

## A Survey of the English Activo-Passive Verbs in Historical Perspective

by

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(Received September 30, 1994)

### 1.1

In English, the verbs (with an animate subject) denoting emotions are mostly expressed in the passive e.g. *I was surprized, amazed, delighted*, but logically these verbal phrases should be put into an active form because the focus of attention should fall upon a person who is experiencing the emotion, and he/she should take an active form of the verb to express his/her feeling. The Japanese equivalent of the examples above would be: *Watashi wa odoroiita, yorokonda* (instead of a rarer *Watashi wa odorokasareta, yorokobasareta*). However, this usage seems to have been uncommon in English since the Old English times. In OE (= Old English) the verb takes the person who is experiencing the emotion in the dative case e.g. *him wæs geomor sefa / murnende mod, Beo (= Beowulf)*<sup>1</sup> 49-50, and the verbal phrases denoting emotions *geomor sefa* 'sad mind' and *murnende mod* 'mourning mood' are in the nominative. That is, literally, 'A sad mind, mourning mood was for them.' Hence, ModE: 'Their soul was sad, their spirit sorrowful.'<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2

With verbs of like and dislike also, a thing or an event was often the subject of the sentence in OE: *Ðam cyngellicodon peran* 'The pears pleased the king'; *Ac me swa ðeah no ne licade on him ðæt he ða weorþunge Eastrena on riht ne heold* 'But that his not cherishing Easter rightly did not please me about him';<sup>3</sup> where in ModE (= Modern English) we would usually use a person as a subject: 'The king liked the pears; But I did not like in him his not keeping the Easter in the right way.'

Thus it seems that the subject and object have easily exchanged roles in English without regard to the party who is experiencing the emotion. Whether or not this is the case with other kinds of verbs than verbs of emotion in OE, ME (= Middle English) and ModE is the main interest in the research of the activo-passive verbs.<sup>4</sup>

### 2.1

Before going into further discussion of these kinds of verbs, however, we will look at OE passages with two verbs one of which is in the active form where there should be a passive in ModE.

In OE we often encounter the construction whereby the verb of command is followed by the infinitive in the active voice, whereas it really should be the passive e.g. *Ic Elfred dux hatu writan and cyðan an ðissum gewwrite Elfrede regi* 'I alderman Alfred order to be written and made known in this writing to King Alfred.'

Examples in *Beo* are:

... *Him on mod bearn*

*pæt healreced hatan wolde*

*medoærn micel men gewyrcean*

*ponne ylde bearn æfre gefrunon*

67-70

'It came into his mind that he would order men to build a hall,'

... *Het yðlidan*

*godne gegyrwan*

198-9

'(He) bade make ready for himself a good ship'

Eow het secgan sigedrihten min

391

'My conquering lord...bade me inform you'

Heht ða eorla hleo eahta mearas  
fætedhleore on flet teon  
in under eoderas

1035-7

'Then the protector of nobles bade eight horses with gold-plated bridles, be brought into the hall,'

*Gefrignan, geseon, (ge)hieran* in *Beo* also use the verb in the active voice, where the meaning is passive:

Da ic wide gefrægn weorc gebannan  
manigre mægbe ... / ... folcstede frætwan.

74-76

'Then I heard that orders for the work were given ... to many a nation ... to adorn the people's hall.'

mære maðumsweord manige gesawon  
beforan beorn beran

1023-4

'many saw the jewelled sword of honour borne before the hero'

Du wast, gif hit is  
swa we sopolice secgan hydron

272-3

'Thou knowest if it is so, as truly we heard it said,'

No ic wiht fram þe  
swylcra searoniða secgan hyrde

581-2

'I have never heard such contests ... related about thee.'

## 2.2

When the subject of the second verb in each passage above is not expressed, it is always indefinite. The focus of attention is on the verb rather than the person who does the thing expressed by the verb. For instance, in the first example of *hatan* + infinitive combination, the action of *gewyrcean* 'work, make' is the focus of attention rather than who makes the hall. In *gefrignan* + infinitive combination in *ll.74-6*, the narrator's attention is on the comand of adorning the hall rather

than who ordered it to be decorated. This situation is explained by Sweet as follows.<sup>5</sup>

After verbs of command the active infinitive is used where MnE. would require a passive: *hie heton him sendan maran fultum* 'they ordered greater forces to be sent to them.'

