Passive

The transformational analysis

As mentioned in the text, the relationship between sentences such as the following is a major concern of contemporary syntactic analysis.

1) 
   a. Active sentence:  
     A thief stole the painting.
   
   b. Passive sentence:  
     The painting was stolen (by a thief).

2) 
   a. Active sentence:  
     The dog chased the truck.
   
   b. Passive sentence:  
     The truck was chased (by the dog).

In describing the relevant differences and similarities, linguists often make use of the terms agent (the doer of the action designated by the verb) and theme (the entity directly affected by that action). (These notions are discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.)

3) 
   a. Active sentence:  
     A thief took the painting.
     Agent theme
   
   b. Passive sentence:  
     The painting was stolen (by a thief).
     theme agent

As explained in the text, the following sort of D–structure, shown in Figure 1, is used for a passive sentence in which the agent is not expressed.
Where the agent is expressed as a PP, it appears inside the VP, as shown in Figure 2.

**Figure 1** D-structure for *The painting was stolen*

**Figure 2** D-structure for *The painting was stolen by a thief*
As explained in the text, the next step is to move the auxiliary verb to the I position and the complement NP to the subject position, as shown in Figure 3.

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 3** S-structure resulting from movement

But what ensures that movement takes place and that the subject position is not simply left empty in the surface structure of a passive sentence? The answer may well lie in the **Case Filter**. Visit [the advanced material on *Case*](#) for further explanation.

The key idea is simply that a passive verb is unable to assign a **Case** feature to its complement. Since only transitive verbs are able to assign Case, this is just another way of saying that passive verbs are intransitive—that they cannot have a direct object in surface structure. (This idea is sometimes made more precise by saying that the –en or –ed suffix found on the passive form of the verb has a detransitivizing function.)

Given that a passive verb cannot assign a Case feature to its complement, the direct object must find its Case elsewhere if it is to satisfy the Case Filter. As illustrated in Figure 4, it is “attracted” to the empty subject position due to the availability of nominative Case there.
Other approaches to the analysis of passives

As mentioned at the beginning of Chapter 5, transformational syntax is not the only type of syntactic analysis used in contemporary linguistics. The study of the relationship between active and passive sentences offers an excellent opportunity to consider two other approaches to syntax, one focusing on grammatical relations such as subject and direct object, and the other focusing on the way in which syntactic structure is used to communicate information.

The relational analysis

The transformational analysis works well for English and for other languages in which passivization is marked by a combination of verbal affixation (indicating a loss of the ability to assign case) and a change in the position of the theme (indicating movement). However, not all languages have passives of this type. In Tzotzil (a Mayan language of Mexico), for instance, the relative order of the agent and the theme is the same in active and passive constructions.
4)

a. Active sentence:
Lá snákan ti vïhike ti xpétule.

theme agent

seated the man the Peter

‘Peter seated the man.’

b. Passive sentence:
Inákanat ti vïhike yuʔun ti xpétule.

theme agent

was seated the man by the Peter

‘The man was seated by Peter.’

Here the passive is signaled by a change in the form of the verb and the appearance of the preposition yuʔun ‘by’ before the agent, but there is no change in the relative order of the agent and theme.

Mandarin Chinese employs yet another option.

5)

a. Active sentence:
Zhū làoshi pïyuè–le wôde kãoshi.

agent theme

Zhu professor marked my test

‘Professor Zhu marked my test.’

b. Passive sentence:
Wôde kãoshi bèi Zhū làoshi pïyuè–le.

theme agent

my test by Zhu professor marked.

‘My test was marked by Professor Zhu.’

Here, the passive is marked by a change in word order and by the appearance of the preposition bei ‘by’ before the agent, but the verb has exactly the same form in both patterns.

This has led some linguists to believe syntactic phenomena are best described in terms of grammatical relations such as subject and direct object rather than case or movement. According to proponents of relational analysis,
the key facts about the contrast between active and passive sentences should be stated as follows in Table 1. (An NP that occurs with a preposition is said to be oblique.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active pattern</th>
<th>Passive pattern</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>subject</td>
<td>oblique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>direct object</td>
<td>subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This works straightforwardly for English, as the following example helps illustrate.

6)

a. Active sentence:    The thieves took the painting.

   subject    direct object

   subject    oblique

b. Passive sentence:   The painting was taken (by the thieves).

Notice that the direct object in the active 6a) (the painting) is the subject in the passive 6b) while the subject in 6a) (the thieves) corresponds to an oblique NP in 6b)—just as the generalizations in Table 1 say they should.

Since the criteria used to identify subjects and direct objects differ from language to language, relational changes can be associated with a variety of structural effects. In English, where the direct object appears after the verb and the subject before it, a change in an NP’s grammatical relation will also involve a change in its linear position. In other languages, word order may not be so important and the relational changes may be indicated in other ways—by verbal affixation, by case, or by the use of a preposition (as in Tzotzil). By analyzing passivization in terms of processes that affect subjects and direct objects, it is possible to go beyond these differences and to capture the universal properties of this important phenomenon.

Notions like subject and direct object have an important role to play in syntactic analysis, and they are often used to describe phenomena in a way that can be understood by linguists of all theoretical orientations. We will see additional examples of this in Chapter 8.
The functional analysis

Some types of syntactic analysis focus on the relationship between a sentence’s form and the way in which it is used to communicate information. Work of this sort is often called functional analysis, since it seeks to understand syntactic phenomena in terms of their communicative function. The contrast between active and passive sentences is especially instructive in this regard. Although both sentence types have the same basic meaning, they differ from each other in terms of how they present the situation that they describe. Put another way, they differ from each other in how they “package” the information to be communicated. Two differences are worth noting here.

First, passive sentences tend to de-emphasize the role of the agent in the situation being described. In fact, the vast majority of passive sentences do not mention the agent at all. In English, for instance, we can say simply The painting was taken or The dishes were broken, without attributing responsibility for these events to any particular person.

Second, passive sentences foreground the theme by making it the subject of the sentence. As a result, the situation is presented from the perspective of that person or thing. (As we will see in Chapter 6, the subject usually introduces the entity that the rest of the sentence is about.) Consider in this regard the passage in 7).

7) Gretzky raced down the ice, stole the puck, and passed it out in front of the net. An instant later, he was hit by the defenseman. (Compare: An instant later, the defenseman hit him.)

The italicized passive sentence sounds more natural than the corresponding active sentence, since it brings to the foreground the pronoun he, which refers to the person (Gretzky) from whose perspective the entire series of events is being described.

In contrast, the passive is not nearly so natural in the following context.
Gretzky raced down the ice, circled the net, and stopped. *The puck was then stolen by Gretzky* from the defenseman. (Compare: *He then stole the puck* from the defenseman.)

Here the passive sentence seems somewhat less natural, since it suddenly foregrounds the puck even though the rest of the passage is about Gretzky. This abrupt shift in the flow of information could by avoided by using the active sentence, with a pronoun in the subject position referring to Gretzky.

As this example illustrates, the functional analysis of the passive pattern focuses on the way in which it packages information compared to active sentences, placing the emphasis on how it is used rather than just on its structure. The key claim is that the function of the passive construction is to de-emphasize the agent (often deleting it entirely) and to draw attention to the theme NP. By analyzing syntactic structures functionally, it is often possible to gain insights into why human language has the particular syntactic patterns that it does and how these patterns contribute to the larger task of communication.

You are now ready to do the *exercises on passive*. 