

Approaches to Voice in Current English from the Standpoint of Agent

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, every student in Japan must study English on entering junior high school whether he or she wants to study it or not. Through learning foreign languages, we gradually come to know that there are many customs and thoughts which are quite different from ours in the world.

As for the present writer, when she was taught voice, she was very glad as though she had invented the difference between Japanese and English for the first time, because English seemed to give life to every inanimate thing by transformation from active to passive.

You can remember that on many examinations, there were a few transformation questions concerning voice, can't you? Let us take one typical example.

Question : Change the following active sentence into a passive one.

Shakespeare wrote this play.

Answer : *This play was written by Shakespeare.*

Under voice transformation, active sentences are transformed into passive sentences (with the same or at least very nearly the same meaning).

Is the relation between active and passive voice as simple as in like the above example? No, it cannot be so simple. So, in this paper, we concentrate on voice and investigate it through assumption of passive scale (or force).

ASSUMPTION OF PASSIVE SCALE (OR FORCE)

To begin with, we should know general opinions about voice which famous linguists have articulated up to the present. But each linguist has his own characteristic theory on language and differs in his grammatical standpoint. At a glance, we can easily confirm the existence of three major approaches: traditional linguistics, constructive linguistics and transformational grammar. Anyway, it is thought to be very important that a clear definition is given to voice. At first, it is useful for us to know about general definitions by a few famous linguists.

By voice we mean different grammatical ways of expressing the relation between a transitive verb and its subject.¹⁾

The active voice indicates that the subject does something, is, or is becoming, something.²⁾

The passive voice represents the subject as acted upon.³⁾

In *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, voice is defined as follows.

Voice is a grammatical category which makes it possible to view the action of a sentence in two ways, without change in the facts reported. ... The active-passive relation involves two grammatical 'levels': the verb phrase and the clause. In the verb phrase, the difference between the two voice categories is that the passive adds a form of the auxiliary BE and the past participle (the *-ed* form) of the main verb.

At the clause level, passivization involves rearrangement of two clause elements and one addition. (a) The active subject becomes the passive agent, (b) the active object becomes the passive subject, and (c) the preposition *by* is introduced before the agent. The prepositional agent phrase of passive sentences is an optional sentence element. The process of active-passive transformation for a monotransitive sentence with nominal object can be represented diagrammatically.

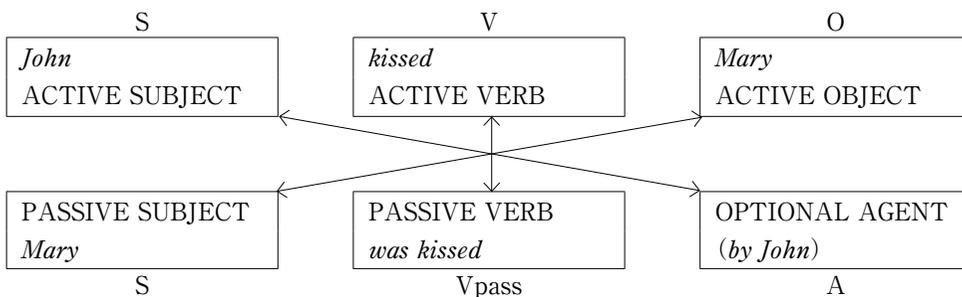


Fig. 1 The active-passive relation

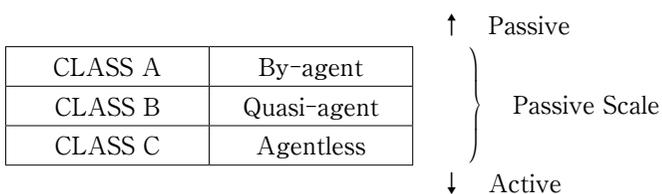
Alternatively, voice transformation can be expressed with this formula:

noun phrase1 + active verb phrase + noun phrase2

~ noun phrase2 + passive verb phrase + (*by* noun phrase1)

