

A New Look at Noam Chomsky's Theory of Grammatical Voice

Paul Kent Andersen, PhD¹

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to argue that there are serious flaws with Noam Chomsky's theory of grammatical voice which has become the general consensus in modern linguistics. Our arguments are based on evidence taken from the language spoken by the majority members of the Nacirema tribe in North America and differs substantially from English as depicted in the linguistic literature. The passive sentence itself has two different meanings, only one of which is the same as in the active sentence. Indefinite agents are not deleted in passive constructions. There are active sentences which have two distinct corresponding passive sentences all three of which have the very same meaning and form of the verb. In order for passive morphology to alter the grammatical status of the active's subject and object, it must be added to the active form of the verb, since without the active form of the verb there are no subjects and objects whose grammatical status can be altered.

Keywords: Grammatical voice, Passive, Transformation, States of being, Progressive, Deletion, Naciremac

Introduction

Grammatical voice and the assumption that passive sentences are transformations of corresponding active sentences was first proposed by Noam Chomsky and has been accepted as the general consensus by grammarians of all schools of linguistics, generative as well as functional and cognitive alike. Moreover, the analysis of passive sentences being transformations of active sentences has become a foundation stone and even guiding intuition for modern theories of grammar. In this paper we will argue that this assumption of passive constructions being transformations of active sentences is seriously flawed. Before we start, though, we must mention the following obstacle for all critical analyses of "grammatical voice" in linguistics. In spite of the fact that "grammatical voice" was first established as a grammatical category for the Classical Greek and Latin languages, investigations of "grammatical voice" in linguistics today focuses on the English language, cf.:

“theoretical consideration of passive constructions has naturally [sic!] focused on English” (Langacker and Munro (1975: 789)).

"Grammatical voice" has moreover been investigated intensively in English for many decades by generations of grammarians. Thus, it is safe to assume that all relevant resources in English have been depleted and that all relevant data have already been gleaned from the English language. We should therefore expect it to be near impossible to be able to find even a single shred of new evidence from English, far less any new argument based on the English language, that could possibly change the opinion of modern grammarians with regards to the validity of the theory of "grammatical voice". On account of this, we had no other choice in the matter than to base our arguments on examples collected from a different kind of language altogether. This is the language spoken by the majority members of a tribe in North America called the "Nacirema" which we shall refer to as "Naciremac".

¹ A retired Professor of General and Comparative Linguistics from Sweden. Author of the books: *Affectus: Thracian vs non-Thracian Western Linguistics with Special Reference to Naciremac* and *Grammatical Voice: A Tale of Two Linguistics*.

1. The Theory

(a) The first component of the theory for grammatical voice was the recognition of the following sentences as representing textbook examples of active and corresponding passive sentences in English.

- (1) The cat saw the mouse. [active sentence]
- (2) The mouse was seen by the cat. [passive sentence]

From an analysis of these two types of sentences grammarians have come to the following important conclusions:

- (b) Both of these sentences have the same basic meaning or sense.
- (c) On account of (b), the passive sentence (2) is not independent, but rather it has been transformed from the corresponding active sentence (1).
- (d) There is a difference in the form of the verb: "saw" in the active sentence and "seen" in the corresponding passive sentence.
- (e) The meaning of the form of the verb in the passive sentence is that of affecting changes in the grammatical status of the active sentence's subject and object needed to transform it into the passive sentence without changing meaning, i.e., the active sentence's object becomes the new passive sentence's subject and the active sentence's subject becomes a prepositional object of the new passive sentence.
- (f) In about 70% of passive sentences the active sentence's subject is omitted because it is unknown or not important.
- (g) The meaning of passive sentences is that of portraying an event and the resulting state of being, cf.:

“Irrespective of whether the agent is specified or not, clauses such as (41) [a. The crowd was dispersed by the Militia. b. - The Sex Pistols were discovered by Malcolm McLaren.] clearly refer to both the act of dispersing or discovery and the resultant state of completion” (Siewierska 1984:140).

“a passive sentence [in English] portrays both the occurrence of an event and the state which arises as a result of the event” (Beedham 1982:45).

2. The Meanings of the Passive Sentence

As we have just seen, the meaning of passive sentences is that of portraying an event and the resulting state of being. With this in mind, let us take a look at another passive sentence "the window/it was closed" in English:

When I came at five the window was closed, but I do not know when it was closed.

There doesn't seem to be any problem here, but if we were to take a look instead at the following similar sentences in Naciremac, we find that there are indeed problems.

