

A Contrastive Study of Grammaticalization of the “Be” Passive in English and the “Bei” Passive in Chinese

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the grammaticalization of “Be” passive in English and that of “Bei” passive in Chinese based on four aspects including: process, mechanisms, degree, and formation to make a contrastive study in order to understand the similarities and differences between them and explore the underlying causes.

Keywords

“Be” Passive; “Bei” Passive; Grammaticalization; Contrastive Study.

1. Introduction

Many scholars have made contrastive studies on grammaticalization of English and Chinese passives and also have made quite a few remarkable findings in recent years. However, most of them compare English and Chinese passives on the whole, in which “Be” passive in English and “Bei” passive in Chinese are referred to but have not been studied thoroughly. Only few explore the grammaticalization procedure of these two kinds of passives and touch on their motivations and mechanisms in some sort. This paper attempts to examine the grammaticalization of these two kinds of passives and explore the underlying causes. The contrastive studies will be made from two perspectives: diachronic perspective (process of grammaticalization) and synchronic perspective (result of grammaticalization).

2. Diachronic Perspective

This section will make a contrastive analysis of “Be” passive and “Bei” passive from diachronic perspective including five aspects of principles, mechanisms, process, degree, and formation of grammaticalization.

2.1 Principles of Grammaticalization

Both the grammaticalization of “Be” passive and that of “Bei” passive observe the general principles of grammaticalization. But some of these principles, such as divergence, persistence, decategorization, delaying, and one-way cycling, are more applicable to grammaticalization of lexicon than to grammaticalization of sentence structure. The grammaticalization of “Bei” passive contains grammaticalization of the word “被” so it observes more principles than that of “Be” passive.

To be exact, “Bei” passive experiences the coexistence with “Wei” passive and “Jian” passive (layering) and stabilizes as the norm of Chinese passives (specialization) because it is most frequently used (frequency). Besides, the word “被” is extended from a noun to two different verbs. One means “cover”, and the other means “suffer” which then becomes a passive marker (divergence). So it is decategorized from a content word to a functional one (decategorization and one-way cycling). But its original meaning (quilt) and the later meaning as a passive marker are both retained in Modern Chinese (delaying). At the same time, because the passive marker “被” is derived from the verb “suffer”, “Bei” passive primarily express undesirable events (persistence). Obviously, all these happen gradually and slowly (graduality).

Although “Be” passive does not observe as much grammaticalization principles as “Bei” passive does, it undoubtedly obeys some of them since it also experiences the grammaticalization of a sentence structure. For example, it undergoes the choice of auxiliaries “beon”, “wesan”, and “weorðan” (layering). Because of the high frequency of usage (frequency), “be” and “get” are stabilized as passive auxiliaries (specialization). Similar to that of “Bei” passive, the grammaticalization of “Be” passive is also a gradual and slow process (graduality).

2.2 Mechanisms of Grammaticalization

Mechanisms working in the development of human language are approximately the same. English and Chinese are no exception. Therefore the grammaticalization of both “Be” passive and “Bei” passive observe the same mechanisms more or less such as reanalysis and metaphor, analogy and metonymy, change of syntactic position, and language contact.

However the concrete process of these mechanisms working in them is different. For example, on the one hand, it is the similarity between “be + adjectival past participle” construction and “be + verbal past participle” construction (metaphor) that makes it possible to use the latter to express the outcome state of causative events via analogy; on the other hand, it is the contiguity and correlation of the construction elements (metonymy) that makes it possible for the construction “[subject + be] + past participle” to be reanalyzed as “subject + [be + past participle]”. In terms of the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive, it is because of the change of syntactic position and the contiguity and correlation of the construction elements (metonymy) that a verb-object structure (V(被) + O(害)), is reanalyzed as an adverbial-head structure (Aux(被) + V(害) or Prep(被) + N(苏峻) + V(害)). Analogy working in the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive can be seen in the evolution of “Bei ... Suo” construction from “Wei ... Suo” construction.

Besides, the grammaticalization of the word “被” is covered in the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive in Chinese so the meaning evolution of “被” is inevitably involved which is not involved in the grammaticalization of “Be” passive.

2.3 Process of Grammaticalization

Both the process of the grammaticalization of “Be” passive and “Bei” passive is gradual and slow because both English and Chinese have long histories and the fact that the changes within a language is gradual. The history of Chinese is much longer than that of English and existing texts of Chinese begin much earlier than those of English, therefore the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive can be studied in greater detail. For the same reason, the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive in Chinese undergoes a much longer period and thus experiences a relatively more complicated process.