The terms 'subject', 'object', and 'agent' are useful labels for describing phenomena such as subject-verb concord or the use of objective pronominal case forms. However, although the structure of a sentence changes under voice transformation, its meaning remains the same. In *John kissed Mary* and *Mary was kissed by John*, *John* is in both voices 'the performer of the action'. In the sentence construction, however, the active subject corresponds to the passive agent.⁴⁾

In this paper, we investigate voice on the supposition that every passive sentence has the same form: be (except general verb) + past participle (including adjective derived from past participle). The present writer has made her own simple classification on the basis of agent. We attempt to clarify that there are various steps from passive to active in supposed passive scale (or force) and try to find the features of each class as seen in the following figure.



This figure is intended to be provisional. We will later revise it and return to it in the conclusion.

WHAT DO AGENT AND AGENTIVE FUNCTION MEAN?

Let us examine passive scale on the basis of agent. It then seems necessary to define the term “agent”.⁵⁾

Jan Svartvik has two opinions concerning agent.⁶⁾ One is that agent in a passive sentence is defined to be a subject in a corresponding active sentence. Another is that an agent is defined to be a kind of adjunct with agentive function. In this paper, we employ the latter definition.

By the way, what are agentive functions? Jan Svartvid enumerates four primary ones: (1) agency, (2) cause, (3) instrument and (4) place. It is difficult to draw clear lines between (1) agency, (2) cause, (3) instrument and (4) place. But if we transform a sentence from passive to active, we can easily tell (1) agency, (2) cause, and (3) instrument from (4) place, as in the following examples:

- | | | |
|---|-----------------|--|
| { | (1) agency: | Her son was killed by an American soldier. |
| | | An American soldier killed her son. (1)' |
| | (2) cause: | Her son was killed in the war. |
| | | The war killed her son. (2)' |
| { | (3) instrument: | Her son was killed with a machine gun. |
| | | A machine gun killed her son. (3)' |
| { | (4) place | Her son was killed on Truck Island. |
| | | × Truck Island killed her son. (4)' |

Let us examine the following examples. If sentences (1)' (2)' (3)' are in turn transformed to active sentences with (1) agency, (2) cause, and (3) instrument respectively, the difference between (1)' and (2)' (3)' becomes clear as follows.

- | | | |
|---|---------|---|
| { | (1)'' | An American soldier killed her son with a machine gun in the war. |
| | × (2)'' | The war killed her son by American soldier with a machine gun. |
| | × (3)'' | A machine gun killed her son by American soldier in the war. |

Jan Svartvik labels (1) as 'by-agent', and (2) and (3) as 'quasi-agents'. As described above, by-agent belongs to CLASS A and quasi-agent to CLASS B.

The divisions among these agents are made according to the viewpoint of grammar and lexicon. Only the preposition 'by' can be recognized from the aspect of grammar.⁶⁾

THE FEATURES OF EACH CLASS

As has already been seen, we employ Jan Svartvik's definition that 'agent' is a kind of adjunct with agentive function in this paper. Here we investigate the features of each class from A to C and consider the passive scale of each.

1. CLASS A (by-agent)

All passive sentences with by-agent belong to this class. There is no problem concerning prepositions which precede an agent, because the preposition 'by' is admitted as the only one in this class. Let us examine the notion of 'agent'.

1. The Form Class of by-agent

Nouns have the qualification to become objects of prepositions from the aspect of grammar.

a. Common Noun

If they were lucky, they were punished *by the factory owner*.

(*Caught in the Act* p. 11)

It's not, theoretically, subsidized *by licence-fee payers* in Britain.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Dec. 2004, p. 48)

Lately you keep hearing this phrase, "the corporate coup d'etat," like the country's actually been taken over *by the corporate elite*, and . . .

