„By" used to introduce an agent

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Sadržaj

Summary and Keywords

The preposition "by" has a variety of differing meanings. One should not, however, limit one's knowledge of semantics and meaning to the lexical entries in a dictionary. In order to fully experience a language all the different aspects have to be included. A particularly important part of the meaning carried by the preposition "by" is the one denoting agency. Agency is a crucial element in the semantic roles of a sentence, especially in passive constructions where it is typically expressed using the preposition 'by.' While grammatical relations are clearer, semantic roles can be more ambiguous and may lead to interpretive challenges. This complexity becomes apparent when analyzing how the preposition 'by' functions in the transformation of active sentences into passive ones, highlighting the importance of 'by' in marking the agent or doer of the action in a passive sentence.

Key words: agent, causer, experience, instrument, involuntary causer, semantic roles

Introduction

Prepositions are integral to the structure of the English language, playing a crucial role in conveying relationships between words in a sentence. While prepositions may seem simple, they are complex and multifaceted, contributing significantly to the meaning and clarity of sentences. One preposition of particular importance is "by," especially in passive constructions, where it plays a central role in indicating the agent or doer of an action. This paper will explore the function of the preposition "by" in passive voice constructions, providing insights into how it helps express agency in English.

Historically, the use of "by" in passive constructions has undergone significant changes. In Old English, passive meanings were often conveyed through reflexive verbs and impersonal constructions, and the preposition "by" had not yet become standardized in marking the agent (Hogg 122,142,147). By Middle English, "by" began to appear more frequently in passive sentences, and according to Denison, it became fully standardized in Early Modern English for marking the agent in passive voice (Denison 256). Understanding this historical development sheds light on the syntactic evolution that has made "by" a key element in passive constructions.

This paper will focus specifically on the role of "by" in denoting agency in passive voice constructions, examining its function and structure. While "by" can be used in various contexts—such as conveying means of transport, communication, or results—this paper will limit its scope to how "by" functions to express the doer of an action in passive sentences. By analyzing its grammatical role, we can better understand how the passive voice works in English and how speakers use it to shift focus from the agent to the action or its recipient. The paper will also explore the syntactic and semantic roles of "by" in passive transformations, focusing on how active sentences are converted into passive ones. Through this analysis, the aim is to provide a deeper understanding of the relationship between sentence structure, meaning, and the way English speakers conceptualize agency in passive voice constructions.

Main part

The use of the passive voice involves more complexity than simply converting an active sentence into a passive one, which is often the first assumption. This section will focus specifically on the implications of using the preposition 'by' in passive constructions, particularly when the subject of the active sentence is the agent. Through an analysis of various examples, this section will illustrate how these sentences differ in voice. To better understand this conversion, the works of Chomsky and Leech will be referenced to provide further insights.

Transformation from active into passive

The transformation from the active into the passive itself is in the English language very structured so in a way one can deduce a simplified formula by which the transformation would usually occur.

According to Noam Chomsky in his well known work "Syntactic Structures" (1957), the transformation from an active to a passive sentence involves several key steps:

Promotion of the Object:

The first step here is the promotion of the object, where the direct object of the active sentence is moved to the subject position in the passive sentence.As shown by the example below, the direct object of the active sentence "the bathroom", is moved to the subject position in the passive sentence.

Example: Active: "Ann cleaned the bathroom." → Passive: "The bathroom was cleaned by Ann."

Demotion of the Subject:

The second step is when the subject of the active sentence is demoted and introduced with the preposition "by," forming a by-phrase that denotes the agent. It's important to note that in some cases, mentioning the agent is unnecessary and can be omitted without affecting the meaning of the sentence. This transformation shifts the focus of the sentence from the doer of the action to the action itself or its recipient. As the focus shifts sometimes when the agent is obvious or unimportant it can be omitted and the sentence wouldn't lose its meaning. In our above example the subject and agent in the active sentence loses its position as subject in the passive sentence and gets introduced with the by-phrase after the verb.

Insertion of the Auxiliary Verb:

The third step is changing the verb phrase into the corresponding passive voice, the verb is modified to include a form of "to be" followed by the past participle of the main verb.

Example: "cleaned" becomes "was cleaned." (Chomsky 42-43)

In Chomsky's other work"Aspects of the Theory of Syntax" (1965), he further elaborates that this transformation preserves the semantic roles while altering the syntactic structure. The agent, introduced by "by," remains semantically the same, but its syntactic role changes.

