

# The Loss of Textual Function Caused by Passive Voice Translation

HUANG Xiao-zhi, GAO Wen-cheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Passive voice is an important grammatical phenomenon, and the translation of English passive voice is a hot issue in translation research. In translation, some linguistic phenomena of the source language cannot be expressed in the target language, and the translation has limits of translatability. However, fewer scholars have studied the loss of textual function caused by the translation of passive voice. The authors argue that the conversion of voice in the translation process can, to a certain extent, cause the loss of meaning. In this paper, the authors analyze the loss of textual function caused by the conversion of English passive voice to Chinese active voice from the perspective of the limits of translatability. The authors believe that this phenomenon is common and unavoidable. Therefore, when dealing with the passive voice, the translator should preserve its discourse function as much as possible, rather than just “converting passive to active voice”.

*Keywords:* passive voice, textual function, the limits of translatability

## Introduction

English and Chinese belong to two different language families, and their linguistic expressions are very different, one of the obvious differences is in the voice. In Chinese, the word “被” was once regarded as an “unfortunate voice” with a pejorative meaning. In recent years, under the influence of western culture, the pejorative meaning of the word “被” has gradually diminished. However, according to the usage of Chinese, the word “被” rarely appears in Chinese sentences. Compared with Chinese, the passive voice appears more frequently in English. Therefore, the treatment of the passive voice is very crucial in English to Chinese translation. In recent years, domestic scholars have begun to pay attention to the comparative study of English-Chinese passive sentences and their translation strategies. By comparing the differences between English and Chinese passive sentences, some scholars (Xie, 2004; Li, 2011; Li, 2012) have put forward the problems in the comparison of English and Chinese passive sentences and their translation methods. Scholars generally agree that the translation of passive sentences should be combined with the actual situation so that the translation can achieve the function of the original language as much as possible. The domestic scholars’ research on passive voice mainly focuses on comparing the differences between English and Chinese passive sentences and proposing corresponding translation strategies. However, fewer scholars have paid attention to

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HUANG Xiao-zhi, Master, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

GAO Wen-cheng, Professor, Ph.D., master student supervisor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology.

the loss of textual function caused by the translation process of passive voice. Based on this situation, the author has studied the problem of the loss of textual function caused by the translation of passive voice from the perspective of the translatability limit.

## Passive Voice

### Functions of the Passive Voice

Nowadays, the social function of language is receiving more and more attention from the academic community. Scholars are particularly concerned with the nature and function of language. According to Jespersen (1933), the passive voice is used in cases where the subject in the active voice is uncertain or not easily specified. The choice of voice depends on the emphasis that the sentence wants to put on it. The passive voice is usually used when the writer wants to emphasize the predicate in the sentence. The principle of End Focus, which states that important and complex information should be placed at the end of a sentence, motivates the use of passive voice. The conversion of voice is a syntactic device that reverses the order of sentences and restructures them so that the information is arranged by the End Focus principle. According to the principle of “prominence”, the passive structure is a syntactic device that highlights what is being said. According to the Functional Sentence Perspective, secondary information tends to appear at the beginning of a sentence, while new information has appeared at the end of the sentence. In a sentence, the known information is called the primary position and appears earlier; the unknown information is called the descriptive position and appears later. Using passive constructions, the object of the active voice can become the subject. In some parts of speech, the passive voice can convey information more effectively than the active voice. It is generally accepted that the passive voice is a unique grammatical form and is used in several situations: (1) to emphasize the object at the beginning of a sentence; (2) when it is not necessary or difficult to indicate the agent; (3) based on politeness.

### The Lack of Rationale for Translating the Passive Voice

In most translation textbooks, the English-to-Chinese translation technique of “turning passive into active” is mentioned, but it lacks justification. No translation technique is a panacea and has specific conditions of application. Many beginners translate English passive sentences into Chinese active sentences as soon as they see them, without thinking about them. Not all English passive sentences require conversion. Before translating, translators should think about “Why do we need to change passive to active voice?” and “Under what circumstances should the passive be changed to active voice?”

- (1) a. He was saved by the police.  
b. 警察救了他。
- (2) a. This peace was broken by the War.  
b. 战争爆发，打破了这种和平的生活。

The above translation reads smoothly out of context, but is it necessary to change the voice? And what is the basis for the conversion? The above sentence can be translated exactly as follows:

- (1) c. 他被警察救了出来。
- (2) c. 这种和平的生活被完全打破了。

The voice and order of the original sentence are preserved, and the sentence reads smoothly. The translation of (b) is not justified. The proportion of the word “被” in Chinese sentences is relatively low, but that does not mean that the word “被” cannot appear. Not all English passive verbs need to be transformed. It is only necessary to change the form of the original text when the unchanged form will affect the smoothness of the sentence or the reader’s understanding of the sentence. In the author’s opinion, the translation technique of “passive to active” is feasible, but there are prerequisites for using this technique, that is, only when the sentence structure is changed, and the voice is changed can the readability of the translation be guaranteed.

### **Loss of Textual Function of Passive Voice Translation**

The passive voice is a lever to promote the construction of language and culture in the generative grammar community, and every model is conceived and discussed without its help (Xiong, 2003). According to Liu (2005), the passive voice can emphasize the subjectivity of the subject, as well as indicate the subjectivity while emphasizing the subject. The author integrates the views of Liu, Halliday, and other scholars, and proposes several cases of loss of textual function of passive voice translation

#### **Emphasizing the Subjectivity**

The original language uses the passive voice to emphasize the subject’s subjectivity (passivity). In the process of English-Chinese translation, the subjectivity of the original language is ignored to facilitate the Chinese readers’ understanding and make the translation more fluent.

