

Topic, focus, and word order changes: Week 5

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1 Intro

We will mostly be looking at these three constructions, the passive voice (1), extraposition (2), and existential (3).

- (1) a. Her son was arrested by the police.
b. The police arrested her son.
- (2) a. It's unusual for her to be this late.
b. For her to be this late is unusual.
- (3) a. There were two doctors on the plane.
b. Two doctors were on the plane.

These sentences have two common characteristics.

- 1. They are non-canonical, have a more basic counterpart (examples b in the sentences above).
- 2. They package information differently than their counterparts, but generally contain the same information.

Sometimes, there is no well-formed basic counterpart (239 ex 3). But they almost always have the same core meanings. Some exceptions are noted when there is both a quantifier and a negative in the clause, shown in (240 ex 4).

2 Passive clauses

Active Voice Subjects are aligned with the actors or agents.

Passive Voice Subjects are aligned with participants or patients.

Note the structural differences shown in the trees on p. 241 (ex. 7).

- (4) Syntactic differences:
 - a. The subject of the active appears in the passive as complement of the preposition *by* in a PP functioning as a complement.

- b. The direct object of the active appears as the subject of the passive.
- c. The passive has auxiliary *be* carrying the tense inflection and taking as complement a subjectless non-finite clause with a head in past participle form.

Voice and information packaging In English, generally subjects must represent old information. Not always true, but a tendency. Passive voice helps us to do that.

Short passives If the agent by-phrase is not expressed, H & P call these short passives. Examples on p.243 (12).

Lexical restrictions There are some verbs that cannot be passivized: many intransitive verbs, and a few transitive verbs. See (13) on p. 244.

Ditransitive passives All of the players in a ditransitive can be passivized. See (14)

Prepositional passives These can be two types, specified prepositions and unspecified. Generally, these are fairly restricted.

Get-passives Similar to *be*-passives, but *get* is a lexical verb. Also, *get* passives carry a degree of affectedness with them that *be*-passives do not have. That is why (17-iv-b) is bad.

Bare-passives See examples on p. 246 (18) and (19).

Adjectival passives In sentences like (20) on p. 246 they are ambiguous, but in (21) they are not.

Passive at work handout

Look at the handout and see the passive voice being used in good writing.

3 Extraposition

Two types, subject and internal complement. Subject is more common.

3.1 Subject extraposition

See the examples in (22) on p. 247.

The subject of extraposed clauses is the dummy *it*, this can be shown through subject tests. And there are several reasons why extraposed versions of clauses are more common than non-extraposed clauses.

1. Subordinate clauses tend to be longer (heavier) than NPs, and English speakers like to put heavy things at the end.
2. Non-extraposed subjects are only possible when they can be taken as old information. See the ex. (24) on p. 248.

3.2 Internal complement extraposition

These are found in complex-transitive constructions, where it is almost always required. See example (25).

4 Existential clauses

These are sentences formed with the dummy subject *there*. See (26) on p. 249. *There* passes the subject tests, and the displaced subject triggers agreement.

Agreement in existentials

It is very common in informal SAE for *there* subjects to have singular agreement regardless of the displaced subject. This is only true when the the verb *is* can be reduced and attach to *there*. Prescriptivists don't like this, but it seems to have become a feature of informal, spoken SAE.

- (5) There's issues with the contract.
- (6) There's two dogs in the street.

4.1 Bare existentials

These clauses have no corresponding basic version. Used to assert the existence of things, see (28) on p. 250.

4.2 Extended existentials

Contain an additional element (a list of them is in (29)).

4.3 Constraints

Indefinite NPs prefer existensial constructions.

Definitie NPs prefer non-existential constructions.

- (7) A dog is in the street.
- (8) There is a dog in the street.
- (9) The car is just sitting there.
- (10) ?There's the car just sitting there.

Again this has to do with old and new information. Indefinite NPs tend to be new information and so they are not great subjects. Definite NPs tend to be old information and so are good subjects.