Grammatical relations and semantic roles

Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, and Svartvika group of notable linguists, in their work "A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language," expand on the role of "by" in passive constructions. This work is a grammar and therefore has a more categorical approach to the topic of the preposition "by" used to show agency, but it is nonetheless relevant. Starting with the function of the preposition "by" which is used to introduce the agent, the performer of the said action. (Example in passive: "The cake was baked by Mary.") (Quirk et al. 164)Another thing they mention is the use of the preposition "by" in the passive voice; they mention two types: agentive and non-agentive uses. "By" except for being used to denote agency as in the examples before can also denote other causes or instruments. As in the example: "The window was broken by the storm." Here the noun storm is not a conscious doer of an action and is therefore listed more as a cause or involuntary doer. Since semantic roles and agency are crucial for understanding the use of the preposition 'by' in passive constructions, Berk (1999) provides a further explanation of these roles within a sentence. Semantic roles as such, showcase the varying roles that different elements of a sentence play in relation to the semantic meaning of the sentence. The semantic roles, however, are different from the grammatical relations which are less abstract and more clearly show us the relations between various parts of the sentence, for example there is the subject, verb, object, complement and adverbials, with a number of their sub groups.

The English language has quite a structured approach to grammatical relations and a major part of the meaning of the sentence is derived specifically from the grammatical relation- there is a pattern in the English language when talking about grammatical relations. The structure of the sentence most commonly goes as such: Subject at the beginning of a sentence and then followed by the verb. The verb then affects the pattern of the rest of the sentence and is in actual fact the central part of the sentence. The transitivity and type of the verb will mostly decide the structure of the following parts of the sentence. The verbs and sentences can then be copular, intransitive, monotransitive, ditransitive and complex-transitive. What is important for this paper is that only

transitive verbs can have a passive voice, and therefore also a passive form with a prepositional phrase with the preposition „by".This is because, according to Van Valin and LaPolla, transitive verbs are key to forming passive constructions because the object of the active sentence becomes the subject in the passive, shifting focus from the agent to the action's recipient (Van Valin and LaPolla 140-141).As mentioned previously it is not enough to simply look at the grammatical relations, it is important to build on the foundation provided to us by the structurally regular grammatical relations with the semantic aspect of the sentence- the semantic roles. In a sentence, the subject can take on various roles. According to Berk (22-23), these roles include the agent, instrument, experiencer, patient, causer, locator, and described subject.The three main roles that this paper will be concerned with are the agent, involuntary causer and patient, with a further explanation on the instrument for distinction in some of the examples.

The agent, causer, patient and instrument

The agent is the one who instigated the action- or the "doer". More precisely the agent is "an animate being that acts deliberately with intent." (Berk, 15) Although there is debate about whether some 'animate beings' can act with intent, the issue arises with creatures considered to have low intellect, often referred to as 'lower creatures.' The question is whether their actions, driven purely by survival instinct, can truly be considered intentional. Berk classifies these examples into the category of agent despite the conundrum of whether beings such as insects, worms and similar have enough intelligence that their actions, for example moving, procreating or feeding can be categorized as intentional.

The Causer differs from the Agent in that it initiates an action, but unlike the Agent, it does so without deliberate intent or purpose. Instead, the Causer's actions are typically the result of external forces or involuntary processes.Here Berk talks about the involuntary causer, a category that can largely clash with the agent. The major difference here is in the intent of the action. As already mentioned the agent has to have intent when doing something, the causer is, though, a role where there is no intent behind the action even if the action was indeed caused by the being or entity in question. When the causer is an animate being, it is important to determine whether the action was carried out with intent. If the being acted deliberately, it is classified as an agent. However, if the action was accidental or unintentional, the being is considered a causer rather than an agent, as the action occurred without deliberate intent. In trying to distinguish the agent from the causer there can oftentimes be some ambiguity and one always has to look at the context of the sentence. There are also other ways in which the subject

of an active sentence is portrayed in the passive equivalent of the sentence, but the thing one must be careful of is the role that the subject in the active sentence was trying to fill. When in an active sentence the subject is also the agent, then most commonly this agent in the passive voice would indeed be introduced with the preposition "by". When delving further into the semantic roles that are here relevant. It is important to note that the agent is often confused with the involuntary causer or force due to semantic ambiguity. According to Dowty, an important context in deciphering the roles is volition and sentience, whichprovide a framework for understanding the distinction between different roles in sentence structures (Dowty 572-573). The involuntary causer, unlike the agent who intentionally instigates an action, refers to a subject that causes an action without intent.The involuntary causer is also a role that can be expressed by the preposition "by" in the passive sentence. Without looking at whether there is the intent on causing an action, the causer can easily be confused with the agent because of how similar they behave in such an instance, as shown in the following example:

" Torrential rain is causing massive flooding in the region."

