

## Establishing the Connection between Valency and Passive Voice in the English Simple Sentence Constructions

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### ABSTRACT

*A sentence is generally construed as a unit which is made up of one or more clauses. Hence, the English simple sentence, made up of a subject and a predicate, contains just a clause which makes a complete thought and expresses a single proposition. Against this backdrop, this study examines the connection between valency and passive voice in the English simple sentence constructions. It further analyses samples of the English simple sentences both from the literature and introspection. As emanations from the English simple sentences, the English passive voice may be devoid of the 'by-agentive' phrase. The point just made does not rule out the presence of a predicate in such expressions. Noticeably, both the active and passive voice are connected to the English simple sentences. Employing the approach of Corpus Linguistics to sentence analyses, samples of the English simple sentences gathered from introspection and related literature are considered for analysis. The study re-affirms that there is a connection between valency and passive voice in the English simple sentence constructions. The study further discovers that the presence of referring expressions in both the active and passive voice sentence constructions indicates the number of valency in such constructions. The paper concludes by recommending that valency and passive voice in English grammar be painstakingly taught to both native and non-native learners of English since the former can be used to explain the latter and vice-versa.*

**Keywords:** simple sentence; valency theory; predicate; argument; active and passive constructions

## **INTRODUCTION**

The study examines the English basic simple sentence by considering its relevance to the teaching and learning of the concepts of valency and passive voice. The English sentence is traditionally defined as a group of words that makes a complete sense or thought. Meanwhile, thought, according to King (2007), is defined as the way the words of a sentence are structured in a sentence (King, 2007, p.11). In other words, thought refers to rightness of word order in a sentence to construe meaning. Thus, the thought of a French person may differ from that of a German since the word order in the two languages differs. It should be noted that the English simple sentence has its unique syntactic pattern: the subject comes before the predicate (Allerton, 1982, p.15). In addition to this unique syntactic structure, there are nine syntactic patterns realising the English basic simple sentence: SP, SPO, SPOO, SPC (nominal), SPC (adjective), SPA, SPOC (nominal), SPOC (adjective) and SPOA.

Note that, S stands for Subject; P for Predicator; A for Adverbial; C for Complement (which could be Noun Complement or Adjective Complement) and; O for Object (which could be Direct Object or Indirect Object).

The English simple sentence is therefore marked by tense. Little wonder, the inseparability of tense and verb in many natural human languages. On the contrary, the presence of a verb in certain sentence constructions may render such constructions not meaningful (Allerton, 1982, p.11). Against this backdrop, the present study considers the English valency as well as the corresponding verb which makes it possible for the English simple sentence constructions to have meaningful variants.

It should be noted that valency is a term that cuts across at least two fields of study: Chemistry and Linguistics. In Chemistry, valency occurs when a chemical element has the capacity to combine with a fixed number of atoms of another element. The element, Sodium (Na), is considered a monovalent compound. This is

because Sodium has one atom and hence, one valency. Another element Oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) is said to be a divalent compound. This is because Oxygen has two atoms and hence, two valency. Similarly, in Linguistics and more so in Grammar, a simple sentence construction with just one noun phrase is said to be monovalent and hence, has one valency. However, if such simple sentence construction has two noun phrases, it is divalent and hence has two valency. This is the idea of valency and its requirements (Allerton, 1982, p.12). It should be noted that valency structure is applicable to the sentence constructions of the English active and passive voice (Allerton, 1982, p. 78). As a result, both the learner and teacher of the English language should not only be concerned with the clause(s) that constitute(s) the active and passive voice, but with the corresponding verbs be it transitive or intransitive. To Allerton (1982: vi), the English verb valency is of critical importance to the language learner and teacher. Thus, the present study aims to consider and analyse the English simple sentence constructions most of which are in their active and passive formations. The reason is to further investigate the connection shared by valency and passive constructions in the English simple sentence constructions.