Suppression of subject thus explains the change of voices in the verb in the two-verb constructions.

## 3.1

However, when there is only one verb in a sentence and this takes active forms where passive is appropriate in the meaning, then the problem is not solved simply by supplying a subject. In sentences like *Milk keeps well in refrigerator* or *This meat cuts tough*, it is not either milk or meat that is responsible for keeping well or being hard in cutting. Since *keep* and *cut* are transitive verbs, it may be grammatically explained by the transitive-intransitive transerence. Mustanoja says, "Throughout its (=the verb with double functions) history, ... the English language has shown a remarkable tendency to develop intransitive functions for transitive verbs. The development has been accelerated by the morphological simplication completed within the ME period. Another accelerating factor may have been the influence of French."<sup>6</sup> The former reason concerns with distinction between the transitive *ja*-class verbs and intransitive *o*-class weak verbs, an issue we cannot explore here because the process of the disappearance of the distinction was already manifest and the distinction "is no longer strictly observed in the OE period."<sup>7</sup>

About the French influence on this syntax of English, Mustanoja points out that there is an "inherent aversion of English speakers to the reflexive forms"<sup>8</sup> as against the frequent use of this form in French. Visser also says that the kind of verbs which prefer the reflexive form tend to be the ones denoting "quasi-automatic activity" and gives examples in French as follows.(underline Kobayashi)

*Cette etoffe se vend a vil pris.*

*Le Rhin se franchit assez promptment, quand la traversee se fait de France en Allemagne.*<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2

In ME there are example of the use of intransitive verbs instead of reflexive and passive, and it seems to be the case of the mere dropping of the reflexive pronouns: *the tresor of the benefice Wherof the povere shulden clothe And ete and drink and house bothe* (*Confessio Amantis* Prol. 317-8)<sup>10</sup>

Since the use of the reflexive pronoun reverses the direction of the activity expressed by the verb, arbitrary deletion of this pronoun leads the meaning of the verb into confusion. In the example above, the party which is to be clothed and housed should be expressed with the reflexive pronoun if it is ModE. In the ME period it has already become popular in French to use reflexive expression in place of the passive.<sup>11</sup> and Gower, a follower of French fashion, seems to have partially adopted the form without regard to the direction in which the verb was aiming.

Change of the transitivity of the verb was more systematic in OE than in later times, though confusion was everywhere as stated in 3.1. Sweet says the prefix *for-* “most commonly gives the sense of loss or destruction,”<sup>12</sup> and it means that the meaning of the root is changed into the one without it e.g. *fordon* ‘destroy,’ *forweorpan* ‘perish.’ In *Beo*, *byrnan* which is an intransitive verb ‘burn, to be on fire’ from the fusion of *beornan* and *bærran* is changed into a transitive when the prefix *for-* is attached.

*æfter deorum men dyrne langað  
beorn wið blode*

1879-80

‘a secret longing after the dear man burned in his blood’

*...syððan mergen cwom  
deaðwerigne Denia leode  
bronde forbærnan, ne on bel hlanan,  
leofne mannan*

2124-7

‘Nor could the people of the Danes, when morning had come, burn his body after death, nor lay the beloved man on the funeral pyre.’

### 3.3

Ablaut also played a part in changing the verb from

transitive into intransitive or vice versa in OE. To take an example in *burn* again, OE *beornan* used to be an intransitive whereas *bærnan* was a transitive e.g.