2.4 Degree of Grammaticalization

The passive meaning of “Be” passive in English is expressed by its structure while the passive meaning of “Bei” passive in Chinese is primarily expressed by the word “被”. According to the grammaticalization cline (structural means > lexical means > discursal means), the degree of the grammaticalization of “Be” passive in English is higher than that of “Bei” passive in Chinese.

2.5 Formation of Grammaticalization

Formation of grammaticalization can be either overt or covert. The formation of the grammaticalization of “Be” passive in English is overt since it is a kind of structure so that we can see it in the form. For the same reason, the formation of the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive is also overt. But the grammaticalization of the word “被” involved in the grammaticalization of “Bei” passive is covert because the result of its grammaticalization is not reflected in its form so we can only tell its word class by its distribution in the sentence.

3. Synchronic Perspective

This section will talk about the similarities and differences of grammaticalization of “Be” passive and “Bei” passive from synchronic perspective containing syntactic feature, pragmatic function, and usage frequency.

3.1 Syntactic Forms

There is something in common in syntactic forms of “Be” passive in English and “Bei” passive in Chinese. For example, patient occupies the position of subject; predicate verb must be transitive; passive meaning is marked in syntactic form; agent is introduced by a preposition and can be omitted. All these similarities satisfy the definition of syntactic passives.

There are some differences between them as well.

To begin with, there are differences on the agent. In order to introduce the agent, preposition “by” is put between the predicate verb and the agent in “Be” passive and preposition “被” is put between the agent and the predicate verb in “Bei” passive. Thus the agent of “Be” passive appears after the predicate verb while the agent of “Bei” passive appears before the predicate verb. Although the agent is optional in both “Be” passive and “Bei” passive, its omission in “Be” passive is more frequent. According to Quirk et al, about four out of five English passives have no expressed agent (Quirk et al, 1985:164). Wang Li holds that normal Chinese passives require the presence of the agent (Wang Li, 1984:129). If the agent is omitted in “Be” passive, “by” is omitted with it as well. But “被” can not be omitted whether the agent is omitted or not in “Bei” passive. The reason is that passive meaning of “Bei” passive is expressed by the word “被” while that of “Be” passive is expressed by the whole structure.

Secondly, the differences lie in the predicate verb. Because of the metaphor in the grammaticalization of “Be” passive, “Ved” in “Be” passive is similar to the adjective expressing outcome state. Therefore “Be” passive possesses the maturity of expressing state without other assistance. Whereas the verb in “Bei” passive must take complement such as the complement of result, the complement of direction, or aspect particles like “着”, “了”, and “过” in most cases to express the fulfillment of an action. For example:

- (1) 张三被（李四）打了。
- (2) 树枝被雪覆盖着。
- (3) 车被修好了。

Differences also lie in the subject. Nouns, pronouns, noun phrases, clauses, or even sentences can be the subject of both “Be” passive and “Bei” passive. But the clause is often replaced by the anticipatory pronoun (or dummy pronoun) “it” when it is used as the subject of “Be” passive. For instance,

- (4) It was said that a park would be built here next year.

This is due to the End Weight principle, which means that the longer or more complicated element is always put at the end of the sentence in order to keep the balance of the sentence and release the readers off reading over-complicated information in the beginning of the sentence. However, such a change is not necessary in “Bei” passive.

- (5) 他昨天考试作弊，被老师发现了。

3.2 Semantic Features

Although both express passive meaning, i.e the subject is the acceptor of the action, “Be” passive and “Bei” passive have some differences in their semantic features. As stated in 4.3.1.2, “be + Ved” construction in English is derived from “be + adj.” construction so it primarily expresses an event already happened emphasizing the state arisen from it due to the realization of it. On the country, “Bei” passive lays stress on the actions. It is because the passive meaning is

expressed by the word “被” which is derived from a verb “suffer”. It makes “Bei” passive more like “Get” passive on this point.

Apart from this, “Bei” passive primarily expresses undesirable things while “Be” passive is not restricted to this. Although since the May 4th Movement, more and more neutral or even desirable things are expressed by “Bei” passive, undesirable things are the majority of “Bei” passive. It can be proved by the following investigation. We analyzed 1000 “Be” passives and 1000 “Bei” passives retrieved respectively from Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe (AU) and China Core Newspaper Databases (CCND) randomly. The result is shown in table 1 (Vertical proportion refers to the ratio of each type of passive in the same meaning; lateral proportion refers to the ratio of each meaning in the same type of passive).