This is an active sentence that illustrates how an inanimate being or a force of nature can act as the cause of an action. When this sentence is transformed into the passive voice, it would read as follows::

"Massive flooding in the region is caused by torrential rain."

When we look at those two sentences, the principle is the same as it would be if the subject of the active sentence was an agent. The involuntary causer of the action is in the position of subject in the active sentence, which changes to the object in the passive sentence, which puts the involuntary causer into the same situation as if it were the agent. However, this distinction can lead to confusion in examples where the intent behind the action is open to interpretation. Consider the sentence:

"Tina caused the big mess in your room."

When this sentence is transformed into the passive voice, it becomes:

"The big mess in your room was caused by Tina."

In this case, the subject of the passive sentence ("the big mess in your room") corresponds to the object of the active sentence. There are two possible interpretations of this sentence.

The first one is if the cause was an accident. If Tina accidentally caused the mess, the semantic roles remain consistent with those in the previous example of torrential rain causing flooding. Here, Tina would be seen as an involuntary causer rather than an intentional agent.

Alternatively, if Tina intentionally made the mess—perhaps out of spite or anger—she would be classified as the agent. In this scenario, she is the doer of the action with deliberate intent. The passive sentence still places the big mess as the subject, now serving as the patient affected by Tina's actions.

In both interpretations, the grammatical structure of the sentences is the same, but the underlying meaning shifts depending on Tina's intent.The Patient is the participant in a sentence that is affected by the action. According to Berk, the direct object in a sentence is typically identified as the Patient. This means that if a sentence contains a direct object, that object is labeled as the Patient. It's important to note that it is impossible to have both a separate Patient subject and a direct object in the same sentence. In such cases, the subject would play a different role rather than being the Patient.

The Instrument, on the other hand, is the intermediate cause of an action that has been influenced by the Agent. The Instrument is often used to shift the focus away from the Agent and toward the means by which the action was carried out. For example, consider the active sentence:

"A brick broke the windows of the shop."

In this sentence, "brick" is the Instrument, not the Agent. The Agent, the person who threw the brick, is either unknown or irrelevant. When transforming this sentence into the passive voice, the sentence can still include the Instrument:

"The window of the shop was broken by a brick."

Alternatively, the sentence can also be expressed as:

"The window of the shop was broken with a brick."

Both "by" and "with" are grammatically correct in this context, but they serve slightly different purposes. When the subject of the active sentence is an Agent, only the preposition "by" should be used. However, when focusing on the Instrument, "with" is also appropriate.

Distinction of the roles and examples

There are many different semantic roles, but it would be physically and semantically impossible for every role to always be used in every sentence. Everything depends on the number of noun phrases and their semantic meaning and positioning in the sentence. Because the semantic roles rely so heavily on the meaning in the sentence, they are more abstract and can in some cases be interpreted from various angles in a different way. Asmentioned one has several angles to consider when analysing semantic roles and instead of only relying on rigid categorisations one should also look at the context of the sentence. One can perhaps focus on the theory provided by Charles Fillmore in his work, which provides a deeper theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. Fillmore emphasizes the importance of semantic roles, such as Agent and Patient, in the structure of sentences. In passive constructions, the Agent (the doer of the action) is marked by the preposition "by," which reflects a demotion from the subject position in the active voice to a peripheral role. For example:

Active: "The cook (Agent) baked the cake (Patient)."
Passive: "The cake (Patient) was baked by the cook (Agent)."
Fillmore's distinction between deep and surface structures highlights that the deep structure of a sentence retains the semantic roles, while the surface structure changes in the passive construction.(Fillmore 40) The preposition "by" serves to maintain the semantic integrity of the sentence by clearly marking the Agent, despite the syntactic rearrangement.

An analysis of some different examples will be given in order to give further insight into how they look and how the sentences differ in respect to voice. In order to further show variety in how the preposition "by" is used in the passive voice. The first example is: "Ann cleaned the bathroom." In regards to the valency of the verb, this is a simple monotransitive sentence following the pattern of: Subject (S) + Verb (V) + Object-direct (Od) With "Ann" here being the subject as well as the agent of the action, and "the bathroom" being the direct object and the patient affected by the action. When converting the sentence into the passive voice we get: "The bathroom was cleaned by Ann." In doing this conversion, the semantic roles stay the same; "Ann" is still the agent and "the bathroom" is still the patient. What did change, however, are the grammatical relations. The subject of the passive sentence is now "the bathroom" and by

adding the preposition "by" to the noun phrase "Ann," the prepositional phrase "by Ann" is now a prepositional object instead of a direct one as it was in the active sentence. According to Chomsky, the preposition "by" systematically marks the demoted subject (agent) in the passive construction.