*Se ðe æfre nu beorneþ on bendum  
‘he who now never burns in bonds’<sup>13</sup>*

*Hi bærndon gecorene  
‘They burned the chosen.’<sup>14</sup>*

There are several examples of this type of verb: *lie-lay*, *rise-raise*, *sit-set*, *fall-fell*, etc. Like the confusion of *beornan* and *bærnan*, it may be possible to explain that some activo-passive verbs are the result of the confusion of vowels and the *lie-lay* type verbs are the remains of the old forms. But what we are interested in here is the verb which is “an intransitive verb alongside of which there exists an etymologically related transitive homonym,” in other words, “notionally passive though formally active” verbs according to Visser<sup>15</sup> and Jespersen<sup>16</sup> respectively.

### 3.4

While Jespersen refrains from classifying his activo-passive verbs, saying “our concern is not with a special class of verbs ... but with a special use of a great many verbs under special conditions.”<sup>17</sup> Visser at least tries to sort them out under three kinds of sentence constructions: (1) those in which the verb functions as a quasi-copula (e.g. *the milk tastes sour*), (2) those which contain the verb without further qualifications (e.g. *our fleet may winter here, clean and repair*), and (3) those in which the verb is accompanied by adverbs like *well, easily, better, smoothly, heavily, sonner, not* (e.g. *these books sell well; these clocks wind easily*), or is construed with *will not, will never* (rarely *will*) (e.g. *it will not spin into good yarn*).<sup>18</sup>

As for (1), we have to note that not all the quasi-copula verbs are used in double functions in ModE e.g. *become, seem, look, appear*. There is no OE and ME evidence of them in Visser. Nor all the verbs that Visser enumerated as examples in (1) are copulas e.g. *cut, drink, pack*. The main group of verbs which are used here as copulas are verbs for the senses e.g. *feel, hear, smell, taste*, but we (including Visser) know that *see* is never used as an active verb with a passive meaning. Besides, we observe in Visser’s nine examples in (1) that

they all require an adjective as complement:

*The meat cuts tough.*

*A plate well washed ... develops cleaner than one washed insufficiently.*

*The wine ... drunk (sic.) too flat.*

*They'll (rabbits) eat much better smotherd with onions.*

*The air felt chilly.*

*You have been three days upon it. It hears ill abroad.*

*When the small balls did not pack perfectly tight,*

*Al ðat eure smelled swete. (OE)*

*Blacke as soote and tasting not much unlike it.  
(ME)<sup>19</sup>*

Those in group (3) *sell, wash, use, let, load, milk, open* require an adverb (*The book sells well*) or *will*, mainly denoting customs (*This clothe will wash; The figures would not add up*). Jespersen, observing this fact says, "The sentence therefore is descriptive of something that is felt as characteristic of the subject, and therefore the verb generally requires some descriptive adjective or adverb."<sup>20</sup> The subject, therefore, seems to have some kind of will even though it is not animate, or at least the author or the speaker wants to treat the subject as something which has a will of its own. For instance, in the sentence *Cloths and other stuffs of this Colour must tear and wear sooner than those of any other Colour*,<sup>21</sup> the action of wearing and tearing are expected to be performed by the cloths with the colour, not by any other agent, or at least the emphasis falls upon the quality of the cloths not of the person who wears or uses the cloths nor of the detergent, environment, etc. So it can be said that in (1) and (3), the subject receives attention with the help of complements or adverbial modifiers and looks active even though the underlying meaning is passive.

Regarding the examples in (2), we can say that these verbs do not have a particular direction to which the subject wants to lead the thing or matter, that is, they are rather neutral in causativeness or transitivity. ModE examples are:

*Small sounds carried far.*

*Dinner is servng.*

*I cannot taint with fear.*

*Matches that strike only on the box*

*I ... never could understand why it sold.*

The ME verbs which fall into this category are *close, congeal, discharge, stretch, strike*, and OE examples are *berstan, losian, openian*, etc. Other verbs in (2) such as *act, bake, catch, clean, condense, consume, cure, fasten, play, preserve*, etc. do not take a particular direction but cause the object to be changed in quality or quantity. The objects are, therefore, more appropriately made into subjects e.g. *The scythe end caught in the rigging --The scythe end was caught in the rigging*. That is why Jespersen calls this kind of verb an "activo-passive verb."

