

## NOTES ON PASSIVE AND PSEUDO-INTRANSITIVE CONSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND ARABIC

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1. Language leaves at our disposal a variety of structures that we could mould our messages into. Our choice of one or the other is determined by the functional features that each of these structures is characterized with. It is a medium with which we can describe processes and activities. It also functions so as to establish social relationships between interlocutors – the speaker, the addressee, ... Thirdly, it functions so as to relate to the features of the relevant situation in which it is used (cf. Halliday 1970:143). All these functions influence the linguistic structure in specific ways.

As far as the content of the message is concerned, this is categorized by language into a limited number of processes which are manifested in a limited number of structural 'modes', such as the transitive and intransitive modes. However, within these, we may find two or more alternative choices that we can choose from to express different processes. The choice of one from these available structures is determined by the way we see the process, the participants, and the roles that these participants play in the activity that we want to describe.

One good candidate for this variation is the choice that we usually make between the passive structure, where the logical object – the patient – is brought into prominence and thus assumes the role of the grammatical subject, and another structure which is characterized by a voice difference from the passive, but in which the logical object assumes, as it does in the passive, the role of the grammatical subject. This structural variation is illustrated in the following sentences from English.

- (1) a. The soup is being cooked.  
b. The soup is cooking.
- (2) a. That book was sold out within two months.  
b. That book is selling fast.
- (3) a. The cotton shirt was washed by the maid.  
b. Cotton shirts wash easier than others.

I shall term the (b) sentences as 'pseudo-intransitive' structures following Lyons (1968:363)<sup>1</sup>. The question is: what is it that determines the choice of one or the other? Is there a difference in meaning involved? In the following I shall try to distinguish between the uses and hence the meaning, of each of the two, and explain the cause of this difference in meaning between them, consulting examples from English and Standard Arabic. I shall also attempt to show the areas of similarity between the two languages in this respect.

2. In English these processes are expressed in sentences consisting of a number of syntactic categories denoting the different aspects of the process: a lexical item that denotes the process itself, which is the verb; and those that denote the participants in the process. These are the roles of the agent, or actor, that initiates the process; the patient, or the goal; the receiver, or the benefactor, etc. The difference between these clause types is basically that of the number and type of inherent, or necessary participants, or roles, that these clause types require. This corresponds to the distinction we make between the transitive and intransitive clause types and the relation that obtains between them. Obviously, in clauses of the transitive type there are two inherent roles at least – i.e. that of the affected participant<sup>2</sup>, and the agent or initiator (and in some cases, the benefactor or recipient of the action). Verbs denoting various actions and processes subcategorize into distinct types, each requiring a specific number of participants' roles. But in clauses of the intransitive type there is only one inherent role. Thus we have on the one hand:

(4) John built the chair.

and

(5) The chair was built by John.

On the other, we have

(6) Susan laughed.

and

(7) The train arrived in the station.

This could be taken in logical terms as the difference between one-and two-place predicates. We may notice here that, beside these, we have also sentences like:

(8) I am reading.

(9) The chair was built.

<sup>1</sup> This construction has been well-attested in the literature. Jespersen (1961:347) calls the use of verbs in this construction their "passivo-active" use since the sentence is passive in meaning while the verb is in the active form. O'Grady (1980) uses the term "derived intransitive" for this construction since the transitive use of the verbs tends to be more basic.

<sup>2</sup> The term *affected* is used here to avoid the discrepancies between causative and transitive sentences that the term *goal* might invoke (cf. Halliday 1970:156).

which might be taken to belong to the same clause type as that of sentences (6) and (7) since there is only one apparent participant: the agent, or initiator in the first, and the affected in the second.

However, these cases of what is generally termed as 'object deletion' and 'agentless passive', are not to be mistaken for the intransitive clause type in any way. While there is one inherent participant role in sentences (6) and (7), there are two such roles in (8) and (9). The second is present, albeit not overtly realized. Hence, the difference between (4) and (5), and (8) and (9) is that of obliterating the affected participant in (8) and the agent participant in (9). They are there although they are not expressed openly.