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jun. 2004, p. 44)

b. Proper Noun

Today Stain Louis is a relaxed fishing town on the Atlantic coast and has long since been overtaken in importance *by Dakar* over a hundred miles to the south.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Dec. 2004, p. 72)

The letter had been signed *by J. R. Broadribb*, who was, apparently, the senior partner.

(*Nemesis*, p.51)

c. Common Noun and Proper Noun

Originally the proprietor of a cab, Mr. Inch had died, been succeeded *by his son 'Young Inch'*, then aged forty-four, who had turned the family business into a garage and acquired two aged cars.

(*Nemesis*, p. 31)

Seven years, \$6 million, and about a thousand arguments later, the memorial fountain

to Princess Diana was inaugurated today *by the Queen, the mother-in-law* she had so not gotten along with. (The Voice of EJ, Dec. 2004, p. 64)

d. Pronoun

Many grammarians⁷⁾ say that it is mainly an awkward sentence in which a pronoun is used in a prepositional unit which performs an agentive function. As a matter of fact, such sentences are very rare.

Conservative Republicans are also deeply disturbed *by this*.

(The Voice of EJ, Jun. 2004, p. 44)

2. The Gender of Agent

Agent is divided into animate and inanimate. In our materials, there is a higher proportion of inanimate agents to animate ones. The ratio of animate to inanimate is about two to three.

a. Animate Agent

She will see how many of them have been damaged or killed *by the big animals* --- she is sampling the area for large animal damage.

(The Voice of EJ, Jun. 2004, p. 76)

The seat in front of them was occupied *by the other woman* of about sixty.

(Nemesis, p. 47)

Prisons at the time were still largely privately owned and administered, some *by the local magistrates*, and others *by entrepreneurs* who set up what were effect prison business.

(Caught in the Act, p. 13)

b. Inanimate Agent

And they're silenced *by the mainstream media*.

(The Voice of EJ, Jun. 2004, p. 40)

I mean, I was very relieved and moved *by the response in Dublin*, because that was probably the most, one of the most scary premieres I've ever been to.

(The Voice of EJ, Jun. 2004, p. 28)

What company wouldn't be shocked *by the news* that 50 percent of the staffs were just about to be axed within the next few days, four or five weeks before Christmas?

(The Voice of EJ, Jan. 2005, p. 78)

3. The Position in Passive Scale

It is significant that CLASS A has a systematic one-to-one correspondence between active and passive. The transformation from a passive sentence to an active sentence is more easily done in this class than in any other class. We can see a transformation similar to the one that was quoted in the introduction.

I'm fascinated by the careers of successful and interesting women.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jul. 2005, p. 40)

The careers of successful and interesting women fascinate me.

She was escorted downstairs by Cherry.

(*Nemesis*, p. 16)

Cherry escorted her downstairs.

As far as our investigation is concerned, we do not find any passive sentences that can not be transformed into active ones when they express by-agents which have functions of (1) agency. But it does not prove that CLASS A has strong passive force; for the position in passive scale is determined by the force that the 'be + p.p.' form contains.

4. By-agent Which Does not Mean Agency

Let us examine an interesting sentence :

People had babies, but the people who had babies were not likely to be even

known *by name* to Miss Marple.

(*Nemesis* p. 8)

Though the prepositional phrase 'by name' has the form of by-agent, it indicates (3) the instrument. The actual agent is *Miss Marple*. If we transform the italicized part, we would create the following infinitive:

for Miss Marple to know babies by name

It is even more interesting to compare the above sentence with the following sentence:

. . . unfamiliar with many terms of religions and ethnic significance known by their parents.⁸⁾

B. CLASS B (quasi-agent)

'Quasi-agent' can be used with various kinds of prepositions except 'by'. Being lexically determined, quasi-agents may naturally have specific meanings, such as cause or instrument.

1 . Variety in Prepositions Which Precede Quasi-agent

Now, let us see which prepositions are used with quasi-agents.

a. about

In this case, the preposition ‘about’ means ‘in relation to’ .