### 3.5

As one of the reasons for the emergence of this ambiguity, Mustanoja gives the fashion of the times. As mentioned in the section of French influence of this construction, he says that there has been a remarkable tendency to develop intransitive function for transitive verbs in ModE.<sup>22</sup> In French this preference for the intransitive form of the verb was introduced in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and the passive meaning was clear because of the use of reflexive pronouns. That English speakers adopted this form from French, dropping the reflexive pronoun is doubtful because the reflexive construction has been frequently used in German also. The only thing we are sure about the construction with the activo-passive verbs in English, therefore, is that it was a fashion, a style of sentence or expression which has become as the time passed. The date of the first quotation of active verbs being used with passive meaning in Jespersen and Visser are shown in the following section.

### 3.6

In order to see when and what kind of active verbs came to be used in passive ways in the history of English, I will here present the list of those verbs which have been alphabetically ordered in Visser and Jespersen's investigations.<sup>23</sup> Rearrangement for chronological order was done by Kobayashi, making reference to *OED*<sup>24</sup> and *MED*<sup>25</sup>.

OE

*adrincan* 'to be drowned,' *berstan* 'to burst,' *biernan*

'to burn,' *brecan* 'to break,' *dælan* 'to divide,' *losian* 'to escape,' *miðan* 'to conceal,' *openian* 'to open,' *sceadan* 'to divide'.

ME

*bread* c1200, *dry* c1200, *rend* c1205, *smell* 1220, *wring* a1240, *wear* c1275, *quench* c1290, *fry* c1300, *roast* a1300, *wipe* c1300, *kindle* c1340, *enpair* c1380, *close* c1385, *corrupt* c1386, *congeal* c1400, *strike* a1417, *discharge* 1464, *pay* 1475-88, *stretch* 1485

ModE

*commix* 1519, *shed* 1523-34, *tear* 1526, *waste* 1526, *consume* 1526, *soil* 1530, *read* 1533, *ask* 1579, *replenish* 1579, *feel* 1581, *tell* 1584, *preserve* 1585, *keep* a1586, *play* 1588, *lock* 1590, *untie* 1590, *sully* 1591, *cure* 1592, *patch* 1593, *plant* 1594, *tear* 1597, *stain* 1600, *muster* 1603, *ruin* 1604, *knit* 1605, *taint* 1605, *drink* 1607, *spend* 1607, *taste* 1615, *vend* 1922, *nourish* 1626, *peel* 1634, *dervie* 1634-5, *pull* 1641, *petrify* 1646, *transfer* 1646, *hear* 1658-, *act* 1668, *steer* 1669, *defile* 1673, *marshal* 1687, *conform* 1699, *condense* 1704, *eat* 1706, *fill* 1713, *form* 1722, *pawn\** 1724, *spoil* 1726, *rub* 1726, *read* 1731, *glaze* 1747, *clean* 1748, *break* 1751, *sell* 1751, *thresh* 1760, *deform* 1760, *wash* 1765, *measure* 1765, *emancipate* 1775, *originate* 1775, *button* 1777, *blanch* 1788, *transplant* 1796, *repeat* 1796, *fuse* 1800, *shut* 1801, *lull* 1808, *translate* 1812, *magnify* 1814, *string* 1817, *sing* 1821, *paint* 1827, *write* 1827, *compose* 1828, *fasten* 1829, *rend* 1830, *load* 1832, *serve* 1836, *adjourn* 1839, *spin* 1842, *weave* 1842, *miscarry* 1843, *lift* 1844, *pack* 1846, *digest* 1847, *delight* 1849, *whisper* 1850, *join* 1855, *develop* 1861, *plough* 1864, *catch* 1875, *bake* 1876, *smoke* 1883, *let* 1848, *milk* 1886, *carry* 1886, *subscribe* 1888, *beggar\** 1889, *conceal* 1890, *strike* 1892, *take* 1892, *cut* 1892, *make* 1893, *scatter* 1894, *nurse* 1897, *photograph* 1893, *compare* 1917, *cook\** 1920, *listen\** 1920, *rhyme\** 1921, *tire* 1929, *reform* 1933, *open* 1941, *adapt* 1945, *scare* 1951, *resume* 1957, *shock* 1959