Distinction between clause types is also made in terms of voice. This concerns the choice of the subject of the sentence from the various participants in the process, combined with the appropriate modification on the verbal phrase. Active voice sentences choose the agent or the instrument participant while the subject of the passive sentences is the affected participant.

All this brings into the discussion another construction which may belong to a separate clause type. This is the pseudo-intransitive construction in sentences like.

(10) Science fiction sells fast.

What we have here and in similar sentences (cf. sentence (1. b) above) is a construction in which the patient or the logical object – i.e. the affected participant – functions as the subject, similar to passive sentences. Yet the verb is in the active voice.

How similar, or dissimilar is (10) from the passive (11)?

(11) The book was sold.

In both sentences the sentence is built of categories indicating the process and the affected participant. If this is the case then one may assume that they would be understood in the same way. However, we do distinguish between the two sentences, and hence the structures; and usually choose one or the other at different times and in different contexts. What is then the semantic difference between them? We may start with a brief account of the function that the passive construction performs.

The choice of the passive when talking about 'selling books' is related, in Halliday (1970) terms, to the textual function of the language and the kind of modification this function imposes on the linguistic structure. This "thematic structure of the clause is the one responsible for bringing the affected participant into focus as the theme, moving it to the beginning of the clause as the 'psychological subject'". The fronting of the affected participant is in agreement with "the tendency in Modern English to associate theme and modal (grammatical) subject whenever the actor [...] is outside the complex of the theme". Thus passivization "disassociates the actor so that it can either be put in focal position at the end or, more frequently, omitted" (Halliday 1970:161). Thus the passive construction contains

the same two participant roles that its active counterpart does: the actor and the affected participants. Textual considerations will lead to the omission of the actor, or agent, in those cases where it is omitted. The actor or the initiator of the action is brought into perspective but it is not given a central role in the scene (cf. Fillmore 1977). This is the reason behind what is generally believed about passive constructions with unmentioned agents, that there is always the feeling that the deed has been carried out by somebody and that the idea of an agent, or actor, or initiator is present even if it is not overtly realized on the surface.

On the other hand, the pseudo-intransitive construction is used when we choose to express the process or action – i.e. describe it by bringing into the picture the affected participant but none of the other participants. The agent, or actor is not brought into perspective or into the scene. This is part of the ideational function of the language. Possibly, this is why the idea of the so-called inherent passivity is present in such constructions since it is felt that the idea of agency is not involved – or not encoded. The difference between the two constructions can be seen as that of difference in orientation. As Halliday (1967) puts it, the passive construction is agent-oriented, while the pseudo-intransitive is process-oriented.

In pseudo-intransitive constructions we seem to predicate a certain attribute of an entity when that entity is felt to possess some property that facilitates or enhances what we predicate of it. Of course, that does not mean that there is no agent behind the carrying out of the process. In such constructions human agency is necessary. It is simply not encoded (O'Grady 1980). This is why these constructions are felt to be passive, and why verbs that enter into these constructions are felt to differ from ordinary intransitive verbs.

As a concrete example of the difference between passive and pseudo-intransitive constructions, let us take the following sentences.

- (12) Those shirts washed fast.  
 (13) Those shirts were washed easily.

Talking about the event of washing would direct us toward choosing the passive construction (13). But if we talk about a certain property that a given thing inherently possesses – i.e. if this thing belongs to the class of things that are 'washable' – then the construction chosen will be the pseudo-intransitive one.

What has been said about 'wash' can be equally said about the other members of the class of verbs that occur in pseudo-intransitive constructions; verbs like *cook, bake, fry, convert, build, add, do, cut*, etc..., but not, say, verbs like: *buy, see, cut, or help*, for example.<sup>3</sup>

Talking about a certain kind of meat and how susceptible it is to 'cooking' we say.

- (14) Lamb usually cooks quickly.

<sup>3</sup> There is no clear limit on type of verbs that can occur in pseudo-intransitive construction. Although this construction is very frequent in English not all verbs can be used pseudo-intransitively (cf. Lyons 1968:367).