This may sound strange, Dr. Sam, but I’m *worried about* Alzheimer’s disease.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jun. 2004, p. 108)

And in a way the movie Chelsea Walls is a combination of *being inspired about* what’s happening with DV today and a byproduct of the theater company.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jan. 2005, p. 16)

I’m taking a train to Hokkaido this summer. I’m really *excited about* it.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jul. 2004, p. 90)

b. at

It is significant that the preposition ‘at’ is often used in passive sentences which express emotion.

Mr. Rafiel must *have been* very *upset at* losing you. (*Nemesis*, p. 37)

Frankly, Freeman, *at* this point I *am puzzled*.

(*The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy*, p.41)

c. for

The agents preceded by ‘for’ mainly express cause.

There were in the early part of the nineteenth century nearly 200 offences *for* which children could *be sentenced* to death. (*Caught in the Act*, p. 12)

A guy by the name of Milo Redek *was fingered for* the robbery.

(*A Man Like Morgan Kane*, p. 18)

d. in

Quasi-agents preceded by ‘in’ abound not only in number but also in the meanings that they express.

He’s *engaged in* a kind of global sniper politics.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jun. 2004, p. 46)

So she *was* always *interested in* getting me to take as many different extracurricular activities, and so she signed me up for this little acting class.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Jan. 2005, p. 6)

“Such ability should not *be wasted in* looking for a lost cat.”

(*The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy*, p. 31)

“Lord Carter *was killed in* an automobile accident!” (*Ibid*, p. 41)

We’ve *been entangled in* too many weird mysteries already. (*Ibid*, p. 26)

The linen cocoon in which it *was wrapped* had been partly opened so that the professor could see Ra-Orkon’s face. (*Ibid*, p. 19)

‘Cafe and Saloon’ *was written* in very worn lettering.

(*A Man Like Morgan Kane*, p. 48)

e. of

In Old English, ‘of’ was used as a preposition which preceded agent. In Modern English, ‘of’ is sometimes employed in the same way, though it is felt to be rather literary. It is often employed with the ‘be + p.p.’ sequence that expresses emotion: be terrified, be disappointed, be frightened, etc.

And the people from the other kingdoms, who really and truly *were frightened of* their own dragons and daren’t go near them except to feed them, all felt frightfully jealous, and thought Incrediblania must be a very wonderful place.

(*The Home-Made Dragon*, p. 17)

f. over

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines ‘over’ as follows:

(definition 15) concerning; about; regarding (a quarrel over politics)⁹⁾

He was not one who would *be upset over* that sort of thing. (*Nemesis*, p. 37)

g. to

The preposition ‘to’ originally expresses a direction.

None of them *is known to* me personally, but one of them at least must be connected with the riddle I have to solve (*Nemesis*, p. 51)

h. under

Interpreted in a broad sense, ‘under’ is regarded as a preposition which precedes agent.

Those sealed instructions are to *be opened* only *under* certain circumstances, none of which has yet arisen. (*Nemesis*, p. 27)

i. with

Quasi-agents that follow the preposition ‘with’ often express instruments.

Not that it *wasn't* absolutely *crusted with* precious jewels and worth more than anyone in the kingdom could reckon up to. (*The Home-Made Dragon*, p. 35)

The palace *was crowded with* soldiers and noblemen. (*Ibid*, p. 39)

It's very difficult to put a name to that style, but television *is ridden with* cliché, radio too, more, much more television, and people are watching a lot of it these days --- . . . (*The Voice of EJ*, Dec. 2004, p. 42)

There are two kinds of quasi-agent which are not preceded by prepositions.

j. to-infinitive

This type of infinitive often expresses cause.

