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The passive paradox: A reply to Costermans and Hupet

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As a result of experiments on the choice and interpretation of sentences in the passive voice (Johnson-Laird, 1967, 1968*a*, *b*), I have argued that one reason a speaker chooses the passive voice is in order to emphasize the relative importance of the entity referred to by its grammatical subject. In other words, speakers put first what they wish to emphasize. Costermans & Hupet (1977) accept my findings, but offer some cleverly contrived results of their own that they claim contradict my original hypothesis.

The root of the disagreement is simply that fact that the passive voice has a variety of uses. One of them is, as Jespersen (1924) and others before him have pointed out, to allow the person or thing that is of the greater interest to be made the grammatical subject of the sentence, e.g. 'His son was run over by a motor car' (Jespersen's example). In formulating and testing this hypothesis, initially in ignorance of having been anticipated by Jespersen, I assumed that other things being equal a reasonable index of linguistic importance would be size. If the only way subjects could distinguish between 'red follows blue' and 'blue is followed by red' was by colouring a rectangular strip, then it was reasonable to suppose that they would represent the more important referent with a larger area of colour. Certainly, the experiments indicated that individuals took the grammatical subject of the passive to refer to a larger area than the grammatical object. The notion of importance is, of course, rather vague and in my thesis (Johnson-Laird, 1967), though not in the published papers, I introduced a technical term, 'dominance', for which I proposed an independent operational definition. Such a procedure is just as unsatisfactory as relying on the intuition that size correlates with importance. At least, I used to think so until I read Costermans & Hupet's claim that importance attaches to the *smaller* area of the coloured strip. Of course I do not wish to argue that a small area of a stimulus cannot be important: in real life, it may be crucial. But it is hard to believe it will be so in experiments where size is the only variable that subjects can manipulate.

I still wish to maintain that one use of the passive is to allow the importance of the grammatical subject to be emphasized. There are three phenomena that seem to be decisively in favour of this point of view and against Costermans & Hupet's claim that it is the grammatical object that invariably refers to the important entity.

First, one sort of passive is the so-called agentless form that has no grammatical object, e.g. 'The hostages were released yesterday'. Whatever the reason the grammatical object is omitted, the passive can hardly have been chosen in order to emphasize it. Such passives, in fact, are the most frequent sort to be found in both spoken and written texts (see Jespersen, 1924; Svartvik, 1966).

Second, importance ought to be reflected in the relative scope of quantifiers: the most important quantifier is the one with the largest scope. A pair of sentences such as:

All philosophers have read some books
Some book have been read by all philosophers

are, when isolated from context, ambiguous in the same way (Chomsky, 1965). There is, however, a natural tendency to interpret the first sentence to mean that all philosophers have read some books or other, and to interpret the second sentence to mean that there are some particular books that all philosophers have read (see Johnson-Laird, 1969, for relevant experimental results). These interpretations accord with the principle of treating the initial quantifier as containing the second quantifier within its scope.

Third, in an unpublished experiment (Johnson-Laird, 1967), subjects were asked to choose whichever member of active and passive pairs of sentences they thought was more likely to occur in everyday language. It was evident that they preferred sentences with grammatical subjects that were definite (as opposed to indefinite), that consisted of a proper name (as opposed to a common noun), and that referred to a human being (as opposed to an inanimate entity). The subjects would choose a passive rather than an active in order to maintain these preferences. Once again, the preferred grammatical subject seems intuitively to denote the more important entity. Similar results for definiteness have been reported by other investigators (e.g. Grieve & Wales, 1973).

Do these three phenomena constitute decisive evidence that a passive can be used to emphasize the importance of its subject's matter? Perhaps not. Once grant Costermans & Hupet's assumption that the smaller of two areas of colour is thereby the more important, and one seems to enter into a topsy-turvy world. As the area gets progressively smaller, it presumably grows in importance, and so the most important areas of all are the invisible ones. Indeed, one may just as well argue, first, that the most important referent in a situation is the one not explicitly referred to in the agentless passive (it is not referred to because it is invisible!), second, that the smaller the scope of a quantifier, the more important it is, and, third, that important entities tend to be inanimate objects rather than human beings and tend to be referred to by indefinite nounphrases rather than by name. In short, one may as well argue that the reasons why a speaker chooses to say: 'His son was run over by a motor car' is in order to emphasize the importance of 'a motor car'. A disinterested reader may be wondering why anyone would wish to maintain such a view. Its underlying motivation arises from another use of the passive voice.