### ***Statement of Research Problem***

Different research works have been carried out on valency and passive voice. Research works which examine related researches on the English passive voice and valency include the works of the following: Ágel & Fischer (2012); Herbst (2019); Nordquist(2019), Höllein(2020); Qi & Wang(2021) among others. It should be noted that these writers employ diverse linguistic approaches especially corpus approach to the study of the English passive voice and valency. The present study is not an exception. Hence, the study examines the connection between valency and passive voice in the English simple sentence constructions by considering and analysing samples of the English simple sentences both from related books on the literature and introspection. This becomes necessary in order to elucidate meaning more so from passive constructions. Hence, the vacuum the present study intends to fill. Next discussion focuses the approach of Corpus Linguistics.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

Corpus linguistic approach is useful in teaching and learning. The same is both a methodology as well as a tool. It is a methodology which can be used by scholars of many different theoretical leanings. It is also relevant to linguistic theory useful for research on syntax and the lexicon (Nordquist, 2019).

“...a good idea to study language in use. One efficient way of doing this is to use corpus methodology...”(Lindquist, 2009).

According to Wales (92), corpus stylistics is a branch of computational linguistics developed in the late 1960s to help investigate certain characteristics of the data like consistent use of words, words length, and sentence types. Against this backdrop, the present study considers Corpus linguistic approach to the analysis of sentence types. The sentence types used for analysis are the English simple sentences. Different simple sentences are purposively selected from related books on the literature as well as from introspection. The sentence types which are basically the English simple sentences, also incorporate the English active constructions as well as their passive counterparts. It should be noted that the basis of every sentence type is a sentence and more so, the simple sentence. Below are comments on the English simple sentence and proposition:

### ***The English Simple Sentence***

In consonance with Greenbaum & Nelson (2010), a sentence is made of a group of words that makes a complete sense. It is also defined as an ideal string of words formed in accordance with the grammatical rules of a language (Thakur, 2007). Similarly, a sentence is seen as a fairly complex structure with certain words grouped together to function as units and wherein, those different units exhibit certain kind of relationships (Kroeger, 2006). From the different definitions of a sentence, it can be inferred that a sentence is a combination of meaning-making words, henceforth, thought, logically arrayed based on the laid down rules of syntax

of every human language. Thus, every simple sentence and every proposition has at least a predicate. The predicate in grammar refers to the part of the sentence after the subject of the same. Predicate is thus, the element of meaning which identifies the property or relationship that the subject in a sentence shares with the rest of the sentence (Kroeger, 2006, p.53). It should be noted that the predicate is not limited to the verb alone (Kroeger, 2006, p.53). While a simple sentence henceforth, declarative, can function as a statement, a statement in turn, can be a proposition. But what are propositions? Propositions talk about entities which may be true or false. In other words, a proposition is subject to verification that is, one can find out if it is true or false (Kreidler, 1998, p. 63).

Consider Sentence (1),

1. John/ is/ a doctor.

Sentence (1) is a statement as well as a proposition. As a proposition, it may be true or false depending on the knowledge of the language user about the person, 'John'. It should be noted that every simple sentence has varying number of referring expressions. These referring expressions are otherwise known as arguments. Hence, the argument structure is a representation of the number and type of arguments associated with a particular predicate. Interestingly, different types of arguments may overlap; *theme* (a type of argument) may overlap with *agent* (a type of argument). Consider the sentence,

S	P	A
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3. Max /jumped/ over the wall.

In Sentence (3), 'Max' is the theme (subject) as well as the agent (the doer of an action). Hence, the two types of argument; *theme and agent*, overlap (Kroeger, 2006, pp. 9-10). In English grammar, participants are assigned diverse roles. These roles are termed semantic roles which will be further discussed. It should be noted that an argument is not a semantic role. Rather, it is a phrase structure with one or several semantic roles. However, an argument could be a subject or an object.

Consider the following:

4. Richard /gave/ Ron/ his old radio.

In Sentence (4), the primary object is “Ron” and hence, a direct argument. However, there is a slight modification of what obtains in Sentence (4), in Sentence (5) below:

5. Richard /gave/ his old radio/ to Ron.

In Sentence (5), there is a slight modification of the sentence structure. While “gave” informs a human object in Sentence (4), the same verb informs a non-human object in Sentence (5). Hence, an oblique argument. Sentences (4) and (5) therefore convey the same meaning. The two sentences are paraphrases or sentence synonyms. Interestingly, the meaning of a predicate is tied to the number of arguments it may have to constitute its argument structure (Kroeger, 2006, p.68).