Well today we're very *pleased to be* with David Brenner, who is the editor and presenter of BBC Sports World. (*The Voice of EJ*, Jan. 2005, p. 40)

I came upon *The Code of The Samurai*, and I *was fascinated to realize* that samurai meant "to serve". (*The Voice of EJ*, Jul. 2004, p. 18)

k. that-clause and wh-clause

If I use my husband's name, everyone instantly knows he's Japanese, and you'd *be surprised how many people think* that gives them the right to ask me nosy questions about my husband and my marriage.

(*The Voice of EJ*, Dec. 2004, p. 86)

We can surmise that the preposition 'at' or the sequence 'at the fact that' is omitted in the following example.

I'm not surprised actually *that* Mr. Smith has got on well. (*Nemesis*, p. 108)

2. The Passive Force Effected by Preposition

As has been seen above, many kinds of prepositions are used with 'quasi-agents'. Next, let us examine what influence is imported to passive force by prepositions. The following five sentences appeared on our investigation.

(1) Professor Yarborough *was* at that time very *upset*.

(*The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy*, p. 34)

(2) 'Was Mr. Rafiel very *upset about* it ? (*Nemesis*, p. 36)

(3) Mr. Rafiel must *have been* very *upset at* losing you. (*Ibid*, p. 37)

(4) They would have thought it was a joke, except for the fact that it had come

from Alfred Hitchcock, who assured them that his friend, *was* badly *upset* by the mystery of the whispering mummy.

(*The Mystery of the Whispering Mummy*, p. 25)

(5) He was not one who would *be upset over* that sort of thing. (*Nemesis*, p. 37)

Notice that every sentence contains the word 'upset'. Examining the dictionary entry for 'upset' reveals that it is both a transitive verb and an adjective.

Which occurrences of 'upset' are past participles of transitive verbs, and which are adjectives in the five sentences above? It is not easy to determine which word class each 'upset' belongs to.

Fortunately, the difference in prepositions provides clues. As these five sentences differ in tense and mode, it is doubtful that we can reach an objective conclusion. In any case, let us examine each of the sentences above.

(1) no preposition

This 'be upset' sequence seems to be weakest in passive force. In other words, 'upset' is perhaps recognized as an adjective. It is accompanied by 'very', which is recognized as an adjective modifier.

(2) about

This 'upset' sequence must be regarded as adjectival if we follow the same reasoning as in (1) above. According to *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language*,¹⁰ the preposition 'about' has the following meanings: 'concerned with; having to do with; concerning; in connection with'. However, no good examples have been found with adjectives derives from past participles. From the aspect of grammar, the (2) sequence ought to be recognized as 'be-verb + adjective'. The relation between 'upset' and 'about' is rather weak.

(3) at

This sequence also includes 'very'. But the preposition 'at' has the following definition in *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English*.¹¹

8. used to show the thing that caused an action or feeling:

I'm surprised at you!

As 'at' is thought to express cause judging from the above quotation, it may give some passive force to the 'be upset' sequence.

(4) by

This sequence is felt to have the strongest force of all the 'be upset' sequences.

There are two reasons for this. First, the modifier which expresses degree is the adverb 'badly', not the adjective 'very'. Secondly, the preposition 'by' is the most common and typical one that precedes an agent in modern English.

(5) over

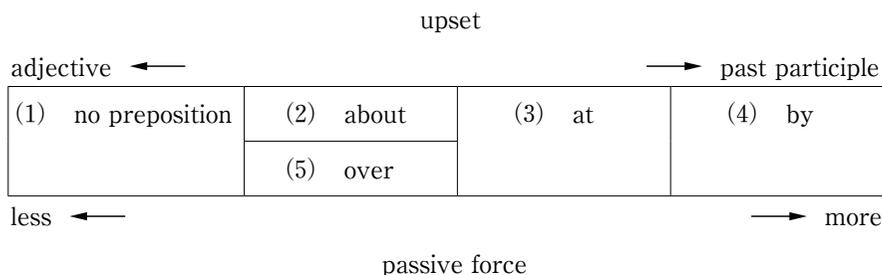
'Over' seems to be used in the same way as 'about', according to the following definition:¹²⁾

prep. 9. in connection with; while engaged in; concerning;

We all laughed over the affair.