Visser lists all the verbs that Jespersen quoted as examples of constructions with activo-passive verbs except 5,<sup>26</sup> which are astericized in the list. 4 of them i.e. *pawn*, *beggar*, *listen*, and *rhyme* are not found with this function in *OED*, and perhaps that is the reason that Visser did not recognize them as passival verbs. Since

there is no grammatical rule as to the use and non-use of the active form of the verb in a passive sense, we may simply have to admit its use at a certain period of the English language. To take an example even from the most general kinds of verb, it is true that there is a preference for the use of this kind of style at certain periods. For instance, among the verbs for senses which are often used in activo-passive ways (cf. *This milk tastes sour*; *The carpet feels soft*), *hear* does not take this form now, though it was used in the seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.<sup>27</sup> Taking these facts into account, we still endeavour to observe whatever we can from the list above.

### 3.7

In OE there were limited number of activo-passive verbs among the verbs of motion, not necessarily direction oriented. They are *burst-break-divide* type of verbs, *lose-conceal* type of verbs and *burn* type of verbs, but they are difficult to be brought together under one category. As we saw in the beginning of this paper, even the direction of the directive verbs were sometimes made ambiguous in early history of this language, so the passival quality of the active form of the verb may have been so common as to escape our notice.

The use of activo-passive verbs became very common in ME, but examples are limited in number and genre — there are many culinary terms e.g. *fry*, *roast*, *congeal*, *dry*, *wipe* and domestic words e.g. *breed*, *wring*, *wear*, *kindle*, *close* but only one verb of senses i.e. *smell*. There is no verb of fighting, hunting, thanking or socializing.

The period in which this usage of the verb became most popular is the nineteenth century. The fields which this type of verb covers are diversified and there is not one particular field that prefers this form. The verbs which denote most domestic and essential household activity came to be used in this way e.g. *shut*, *sing*, *spin*, *weave*, *lift*, *plough*, *bake*, *smoke*, *milk*, *carry*, *strike*, *take*, *make*, *cut* so do those which denote more sophisticated activities e.g. *translate*, *magnify*, *paint*, *compose*, *serve*, *develop*, *subscribe*, *photograph*. Approximately the same observation can be made in the verb of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though they are less in number.

4.1

Generally speaking, therefore, the activo-passive verbs have become popular in recent times in an environment which is rather close to our daily life.

In a casual environment, English speakers prefer the active voice rather than the passive. Mustanoja says:<sup>28</sup>

In English ... the passive has remained a characteristic of the written language. It is relatively seldom that it gains popularity in colloquial speech, which prefers the type *they took him to prison to he was taken to prison*; cf. also *the book sells well* and other expressions.

Although it may seem too extensive to apply this phenomenon to the case of activo-passive verbs, the principle of mere economy of speech will also support the English preference.

4.2

English speakers who showed aversion to reflexive pronouns may also prefer to avoid the *be*-verb plus past participial construction (= passive) in a colloquial environment. In order to see if it was also true with ME speakers, I took a brief look at one of Chaucer's works which contains both literary passages and conversations.

In his *TC* (= *Troilus and Criseyde*) I to III, the activo-passive verbs were used in the following contexts.

The noise up ros, when it was first aspied  
Thorough al the town, and generaly was spoken,  
That Calkas traitour fled was and allied  
With hem of Grece, and casten to be wroken  
On hym that falsly hadde his feith so broken,  
And seyden he and al his kyn at-ones  
Ben worthi for to *brennen, fel and bones.*

I 85-91

'And ek his fresshe brother Troilus,  
The wise, worthi Ector the secounde,  
In whom that alle vertu list *habounde*,  
As alle trouth and alle gentillesse,  
Wisdom, honour, fredom, and worthinesse.'

II 157-61

'And swich a wigh is for to *blame*, I gesse.'

II 287

That ones may in hevene blisse be,  
He feleth other weyes, dar I leye,  
Than thilke tyme he first herde of it *seye*."

