

ON THE MEANING OF THE JAPANESE PASSIVE

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I

In her discussion of the Japanese adversative passive, Anna Wierzbicka writes (1988: 260):

“The problem is extremely interesting and important both for intrinsic reasons and because of its wider methodological implications. It can be formulated like this: if one form can be used in a number of different ways, are we entitled to postulate for it a number of different meanings or should we rather search for one semantic common denominator (regarded as the MEANING of the form in question) and attribute the variety of uses to the interaction between this meaning and the linguistic or extralinguistic context?”

Though it “may seem obvious” that the second stand is “methodologically preferable” (261), she takes the first position and concludes that “the Japanese passive has to be recognized as multiply ambiguous” (286). In the following I intend to show that this view is both wrong and fruitful.

Wierzbicka argues that “Japanese actually has a number of different syntactic constructions which use the same passive morphology” and that the establishment of these constructions “is tantamount to detecting a number of meanings which the language has grammaticalized” (261). But how do we recognize these syntactic constructions? Wierzbicka points to the semantic categorization of nouns and verbs and states that the resulting categories “can be thought of as inherent ‘syntactic features’, but of course such ‘syntactic features’ are not something independent of and additional to the meaning of the nouns which they characterize: they are simply part of the meaning” (287). It follows that the meaning of a syntactic construction can in principle be identified with the meanings of its constituent parts and their relations. The meaning of the Japanese passive can then be identified by eliminating the meanings of the syntactic constructions in which it occurs.

Consider the following examples (with Wierzbicka’s translations):

- (1) *John wa Mary ni kare no piano o hikareta.*
 John TOP Mary DAT he GEN piano ACC play-PSV-PAST
 ‘Mary played John’s piano; John was negatively affected by it.’
- (2) *John wa Mary ni piano o hikareta.*
 John TOP Mary DAT piano ACC play-PSV-PAST
 ‘Mary played the piano; John was negatively affected by it.’

These sentences represent different constructions in Wierzbicka’s account: the first exemplifies the “passive of undesirable action involving one’s property or a person related to one”, whereas the second exemplifies the “passive of undesirable local event caused by another person” (290). The difference between the two constructions resides in the fact that John is connected with the piano in the first sentence and with the location of the event in the second. He is connected with the agent of the event in the following example:

- (3) *John wa hitori musume ni amerikajin to kekkon sareta.*
 John TOP one daughter DAT American COM marriage do-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s only daughter married an American; John was negatively affected by it.’

If we eliminate the difference between the three syntactic constructions, we are left with a person who is negatively affected by an event which involves someone or something connected with him/her. The following sentence allows all three interpretations:

- (4) *John wa kodomo ni tabako o suwareta.*
 John TOP child DAT cigarettes ACC smoke-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s child was smoking cigarettes’, ‘a child was smoking John’s cigarettes’, ‘a child was smoking cigarettes near John’.

Consider furthermore the following examples:

- (5) *John wa raifu seebaa ni kodomo o tasukerareta.*
 John TOP life guard DAT child ACC rescue-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s child was rescued by a lifeguard; John was positively affected by it.’
- (6) *John wa raifu seebaa ni booto o tasukerareta.*
 John TOP life guard DAT boat ACC rescue-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s boat was rescued by a lifeguard; John was positively affected by it.’
- (7) *John wa dareka ni tsuma o korosareta.*
 John TOP someone DAT wife ACC kill-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s wife was killed by someone; John was negatively affected by it.’

- (8) *John wa dareka ni ie o yakareta.*
 John TOP someone DAT house ACC burn-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s house was burnt by someone; John was negatively affected by it.’

Sentences (5) and (6) exemplify the “passive of transitive good fortune caused accidentally by another person”, while sentences (7) and (8) exemplify the “passive of transitive misfortune caused by another person”. As is clear from these examples, the fact that John is negatively affected is not an inherent feature of the passive verb form but results from the lexical meaning of the verbs ‘kill’ and ‘burn’, as opposed to ‘rescue’. What the sentences have in common is that John’s desire is of no consequence to the event. If it is, a different construction is used:

- (9) *John wa raifu seebaa ni kodomo o tasukete moratta.*
 John TOP life guard DAT child ACC rescue-GER get-PAST
 ‘John’s child was rescued by a lifeguard because John wanted it; John was positively affected by it.’