(3) a. She was hard hit by the flu.

b. 她得了重感冒。

The original language uses the passive voice, emphasizing the forced subject “she”. The translation converts the passive voice into the active voice but does not emphasize the original situation.

#### **Highlighting the Subject Position**

English and Chinese have two different features. English highlights the theme, while Chinese highlights the topic. Halliday (2002) et al. studied the textual function of the passive voice from the perspective of systematic functional grammar. The passive voice, as an important grammatical device, plays a specific role in the context in which it is used. In terms of text structure, passive and active voices have very different structures. The shift in voice is not only a rearrangement of sentence structure but also a change in its textual function. The passive voice keeps the main position of the sentence in the same place and serves to highlight the main position. The following is an example.

(4) a. I took the license test for the third time. I had been asked to drive in a busy street and had finished my test so successfully. after having been asked to drive out of the street, I began to acquire self-assurance.

(4 a) contains two passive structures. Convert each of them into an active sentence:

b. The examiner was testing me for a driving license for the third time.

c. The examiner had asked me to drive in a busy street.

In (4 a), the subject of each sentence is “I”, and the topic of the passage is “the experience of getting my driving license”. If the two passive structures are changed to active structures (see 4 b, 4 c), the subject position

becomes “examiner” and the whole passage has two subjects, which may confuse the reader. Therefore, in the above example, the passive voice is used to make the subject position of each sentence consistent. In the translation, the subject position should also be consistent as far as possible.

### **Highlighting the Subject Position while Indicating the Subjectivity**

The original language can emphasize the subject position and indicate the subjectivity at the same time. In Chinese, to achieve this effect, it is often necessary to add phrases, but this will make the sentence read more wordy, which is not in line with the Chinese expression. For example:

- (5) a. I had my hair cut this morning.  
 b. 我今天早上剪头发了。

The original language indicates that someone else cut “my” hair, but the translation cannot convey this meaning. The reader has no way of knowing whether the hair was cut by himself or someone else. This leads to a loss of meaning in the translation process.

### **Emphasizing the Focus of the Discourse**

In written English, one cannot judge the main importance of information by pronunciation and intonation, and then one must rely on the order in which words appear in the sentence to judge the importance of information. The main information is usually located at the end of the sentence. This linguistic phenomenon is called End Focus. The passive voice can be divided into two categories, one with the agent and the other with the agent omitted. The author analyzes the end focus of these two types of passive sentences separately.

#### ***Passive Sentences with the Agent***

In English, the number of passive sentences with agents only accounts for 15%-20% of the total number of passive sentences. According to Zhang Zhenbang (2017), “To emphasize the agent, passive sentences with phrases with the preposition ‘by’ are commonly used” (p. 169). According to this principle, after the conversion from active to passive voice, the subject in the active voice is located at the end of the sentence in the passive voice to emphasize the agent. That is, the most important information is placed at the end of the sentence so that it becomes the key of the whole sentence, e.g.:

- (6) a. Who made these cakes?  
 b. My mother made them.  
 c. They were made by my mother.

(6 b) Put “them” at the end of the sentence, (6 c) Put “my mother” at the end of the sentence. There seems to be no difference in the meaning of these two words. From the perspective of functional grammar, there is a clear difference between these two sentences, and they have different intentions. (6 c) shows that the speaker wants to emphasize the agent (my mother).

#### ***Passive Sentences without the Agent***

Among the passive sentences in English, there is a large proportion of passive sentences without an agent. The absence of the agent in a passive sentence is usually because the agent is not known, or the agent is obvious and does not need to be pointed out. In this case, the passive voice is used to highlight the act itself or the result (Kang & Zhou, 1991).

- (7) a. The cup was broken.

In (7 a), “was broken” is the focus. In this sentence, the actor is not pointed out, but the passive voice is used to emphasize the result of the act and the state that the cup was broken.

### ***The Communicative Intention Function of the Discourse***

The English passive structure is more euphemistic than the active structure. The speaker uses indirect discourse to express his communicative intention, which can achieve a polite or euphemistic effect. For example:

- (8) a. Do not enter the conference room without permission.  
 b. You can't enter the meeting room without permission.  
 c. 未经允许, 请勿进入会议室。

This is a notice posted outside the door of a conference room. The passive sentence (8 a) is used here. Compared with (8 b), the tone of (8 a) is more euphemistic and easier for readers to accept, and it also serves as a warning. According to the Chinese expression, the author translates the original language into (8 c), which is more direct in tone than the passive sentence (8 a), and the passive sentence is converted into an imperative sentence, which is more acceptable to Chinese readers. However, in the process of this conversion, the politeness of the original discourse communication is compromised.

- (9) a. You have been told many times not to make the same mistakes.  
 b. I have told you many times not to make the same mistakes.  
 c. 我已经告诉你很多次了, 不要再犯同样的错误。

The passive sentence (9 a) avoids mentioning the speaker himself to indicate euphemism. The subject of the active sentence (9 b) is the speaker, and the tone is more direct compared with (9 a). The translation of the original language into the translated language (9 c) is more in line with Chinese expression, but it also loses the politeness of the discourse communication.

## **Conclusion**

It is indisputable that translation has a limit of translatability. There are commonalities and individualities among languages, and the commonalities enable translation activities, while the individualities are reflected in the obstacles that exist in translation. However, these obstacles are not insurmountable, and the limits of translatability will inevitably shrink with the continuous development of language, the increasing competence of translators, and the improvement of readers' aesthetic ability. By analyzing examples of English passive sentence translation, we can find that the Chinese translation of English passive sentences is likely to cause the loss of textual function. Although it is impossible to overcome this obstacle, as a translator, we should have the awareness of making the function of the translated text as close as possible to the original text, and we should not fail to think about it when translating English passive sentences, and we should make much deliberation to choose the most appropriate translation.

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