III 1657-9

(Italics by Kobayashi)

All except the first quotation are speeches by Pandarus. Although these examples are too few in number to draw a conclusion about the use and non-use of the activo-passive verbs in a colloquial environment, it can at least give us the idea that they are more often seen in an oral presentation than in explanatory comment. Elliott says<sup>29</sup> in his *Chaucer's English* that Chaucer preferred colloquial to formal style. Therefore, the narrator's comment here may not be in grand style which he preferred at the beginning and end of each volume of *TC*. So at least in this narrative, we may be able to say that the activo-passive verbs tend to appear in a colloquial environment, though we cannot extend this conclusion to other works of Chaucer or to the literature of ME.

The use of activo-passive verbs reflects a mode of speech which developed out of a confusion of styles of speech and writing in ME, in anticipation of it flourishing in the early ModE as one of the popular constructions in both speech and writing.

Notes

- 1 The text of *Beowulf* is Fr. Klaeber ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, D.C. Heath and Co., Massachusetts, 1950.
- 2 The ModE translation of *Beowulf* is from John R.C. Clark-Hall, *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1972.
- 3 J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 1898. *Supplement* by T.N. Toller, 1921 s.v. LICIAN.
- 4 Jespersen thinks that the activo-passive verbs are not a special class of verbs but they are used in a special way under certain circumstances. (Cf. 3.4) He says, 'The peculiarity of this use consists in the passive meaning to be attributed here to the active verbs, which is thus notionally passive though formally active.' Otto Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar* III, George Allen and Unwin Ltd., London, 1909-49, p.350.

- 5 *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer*, revised throughout by Norman Davis, Oxford University Press, 9th Edition (Senjo Publishing Co.), p.55.
- 6 T.F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax* I, Société Néophilologique, 1960, p.429.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Mustanoja, p.430.
- 9 F. Th. Visser, *An Historical Syntax of the English Language* I, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1963-9, p.153.
- 10 Mustanoja, p.441. Underline by Kobayashi.
- 11 Mustanoja, p.431.
- 12 *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Primer*, p.40.
- 13 *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* s.v. BEORNAN.
- 14 *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* s.v. BÆRNAN.
- 15 Visser, p.153.
- 16 Jespersen, p.350.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Visser, p.153.
- 19 The quotations with the asterisks are from A.H. Murray *et al.* ed. *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, Clarendon, Oxford, 1888-1993 and Visser, p.154.
- 20 Jespersen, p. 351.
- 21 *OED* s.v. TEAR
- 22 Visser, pp.154-9 and Jespersen, pp.347-9. Those which appear only in the combination with *back, up,* and *off* are not listed: *cast back* (1534), *draw up* (1833), *add up* (1850), *tie up* (1865), *brush off* (1891), *rub off* (1956), etc.
- 24 Cf. note 19.
- 25 H. Kurath and S.M. Kuhn, *Middle English Dictionary (MED)*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1954.
- 26 Jespersen, pp.347-8:
1. If I had anything that would sell or *pawn* for a little money
  2. Description would but *beggar*
  3. That doesn't *listen* so bad.
  4. a poem so full of feeling that it would not *rhyme*
- 27 This is an example of the 17th century (Visser, p.154). You have been three days upon it. It *hears* ill abroad. *Burton's Diary* IV 147.
- There is another example of *hear* in this use in *OED*. If such Indulgences *hear* ill in the World, and naturally expose a Man to Censure and Disrepute. Stanhope, *Praphr.* III 502.
- 28 Mustanoja, p.437.
- 29 R.W.V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1974, p.73.

## 英語能動受動態動詞の歴史的考察

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(平成6年9月30日受理)

英語の自動詞の中で能動形でも受動の意味をあらわすものを選び、その発生条件、即ち、動詞の性質、ジャンル、修飾句との結びつき、助動詞や使役動詞との関係などを歴史的に考察した。古い作品からの例の他、JespersenとVisserの挙げた例を再検討し、時代によって、又、文語・口語の違いによって能動受動態動詞の好まれかたに差があったことを示した。