It is as if we are talking about lamb as belonging to those things that are 'quickly cooked'. It has something that facilitates 'cooking'. But someone wondering 'how come the lamb chops were so delicious' would be told that 'they were cooked in the oven for 45 minutes'. The same can be said about the verb 'lock' in the following two sentences.

- (15) The door is locked.  
 (16) The door locks securely.

The first sentence speaks of the door being locked by some agent, though this is not expressed openly, while the second speaks of the 'lockability' of the door, a property that this door is characterized with. It has something which facilitates 'locking'.

We may note here that pseudo-intransitive constructions are frequently found with the verb in the present simple tense. This can be the reason why these constructions are understood the way they are – i.e. the subject possesses an inherent property which facilitates what is predicated of it. Or it could be the result of the way we understand this construction; the present simple tense being the one used to express general facts and tendencies. So is the tendency to use generic subjects in this construction rather than specific ones. Notice the big difference in acceptability between the following sentences.

- (17) Marines don't kill easy.  
 (18) That marine soldier didn't kill easy.

But this difference in acceptability may be a property of specific verbs. We can easily find perfectly acceptable sentences of this construction with specific subjects (e.g. sentence (16) above), or with verbs in other tenses such as (1b) and (12) above.

3. Arabic, with its rich morphological system has the tools to express the difference in meaning signified by the passive and pseudo-intransitive constructions. The discussion of the syntactic and morphological properties of the constructions that express these differences and the semantic relation between them will be our main concern in this section.

Passivization is realized in Arabic by a change in the vowel pattern of the verb stem, e.g. *katab* 'wrote' becomes *kutib* 'was written'. In Arabic passive sentences the agent is not usually mentioned. 'By-phrases' are generally unacceptable though one may find them occasionally and in some fixed expressions – i.e. idiomatic – in modern styles. Moreover, the affected participant, i.e. the logical object – assumes the position and the case inflection of the subject of the active counterpart.

- (19) *kataba*      *zayd-un*      *al-kitaab-a*  
 wrote      Zayd-nom      def-book-acc  
 'Zayd wrote the book'  
 (20) *kutiba*      *al-kitaab-u*  
 written      def-book-nom  
 'The book was written'

The equivalent of the pseudo-intransitive construction is achieved through the choice of the appropriate derived verb form. Arabic, like other Semitic languages, has a rich system of verb form derivation which allows the construction of a number of derived verb forms from the basic form or other derived forms through changes in the vowel pattern and prefixation. These derived forms add some modification to the general sense of the basic form. The modification ranges between causation, extensiveness, intensiveness, reciprocity, reflexivity, intransitivization, ...<sup>4</sup>. This change in verb form will necessitate some changes in the syntactic structure of the clause. Some of the derived forms are intransitive while the basic verb form from which they are derived is transitive. It is thus felt that in these cases the transitive construction is more basic than the intransitive one. This resembles what we noticed with the English pseudo-intransitive construction. The following pairs of sentences exemplify this.

- (21) a. mazzaqa zayd-un al-biṭaaqat-a (verb form II)  
tore Zayd-nom def-card-acc  
'Zayd tore the card'  
b. tamazzaqa-t al-biṭaaqat-u (verb form V)  
tore-fem def-car-nom  
'the card tore'
- (22) a. kaṣaf-tu al-sirr-a (verb form I)  
disclosed-I def-secret-acc  
'I disclosed the secret'  
b. ʔinkaṣafa al-sirr-u (verb form VII)  
disclosed def-secret-nom  
'the secret was disclosed'
- (23) a. malaʔ-tu al-kaʔs-a (verb form I)  
filled-I def-glass-acc  
'I filled the glass'  
b. ʔimtalaʔa al-kaʔs-u (verb form VIII)  
filled def-glass-nom  
'the glass was filled'

In the above pairs the (a) sentences differ from the (b) sentences in that the affected participant – i.e. the logical object – assumes the position of the subject in the latter set, and the position of the object in the former set. In the (a) sentences it is the agent or the initiator of the action that assumes the position of the subject. Nevertheless, the two sets are similar in voice. All the verbs are in the active form.

