

## THE PASSIVE, AN UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE

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Bible translators are concerned with transferring the meaning of words into equivalent expressions in another language. Many times a formal equivalence, that is a word-for-word translation, is considered the ideal. But of course meaning is not confined to just words, for meaning may be spread out through several words and it is the phrase that must be translated. At times a word in the source language must be translated into a phrase in the receptor language. On the other hand, though, the reverse can sometimes be accomplished: a phrase in the source language can be summed up in a single word in the receptor language.

It is here, however, that the process of translation has often stopped. It is thought that meaning does not extend beyond the word, or at best beyond the expression or phrase which often forms the basis for idioms and other exocentric expressions. But meaning goes beyond the word and phrase levels of language, as Nida (1964) and later Nida and Taber (1969) have pointed out. Linguistic structure also has meaning, which also must be taken into account in the translation process. The relationship between linguistic categories, such as nouns and verbs, and relationships between kernel and derived structures<sup>1</sup> (for example simple and complex sentences), all play a role in the construction of meaning and communicating that meaning to others.

But linguistic meaning does not necessarily stop at the relationships between units of grammar. A whole linguistic structure or pattern may carry meaning or be infused with a particular semantic feature, so that whenever such a grammatical pattern is used, this particular meaning is present in addition to the meaning of the words and combination of words contained in the pattern. The term construction in linguistics is usually reserved for the higher level patterns such as clause or sentence and denotes *types* of clauses or sentences. For example, the active sentence is a type of linguistic construction. So is an interrogative sentence and an imperative, which in English require certain words to be changed or deleted, thus producing different types of construction. It is in this higher linguistic level sense that I use the term in this article, the purpose of which is to show that such higher level constructions may also have a meaning of their own.

### The Passive Construction

The passive, that is a sentence in the passive voice, is a type of linguistic construction that carries a meaning of its own in many languages. Prof. Fred Householder Jr. of Indiana University (personal communication)

<sup>1</sup> Current transformational theory has abandoned the concept of kernels and derived structures. The theory now states that all that is semantically relevant to the interpretation of a sentence must be contained in a base or underlying structure. Transformational rules, therefore, function as a road map mapping base structures (and sometimes filtering ungrammatical structures out) into surface structure, or the way we speak.

states that the passive in many languages from East Africa across to Southeast Asia is used only in a bad or unpleasant sense. Sometimes the passive communicates the negative feeling of the speaker. At other times it casts an undesirable value on the content of the message. For instance, when something that is usually considered beneficial to oneself or to the community is spoken in the passive voice, it is reinterpreted as something undesirable.

Thai is a language having a passive construction but using it in an unpleasant sense. Chalao Chaiyaratana (1961), a Thai linguist, pointed this out, especially as concerns adult Americans learning Thai as a second language. Speakers of English use the passive frequently but without any connotation of pleasure or displeasure. However, the passive is used at times by English speakers as a device for achieving objectivity or non-commitment in reporting a message. So when an American speaks Thai and uses the passive indiscriminately as in English, unacceptable sentences occur. For example, when it is said in Thai, in the passive voice, that

(1) He was sent to America to study,

it sounds incongruous, because for a Thai student to go to America to continue his education is anything but an unpleasant experience! For punishment, a student is not sent to America to school.

On the other hand the Thai expression,

(2) The boy was sent to school,

is acceptable for, as one person informed me, this expression in Thai indicates the boy is being forced against his will to attend school, which can be a most unpleasant experience.

Certain verbs in Thai can most readily be used in the passive voice. These verbs, such as *to kill*, *to hit*, *to blame*, *to accuse*, etc., contain a common semantic feature denoting distasteful associations. The following examples in the passive voice appear natural in Thai.

(3) (a) He was shot by a gun.

(b) He was bitten by a dog.

(c) The dog was driven away by the man.

(d) The house was broken into by a burglar.

The messages communicated by the verbs in these sentences are undesirable and the passive voice reinforces such feelings.

Other verbs are not suited to the passive voice under such circumstances. These are verbs that denote pleasure or beneficial activity. The following sentences are not acceptable in Thai in the sense in which we would understand them in English.

(4) (a) We are loved by God.

(b) We were invited to the party by the mayor.

(c) The boss was liked by all the workers.

(d) The dog was patted by the boy.

To say that these sentences are unacceptable is not to say that it is syntactically impossible to say them in Thai. Indeed they may be uttered, but if they are, their meaning is altered. To use the passive voice in sentence (4a)

is to state that it is undesirable for God to love us. And to be invited by the mayor would mean a boring, perhaps unpleasant evening at a party one does not want to attend. From (4c) we may gather that superficially the boss may have been liked, but secretly he was despised. In (4d) we may understand that the boy grudgingly or out of self-defence patted an unfriendly dog.