Consider the example, S                      P

6. The cup /broke.

As a simple sentence, Sentence (6) is a statement as well as a proposition. This is because the sentence tells of an event that is perhaps true. However, Sentence (6) has only one argument which is, ‘The cup’. The same sentence can be recast.

Consider the recast sample,

7. Simisola/ broke/ the cup.

In Sentences (6) and (7), the represented arguments are referring expressions since the arguments involve noun phrases. However, while verbs like *broke*, *smoke* and other transitive verbs can bond with one argument or two, the verb ‘be’ as well as its forms (*am*, *is*, *was*, *are* and *were*), has no meaning but may be part of a syntactic structure with no semantic structure (Kreidler, 1998, pp.66-67).

As already observed that change in sentence structure is tantamount to change in thought; certain statements can undergo change in tense. Consider the following:

8. George /sends /his siblings/ e-mail. (Present tense)

9. George /sent/ his siblings/ e-mail. (Past tense)

Sentences (8) and (9) are sentences which differ in thought. This is because Sentence (8) conveys an activity carried out in the present while Sentence (9) conveys an activity carried out in the past. Next discussion focuses semantic roles in the English simple sentence construction. This is the idea of valency theory in semantics.

### ***Valency Theory and Semantic Roles in the English Simple Sentence Constructions***

As earlier discussed, a predicate is inevitable in the English simple sentence construction. However, there are underlying concepts that could complement a predicate. Valency is one of them. As a concept, valency theory describes the semantic potential of predicates in terms of the number and types of arguments which may co-occur with them. Thus, predicates are parts of the English sentence construction. In addition, predicates are the dependent structures of the English simple sentence. However, predicates cannot occur meaningfully in isolation except in context. With arguments as noun phrases or referring expressions, the same arguments could assume different roles. Such roles are termed semantic roles. Semantic roles are associated with the subject and the object in a sentence construction (Allerton, 1982, pp.53-59). Also, semantic roles refer to the different roles that the parts of the simple sentence can play in any sentence construction. Such roles include thus: *actor, affected, patient, theme* and so on. What then is the connection between the predicate and semantic roles of a simple sentence construction? Again, the answer to the above question is determined by the term, valency. This is because in semantics, valency is concerned with predicate which in turn, depends on the type of verbs a sentence construction co-occurs with especially in a simple sentence/declarative construction. Valency therefore is defined as the

account of the number of arguments that a predicate has. For example, the verb, ‘break’ as earlier discussed, has variable valency. What this means is that the number of valency the verb ‘break’ can bond with in any sentence construction, could be more than one.

Recall, Sentence (6), The cup broke. Thus, Sentence (6) has one valency; *the cup*.

Succinctly put, Sentence 6 has one argument, one referring expression, and one valency. However, it is possible for the same verb ‘break’ to attract two or three valencies as follows:

10. The chair was broken by the thieves.

Sentence (10) has two valencies; *the chair* and *the thieves*.

11. The chair that was broken by the thieves belongs to Kuhu.

Sentence (11) has three valencies; *the chair*, *the thieves* and *Kuhu*.

From the samples, Sentence (10) has two arguments or two referring expressions, hence, valency two. Sentence (11) has three arguments or three referring expressions; hence, valency three.

On the contrary, a simple sentence may be devoid of an argument. Consider the following:

12. It is snowing.

Sentence (12) is devoid of an argument. This is because there is no connection between ‘It’ which is a dummy subject and the predicate of the same, ‘is snowing’. Thus, Sentence (12) construction is termed valency zero since it has no argument or zero argument. In addition, there is no connection between the subject of the sentence, ‘it’ and the predicate of the same. Instances of zero valencies abound in weather predicates (Kreidler, 1998, p.68). But then, how do we identify the presence of a valency in a sentence construction?