Beside the above two sets there is a third set of related sentences. There are:

- (21) c. muzziqa-t al-biṭaaqat-u  
torn-fem def-card-nom  
'the card was torn'

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of the morphology and semantics of the verb forms in Arabic see Wright (1975) and Macdonald (1963).

- (22) c. kuṣifa al-sirr-u  
disclosed def-secret-nom  
'the secret was disclosed'  
(23) c. muliʔa al-kaʔs-u  
filled def-glass-nom  
'the glass was filled'

These are passive sentences as the verb forms indicate. They are the passive counterparts of the (a) sentences above. When we compare them with the (b) sentences above we notice that in both constructions there is one overt participant role – this is the role of the affected participant. In both constructions this participant assumes the position of the subject. In addition to this, there is no mention of the agent or the initiator in the sentences of either of the two subsets.

The two, however, differ in two things. First, the verbs of the (b) sentences are in the active voices whereas the verbs of the (c) sentences are in the passive voice. Second, it seems that although both constructions exhibit one overt participant role, they differ with regard the roles they require inherently. In the passive (c) sentences, two inherent roles obtain: the affected participant, and the agent or initiator of the action, though this latter is not overtly realized. The (b) sentences are of the type that requires one inherent role; that is of the affected participant.

This distinction corresponds to the distinction we find between their meanings. The (c) sentences are understood as denoting processes that have been caused by somebody, in spite of the fact that this 'somebody has been relegated to obscurity', so to speak. Nevertheless, the idea of an agent is still present. In other words, these sentences are agent-oriented in Halliday's terms. On the other hand, the (b) sentences are understood as denoting processes as they are predicated of certain entities. Although there must be an agent or an initiator of the process but it has no place in the picture. These sentences are process-oriented. Let us illustrate this difference in meaning between the two constructions with following example.

- (24) al-zujaa-j-u xuddiṣa  
def-glass-nom scratched  
'the glass was scratched'  
(25) yataxaddaṣu al-zujaa-j-u bi-sur<sup>c</sup>at-in  
scratches def-glass-nom with-quickness-gen  
'glass scratches quickly'

In (25) we are speaking of a process that took place and affect a certain entity. Sentence (24), however, does not speak of that process as self-initiated. Rather, the intervention of an agent is present though the agent or initiator is not mentioned overtly. The 'scratching of the glass' was caused by somebody. If someone asks why the glass was removed, he would be given (24) as an answer. In (25) we are talking about the availability of glass for scratching quickly. It is a property of glass that it scratches quickly.

The difference in meaning between (21b) and (21c) is the same as that between (24) and (25) above. The passive (21c) speaks of an effect that was achieved on something involuntarily, so to speak. That is, the card underwent a certain process that was effected by some person, though this person is not mentioned. The pseudo-intransitive (21b) speaks of an event that took place on something without giving any role to the agent of the action. The affected thing, i.e. the card, has sort of 'let itself' into the process and thus was affected accordingly. Many of the form V verbs are used to project this meaning in relation to their corresponding passive form II verbs. One can mention for example such verbs as *taḥaqqāqa* 'become true', *tabaddala* 'change', *tafakkaka* 'dismantle', *tadammarā* 'be ruined', .....

As sentence (22b) above shows, verb form VII is also used pseudo-intransitively with the same meaning as sentence (21b) with verb form V, expresses. Actually, verb form VII is the Arabic pseudo-intransitive par excellence. In other words it is the form most frequently used to convey the meaning expressed by verbs in pseudo-intransitive constructions in English. Compared to its corresponding passive (22c), sentence (22b) speaks of 'the disclosure of the secret' as an event that took place without admitting any role for an agent behind the event. The secret has 'let itself' be disclosed. It was available for disclosure. This availability is seen more clearly when the tense of the verb is changed to the imperfect form. Sentence (22c) refers to an event of disclosure that someone has caused. The effect has been achieved without the participation of the affected thing – the secret in this case. The relation between the verbs of these two sentences: *ʔinkaafa kuifa* (the form VII derived verb, and the passive form I basic verb) obtains between all other form VII verbs and their passive form I cognates, e.g. *ʔinšaqqa/šūqqa* 'tear'; *ʔinhadda/hudda* 'demolish'; *ʔinhazama/huzima* 'put to flight'.

