

THE SUBJECT AND THE VERB IN JAPANESE PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

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At ALS 2008, Iwashita reported findings of research on the nature of the subject in each *semantic* type of passive in Japanese. The focus of this paper is on the relationship between the subject and the verb in each *syntactic* type of passive construction, and how this relates to the likelihood of the passive sentence expressing negative connotations. The data for the study comes from *The Corpus of the Written Word in Contemporary Japanese*, which includes books and government publications published in Japan from 2000 to 2005. This corpus has given access to a wide range of examples of the target form for analysis.

In this paper, Japanese passive constructions are syntactically classified into three groups, ‘direct passive’, ‘semi-direct passive’ and ‘indirect passive’. A direct passive is defined here as one that has a corresponding active clause, and whose subject would correspond to a core argument in that active clause (that is a direct object or an indirect object). We define a semi-direct passive, as one that has a corresponding active clause, and whose subject would be a peripheral argument in the active clause. An indirect passive is defined here as one whose subject does not correspond to any of the arguments, core or peripheral, of the active verb.

In accounting for the negative connotation, in their words the ‘adversative meaning’, Wierzbicka (1979, 1988:270) and Kuno (1982: 205) use the notion of involvement. However, there are some cases of body-part passive, a kind of semi-direct passive, that cannot be explained with the notion of involvement. Shibatani (1996: 7) proposes the notion of relevance, which relates to two criteria, proximity and affectedness, to account for these cases. When we consider cases beyond the body-part passive type, however, the notion of centrality of the subject to the event can be applied more widely.

Taking a general view of all three syntactic categories, there seems to be a scale throughout regarding the subject’s degree of centrality to the event and the likelihood of the construction expressing a negative connotation. In a semi-direct passive, compared with a direct passive, the subject’s centrality to the event is low, since it would correspond only to one of the peripheral participants of the active clause. Passive clauses of this type were found to be more likely than direct passive clauses to convey a negative connotation. In the case of the indirect passive, the degree of centrality of the subject to the event is lowest, as the subject does not correspond to any argument of the active clause. The likelihood of a negative connotation for this passive type is the highest of all three.

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