- (1a) ??When I came at five, the room was emptied, but I do not know when it was emptied.
- (2a) ??When I came at five, the window was cleaned, but I do not know when it was cleaned.
- (3a) ?? When I came at five, the door was opened, but I do not know when it was opened.

What we find here in Naciremac is the same basic sentence used twice: in the first instance "was emptied/cleaned/opened" portray actions taking place as well as the resulting state of being; in the second instance one does not know when the actions took place that led to the resulting state of being. This doesn't make any sense and in fact it is self-contradictory. Consider now the following sentences in Naciremac where the words "empty", "clean" and "open" are used instead in the first occurrence and where they portray only states of being but not actions and resulting states:

- (1b) When I came at five, the room was empty, but I do not know when it was emptied.
- (2b) When I came at five, the window was clean, but I do not know when it was cleaned.
- (3b) When I came at five, the door was open, but I do not know when it was opened.

These sentences make perfect sense now and thus they clearly demonstrate that what is really at issue here is distinguishing the expressions of states of being in the first instances and passives in the second instances, cf.:

When I came at five the window was closed (i.e., it was in the state of being closed), but I do not know when it was closed (i.e., when the action took place that led to the window being in the state of being closed).

Thus, in contrast to English, a sentence such as "the door was closed" in Naciremac has two different meanings: it can portray (i) a state of being or (ii) a state and the preceding action. There are some exceptions, for example, with the verbs "to clean" (clean vs cleaned), "to open" (open vs opened) and "to empty" (empty vs emptied).

Let us drive home this point by taking a look at some other examples from Nacirema.

- (4) The door to his office was closed and locked, just as he'd left it.

Here it should be quite obvious that the door was left in the state of being closed and being locked and not left with some perpetual actions taking place that eventually would lead to the door ending up these states.

- (5) Downtown looked much as he had left it, but there were many more empty storefronts. He was surprised how many FOR RENT or FOR LEASE signs there were. Even the Navy recruiter was closed and empty.

In this example "was closed and empty" refers to states and not actions and resulting states. Had "was closed" had a passive meaning here, then surely one would have expected "was closed and emptied", or more logically "was (first) emptied and (then) closed".

Note the same situation in the next examples.

- (6) It was a Tuesday, and the museum was closed, but if it had been open other visitors could have easily mistaken the group for any guided tour.
- (7) Somebody slapped a handwritten sign on the front door of the biggest bowling alley in Missouri that said it was closed.

Many more such example can readily be added. The conclusions we reach here from this investigation of Naciremac are:

(a) "The door was closed" has two different meanings in Naciremac: it can portray (i) a state of being or (ii) an action as well as the resulting state (i.e., the meaning of the passive) as a metonymic interpretation.

(b) When portraying a state of being, the sentence ("The door was closed") does not have the same meaning as a corresponding active sentence -- note too that one cannot add a prepositional phrase "by X" portraying the agent -- and thus it cannot be the result of a transformation of the corresponding active sentence which changes the grammatical status of the active sentence's subject and object without changing meaning.

3. The Fate of the Active Sentence's Subject

The results of intensive research over many decades by generations of linguists are that agents (the active sentence's subjects) always exist in passive sentences in English, but they are nevertheless omitted in roughly 70% (some researchers stipulate as high as 90%) of the time because they are unknown or not important:

The cat saw the mouse. [active sentence 100%]

The mouse was seen by the cat. [passive sentence 30%]

The mouse was seen. [agentless passive sentence 70%]

The situation in Naciremac is again quite different. Recall from our previous discussion of sentences such as "the door was closed" where we concluded that they could have two different meanings: (i) they can portray only a state of being and (ii) they can portray a state of being and the preceding action leading to the state. In the first instance there is no agent that could possibly be omitted in the first place, cf.:

??When I came at five the door was closed by the janitor, but I do not know when the door was closed (by the janitor).

Another important difference between English and Naciremac is that instead of going to all the trouble of creating an expression, transforming it and then deleting it because it is unknown or unimportant as in English, in Naciremac one starts out already in the beginning with creating indefinite expressions that portray the fact that the entities are unknown or not important. They also do not need to be omitted, as in the following examples:

(8) The attack was recorded by someone nearby.

(9) Kennedy was frightened by something in that house.

(10) Or was it transmitted by some other means?