The relation between the two sentences (23b) and (23c) is similar to that which we saw between the other two pairs. The passive (23c) speaks of a process of filling that the glass has undergone. This process was carried out by a certain agent that is not mentioned in the sentence. In the pseudo-intransitive (23b) with the verb in form VIII, the process that the sentence speaks of has affected an entity which has let itself be affected by it. It speaks of the glass which has undergone the process of filling with no mention of an agent. We may note here that not all verbs of this form – i.e. form VIII – yield this pseudo-intransitive interpretation. But some do. Thus the same relation that we find between the verbs in sentences (23b) and (23c), i.e. the derived form VIII *ʔimtalaʔa*, and the passive form I *muliʔa* exists between such pairs of verbs as: *ʔintašaba/nušiba* 'be erected'; *ʔintašara/nušira* 'spread'; *ʔijtamaʔa/ijumiʔa* 'gather'; *ʔištalaʔa/šūʔila* (*ʔusʔila*) 'ignite'; *ʔixtalaṭa/xuliṭa* 'mix'. In all the above pairs the first verb is pseudo-intransitive. It refers to an action or a process that has as effect on a certain entity. No role is given to the agent or the force responsible for the effect. The subject of this verb is the affected entity or thing or person, which appears to have some inherent properties which facilitate the process. In these sentences the affected participant seems to lend itself to the process. The second verb indicates an action that is

caused by some force or agent, though this is not mentioned. Only the affected participant appears on the surface.<sup>5</sup>

An important point that should be noted here is the availability of a passive form to two of the three forms that are under discussion. From active verbs of the derived form V we get passive forms, though this seems to be a property of particular verbs. Thus from *tawassama* 'see' we have the passive *tuwussima* and from *tawassaʔa* 'enlarge' we have *tuwussiʔa*. Likewise we have *tawakkala/tuwukkila* 'depend', *tamattaʔa/tumuttiʔa* 'enjoy', *takallama/tukullima* 'speak'.

The passive is also available for a number of verbs of the derived form VIII type. Thus we have from *ʔittafaqa* 'agree' the passive form *ʔittufiqa* and *ʔijtamaʔa/ʔijtumiʔa* 'gather'; *ʔištabaha/ʔištubiha* 'suspect', *ʔiḡtasala/ʔiḡtusila* 'wash'. The following sentence exemplify this.

- (26) *yutawassaʔu fi al-ʔaḥkaam-i*  
 extended in def-regulations-def  
 'The regulations were extended in ('relaxed')
- (27) *lam yutaḥaqqaq min zaʔmi-hi*  
 not make sure from claim-his  
 'The claim was not made sure of'
- (28) *ʔijtumiʔa ʔalaa al-ʔamr-i*  
 agreed on def-matter-gen  
 'the matter was agreed upon'
- (29) *ʔiḡtusila fi al-ḥammaam-i*  
 washed in def-bathroom-gen  
 'the bathroom is washed in!'

In these sentences two things are noticeable. First, there is no subject in any of them. These sentences seem to be instances of what is known as impersonal passive in linguistic theory (cf. Lyons 1968:379).<sup>6</sup> Second, it appears that the unmentioned agents in all of these sentences are human agents. This can be seen from the active counterparts.

