

The Study on EICM of English Passive Structures of Construal Process of Cognitive Subject

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Abstract: *The English passive voice has always been a focus of linguists' research. The richness reflected in the passive voice structure itself embodies people's different conceptualization ways of observing events. This paper classifies the English passive voice structures based on the ICM and EICM theories proposed by Croft, and analyzes the process of cognitive subjects' interpretation of the passive voice under the theoretical framework of Langacker's cognitive grammar, using literature analysis and qualitative analysis methods. The aim is to enrich the cognitive perspective of English passive voice research, help English teachers improve the teaching effect of passive voice, assist language users in understanding the conceptual essence contained in the passive voice, and thus correctly comprehend the semantics of English passive structures.*

Keywords: *English passive structures; ICM; EICM; Langacker's construal theory*

1. Introduction

The English passive voice has always occupied an important position in linguistic research, not only because of its core status in grammatical structure, but also due to its richness and complexity. The construction and application of the passive voice reflect how people conceptualize and express various events in the real world from different angles and levels. Linguists have studied the English passive structure from the perspectives of traditional grammar, transformational-generative grammar, systemic-functional grammar, and cognitive grammar. However, there are few in-depth and systematic studies on its cognitive interpretation.

Based on previous research, this paper selects representative examples of English passive structures from mainstream grammar books. Taking cognitive linguistics as the theoretical framework, this paper conducts cognitive analysis on them through literature research and qualitative analysis. It further discusses the cognitive interpretation process of English passive structures, aiming to reveal the intricate linguistic cognitive mechanism within the English passive structure.^[2]

2. The illustration of theory

Lackoff(1987) pointed out that the ideal cognitive model is the inherent cognitive experience formed by human beings in a certain environment, and it is a relatively stereotyped mental structure. That is to say, ICM refers to the abstract, unified and idealized understanding of the speaker's experience and knowledge in a certain field in the specific cultural background. Xiong xueliang(2003) believed that idealized cognitive model theory is the product of people's cognitive conceptualization of world, and the idealized cognitive model is also inevitable in language. All in all, the ICM theory fully takes into account the subjective initiative of people in understanding the objective world. It is more comprehensive, flexible and explanatory in explaining problems that are difficult to be solved by traditional linguistics. (Li, 2021) Based on the idealized cognitive model, Croft(1990, 1991) proposed the event idealized cognitive model of passive sentences. Croft (1991:269) analyzed the idealized cognitive model of human using verbs to represent simple events. Croft in this model proposes that these three causal-aspectual event types are the prototypical event types. That is to say, causative, inchoative and stative event types provide the idealized cognitive model for the internal structure of simple events.^[1] It is clear that the conceptualization process of passive concepts in English is based on the view of "stative event", which is a typical event idealized cognitive model. Other forms of English passive structures including pseudo passive structure, mixed passive structure, get-passive structure as well as middle structure all conform to the corresponding view of events. Zhao Yanfang (2001:72) demonstrated that idealized cognitive model is a variety of relatively fixed relational models between concepts

established by people based on experience. It is a cognitive mode formed on the basis of the interaction between people and the outside world, that is, the way to organize and represent people's knowledge. Lakoff calls it an idealized cognitive model because it is not objective but created by human beings. Therefore, the idealized cognitive model of passive structures is a kind of relatively fixed relational model between passive and actuating concepts established by human experience. Therefore, the idealized cognition model of English passive structures is its most typical prototype. There are prototypical and non-prototypical members of English passive structures. In this respect, the idealized cognitive model of events can provide a basis for cognitive analysis of the prototype and non-prototype of English passive structures, thus making the categorization of English passive structures more convincing.^[3]