(11) I think this policy should be ended by whatever means necessary,

Consider furthermore the fact that all events take place in time and space. This does not mean, however, that -- disregarding tenses of verbs (present, past and future) -- all sentences expressing events have words for time (at 2 o'clock, yesterday, in a couple of weeks, etc.) and space (here, on the banks of the Charles River, over there, etc.). In fact, just as the passive in English, so too do the overwhelming majority of sentences expressing events not have such words for time and space. However, no modern grammarian would want to claim that in sentences expressing events, expressions for time and space are first produced and then omitted

because they are unknown or not important. Instead, they would not create an expression for time and space in the beginning. Thus, the same kind of data leads to two distinct analyses. Modern theories of grammar have no guidelines nor set of conditions that need to be fulfilled in order to determine consistently whether a word or expression has first been produced and then deleted, or not produced in the first place.

As mentioned in passing above, some researchers stipulate that the agent in passive sentences in English is omitted in as much as 90% of the time. In addition to this, they also stipulate that the agent in passive sentences in English always portrays new information, cf.:

“However, if one counts actual texts of English, one discovers the following situation: 1. Roughly 90% of passive sentences are agentless, 2. Of the 10% with overtly expressed agents, the majority are indefinite and all [sic!] are expressing the agent as the focus of new information” (Givón 1979:30).

Again, the situation in Naciremac is different as we can see from the following common, ordinary everyday sentences where the agent is a pronoun and refers back to an entity in the previous text and thus represents old information:

- (12) They didn't like him, they were threatened by him ...
- (13) he is brash and he is a braggart and, you know, he doesn't dress and look the way they think a president should and they are offended by him on a multitude of levels.
- (14) He's like the Marcel Marceau of the whole thing, you know. We don't know what he sounds like. Everybody is fascinated by him,
- (15) What do you make of this, that the guy comes out, he got parole. Somebody was star struck by him,
- (16) I also encountered FDR's various deficiencies. But by that time I was captivated by him as president.
- (17) I think she had a lot to do with it, yes. I think he's been very influenced by her.
- (18) Rats were a bit big for her, and she'd been bitten by them before
- (19) He loved his friends. And he was loved by them.
- (20) Mike wore his penguin suit and tried his best to learn the ways of the penguins so he would be accepted by them.

Finally, should it be the case that the passive sentence in English is a transformation of a corresponding active sentence involving grammatical changes without changing meaning, and that the active sentence's subject is deleted after this transformation takes place in 70% to 90% of all passive sentences because it is unknown or not important, then this should certainly mean that the subject is unknown or not important in 70% to 90% of all active sentences as well. This is most definitely not the case, at least not in Naciremac.

4. Adding the Passive to the Active

Let us note once more that the meaning of the passive form of the verb is that of affecting grammatical changes in the active construction's subject and object needed to transform the active sentence into a passive sentence. Assuming that the passive is formed by adding a suffix (for example -n in 'seen', -d in 'closed' and -ed in 'cleaned'), this should mean that the suffix is added to the active form of the verb, since without the active form of the verb, there are no subjects and objects whose grammatical status can be changed in the first place in order to

transform the active into the passive. Although this apparently works well for English, it does not work at all in Naciremac. Consider, again, our textbook examples:

- (1) The cat saw the mouse. [active sentence]
- (2) The mouse was seen (by the cat). [passive sentence]

Assuming that the passive suffix in this instance is -n, we should expect to add it to the active form of the verb 'saw' which would lead to the form ??'saw-n'. This doesn't make any sense at all in Naciremac.

5. Transforming the Active into a Passive without Changing Meaning

As discussed above, the passive sentence in English portrays an event and the resulting state of being. Let us now take a look at the following common, ordinary and everyday sentences in Naciremac:

- (1a) The janitor is cleaning the boys' locker room (as we speak).
- (1b) The boys' locker room is being cleaned by the janitor (as we speak).
- (2a) Little Jonny was closing the front door (when the cat ran out).
- (2b) The front door was being closed by little Jonny (when the cat ran out).

Here we find active and passive pairs of sentences which share the same meaning or sense including that of a progressive action without any resulting state. Note, for example, that in the situation of the first pair of sentences above there could be a surprise fire-drill and that the janitor vacates the building without completing his work and thus without his work leading to the state of the boys' locker room being clean. In the situation of the second pair of constructions it could very well be that little Jonny ran out after the cat and thus left the front door open; hence his action here would not lead to the state of the door being closed.