It follows that the negative interpretation of the examples (1) through (4) must be explained from the fact that John’s desire is of no consequence to an event which involves someone or something connected with him. As soon as it is clear why the affected person’s desire is irrelevant to the situation, the negative implication disappears. Consider the following example:

- (10) *Paama o kakete soto ni detara hito ni furimukareta.*
 perm ACC apply-GER outside DAT go-COND people DAT turn-look-
 PSV-PAST
 ‘When I went out after having a perm people turned to look at me.’

This sentence exemplifies the “passive of desirable or undesirable action involving another person”. The irrelevance of the affected person’s desire is clear because *furimukareta* ‘turned to look at me’ is sufficiently motivated by *paama o kakete* ‘after having a perm’. Similarly:

- (11) *Eigakan de kawaii ko ni tonari ni suwarareta.*
 cinema INST pretty girl DAT near DAT sit-PSV-PAST
 ‘In the cinema a pretty girl sat next to me; I was affected by it.’
 (12) *Kodomo wa kawaii inu ni jaretsukareta.*
 child TOP lovely dog DAT frisk-around-PSV-PAST
 ‘A lovely dog frisked around the child; the child was affected by it.’

The ambiguity in the interpretation of these sentences does not result from their syntactic constructions but from the lexical meanings of their components. The adjective *kawaii* ‘cute’ suggests a positive rather than negative interpretation while it is clear that the affected person exerts no influence on the event expressed

by the verb. When we eliminate *paama o kakete* in (10) or *kawaii* in (11) or (12), the negative interpretation imposes itself.¹

There is an interesting difference between the following two examples:

- (13) *Kinoo wa kaze ni fukareta.*
 yesterday TOP wind DAT blow-PSV-PAST
 ‘Yesterday I was affected by the wind.’
- (14) *Kinoo wa ame ni furareta.*
 yesterday TOP rain DAT fall-PSV-PAST
 ‘Yesterday I was affected by the rain.’

Wierzbicka observes that in the usual interpretation (13) implies a neutral and (14) a negative effect and attributes the difference to the fact that the rain “may inconvenience a person in a variety of ways, not necessarily by wetting him” whereas the wind “is less likely to inconvenience people who are not physically exposed to it” (274). The latter variant is called the “passive of unspecified bodily effect”, compare:

- (15) *Kodomo wa haha ni kata o dakareta.*
 child TOP mother DAT shoulders ACC hold-PSV-PAST
 ‘The mother was holding the child’s shoulders; the child was affected by it.’

These examples again show that the meaning ‘negatively affected’ is not part of the meaning of the Japanese passive but results from the combination of two distinct features, which may, by way of convention, be called ‘affected’ and ‘undergoing’. The negative interpretation arises when the sentence does not contain an element which separates the way of undergoing the action from the way of being affected by it. The presence of a bodily effect specifies the way of undergoing and thereby frees the way of being affected from its negative connotation.

The simultaneous presence of the features ‘affected’ and ‘undergoing’ severely restricts the possibilities of using the passive with an inanimate subject. The only common variant in main verbs is the “passive of local event affecting an object via its parts”, which is similar to the passive of bodily effect:

- (16) *Kuruma wa ressha ni baa o hikkakerareta.*
 car TOP train DAT bar ACC pull-off-PSV-PAST
 ‘The train pulled the bumper bar off the car; the car was negatively affected by it.’

The negative connotation is not necessarily present in poetic language:

¹ Matt Shibatani informs me that example (12) conveys a sense of uneasiness even if *kawaii* is not omitted. This supports the view taken here.

- (17) *Matsu wa yuki ni eda o orareta.*
 pine TOP snow DAT branches ACC break-PSV-PAST
 ‘The snow broke the branches of the pine-tree; the pine-tree was affected by it.’
- (18) *Matsu wa hi ni eda o terasareta.*
 pine TOP sun DAT branches ACC shine-PSV-PAST
 ‘The sun made the branches of the pine-tree shine; the pine-tree was affected by it.’