As Jespersen points out, the passive voice may facilitate the connection of one sentence with another. In particular, if a given topic is under discussion, it is natural to refer to it in the grammatical subject of the sentence and to refer to a new referent in the grammatical object. In order to follow this natural order, it may be necessary to couch the sentence in the passive voice, e.g. 'What happened to John? He was jilted by a girl'. There is a variety of evidence in support of this hypothesis (e.g. Carroll, 1958; Tannenbaum & Williams, 1968; Klenbort & Anisfeld, 1974).

Costermans & Hupet have performed a useful service in drawing attention to the paradoxical contrast between these results and mine, but their resolution of the paradox is implausible. They proceed on the basis of the assumption that what a sentence asserts must be more important than what it presupposes. They test this assumption by requiring their subjects to match sentences to stimuli, and they find that the following sorts of sentences:

Après le rouge, il y a du bleu
(After the red, there is some blue)
Outre le rouge, il y a du vert
(As well as the red, there is some green)
Outre les points rouges, il y a les points verts
(As well as the red dots, there are the green dots).

are mainly matched to a strip with a smaller amount of blue (or green) than red. The subjects take the noun in the asserted clause to refer to a smaller strip of colour than does the noun in the presupposed clause. Since Costermans & Hupet take for granted that what is asserted in a sentence must be more important than what is presupposed, they feel justified in inferring that smallness correlates with importance. Hence, they conclude that my experiments have in fact shown that it is the grammatical object of a passive which is the important entity.

But the paradox can be resolved in another way. What if in some circumstances presupposed information is more important than asserted information? One could then argue that such

circumstances include Costermans & Hupet's experiments, and consequently that the more important entities were matched to the larger areas of the stimuli. The crux is, indeed, the assumption about the relative importance of assertions and presuppositions. In discourse where speakers always ensure that the presuppositions of their utterances have been previously established, it is plausible to suppose that what is new, i.e. what is asserted, may well be of greater importance. But discourse is not always arranged in such an homogenized manner. Certain rhetorical advantages and short-cuts can be achieved by taking for granted something that has in fact yet to be established. (The persuasive effects of such a technique have been explored by Hornby, 1974.) Thus, consider the following example (see Karttunen, 1974):

We regret that no credit is given

This statement presupposes the critical fact that no credit is given and asserts merely a polite regret. Perhaps one way to ensure that presuppositions are treated as more important than assertions is to present sentences out of context. The presuppositions will not then have been established prior to presentation, and the listener (or reader) instead of merely checking the 'given' information against what he already knows will have to try to establish it *ab initio*. The presuppositions will stand out by virtue of their lack of prior satisfaction. The technique of presenting sentences in this way is precisely the one used by Costermans & Hupet. Hence, it is legitimate to suppose that with their material the presupposed clauses were taken to be more important than the asserted clauses, especially as they were also invariably first in the sentence.

It is now easy to explain the paradox of the passives. On the one hand, when a passive occurs in context and its grammatical subject denotes a given referent, then it is likely that its grammatical object will refer to new, and thereby more important, information. On the other hand, when a passive lacks a context, then it is likely that its grammatical subject will refer to information that is not given and which will thereby be taken to be important. Hence, experiments such as mine in which passives occur out of context may well establish the importance of the grammatical subject, whereas experiments in which passives occur in appropriate contexts may well establish the importance of the grammatical object. Paradox resolved.

There is one final corollary. The preference for passives with a definite rather than an indefinite nounphrase as grammatical subject could reflect the importance of the entity referred to or the fact that it is the topic of discourse (or both). It has sometimes been suggested that topicality is all, and that a speaker chooses a definite description only because the referent has already been established as a topic (Hupet & Le Boudec, 1975). Once again, this assumption turns out to be false. As Karttunen (1974) points out, a sentence such as:

John lives in the third brick house down the street from the post office

may be used to give directions to someone who hitherto had no idea that there was such a house. Just as a passive can be used without its grammatical subject denoting given information so too a definite description can be used without its referent having already been identified.

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