Merely by roughly considering the sentences (1) to (5) above, we are unable to reach an exact conclusion as to which ones use 'upset' as an adjective and which ones as a past participle, but one thing can be noted. That is, passive force is rather differently felt by the kinds of prepositions that follow the passive equivalent sequences.

If we attempt to arrange these five sequences in order of the strength of passive force, we could use the following figure:



C. CLASS C

1. Non-agentive Passive

We can point out the main feature of this class by calling it 'agentless passive'. First of all, it seems important to clarify what difference exists between passive with agent (agentive passive), to which CLASS A and CLASS B belong, and passive without agent (non-agentive passive). As we suppose that every passive sentence has the same form, 'be + past participle', we can easily tell a passive sentence from an active sentence, whether there exists an agent or not. Then, let us compare the following two sentences.

- (6) This cake was made yesterday.
- (7) This cake was made by my aunt yesterday.

These are passive sentences. In sentence (6), it is not clear who made the cake. It may be 'my mother', or 'his sister', or a famous cook. According to Nakajima¹³⁾, passive sentences are defined by expressing agents. We will soon find that not expressing agent is deeply connected with the advantages of the passive. Many grammarians note that there are five main advantages in employing passive voice.

- (1) The subject in the corresponding active sentence is unknown or unimportant:

Two newspapers *were delivered* at the house every morning. The first one Miss Marple read while sipping her early morning tea, that is, if it *was delivered* in time.

(*Nemesis*, p. 7)

- (2) The subject in the corresponding active sentence is self-evident from the context:

On this particular afternoon, two days before the boys had received Alfred Hitchcock's letter, Professor Yarborough was standing in the Museum room, nervously tapping a pencil against the lid of the mummy case --- a lid that could *be lifted* off like a lid of a chest.

(*The Mystery of Whispering Mummy*, p. 18)

- (3) It may be preferable not to state the subject in the corresponding active sentence for reasons of tact or delicacy of sentiment:

Enough *has been said* here of a subject which will be treated more fully in a subsequent chapter.

(*A Comprehensive Dictionary of English Grammar*, p. 178)

- (4) The subject in the corresponding active sentence is quite general:

In Springfield he *had been informed* that Cross Bow was a huge ranch with about fifteen thousand head of cattle.

(*A Man Like Morgan Kane*, p.47)

- (5) The passive sentence may facilitate the connection of one sentence with another:

Children in trouble in the new industrial England were dealt with swiftly. If they were lucky *they were punished* by the factory owner. If they *were thought* particularly bad then they *were taken* before the magistrate for a stiffer penalty. Indeed, they were treated in no way differently from adult.

(*Caught in the Act*, p.11)

We can acknowledge that agentless passives (or non-agentive passives) naturally exhibit three of these advantages (numbers(1) to (3)).

2. The Big Proportion in Number

Next, let us examine what proportion of all passives are accounted for by CLASS C.

In *Essentials of English Grammar*, Otto Jespersen says that agentless passives occupy over 70% of the total. Jan Svartvik states in his survey that agentless passive covers some 80% of all passives.

According to the present writer's examination of her own materials, 402 examples belong to CLASS C passives and they cover about 80% of all passives (504 examples in all). The body of materials is very small, so the figure (80%) may not necessarily be exact. But it is fortunate that we have arrived at a reasonably similar figure to the one cited by Jan Svartvik.

3. The Large Range in Passive Scale

As seen above, CLASS C passives constitute the majority of all passives. Moreover, we must acknowledge that CLASS C occupies the widest range in the passive scale.

The following examples are very close to CLASS A passives with regard to passive force, because sequences like 'was said' and 'were told' can be recognized to have rather strong passive force. Their agents seem to be omitted only in order to avoid tedious and unnecessary repetition. As a matter of fact, it is not grammatically unnatural to add them as agents, though it may be stylistically inferior.

But if an Incrediblanian ever met anyone from another kingdom and anything *was said* about dragons, the Incrediblanian would just put on a lofty air.

(*The Home-Made Dragon*, p. 17)

This should reach you, if my solicitors have done what they *were told* to do and, if the posts have done the duty they are expected to perform, on the 11th of the month.

(*Nemesis*, p. 41)

On the other hand, we can hardly find any passive force in the following examples. She *was* deathly *tired*, so tired that she wished she could sleep and sleep for ever.

(*A Man Like Morgan Kane*, p. 40)

One daughter *is married* and lives in America.

(*Nemesis*, p. 38)

ndicated by place in a broad sense.

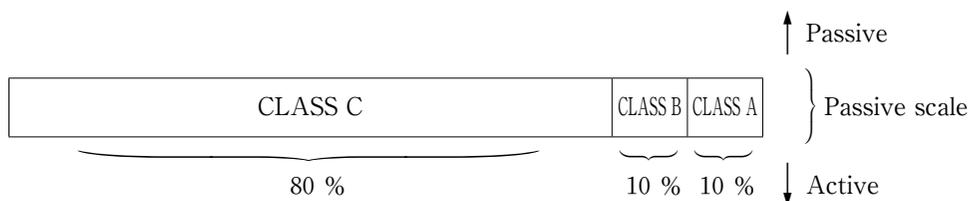
CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have investigated voice from the standpoint of agent.

First, we assume passive force and divide passive voice into three classes. Agentive passives belong to CLASS A, passives with quasi-agent to CLASS B, and agentless (or non-agentive) passives to CLASS C.

Secondly, clarifying the definition of 'agent', we examine four agentive functions and the differences between them.

Then, we investigate each feature of the three classes and examine the passive force. As described above, we show the figure concerning passive force once more.



Consequently, we can understand that every class occupies the various points in passive scale. Some of them are extremely close to active (i. e. some of them have strong passive force). Passive force seems to be contained in the 'be + p.p.' form itself, and is not much influenced by the existence of agent. But if one kind of 'be + p.p.' form is taken out and examined, its passive force is felt differently, being influenced by agents.

Lastly, we examine interesting agents and their features.

NOTES

- 1) H. Sweet, *A New English Grammar* (London: Clarendon Press), pp. 1891-1898
- 2) G. O. Curme, *A Grammar of the English Language* (Boston: Heath, 1959), p. 203
- 3) G. O. Curme, *A Grammar of the English Language* (Boston: Heath, 1959), p. 217
- 4) Randolph Quirk *et al.* *A Grammar of Contemporary English* (London: Longmans, 1972), pp. 801-801
- 5) At present the term "agent" is used as a technical term similar to Jespersen's 'converted subject' and Sweet's 'inverted subject'. The definition is roughly equal to the former one given by Jan Svartvis.
- 6) The use of the preposition 'by' preceding agent is attested from the early 15th century according to *Eigo Tai no Kenkyu* (Hokuseido Co. 1965),
- 7) e.g. Ralph B. Long & Dorothy R. Long, *The System of English Grammar* (London: Scott, Foresman and Company), p. 287
- 8) 『英語 態の研究』 p. 184, quoting *Morphology* by E. A. Nida (1949)
- 9) *Webster's New World Dictionary 3rd College Ed.* (1988)
- 10) *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1965)
- 11) *Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* (London: Longman Group Ltd. 1995)
- 12) *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam, 1965)
- 13) 中島文雄 『文法の原理』 東京：研究社 1949
- 14) Janus: Ancient Italian god, whose temple was closed in times of peace, guardian of doors and gates, represented with faces on front and back of head.
- 15) Jan Svartvik, *On Voice in the English Verb* (The Hague: Mouton & Co, 1966) p. 157

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