There can be little ambiguity here for the identity of "Ann" as the agent, as the situation where she would have accidentally cleaned the bathroom is unlikely. There would be some ambiguity if it was stated that she cleaned the bathroom but was told to by a person of some authority to clean another room entirely. In such a case, it would be debatable if "Ann" were the agent or involuntary causer of the action, with the whole assumption still leaning towards "Ann" being the agent rather than the alternative.

Another example with a direct object, but this time with the addition of a complement making it a complex transitive type of sentence, would be: "A neighbour found the old man dead in his apartment." Here "a neighbour" is the subject as well as the agent, "the old man" is the direct object and patient, "dead" is the complement to the object (Co) giving further information about the state of the object, and "in his apartment" is the adverbial denoting the location where the neighbour came across the old man. The passive of this sentence would be: "The old man was found dead in his apartment by a neighbour." Here we can see more of a difference in the structure of the sentence than in the first example. The structure now is: S + V + Cs (complement-subject) + Op Though the sentence itself experienced a change in structure, the previous pattern regarding the transformation from active to passive stayed the same: agent: subject → prepositional object; patient: direct object → subject The agent changed from a subject in the active sentence to a prepositional object in the passive, while the patient that was a direct object in the active sentence became the subject in the passive one. Leech's analysis emphasizes that the agent, introduced by "by," remains clear in its role but now serves as a prepositional phrase rather than the main subject.

The reason that the neighbour is considered the agent in this example is that, upon reflection of the situation, he had to have had some suspicions about what was happening to the old man, as he had to have entered the old man's apartment with the intent of finding him and discovering what happened. The ambiguity here could ensue if someone were to interpret that the old man was found in the apartment of the neighbour. In that case, the neighbour would indeed have found the old man completely by accident and without expecting the situation to happen. In such a case, the neighbour would be the experiencer of the action.

The sentences in the examples until now follow the same pattern as it pertains to a statement contrasting active and passive. Another way to analyze the behavior of the "by"-prepositional

phrase in the passive would be when we look at questions and answers. Questions or interrogative sentences usually differ from statements in the general word order. In interrogative sentences, unlike in declarative ones, the subject usually follows the auxiliary verb, which changes the usual subject-verb-object word order (Aarts 88-89).As the subject is no longer in the first place and such sentences can be posed in ways where either part of the sentence can be in the question or answer part.For example, if we take the statement "Ann cleaned the bathroom." It is possible to form question-answer pairs about any part of this sentence, such as: Q: Who cleaned the bathroom? A: Ann did. Q: What did Ann clean? A: She cleaned the bathroom. Q: What did Ann do in the bathroom? A: She was cleaning it. It is also possible to consider such sentences from the passive examples. When we have the same sentence but in the passive voice, the questions and answers would look like this: Q: By whom was the bathroom cleaned? A: By Ann. In such cases, the preposition "by" goes at the start of the question followed by either "whom" or "who" instead of the agent of the action who is actually the answer to the question. The roles of the constituents of the sentence are still the same as they would be in the statement; the only difference lies in the word order of the question with the grammatical relations going as follows: Op + auxiliary verb + S + verb This is the word order accepted as being formal, with the root of never putting the preposition at the end of the sentence taken from the rules following Latin grammar. In spoken, more informal English, the question could appear as follows: Q: "Who was the bathroom cleaned by?" A: By Ann. Though such examples of questions are often more natural-sounding in spoken language, the best solution in such cases would often simply be to leave the question in the active voice or to make a change in the structure of the sentence to sound more natural and fluid. For example: Q: "Who was the person who cleaned the bathroom?" A: Ann did. Though even in such cases, one has to consider the background and context of the situation: where is the action taking place, in which circumstances, and with what kind of people is the speaker surrounded? What is the atmosphere like? By answering these questions, a more complete picture is formed about what the situation is like and what language should be used.

Regarding the grammatical relations of the questions, the question word, which in the previous example is "whom," fills in the position of the constituent that is being sought in the answer corresponding to that question. Even in longer and seemingly more complex questions, the same rule applies. In formal English, the question word goes first and replaces the part that should be in the answer. After that comes the auxiliary verb in the second place, and the rest of the verb at the end. Q: "By whom was the expensive cup in my grandmother's house broken after they tripped on the carpet?" A: By my third cousin.