### ***Identification and Classification of the Valency of a Predicate***

There are two key terms central to the understanding of the valency of a predicate: transitivity and valence. The term transitivity means taking an object while the term valence means verb complementation via the number of term arguments (subject and object) in a sentence (Kroeger, 2006, p.69). Hence, the valency of a predicate can be identified by the presence and number of the referring expression(s) in such sentence construction. Albeit, some predicates may not require any arguments at all; the instance of weather predicates (Kroeger, 2006, p.53). Hence, the presence of a referring expression in a sentence is tantamount to valency one; two referring expressions are also tantamount to valency two and so on. It should be noted that referring expressions are noun phrases. The same noun phrase is a syntactic function of case. Hence, the trio of *case*, *transitivity*, and *valency* are inseparable. This is because in a sentence construction, there are *subject* and *object* (*case*), *verb roles* (*transitivity*) and *variable referents* (*valency*) (Kulikov, 2006).

The following classifications and samples from the literature are thus possible:

I. Valency Zero: It is raining/snowing. Presence of weather verbs (rain, snow); hence, weather predicates. In (I), there is absence of referring expression(s) in the sentence construction. Hence, zero valency.

II. Valency One: The dog is sleeping.

A volcano erupted.

The earth rotates (on its axis.)

In (II), there is the presence of one referring expression (as underlined) in each case of the sentences. Hence, one valency.

III. Valency Two: I broke the window.

The cat killed a rat.

In (III), there is the presence of two referring expressions (as underlined) in each case of the sentences. The referring expressions occupy both the subject and object positions. Hence, two valency.

IV. Changes in valency: We ate lunch (in the kitchen)

We ate in the kitchen (Kreidler, 1998, pp.68-69).

In (IV), valency changes due to the different styles of sentence construction in each case. Interestingly, the first sentence construction has two referring expressions, 'We' and 'lunch' and the second sentence construction also has two; 'We' and 'the kitchen'. The only difference is that 'lunch' is missed out in the second sentence construction. Hence, changes in valency. The different classifications explicated above lead to the discussion of the English simple active and passive constructions.

### ***The English Simple Active and Passive Constructions***

A verb describes an action which either happens to a patient or engineered by an agent. Hence, the term *voice* is attributed to both active and passive constructions. In addition, the duo of *transitivity* and *verbs* have a role to play in voice (Dixon & Aikhenvald, 2000). Consider the English simple sentence, *Samuel cut the tree*. Though a simple sentence, the same is in its active voice. Noticeably, majority of the English simple sentences occur in their active voice. In other words, by default, sentences are structured in the active form. Active sentences are basically taught to mean noun phrases that signal the performer of an action. The same performer is otherwise known as the agent. In all, the agent or the performer occupies the subject (pre-verbal) position. This type of subject is typically referred to as the logical subject. Consider the following examples:

13a. Joana /bought/ some toys.

14a. They /put /the cake/ in the fridge.

15a. The children /baked/ some pies.

16a. A doctor /treated/ the patients.

In Sentences (13a-16a), the pre-verbal noun phrases (i.e., the underlined) are the active performers of the actions expressed in the verbal phrases (predicators) and are thus referred to as the logical subjects. Logical subjects both occupy the initial syntactic position and also function as the doer of the implied action. Hence, the English simple sentences are expressed in the active form when there is no reason to accentuate specific parts of the clause. Passive constructions, on the flipside, are those in which the pre-verbal nominal phrases depict the undergoer or target of that an implied action. In other words, in passive constructions, there is change of voice and valency changing processes (Dixon&Aikhenvald, 2000,pp. 255-256).

Represented below are Sentences (13b-16b) which are the passivized versions of (13a-16a):

13b. Some toys /were bought/ (by Joana).

14b. The cake /was put/ in the fridge.

15b. Some pies / were baked/ (by the children).

16b. The patients / were treated.

While it is possible to have full realizations of the passive sentences with the inclusion of the by-agentive phrase (as seen in Sentences 13b and 15b), an omitted by-agentive construction could also be preferred (as seen in Sentences 14b and 16b). This implies that a passivized construction may be realized as long passives (with *by-agentives*) or short passives (without *by-agentives*). Interestingly, in Sentences (13b-16b), the nominal phrases (which are the underlined) denote the noun phrases upon which the actions were carried out. The same are referred to as grammatical subjects because they occupy the position of the mandatory pre-verbal noun phrases in the sentences. It should be noted that grammatical subjects are not the agents of the predicators expressed in the sentences. Hence, passive voice are formed by altering the corresponding active voice to reflect or project specific

information. Noticeably, the English language has four basic clausal elements: SPCA; three of these four elements are rearranged or re-modified to form a passive construction. In the teaching and learning of the English grammar therefore, the following changes are inevitable in passive voice constructions:

*First, the Logical Subject is relegated to the end of the sentence, as the by-agentive adjunct.*

*Second, the object (target/undergoer) is re-ordered to function as grammatical subject.*

*Third, the verbal phrase is expanded with the introduction of an appropriate form of the BE-auxilliary, which is followed by the past participial (-en) verb form.*

Moreover, passive constructions are used where there is a need to lay emphasis the target of an action or where the undergoer is more important than the doer. In addition, passive constructions are used where the doer is already implied (as seen in Sentence 16b).

Samples from introspection of the English simple sentence constructions both active and passive constructions (with or without the by-agentive phrases) include thus:

17. The lion ate the berries.
18. The berries were eaten.
19. The berries were eaten by the lion.
20. Some carrots were chopped.
21. Temmy chopped some carrots.
22. Some carrots were chopped by Temmy.
23. Baldev ate.
24. Baldev ate some plantain chips.
25. Some plantain chips were eaten.

26. Some plantain chips were eaten by Baldev.

27. Stephen is the captain of Salbawa team.

28. The captain of Salbawa team is Stephen.

29. Richard killed a snake.

30. A snake was killed.

31. A snake was killed by Richard.

What are the pedagogical implications of the discussed to the concept of valency and passive voice constructions?

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

In the teaching and learning of the English simple sentences where both the active and passive voice constructions are involved, the study discovers that there is a change in the positions of the predicate and the argument in such English simple sentence constructions. The change in the positions of the predicate and the argument informs the language user's choice of an active or a passive construction. Consider Sentences (17-19):

17. The lion ate the berries.

18. The berries were eaten.

19. The berries were eaten by the lion.

The structure is such that Sentence (17) is a simple sentence and an active construction while Sentences (18-19) are its passive counterparts. Interestingly, Sentence (17) and Sentence (19) have the same referring expressions; 'The lion' and 'the berries' and hence, same valency (valency two). The only difference lies in the positioning of the referring expressions which in a way defines the distinction between the active and the passive constructions. Hence, the study discovers that passivization does affect the argument structure of the clause. This is due to the

presence or absence of an optional by-agentive prepositional phrase in the passive constructions. As a result, the presence or absence of the by-agentive phrase does impact the valency analysis in passive constructions. The instance of Sentence (18) The berries were eaten. The absence of the by-agentive phrase in Sentence (18) has made it possible for the passive construction to have only one referring expression and hence one valency; ‘The berries’. On the contrary, Sentence (19) The berries were eaten by the lion. The presence of the by-agentive phrase in Sentence (19) has made it possible for the passive construction to have two referring expressions and hence, two valency; ‘The berries’ and ‘the lion’. Thus, passivization focuses the realignment of grammatical roles which informs the presence of valency as well as the number of referring expressions in such constructions (Kroeger, 2006, p.57). The study also discovers that semantic roles complement the presence of the logical subjects and grammatical subjects in active and passive constructions respectively. Hence, the study re-affirms and establishes the connection between valency and passive voice constructions in English grammar. This is because for every passive construction, there is at least, the presence of a valency. In addition, since the English simple sentences are involved in the constructions of the active and passive, there is a recourse to the semantic concept of collocation; a term which refers to permissible word combination. In other words, in the construction of both active and passive voice, there is according to the rules of English grammar, permissible co-occurrence of words which informs the meaning element of either the active or the passive voice. However, the study opines that certain English simple sentence constructions which are devoid of valency as noted in weather predicates, could be meaningful.

## **CONCLUSION**

In the teaching and learning of valency and passive construction therefore, learners must be painstakingly put through the fact that for every passive construction (with or without the by-agentive phrase), there is at least the presence of a valency. A valency from the study is tantamount to a referring expression or a

noun phrase. Hence, the presence of valency in passive construction shows that the referring expressions as valency, are message carriers. Through the approach of Corpus Linguistics therefore, valency, can be used in classrooms to explain active and passive constructions and vice- versa.

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