T'in, a Mon-Khmer language spoken in Thailand and Laos, is another language that uses the passive voice for unpleasant experiences. Statistical counts from texts, however, reveal that the passive is used more rarely in T'in than in Thai, but nevertheless it is used in the same way. The most common passive expressions in T'in are *to be killed* and *to be poisoned*. No examples of sentences containing verbs denoting desirable feelings but reinterpreted in an undesirable sense because of the passive construction have been found in T'in texts or heard in conversations.

### Implications for Bible Translation

The passive construction in these languages, which has a definite semantic feature of its own and can even force this feature upon sentences that otherwise would have pleasurable denotations in the active voice, has some important implications for the task of translating the Scriptures. Both Hebrew and Greek portions of the Bible abound with passives: sentences that are written in the passive voice, passive participles and even nouns that are derived from verbs and carry a passive meaning. These passive constructions had no special meaning in Hebrew or Greek: all types of meaning from good to bad or from pleasant to unpleasant, were expressed using the passive.

This of course points to a basic difference between the Biblical languages and a language like Thai. Not only is the passive construction statistically less frequent in Thai, but it also has a different function from that of the passive in Greek or Hebrew. To achieve merely a transference of grammatical form from one language to another can result in a mistranslation or distortion of the Biblical message. A more dynamic translation<sup>2</sup> is called for, a translation that will take into account the meaning of the construction in the receptor language and use it accordingly.

There are three ways in which the passive in such a language as Thai can be used to achieve a more dynamic translation of the Scriptures.

### Passives into Actives

The first way is by translating passives in the source language that denote pleasurable feeling or activity into the active voice in the receptor language. It has become common procedure in several languages to use the active voice for the passive of Greek or Hebrew for the simple reason that no passive voice exists, or the passive is used so rarely that it cannot be extended as fully as it is in Greek or Hebrew. Even where the passive is a standard and frequently used construction in a language, the current trend in Bible

<sup>2</sup> I use the term *dynamic translation* to express the task of reproducing the total dynamic character of communicating the context; not just words alone. Such a translation takes into account the reaction of the receptors or readers and the understanding of the total context translated from another language (cf. Nida 1964: 120; Nida and Taber 1969: 22).

translation is to transform many of the passives in the source language into the active voice. This is especially true of translations, such as Today's English Version, which seek to communicate the Scriptures in a more common or popular language.

Now, in such languages as Thai, an added motivation is given for changing passives into actives. Thai has a passive voice but it must not be indiscriminately used either in a "passive-for-a-passive" type of translation or according to a statistical count. If a passive in Hebrew or Greek is about a pleasurable or desirable event or quality, then there is no choice but to employ the active voice in the receptor language. As an example of this we may look at Matt. 11:4-5.

“. . . Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed (*καθαρίζονται*) and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up (*ἐγείρονται*) and the poor have good news preached to them (*εὐαγγελίζονται*).” (RSV)

In verse 5 there are three active verbs and three passive verbs. All six verbs however, express desirable and beneficial actions. For a language where the passive denotes an unpleasant experience, these passives must be transformed into actives. It would be a distortion of the message to translate literally that the poor were evangelized, only to have this passive expression re-interpreted to mean that it is an undesirable or distasteful experience!

### Passives into Passives

The second way a more dynamic translation can be made in a language which uses the passive with a definite semantic feature of displeasure is to translate a passive in the source language by a passive construction in the receptor language. Of course, this will require a certain feeling for the source language on the part of the translator, for in order to produce a faithful translation the translator must know when an unpleasant situation in the source language is being communicated in the passive voice. If an unpleasant experience is not being communicated, then the passive in the receptor language should not be used.

On the other hand, it may turn out that the passive in the receptor language has more forcible connotations of distastefulness than are called for in the source language. In this case, to use a passive for a passive may be an over-translation, and an active voice in the receptor language be a closer equivalent to the intent of the source. An example of this is found in Matt. 2:12 where the wise men

“. . . being warned (*χρηματισθέντες*) in a dream not to return to Herod” (RSV)

went home another way. The Greek participle above, here in the passive voice *to be warned*, is normally associated with unpleasant or negative feelings. However, in the total context of this Biblical account, a passive construction denoting an unpleasant experience is not correct, for the reader is supposed to rejoice at the deliverance of the Christ child from the machinations of the degenerate King Herod. An active voice, i.e. “God warned them . . .”, is more appropriate.