Construal theory is one of the important theories in contemporary cognitive linguistics. Construal is the cognitive ability of people to observe the situation and explain the content in different ways. It is also the specific way to form concepts, semantic structures and language expressions. Cognitive linguistics holds that construal theory has a good explanatory power for the same but different linguistic phenomena. Construal theory is the cognitive linguistics theory introduced by Langacker who is the founder of cognitive grammar. According to Langacker's (1991, 4) point of view, the construal theory can be traced in five dimensions, that is, specificity, scope, focusing, perspective and salience

Firstly, for the specificity, according to Langacker (2008) one dimension of construal is the level of detail or precision with which the situation is described. That is to say, specificity is a form of human construal in which an entity is perceived or described with varying degrees of accuracy. Secondly, according to Langacker's construal, people's construe of things involves domains. Langacker (2007) defined the scope as the general term of an active cognitive domain, that is, all the conceptual content are activated by an expression as its underlying meaning. Thirdly, for the focusing, through linguistic expressions, it can be done to access specific regions of the conceptual world. Here the construal dimension of focusing involves how conceptual content is selected for expression, and its arrangement into foreground and background. Fourthly, about the salience, the many asymmetries presented by the language structure can all be regarded as prominence or salience.^[4] As its base, an expression evokes a particular conception within which it designates some factors by placing them on stage as the focus of attention. These factors are accorded a special quality, which Langacker (2008) terms salience or prominence. Lastly, about the perspective. Perspective refers to the angle that people choose to observe things. The way and result of construals are different depending on the angle of observation. On the basis of Langacker's viewpoints (2008), if conceptualization (metaphorically) is the viewing of a scene, perspective is the viewing arrangement, which is the overall relationship between the viewers and the situation being viewed. The viewing arrangement comprises the vantage point, subjectivity and objectivity, ground as well as scanning.

Next, based on the linguistic view of Langacker, this dissertation will elaborate on the definition of construal theory, the dimensions of construal theory and its contribution to the cognitive analysis of English passive structures.^[5]

3. Classification of English passive structures

3.1 The prototypical English passive structure

Based on the EICM theory proposed by Croft (1990, 1991) and the linguistic opinions claimed by Xiong Xueliang and Wang Zhijun (2002), the prototypical English passive structure is the agent-less passives, whose form is *NP+BE(auxiliary)+Ved.(verbal)*. Inside, be is semantically an auxiliary verb intended as a link between a verb and a status word. The verb followed by the past participle can be static or dynamic. The static nature of be-passive is the complete passive acceptance of the actions imposed on the subject without any action being taken. Here are some examples of the agent-less English passive structure. For example:

- (1) *The window glass was broken.*
- (2) *The plan was successfully carried out.*
- (3) *Many houses were destroyed in the war.*

Apart from this, agentful English passive structures are also the prototypical types of English passive structures. There comes the form of *NP+BE(auxiliary)+Ved.(verbal)+by-phrase*, which is considered as the nearest prototypical English passive structure. For example (Li, 2021):

(4) *The window was broken by a stone.*

(5) *Printing was introduced into Europe from China.*

Furthermore, the form of *NP+BE(auxiliary)+Ved.(verbal)+by-phrase* has their corresponding active construction. As shown in the following sentences:

(6)

a. *She was invited to my birthday party by me.*

b. *I invited her to my birthday party.* (Ma Degao, 2016: 290)

The passives with by-phrase indicate the force issued by the predicates. And it is more easily changed into its actives than the passives without by-phrase.

3.2 *The non-prototypical English passive structure*

According to the prototype category theory and the idealized cognitive model theory of events, this dissertation classifies the pseudo passive structure, mixed passive structure, get-passive structure and middle structure into the category of English non-prototypical passive structures, owing to the above four structures deviate from the idealized cognitive model of events.^[6]

Pseudo passive structure is generated by interpreting cause events as static events. It describes the resulting state of the affected entity. When using it, people focus on the final state of the affected patient. It takes the form of *NP+BE(linking)+Ved(adjectival)+(propositional phrase)*. For instance (Bo Bing, 2008:187-188):