Pragmatic and Stylistic Considerations

The passive voice where "by" is used to denote the agent, can be used in a variety of different registers and texts:in academic, scientific, journalistic and legal writing besides casual conversation. The use of passive voice and the preposition "by" varies significantly across different registers (Biber et al. 126). In academic and scientific writing, the passive voice is commonly used to emphasize the research or findings rather than the researcher. This helps maintain an objective tone, which is valued in scholarly discourse. For example, "The experiment was conducted by the research team" focuses on the experiment rather than the team.(Swales and Feak 40) In journalism according to Bell in the work The Language of News Media, the passive voice is used to shift focus from the actor to the action or the recipient of the action (Bell 167). This can help frame the information in a way that aligns with the intended emphasis. For example, "The policy was announced by the government" focuses on the policy rather than the government.

And in legal documents one can often see the use of passive constructions to maintain formality and objectivity. This usage helps in presenting facts without attributing unnecessary emphasis on the doer. (Melinkoff 294-295) For example, "The contract was signed by both parties" ensures that the action of signing is highlighted over the actors. For further more comprehensive information on this topic one can read „The Language of the Law"byMelinkoff from 1963.Based on this information, the use of the passive voice and the preposition 'by' can vary depending on the writer's or speaker's intent, the need for clarity, and the emphasis they wish to place on different parts of the sentence.Writers often choose the passive voice to place emphasis on the action or its recipient rather than the doer (Greenbaum and Quirk 45). But it also allows for the omission of the agent, which can be useful when the agent is unknown, irrelevant, or implied. Passive constructions can add a level of formality and objectivity to writing. This is why they are favoured in formal and technical writing where personal opinions or informal tones are less appropriate. For example, "The data was analyzed by the team" sounds more formal and objective than "The team analyzed the data."

By examining the usage of passive constructions and the preposition "by" across different registers and stylistic contexts, it becomes clear how versatile and nuanced this grammatical structure can be. The choice between active and passive voice is often a strategic one, influenced by the need for clarity, emphasis, formality, and cohesion.

Further research options

Of course this is an expansive topic, and this paper could cover only a small fraction of the topic any further research on the usage of the passive voice and the preposition "by" could explore various different aspects, such as cross-linguistic comparisons to examine how passive constructions differ across languages. Especially interesting would here be a comparison between a language that has a lot of passive usage like English and the Croatian language that barely even uses the passive. A historical analysis of the evolution of passive voice in English would also be an interesting research option. For a more contemporary research one can perhaps focus on digital communication, analyzing passive voice on platforms such as social media, as social media platforms are pervasive throughout every aspect of society today. In the area of cognitive studies, one could delve into how the brain processes passive versus active voice, while the impact of passive voice on perception and persuasion in legal, political, or journalistic contexts could be another focus. If one were to make a corpus-based analysis it would be possible to follow trends in passive usage across genres. A more pedagogical approach to researching this topic could assess different methods of teaching passive voice to language learners. Even more relevant topic to research would be to focus on gender differences in passive voice usage, the role of passive voice in legal language reform, and its stylistic functions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the preposition "by" plays a critical role in conveying agency within passive constructions in the English language. Through the systematic transformation from an active to a passive sentence, "by" serves to maintain the connection between the action and the agent, even as the sentence structure shifts. This paper has explored how the subject and agent of an active sentence typically become the prepositional object in the passive form, with "by" marking this transition.

The formulaic nature of this transformation underscores the structured approach of English grammar in handling passive voice. However, while the inclusion of the agent through the prepositional phrase "by" is grammatically correct, it is not always necessary or stylistically appropriate. In many cases, particularly when the agent is unknown, irrelevant, or implicitly understood, omitting the "by" phrase can enhance the sentence's clarity and fluidity.

Moreover, understanding the nuances of when to include or omit the agent is essential for achieving a higher level of proficiency in English. This decision is not just about following grammatical rules but also about enhancing the readability and effectiveness of the sentence. Therefore, the use of "by" in passive constructions is not merely a mechanical process but a strategic choice that can significantly impact the tone and clarity of communication.

In summary, while "by" is the most recognizable and commonly used preposition for expressing agency in passive sentences, its usage requires careful consideration of both grammatical correctness and pragmatic effectiveness. This nuanced understanding of passive constructions is vital for both learners and proficient users of English.

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