- (26) a. *yatawassaʔu al-fuqahaaʔ-u fi al-ʔaḥkaam-i*  
 extend def-theologians-nom in def-regulations-gen  
 'the theologians relax their regulations'
- (27) a. *lam yataḥaqqaq ʔaḥad-un min zaʔmi-hi*  
 'no one made sure of his claim'

<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting here that passivization in spoken Arabic dialects is achieved not by some particular passive morphological modification on the verb as is the case in Standard Arabic. Rather, the derived verb forms VII and VIII are used to signify this change in voice, e.g. form VII in Iraqi Arabic, and Form VIII in Egyptian Arabic. Thus, passivization in these spoken dialects use active verb forms. These are the forms used for pseudo-intransitive construction, and which are morphologically derived from their basic transitive forms. Thus, in these dialects the distinction we are discussing is neutralized. Probably other means are used to signify different shades of meaning.

<sup>6</sup> This is a passive construction with no apparent subject, instances of which we may find in such diverse languages as Latin, Finnish, Welsh, Arabic and German.

- (28) a. ʔijta<sup>ʕ</sup>a al-naas-u ʕalla al-ʔamr-i  
 'people agreed on the matter'  
 (29) a. ʔiḡtasala al-naas-u fi al-ḡammaam-i  
 'people bathe in the bathroom'

The pseudo-intransitive reading is untunable in the above sentences. The subject is not affected in the sense that a thing is affected by a process. In these sentences, the reflexive reading is the prominent one. The first sentence does not mean that 'the theologians extended', like it would if the verb were pseudo-intransitively used. It means that 'the theologians extended their understanding of the regulations'. The same can be said about the second sentence. It means that 'people made sure of his claim', and not that 'they came true', which is the pseudo-intransitive reading. Likewise, the third means that 'people gathered themselves – i.e. brought themselves together – and not 'combined' in the sense that different entities or things would, through the intervention of some agent. The fourth sentence is also interpreted with a reflexive sense – wash themselves – rather than the pseudo-intransitive sense – 'wash' or 'get washed'. The pseudo-intransitive reading could be obtained in the last two sentences – i.e. (28) and (29) – by the use of the derived form VII, if it exists.

It seems that this is the reason behind the admissibility of the passive with some of the verbs of the forms V and VIII. It is only when these verbs are not used pseudo-intransitively that passivization is possible. The converse is also true. When the subject of these verbs is not human the pseudo-intransitive reading is possible. In such cases the verb *tawassaʕa* would mean 'widen', and *tahaqqqa* 'become true'. The difference between the reflexive use and the pseudo-intransitive use of these verbs corresponds to the difference between normal intransitive and pseudo-intransitive uses of some of the verbs in English, e.g. move, change, burn, break, etc. The difference is determined by the choice of the subject. If the subject is human then the verb is understood intransitively. The subject seems to be the agent of the action. When the subject is not human, the verb is understood pseudo-intransitively.

4. The above discussion has shown that the semantic distinction between speaking about an event or a process that a certain entity has undergone, and speaking about a process that was caused by some force and which affected a certain entity is made in both Arabic and English. Both make use of certain formal devices to signify this difference. Distinct process-oriented and agent-oriented constructions are found in the two languages. The passive construction is used in Arabic and English to express the agent-oriented view of an event or process. The passive construction leaves a place for the agent in the picture, even if it is not realized overtly on the surface.

The process-oriented view of an event is realized through different devices in each language. Although both languages use the intransitive 'clause type' – mode of the verb and one inherent participant role, in English the same verb form that is used transitively – and hence in passive constructions – is used in this process-oriented construction; what we have termed in this paper as the pseudo-intransitive construction.

In Arabic, the verb forms that are used to express this distinction are not usually the same, though some uncommon exceptions do exist. In the pseudo-intransitive construction more than one verb form are used. These verb forms are what have been termed by Wright as reflexive. Of these, the derived verb form VII is the main representative and the most frequently used. The other frequently used verb forms are the derived forms V and VIII. These two may not signify the pseudo-intransitive reading at times. This seems to be the case when their subjects are human.

The above discussion did not address the question of the productivity of the pseudo-intransitive construction in the two languages. What is it that allows a particular verb to appear in this construction in English? Why should a given verb choose a particular derived form to signify this reading in Arabic. The answer to these and other questions awaits further investigation.

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