(7) *The way was lost between the trees.*

(8) *He was very agitated.*

(9) *She is resolved to become a ballet dancer.*

Mixed passive structure is also called semi-passive structure. The semi-passive voice is between the true passive voice and the pseudo passive voice. As for the mixed passive structure, its structure is similar to the pseudo passive structure's, both of which are according with the form of *NP+BE(linking)+V-ed+propositional phrase*. For examples (Ma Degao, 2016:306):

(10) *I was impressed by his grasp of the world affairs.*

(11) *We were all worried about the complication.*

Get-passive structure takes the form of *NP+GET(auxiliary)+Ved.(verbal)+(by-phrase)*. The subject in a get-passive structure is both the controller of the event and the affected entity. It acts simultaneously on itself as an affected entity. The subject is also the transmitter of the verb *get*, which acts as the receiver of the verb. For example:

(12) *She got beaten whatever others might say.* (Ma Degao, 2016: 295)

(13) *Be careful not to get burnt by the sun.* (Ma Degao, 2016: 295)

Taking these two sentences as an example, the subject *she* or *you* may be responsible for getting beaten or burnt, or a volitional action by the subject *she* or *you* led to *her* or *his* getting beaten or burnt.

The middle structure is different from the typical passive structure. To begin with, middle construction is a neutral or intermediate voice between the active voice and the passive voice.

Let us look at more middle constructions (Bo Bing, 2008: 186):

(14) *The cake tastes good.*

(15) *That sounds very reasonable.*

4. The specific analysis of the English passive structures with Langaker's construal theory

The diverse manifestations of the English passive structure reflects the disparities between prototypical and non-prototypical members, along with their corresponding event model. Moreover, this diversity underscores the varying construal dimensions that individuals employ in comprehending passive events. The subsequent segment will embark on a comprehensive cognitive construal of

English passive structures with the support of Langacker's construal theory.^[7]

4.1 The cognitive construal of prototypical English passive structure without agent and with agent.

The form of prototypical English passive structure is $NP+BE(\text{auxiliary})+Ved.(\text{verbal})$. And the prototype passive voice subsumes two categories: the agentful passive voice and the agentless passive voice. According to Langacker's construal theory, the meaning of an expression is not limited to the conceptual content it activates, but equally important is the manner in which the content is construed. Because the cognitive subjects may create different language constructions according to their different construal about the objective content. For example, the agentful passive voice and the agentless passive voice are the result of different construal on the same situation by the cognitive subjects. The following content will analyze the construction process of the passive structure of the agentless archetype and the agentful archetype in English according to the theory of construal. For example:

(16) *Over a hundred people were invited to the banquet.*

(17) *President Kennedy was assassinated.*

(Zhang Daozhen 2002:116-244)

Example (16) and (17) are the agentless archetypes, which are construed by analyzing a causative event into a stative event from the affected entity perspective instead of the agent with respect to the syntactic characteristics of the prototypical passives. These two examples are according to the linguistic form of $NP+BE(\text{auxiliary})+Ved.(\text{verbal})$. In example(16), the domain or scope of the inviting event is related to *a hundred people* and the action of *invite*. The sentence gives us a clear understanding that the cognitive subject puts his or her attention onto *a hundred people* during his or her sequential scanning of the scene. Thus, it highlights the patient of *a hundred people*, rather than the source of the action. *A hundred people*, which was originally the object of the action involved in the event, is placed at the beginning of the sentence to become the focus of attention. In the same way, example (17) emphasis on the *President Kennedy*, rather than other presidents. Thus, *President Kennedy* is regraded as important information at the beginning of the sentence to achieve the purpose of cognitive prominence. These phenomena can be explained by the Langacker's construal theory, which is about the salience, because the many asymmetries presented by the language structure can all be regarded as prominence or salience. Example (16) and (17) are the agentless archetypes, which put more emphasis on the patients. Therefore, the cognitive object gives more prominence on the patients.

Besides, the source of action is omitted or does not need to be mentioned due to cognitive subjects construal of this kind of passive events.