In English, according to the general consensus of modern grammarians, a passive sentence is transformed from a corresponding active sentence in a single step by adding the passive form of the verb which in turn has the meaning of affecting changes in status of the active sentence's subject and object without changing meaning. This does not work, though, in Naciremac. Note that even though both the active sentences and passive sentences share the same meaning of a progressive action, the progressive meaning itself is expressed differently in the active and passive sentences: it is expressed by means of the suffix "-ing" added to the verb in the active sentences, but by the auxiliary verb "being" in the passive sentences. The fact that a particular meaning -- in this case the progressive -- is formed in different ways is not uncommon in languages including English. Consider, for example, the formation of the plural form of nouns where we find the suffix -s in cats (plural) versus cat (singular) but then another suffix -en in oxen (plural) vs ox (singular), the formation of the past tense of verbs where we find a change in the vowel in ran (past tense) vs run (present tense) but the suffix "-ed" in jumped (past tense) vs jump (present tense), or the formation of the comparative forms of adjectives where we find the suffix -er in longer vs long, but the word 'more' in more beautiful vs beautiful. The important thing to understand here is that the alternating forms are independent of another and one is simply not a transformation of the other: we do not, for example, form the comparative of 'beautiful' by first adding the suffix '-er' (beautifuler) and then transforming this somehow into 'more beautiful'. Since this is also applicable to our active and passive sentences here with respect to the formation of the progressive, we have evidence that the passive sentence is

independent of its corresponding active sentence and that it is not merely a transformation of the active construction in Naciremac as it must be in English.

More important than this is the fact that in the passive sentences here we find not only the progressive auxiliary verb "being" but also the "perfect" form of the verbs "clean" and "close" ("cleaned" and "closed") which portray states of being but not actions. The progressive and the perfect are members of the same overarching grammatical category (aspect), but they have contradictory meanings: a sentence cannot portray the progressive and at the same time a state of being. Note now that if one were to take a sentence and simply remove the expression for aspect (in the following case the perfect suffixes -ed and -d), one should end up with an incomplete sentence and meaningless combination of words.

(1b') The boys' locker room is cleaned by the janitor.

(1b'') ??The boys' locker room is clean___by the janitor.

(2b') The front door was closed by little Jonny.

(2b'') ??The front door was close_ by little Jonny.

But in the case of the passive sentences (1b) and (2b) here in Naciremac, if we remove the progressive "being", we end up with a complete and meaningful sentence, namely the passive sentences we find in English:

(1b) The boys' locker room is being cleaned by the janitor.

(1b') The boys' locker room is_____cleaned by the janitor.

(2b) The front door was being closed by little Jonny.

(2b') The front door was_____closed by little Jonny.

Assuming that passive sentences are transformed from corresponding active sentences, this would therefore give evidence for this transformation occurring in two distinct steps: first the transformation of the active sentences (1a) and (2a) to (1b') and (2b') and second the addition of the progressive "being" to transform (1b') and (2b') into (1b) and (2b):

(1a) The janitor is cleaning the boys' locker room.

(1b') The boys' locker room is _____ cleaned by the janitor. [first step]

(1b) The boys' locker room is being cleaned by the janitor. [second step]

(2a) Little Jonny was closing the front door.

(2b') The front door was _____ closed by little Jonny. [first step]

(2b) The front door was being closed by little Jonny. [second step]

This does bring with it certain problems, though. As we have already seen above, in English (2b') has been transformed from an active sentence (2a') quite different from that in Naciremac under discussion here.

(2a) Little Jonny was closing the front door. (Naciremac active)

(2a') Little Jonny closed the front door. (English active)

(2b') The front door was closed by little Jonny. (passive first step)

Moreover, adding the progressive auxiliary verb "being" to (1b) and (2b) would cancel the meaning of the perfect form of the verb ("cleaned" and "closed") without, however, removing these perfect forms from the sentence. As far as we can determine, this would be impossible in modern theories of grammar and in all "schools" of linguistics. Note, for example, the generally assumed iconic relation between form and meaning and Frege's principle:

"The meaning of a complex expression should be a function of the meaning of its parts" (Allwood et al. 1977:130).

Continuing with our investigation of Naciremac, consider the following common, ordinary and everyday sentences:

- (3a) The janitor has cleaned the boys' locker room.
 (3b) The boys' locker room has been cleaned by the janitor.
 (3c) The boys' locker room is cleaned by the janitor.
- (4a) Little Jonny had closed the front door.
 (4b) The front door had been closed by little Jonny.
 (4c) The front door was closed by little Jonny.