A passive construction which is about an unpleasant experience is found in Matt. 27:12.

“But when he was accused (*ἐν τῷ κατηγορεῖσθαι*) by the chief priests and elders, he made no answer.” (RSV)

Another example can be found in Acts 19:40.

“For we are in danger of being charged (*ἐγκαλεῖσθαι*) with rioting today, there being no cause that we can give to justify this commotion.” (RSV)

In both these verses the passive voice is used in connection with unpleasant situations. For these two cases, therefore, a passive construction in the receptor language would communicate such a feeling of distastefulness to the reader.

### Actives into Passives

The third way in which a more dynamic translation can be made in a language using the passive voice in an unpleasant sense is to use the passive voice in the receptor language to translate the active voice of the source language. Here the translator must have a feeling for both the receptor and source languages in order to know when a passive construction in the receptor language will more equivalently communicate the message in the source language which is in the active voice. The situations or contexts in both languages must be parallel not only in content of the words chosen but also in the meaning of the grammatical construction chosen to communicate the content.

Admittedly this procedure is more difficult to handle than the two discussed above.<sup>3</sup> However, it may produce a more equivalent translation of the source language. One way to approach the problem is to compare a list of verbs in the receptor language which can most readily be expressed in the passive voice with equivalent verbs in the source language. This will eliminate from consideration any other verbs in both the receptor and the source languages. Whenever an equivalent verb occurs in the active voice in the source language, it can become the focus of a possible transformation into the passive voice in the receptor language. Not every verb of this nature needs to be so translated because matters of style or frequency may dictate that the passive voice be used sparingly. But all things being equal, a more dynamic translation may be produced if some actives are changed into passives.

An actual example of actives in the source language being changed into passives in the receptor language is a recent revision of Matt. 5:11 into Thai.

“Blessed are you when men revile (*ὀνειδίσωσιν*) you and persecute (*διώξωσιν*) you and utter (*εἰπωσιν*) all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” (RSV)

The older Thai versions translated these Greek verbs in the active voice by the active voice in Thai which was a formal equivalent. A newer revision of the Standard language translation has kept the active voice of these verbs,

<sup>3</sup> It seems to contradict our intuition that a sentence in the active voice is somehow more basic than a passive sentence which has a “derived” quality about it. However, this intuition of ours is not entirely valid, as there are languages in which the passive voice appears more basic and the active a derivative of the passive.

but a translation into Popular Thai has changed them into passives, of which the following is an English translation.

“When you are slandered, (when you) are persecuted and spoken evil against because you are my disciple, you are happy.”

The passive construction reinforces for the Thai reader the unpleasant experience of the Greek verbs, something which the older Thai versions failed to do.

Other examples of actives that might best be turned into passives can be found in Acts 16:37 in the account of Paul’s imprisonment at Philippi.

“But Paul said to them, ‘They have beaten (δείραντες) us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown (ἔβαλαν) us into prison . . .’” (RSV)

The two Greek verbs<sup>4</sup> transliterated above are in the active voice. But for a language where the passive is used to denote an unpleasant experience, Paul could be translated to say “We were beaten by them . . . and were thrown into prison”. The focus of the verse is certainly upon Paul and his negative feelings of the moment. The passive construction would communicate such feelings to the reader.

The translator may now become even bolder. He may ask himself whether the context, even though it contains an active verb or verbs denoting pleasant experience, carries distasteful associations after all. If so, then the context may be changed into a passive construction while still using the same verb or verbs. This is equivalent to example (2) above which in Thai means that the child was sent (i.e. forced) to school against his wishes. The verb *to send* in Thai does not of itself denote negative feelings, except when it is used in the passive construction. But then it is the construction and not the verb that creates the negative feeling.

At present I have no clear example of such a context from the Scriptures. Only a close examination of the thrust of the context will reveal whether a passive construction would communicate that thrust or not. But for languages which use the passive to denote an unpleasant experience, it may be worthwhile for the Bible translator to investigate the possibility of using the passive where such a semantic feature is also present in the source.

### Conclusion

Meaning does not necessarily stop at the word or phrase level of language. It can also be an integral part of higher linguistic levels, such as the passive construction in some languages of Southeast Asia. And if meaning is a part of such larger constructions, then it too must be taken into account in the process of translation. But this should not hinder the faithfulness of the translation or distort the style. Rather, it will open up new ways of communicating the Biblical message in another language.

### Bibliography

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<sup>4</sup> The first verb is in a participial form but it is equivalent to a separate clause.