Consider now the following examples:

- (19) *John wa tsuma ni shinareta.*
 John TOP wife DAT die-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s wife died on him.’
- (20) *?John wa tsuma ni naorareta.*
 John TOP wife DAT recover-PSV-PAST
 ‘John’s wife recovered on him.’
- (21) *John wa tsuma ni naorarete yorokonde iru.*
 John TOP wife DAT recover-PSV-GER be-pleased-GER is
 ‘John’s wife having recovered, he is pleased.’
- (22) *John wa tsuma ni shinarete jiyuu ni natta.*
 John TOP wife DAT die-PSV-GER free DAT become-PAST
 ‘When his wife died John became free.’
- (23) *Kodomo no toki ame ni furarenagara gakkoo ni kayotta natsukashii omoide ga aru.*
 child GEN time rain DAT fall-PSV-while school DAT walk-PAST dear memories NOM are
 ‘I have dear memories of those childhood years when I used to walk to school with rain falling on me.’

It is clear that the negative interpretation is lost in the subordinate clause. Wierzbicka concludes that “there is an essential difference between sentences in which the passive verb is the main verb and those in which it is subordinated” (262). I strongly disagree with this point of view. The main verb actually specifies the way of being affected and thereby limits the semantic contribution of the subordinate clause to the way of undergoing the action expressed by the passive verb. The resulting interpretation arises from the collocation of lexical meanings, not from the syntactic construction itself.

It is possible to find examples in which there is ambiguity between the interpretation ‘negatively affected’ and an interpretation where the features ‘affected’ and ‘undergoing’ are separated. Consider the following:

- (24) *Kyoosoo de kodomo ni ittoo ni narareta.*
 competition INST child DAT first-prize DAT become-PSV-PAST
 ‘In the competition, my child got first prize; I was affected by it.’

The interpretation that the parent was positively affected by the event requires that he/she took part in the competition and was beaten him/herself. Similarly:

- (25) *Haha wa kodomo ni nakareta.*
 mother TOP child DAT cry-PSV-PAST
 ‘The child cried; the mother was negatively affected by it.’
- (26) *John wa kirei na ko ni nakareta.*
 John TOP pretty being girl DAT cry-PSV-PAST
 ‘A pretty girl cried because of John; John was affected by it.’

Wierzbicka observes (270): “The first is most likely to be understood as implying that the mother was negatively affected by her child’s crying; the second as implying that John was positively affected by the pretty girl’s crying. But this is not the whole difference. The second sentence (if understood as implying a positive effect) also implies that the pretty girl cried OVER JOHN, whereas the first sentence (if understood as implying a negative effect) does not imply that the child cried over his mother. John can be understood as having been positively affected only if the girl’s crying had something to do with him (was caused by him or had him as its object). It cannot, for example, be due simply to John’s sadistic pleasure in seeing the girl’s distress. The mother is understood as negatively affected by an action which does not directly involve her.” This is a consequence of the fact that the feature ‘undergoing’ must be present either jointly with the feature ‘affected’, as in (25), or separately in another semantic slot, as in (26). The meaning of the Japanese passive is the same, but its interpretation differs according to the collocation of lexical meanings because the latter suggest different syntactic interpretations.²

II

The variants of the Japanese passive discussed by Wierzbicka actually represent a subclass of its total semantic range. This subclass is characterized by two supplementary conditions: (a) the subject is not agentive, and (b) the subject is affected. Neither of these conditions is a necessary prerequisite for the use of the Japanese passive, as is shown by the following examples (cf. Jacobsen 1982: 147f.).

² According to Matt Shibatani, the sense of uneasiness is still present in example (26). This is evidently due to the lexical meaning of the verb.

If the subject is agentive with respect to the action and at the same time negatively affected by the event, the passive verb has potential meaning:

- (27) *Inu wa byooki de nani mo taberarenai.*
 dog TOP sick INST what ever eat-PSV-NEG
 ‘The dog is sick and cannot eat anything.’
- (28) *John wa paatii ni korarenakatta.*
 John TOP party DAT come-PSV-NEG-PAST
 ‘John was not able to come to the party.’

