verb", $V_p + N$:

- (14) She sent for the coat
(14)' The coat was sent for

and a "verb plus prepositional phrase", $V + {}_pN$:

- (15) She came with the coat
(15)' *The coat was come with

Note that without being circular, this classification cannot account for when a combination of the form verb + preposition + noun is passivizable and when it is not.

Svartvik notes incidentally that the acceptability of passives with prepositional verbs may vary considerably:

Some ... collocations (like *look at*) are very close and can occur in the passive with few or no restrictions, but others (like *go into*) will do so only under certain conditions ...

I think a lot of that [problem] can be gone into ...

*The room was gone into at once
...

The difference in acceptability between the two passives must, it seems, be accounted for by some concept like concrete/abstract subject or literal/metaphorical verb (compare *The town/conclusion was arrived at*) (1966:165).

However, this explanation does not take into account the fact that a sentence like:

- (16)' This room must not be gone into (or else the floor will cave in)

is perfectly acceptable in English [see also (6)'above] . Once a large corpus is considered, it becomes obvious that not only does a concrete noun as subject *not* block the passive (as Svartvik would suggest), but an abstract noun as subject does not always permit it:

- (17)' *Obscurity was emerged from ...
(18)' *Ill health was continued in ...

This should suffice as evidence that an explanation merely in terms of "concrete/abstract subject" is insufficient. Furthermore, a literal verb does not always block the passive: