The Passive of the Gesture Expression Construction: Event Structure and Discourse Function

1. GOALS The main goal of this talk is to demonstrate a complex interaction between event structure and a discourse function by examining the condition of the passive of the so-called Gesture Expression Construction (hereafter, GEC), which is exemplified as follows:

(1) a. Pauline smiled her thanks.   (Levin and Rapoport 1988)

   b. The doctor nodded agreement.   (BNC)

As shown in (1), the GEC takes an unergative verb as its main predicate and an NP denoting an expression as its complement. The complement NP normally does not permit passivization, as observed in the literature (e.g., *_Her thanks were smiled by Rilla._ (Massam 1990:180); see also Levin 1993 and Huddleston and Pullum 2002).   However, there are conflicting data attested in corpora:

(2) a. …the native would touch one article after another till _consent was nodded from the ship…_

   b. … as the time neared when the last line is cast off, _the goodbyes are waved_, the screw makes the water boil under the stern, and the passage to Alaska is under way.

In this talk, I will explain the contradictory behavior of the passive of GECs, by appealing to the interaction between the relevant event structure and the effect of a certain discourse function.

2. CLAIM My claim is two-fold: (i) the passive of GECs is governed by the bound pronoun within the object NP, which is semantically motivated by the inalienable possession relation between the subject and object NPs; (ii) GECs undergo passivization if they serve a presentational function in discourse. These claims explain the unpassivizability and passivizability of the construction: I will provide a syntacto-semantic analysis of the GEC in (i) and then propose a semantic and discourse-functional analysis in (ii).   The discussion will proceed in this order.   The consequence implies that discourse-functional factors influence the mapping between syntax and event structure.

3. UNPASSIVIZABILITY & BOUND PRONOUN Massam (1990) claims that the object NP of the GEC does not undergo passivization because it contains a bound pronoun.   The presence of a bound pronoun within the object NP is supported by the following examples ((b) from Ross 1970):

(3) a. Mary smiled {her / * his} thanks.   b. * Tom frowned {Ann's / my} displeasure.

Under this analysis, the unpassivizability of GECs naturally follows from the general constraint on the passive subject containing a bound pronoun.   As is widely known, the possessive pronoun in the passive subject cannot be bound by the antecedent NP in the _by_-phrase:

(4) a. * His$_i$ mother is loved by John$_i$.   b. * His$_i$ role was played by John$_i$.   (Zubizarreta 1985)

Then, why is the bound pronoun present in the object NP?   Massam does not elaborate on this point.

   My answer is grounded on the semantics of GECs: the subject and object NPs establish an inalienable possession relation.   For example, if Mary smiled thanks, the expression of gratitude cannot be attributed to any other participants but the agent, Mary.   In this sense, the agent NP denoted by the subject inalienably possesses the expression described by the object (see Kimball 1973).   In fact, the object NP of GECs displays the definiteness effect, just like other inalienably possessed NP:

(5)   Pauline smiled (*the) thanks.   cf. John has {a / *the} sister.

Thus, the inalienable possession relation in GECs licenses the presence of a bound pronoun, thereby making the formation of passive impossible.

4. AGENTIVITY & PRESENTATIONAL FUNCTION If the present analysis is correct, the acceptability of the passives in (2) will imply that the bound pronoun is no longer present in the construction.   In fact, the subject NP can be marked with a definite article, as in (2b), which in contrast with (5).

The reason for the absence of a bound pronoun, which I propose in this talk, is that, in the passive of GECs, the agent participant is suppressed from the event structure. This proposal is supported by the constraints on the occurrence of the agentive *by*-phrase in (5a) and agentive adverbs in (5b):

(5) a.?? Final goodbyes are waved *by the people*.   b.?? Thanks are nodded {carefully / deliberately}.
Although the judgments of (5) vary from speaker to speaker, most of my informants find them degraded, compared with those without agentive elements. The absence of the agent from the event structure means that no inalienable possession is involved in the construction: the expression denoted by the passive subject in (2) is not understood as an entity attributed to a specific participant. Thus, the absence of an agent is responsible for the lack of the bound pronoun and the passivizability of GECs.

The agent suppression from the event structure in (2) can be explained by their discourse function: the presentational function. The attested data of the passive GEC are found in the discourse type describing events that continuously take place in a given scene. For instance, example (2b) reports what events happen when ships leave for Alaska and the passivized GEC depicts one of the events taking place in the scene. To the extent that the relevant passive plays such a role in describing a scene, we can say that the passive of GECs serves a presentational function (cf. Lambrecht 1994:144).

The presentational function is often associated with non-agentivity. The Locative Inversion Construction (LIC), which is used as a presentational sentence, also suppresses the agent from the event:

(6) a.?? Among the guests of honor was seated my mother *by my friend Rose*.   (Bresnan 1994)
     b.* Out of the room walked a man with long hair *deliberately*.   (Nishihara 1999)
As noted by Bresnan, in the LIC, even if the predicate does not lexically describe an event of existence or appearance of an entity, the construction overlays the event on the basic event structure of the predicate; consequently, in (6a), the existence and appearance of the theme is syntactically expressed and the agent is excluded out of the overlaid loc-theme event. As the non-agentivity seems to be pervasive across presentational constructions (cf. presentational *there*-construction), it can be said that the non-agentive property of (2) is essentially connected to the presentational function in the discourse.

Thus, it is the presentational function that brings the non-agentivity to the passive of GECs, which is responsible for the absence of the bound pronoun and licenses the passive form. Interestingly enough, the passivization licensed by a presentational function can be observed with other constructions that otherwise would not be passivizable: Body-Part Gesture Expressions (e.g. *John craned his neck*) and some type of Cognate Object Constructions (e.g. *Mary screamed a terrifying scream.*):

(7) a.   … *necks were craned* in an effort to get a glimpse of the pair.
     b.   Pictures were taken, *laughs were laughed*, food was eaten.   (Kuno & Takami 2004: 128)
(8) a. ?? Screams were screamed by the crowd.   / * Screams were screamed deliberately.
     b.?* Necks were craned by John and Bill.   /   ?? Necks were craned {carefully / deliberately}.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION The conclusion of this talk is that the passive form of the GEC is licensed by the interaction between the event structure and the presentational function. This implies that (i) the consideration of the event structure and its mapping to syntax must incorporate the discourse-functional effect on the former and (ii) the notion of agentivity is determined under syntactic, semantic, and discourse-pragmatic considerations, supporting the view of Van Valin and Wilkins (1996).

References: Bresnan (1994) "Locative Inversion and the Architecture of Universal Grammar," *Lg* 70-1, 72-131. / Kuno & Takami (2004) *Functional Constraints in Grammar,* John Benjamins. / Massam (1990) "Cognate Objects as Thematic Objects," *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 35: 161-190.