The sentential negation renders the agentive role of the subject in the action compatible with the property of being negatively affected by the event.³

If the subject is not affected, this feature shifts to the speaker and the passive verb has “spontaneous” (*jihatsu*) meaning:

- (29) *Watakushi wa kare no kooi ga shimijimi kanjiraremasu.*
 I TOP he GEN kindness NOM keenly feel-PSV-POL
 ‘I am keenly touched by his kindness.’
- (30) *Kono shashin o miru tabi ni ryooshin ya kyoodai no koto ga omoidasaremasu.*
 this picture ACC see time DAT parents and brothers GEN thing NOM remember-PSV-POL
 ‘I never look at this picture without remembering my parents and brothers.’

“Expressions traditionally categorized as spontaneous proper generally deal with mental or emotional activity that occurs involuntarily” (Jacobsen 1982: 147).

If the subject is agentive and not affected by the event, the speaker is affected in the sense that his desire is of no consequence to what happens and the passive verb has honorific meaning:

- (31) *Tanaka sensei wa asu Tookyoo ni ikareru soo desu.*
 Tanaka teacher TOP tomorrow Tokyo DAT go-PSV REP is-POL
 ‘Tanaka-sensei is supposed to go to Tokyo tomorrow.’

³ Similarly without a sentential negation (and with a consonantal verb stem, cf. Martin 1975: 301):

- (43) *Ano nessa no ue o hadashi de ikareru man ka?*
 that hot-sand GEN top ACC barefoot INST go-PSV thing Q
 ‘How could anyone walk on that burning sand in bare feet?’
- (44) *Boku, Amerika e ikaresoo na n da.*
 I, America to go-PSV-EVID being it is
 ‘It appears I will be able to go to America.’

- (32) *Otoosan ga nakunarareta no wa itsu deshita ka?*
 father NOM pass-away-PSV-PAST GEN TOP when is-POL-PAST Q
 ‘When was it that your father passed away?’

(It is recalled that the Japanese verbs *shinu* ‘die’ and *nakunaru* ‘pass away’ behave as dynamic activities.) It is actually possible to find examples of ambiguity between the strictly passive and honorific interpretations of the passive verb, as in the following instances (cf. Martin 1975: 296):

- (33) *Ato de sono sensei wa koochoo ni okorareta n ja nai ka na.*
 later INST that teacher TOP principal DAT be-angry-PSV-PAST PARTI-
 CLES
 ‘I bet later the teacher felt the wrath of the principal’ or ‘the teacher was angry at the principal’.
- (34) *Kare wa ano sensei ni nihongo o oshierareta.*
 he TOP that teacher DAT Japanese ACC teach-PSV-PAST
 ‘He was taught Japanese by that teacher’, ‘He deigned to teach Japanese to that teacher’.

On the other hand, the feature ‘affected’ is eliminated from the meaning of the sentence when the passive verb form is suppressed, even if the meaning is strictly passive in the sense that somebody is undergoing the action. Consider the following examples (Jacobsen 1982: 130):

- (35) *Keisatsu ni tsukamattara doo suru?*
 police DAT be-caught-COND how do
 ‘What will you do if you are caught by the police?’
- (36) *Warui koto o shite mo hito ni sugu shirete shimau.*
 bad thing ACC do-GER ever people DAT soon be-known-GER finish
 ‘People soon find out when I do something bad.’
- (37) *Higaisha ga mune o sasarete shinde iru no ga jimoto no hito ni mitsukatta.*
 victim NOM chest ACC stab-PSV-GER die-GER is GEN NOM local GEN
 person DAT be-found-PAST
 ‘The victim was found dead by a local person, stabbed in the chest.’