In contrast to English (and other languages in the modern grammarian's repertoire) where we find active and passive pairs of sentences, here in Naciremac we find an active sentence and two distinct corresponding passive sentences all three of which have the same meaning or sense. Recall from our discussion above that the passive is characterized in modern linguistics as portraying both the occurrence of an event and the state which arises as a result of the event. This is true not only of both passive sentences here, but also of the corresponding active sentence. Thus, this characterization of the passive cannot distinguish active and passive sentences in Naciremac. In our discussion of the progressive above we noted that if we were to omit the progressive auxiliary verb "being" from the sentence, we would end up with a complete and grammatical sentence, i.e., the passive sentence in English. If we were to omit the perfect form of the same auxiliary verb ("been") in the passive sentences (3b) and (4b), we would end up with an incomplete sentence and meaningless combination of words:

- (3b) The boys' locker room has been cleaned by the janitor.
 (3b') ??The boys' locker room has _____ cleaned by the janitor.
- (4b) The front door had been closed by little Jonny.
 (4b') ??The front door had _____ closed by little Jonny.

Should the passive sentence be a transformation of the corresponding active sentence, then in this case the transformation would involve but a single step and not two distinct steps as in the progressive above.

In English we find a difference in the form of the verb in the active and passive sentences, i.e. "saw" (active) and "seen" (passive):

The cat saw the mouse.
 The mouse was seen by the cat.

We emphasize: according to modern grammarians, all passive sentences contain a passive form of the verb ("seen") and this differs from the form of the verb in the corresponding active sentence, cf.:

"I claim that in general passive constructions without passive morphology do not exist" Haspelmath (1990:27).

"morphological and syntactic properties are equally essential for the passive voice"
(Kazenin 2001:899).

It is furthermore the basic meaning of this passive form of the verb to affect the grammatical changes needed to transform the active sentence into a passive sentence. Consider now the situation in Naciremac:

The cat had seen the mouse.

The mouse had been seen by the cat.

The mouse was seen by the cat.

Here we find one and the very same form of the verb ['seen'] not only in both passive sentences, but also and more importantly in the corresponding active sentence. This therefore gives evidence that there is no special passive form of the verb in Naciremac and no form of the verb which has as its meaning that of affecting the grammatical changes needed to transform the active sentence into a passive sentence.

6. Conclusion

Chomsky's theory of grammatical voice has been accepted as the general consensus by grammarians of all schools of linguistics. Moreover, since theoretical investigations of grammatical voice over many decades by generations of grammarians has focused on the English language, it is safe to assume that all relevant resources in English have been depleted and that all relevant data have been gleaned from the English language. In this paper we have reviewed the relevant components of this theory and then provided empirical evidence from Naciremac falsifying each and every one of these components. This is moreover only the very tip of the iceberg, when it comes to flaws with the theory for the category "grammatical voice", cf. Andersen (2020a, 2020b). A considerable amount of data could easily be added from Naciremac as well as data from other languages to support these conclusions. Recall also the fact that grammatical voice was first established as a category for the Classical Greek and Latin languages. Accordingly, one could assume that these two languages should be among the most researched languages. In actual fact, scholars have been investigating Classical Greek and Latin, at least in Europe from the beginning of the 19th century. Since Chomsky's invention, Classical Greek and Latin have, just as English, been researched intensively for many decades by generations of grammarians. Our own preliminary investigations of Classical Greek (Andersen (2021)) and Latin (Andersen (2020c)) conclusively demonstrate that modern grammarians and even specialists in Classical Greek and Latin have not even scratched the surface of grammatical voice in these two languages. This is because of the flawed methodology used to analyze the languages.

References

Allwood, Jens, Lars-Gunnar Andersson and Östen Dahl. 1977. *Logic in Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Andersen, Paul Kent. 2020a. *Affectus: ¬Thracian vs Non-¬Thracian Western Linguistics with special reference to Naciremac*. Amazon.
- Andersen, Paul Kent. 2020b. *Grammatical voice: A tale of two linguistics*. Amazon.
- Andersen, Paul Kent. 2020c. *The middle voice in Latin: A preliminary Thracian investigation*. Amazon.
- Andersen, Paul Kent. 2021. *Grammatical Voice in Classical Greek*. Amazon.
- Beedham, Christopher. 1982. *The passive aspect in English, German and Russian*. Tübingen. Gunter Narr.
- Givón, Talmy. 1979. *On understanding grammar*. New York: Academic Press.
- Kazenin, Konstantin I. 2001. "The passive voice." In *Language Typology and Language Universals: An International Handbook, Volym 2*. Edited by Martin Haspelmath, Ekehard Köning, Wulf Oesterreicher and Wolfgang Raible. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. Pp 899-915.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 1990. "The grammaticization of passive morphology." *Studies in Language* 14:25-72.
- Langacker, Ronald W. and Pamela Munro. 1975. "Passives and their Meaning". *Language* 51:789-830.
- Siewierska, Anna. 1984. *The passive. A comparative linguistic analysis*. London. Croom Helm.