(18) *The cup was broken by Mary.*

(19) *A pedestrian was knocked over by a car.*

(Zhang Daozhen 2002:62, 116)

Example (18) and (19) are the agentful archetypes. According to the above analysis, in the prototypical English passive structure with agent or without agent, cognitive subject describe the scene from the vantage point of the affected entity. In example(18) and (19), the domains of their events are construed from the conceptual domains of *cup*, *break*, and *Mary*, and the conceptual domains of *pedestrian*, *knock* and *car* respectively. According to Langacker's construal theory, specificity is a form of human construal in which an entity is perceived or described with varying degrees of accuracy. Example (18) and (19) reflects the viewer's accuracy of observation, which involves their three entities in their domains. If example (18) and (19) are changed into *The cup was broken by Mary* and *A pedestrian was knocked over*, they are less specified.

4.2 The cognitive construal of the non-prototypical English passive structure

According to prototype theory, it is the family resemblance that holds members of a category together. According to the prototypical theory, the prototypical forms of passive structures is $NP+BE(\text{auxiliary})+Ved.(\text{verbal})$, which is considered as the prototype of the category of English passive structures. The other types of passives deviate from prototype passives semantically or syntactically. Non-prototypical passives and prototypical passives both depict the affectedness of the patients.^[8]Non-prototypical passives subsume the pseudo passive structure, mixed passive structure, get-passive structure and middle structure.

4.3 The cognitive construal of pseudo passive structure

The pseudo passive is generated by construing a causative event as a stative event. It describes the resulting state of an affected entity. And when it is used, we focus on the final state of the affected patient. It takes the form of NP + BE (linking verb) + V-en (adjective). For example (Wang, 2015):

(20) *The boy is hurt.*

(21) *The trees are cut down.*

(22) *The exams are finished.*

Examples (20) to (22) conform to the linguistic characteristics of English pseudo passive structure. For the analysis of the example (20), it reflects the cognitive subject observe the event adopting the way of summary scanning from the perspective of the exams, focusing on the final finished state of the exams. According to Langacker's theory, from the dimension of prominence,

Example (21) highlights the result of the action, "finished," rather than the agent, and even there is no agent in this construction. The prominence shifts the focus of the sentence to the state of the exams, rather than the agent who conducted the exams. What's more, from the perspective dimension, example (22) adopts the perspective of the patient, namely the perspective of the "exams". It describes the state of the exams, rather than how the exams were completed by the agent. This choice of perspective reflects the information that the cognitive subject wishes to emphasize.

4.4 The cognitive construal of mixed passive structure

The mixed passive structure is also called the semi-passive structure, which owns the linguistics features of the true passive voice and the pseudo passive voice. The linguistic form of mixed passive structure is *NP+BE(linking)+Ved(adjective+verbal)+propositional phrase*. For example^[9]:

(23) *The garden is dug.*

(24) *All of us were surprised at his eccentric behavior.*

(25) *The students were all worried about the exam results.*

These examples are corresponding to the features of mixed passive structure. The sentence (23) shows that the speaker's observation scope at that time is the patient, the action and the so called agent, that is, *all of us, surprise and his eccentric behavior*. At the same time, the speaker interprets the event in the way of sequential scanning which is consistent with the English passive structures. The speaker focuses on responses of *all of us*, and realizes the control of *all of us* on this whole event. Therefore, example (24) does not highlight the patient, but the emphasis is on the patient's control over the action involved in the event. Besides, in example (25), the speaker focus on the *worry* action under the control of *the students* rather than the patient. It is not only prominent the passivity of *the students* but also more prominent *the students'* inner control of over the action *being worried about*. All in all, according to the Langacker's construal theory, from the perspective dimension, both sentences start from the perspective of the first-person plural, describing the reactions to a certain event. This choice of perspective makes the sentences more closely aligned with the subjective feelings of the speaker. What's more, from the prominence dimension, both sentences highlight the feelings and states of the subjects, rather than focusing solely on the behavior or event itself. This emphasis allows the sentences to place greater prominence on expressing the subjective attitude and psychological state of the speaker. In a word, the English mixed passive structures put more emphasis on the subject's restrictions on the predicate, and the subject's mind and feelings produce the action indicated by the predicate.