The intransitive verbs *tsukamaru* in (35) and *shireru* in (36) can be replaced by the corresponding passives *tsukamaerareru* ‘be caught’ and *shirareru* ‘be found out’ because the states of affairs they express are adverse ones for the subject, but the replacement of the intransitive verb *mitsukaru* in (37) by the passive *mitsukerareru* ‘be found’ causes a substantial change in meaning because there is no obvious semantic slot for the feature ‘affected’. If the way of being affected is specified by other meanings in the sentence, it need not be encoded in the verb form:

- (38) *Otaku no goshinsetsu de daibu tasukarimashita.*
 you GEN HON-kindness INST greatly be-helped-POL-PAST
 ‘I was helped greatly by your kindness.’

The intransitive verb in this example may be compared with the passive in (29) above.

When the feature ‘affected’ is not expressed, the alternative intransitive verb has the same semantic range as the passive (strictly passive, potential, spontaneous, honorific), as will be clear from the following examples:

- (39) *Arashi de densen ga kireta.*
 storm INST telephone-lines NOM be-cut-PAST
 ‘The telephone lines were severed in the storm.’
- (40) *Kono ringo wa zembu sono hako ni hairanai.*
 these apples TOP all that box DAT enter-NEG
 ‘These apples do not all fit into that box.’
- (41) *Ii kangae ga ukanda.*
 good idea NOM come-to-mind-PAST
 ‘A good idea came to mind.’
- (42) *Nani ni suru ka kimarimashita ka?*
 what DAT do Q be-decided-POL-PAST Q
 ‘Have you decided what you will have?’

Jacobsen concludes that “the basic function of *rare* is to provide a productive means of converting dynamic into non-dynamic predicates” (1982: 148). Though this is true in a general way, it does not explain the whole semantic range of the passive as a category: “The extensions from the prototype which a given word or construction allows are as important to an adequate linguistic description as the prototype itself” because the prototype “is linked in different languages with different sets of extensions” (Wierzbicka 1988: 18). A full description of a grammatical category requires an exhaustive treatment of all its variants in all possible environments along the lines which Wierzbicka has indicated. But it also requires us to “search for one semantic common denominator (regarded as the MEANING of the form in question) and to attribute the variety of uses to the interaction between this meaning and the linguistic or extralinguistic context” (260).

Thus, I think that the passive suffix *rare* adds a valence ‘affected’ to the verb in the same way as the causative suffix *sase* adds a valence ‘causing’ and the potential suffix *e* adds a valence ‘enabled’ (cf. already Bloch 1946: 310). The supplementary valence can be linked to other elements of the sentence in a variety of ways, yielding a number of different syntactic interpretations.

III

In view of the foregoing one may wonder if the term “passive” is appropriate for the Japanese passive. I think that it is not. I also think that this should not keep us from using the term.

Shibatani characterizes the “passive prototype” as follows (1985: 837):

- a. Primary pragmatic function: Defocusing of agent.
- b. Semantic properties:
 - (i) Semantic valence: Predicate (agent, patient).
 - (ii) Subject is affected.
- c. Syntactic properties:
 - (i) Syntactic encoding: agent $\rightarrow \emptyset$ (not encoded).
patient \rightarrow subject.
 - (ii) Valence of P[redicate]: Active = P/n;
Passive = P/n-1.
- d. Morphological property:

Active = P;
Passive = P[+passive].

It appears that this characterization is more appropriate for the intransitive verbs in examples (35) and following than for the passive verbs in the earlier examples. The characteristic feature of the Japanese passive is the raising rather than lowering of the number of valences, and the affected participant need not be the subject of the sentence. These facts cast serious doubt on the usefulness of a universalist definition of the term “passive”.

Andersen has recently argued that “the use of the term ‘passive’ as an expression for voice/diathesis in modern linguistics and especially in reference to the structure of Classical Greek is diametrically opposed to the use of the term *páthos* in the Greek grammatical tradition” (1989: 2) because “Thrax has chosen the term *páthos* ‘affection’ (generally translated as PASSIVE) to designate the ‘middle’ voice” (1989: 12). Since “affectedness” is “nothing more than the actual meaning of the term *páthos* in the Greek language (and of the term *passivum* in Latin)” (Andersen 1989: 15), I see no reason to abandon Bloch’s term “passive” for the meaning of the Japanese suffix *rare*.

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