4.5 The cognitive construal of get-passive structure

The get-passive construction is generated by construing a causative event into an inchoative event, and the subject in a get-passive structure is both the controller of the event and the affected entity. The get-passive often reflects an unfavorable attitude towards the action (Quirk, et al. 1985). The linguistic form of *NP+GET (auxiliary) +Ved.(verbal)+(by-phrase)*, it can be seen that it's form deviates from the prototypical members. For example^[9]:

(26) *The passengers got injured in the accident.*

(27) *The audiences completely got confused.*

These two examples are the get-passive structures. According to Langacker's construal theory, from the prominence dimension, in the example(26), the cognitive subject gives more prominence on the result and internal reason of getting injured. Therefore, the effects and causes of injuries in example (26) are highlighted. The same principle applies to the the example (27), the speaker's attention is on the result of getting confused. Therefore, the effects and causes of confusion in the example (27) are highlighted. To sum up, the get-passive structure reflects that the speaker pays more attention on the responsibility of the subject and also lays more attention on the result of the action, rather than the action itself.

4.6 The cognitive construal of the middle structure

The linguistic structures with the active forms which can express a passive meaning are called middle structures. The form of English middle construction is "NP+V+modifier" or "NP.+Auxil. + Not + V". Although the middle structure is in the form of active structure, it is semantically like the passive construction. English middle structures can reflect the subjects' different construal dimensions in a certain scene. The following part will analyse the construal dimensions of the English middle structure. For example(Wang):

(28) *The cloth washes well.*

(29) *The facial mask sells quickly.*

(30) *This cheese doesn't cut easily.*

(31) *This shirt will wear very long.*

Take sentence (29) as the example, the facial mask in the sentence has a special property that it caters to customers' needs, which doesn't means that the facial mask sells something quickly or someone sells the facial mask quickly. According to Langacker's construal theory, English middle structures can be analyzed by the five dimensions of construal theory. Take sentence (28) as example, there are two components in the middle structure, that is, the patient and the action. Therefore, this structure reflects a low degree of detail in the speaker's construal of the event. Besides, during the construal process of the event, the speaker's mind evokes the domain of the cloth and that of washing. At the same time, the speaker also evokes cognitive background knowledge about the properties of the cloth. What's more, the speaker pays more attention on *the cloth* from the perspective of patient and prominence is given to the characteristics of *the cloth*, rather than the actions involved in this event. All in all, compared with the get-passive structure, the internal characteristics of the prominent patient of the English middle structure are stronger than that of the get-passive structure.

5. Conclusions

In summary, this article not only enriches the cognitive perspective of English passive voice research, but also provides English teachers with new ideas for improving the teaching effect of passive voice. In addition, by revealing the conceptual essence of passive voice, this article helps language users to understand passive voice more deeply, and thus grasp the semantic meaning of English passive structures more accurately. This research is of great significance for the development of the linguistic field, and also provides new theoretical support and practical guidance for English teaching and language learning. However, there are still some limitations of the research in this thesis. First of all, the research range of this paper is relatively narrow and does not cover all types of English passive structures. This paper only involves six types. There are still some passive structures that have not been mentioned due to the length of the thesis, such as the passive structure with the auxiliary verb "have", "Have + O + Past Participle" structure. Secondly, due to the constraints imposed by the scope and length of this article, the quantities of the types of English passive structures presented in this thesis are necessarily limited. Ultimately, the corpus utilized in this study was selected through the reference of grammatical texts. For future studies, it is recommended that a comprehensive corpus be employed, which would facilitate a more precise and thorough selection of corpus materials.

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