Table 1

meaning type distribution	Undesirable			Desirable			Neutral		
	number	proportion		number	proportion		number	proportion	
“Bei” passive	701	vertical	69.9%	96	vertical	22.0%	203	vertical	36.2%
		lateral	70.1%		lateral	9.6%		lateral	20.3%
“Be” passive	302	vertical	30.1%	341	vertical	78.0%	357	vertical	63.8%
		lateral	30.2%		lateral	34.1%		lateral	35.7%
Total	1003			437			560		

Compared from lateral perspective, we can see that “Bei” passive primarily expresses undesirable things while “Be” passive is equally accepted whether expressing desirable, undesirable, or neutral things. Contrasted from vertical perspective, “Bei” passive is used much more frequently in expressing undesirable things while “Be” passive is used more often in expressing desirable or neutral things.

3.3 Pragmatic Functions

Compared with their corresponding active forms, both “Be” passive and “Bei” passive can achieve objectiveness and politeness by expressing undesirable things in an indirect way. It is one thing in common in pragmatic functions. Besides, the proper use of “Be” passive and “Bei” passive can avoid monotony of a series of active forms and thus achieve variety. What’s more, they are similar in stylistic distribution in the passives. To be exact, “Be” passive is relatively more formal than “Get” passive and “Bei” passive is more written than “Jiao/Rang/Gei” passive. However they differ from each other in pragmatic functions in many ways. For example, the speaker’s attitude towards the agent expressed by the same meaning colored passive is different between “Be” passive and “Bei” passive. We analyzed the above 1000 “Bei” passives and 1000 “Be” passives again and get table 2 and table 3.

Table 2. “Bei” Passive in Chinese

meaning attitude distribution	Undesirable		Desirable		Neutral	
	number	proportion	number	Proportion	number	proportion
Positive	697	69.7%	78	7.8%	-	-
Negative	31	3.1%	64	6.4%	-	-
Neutral	-	-	-	-	230	23%

Table 3. “Be” Passive in English

attitudinal distribution	Undesirable		Desirable		Neutral	
	number	proportion	number	Proportion	number	proportion
Positive	158	15.8%	109	10.9%	-	-
Negative	173	17.3%	187	18.7%	-	-
Neutral	-	-	52	5.2%	321	32.1%

From the two tables, we can see that in terms of the passive expressing desirable things, “Be” passive can express positive, negative, and neutral attitudes of the speaker towards the agent while “Bei” passive can express positive and negative ones only. It means that “Be” passive is more impersonal and objective than its counterpart.

Although “Be” passive and “Bei” passive are more formal than their respective counterparts, their distribution in various styles is different. According to the investigation of Douglas Biber et al (2000:476) and Li Xiuxiang (2002), the distribution of English and Chinese passives in some main types of texts can be summarized roughly as table 4.

Table 4. Distribution of English and Chinese Passive

type	Academic Writings	News Reports	Conversations
English passive	25%	15%	2%
Chinese passive	0.529%	3.271%	0.208%

Obviously, the occurrence of Chinese passive is far rarer than English passive in all the three styles. Since “Bei” passive and “Be” passive are the norm of Chinese and English passives respectively, a conclusion can be drawn that “Be” passive is used far more frequently than its counterpart. It also explains why the degree of grammaticalization of “Be” passive is higher than that of “Bei” passive.

4. Causes of the Similarities and Differences

The above analysis shows that there are both similarities and differences between the grammaticalization of “Be” passive in English and “Bei” passive in Chinese whether explored from diachronic perspective or synchronic perspective. Apart from the causes mentioned above in each section, there are some other essential reasons as well.

On the one hand, as language phenomenon, both the development of “Be” passive and that of “Bei” passive observe the common principles of human language and the general patterns of cognition. There will surely be something in common in their grammaticalization.

On the other hand, English and Chinese are two entirely different kinds of language belonging to different language families. They have different histories and cultures which will inevitably influence or even determine their forming and development. In ancient periods, the British Isles are isolated by vast seas. To make it worse, the land is rather poor. Therefore the residents have to fight against nature and thus regard man and nature as separated and opposite. To them, the objective world (Nature) is far more noticeable than the subjective world (Man). While studying and understanding the world, they are apt to adopt logical analysis because they view the world

as composed of two basic but opposite entities which can be subdivided into smaller parts. The completeness of form is the prerequisite of logical analysis so the form is of vital importance in western philosophies. Since language is the most significant tool in logical analysis, the form of western language is also of great importance. Influenced by its culture and philosophy, English pays more attention on hypotaxis. It depends on inflection means to connect words or clauses in order to express semantic and logical relations. This explains the reason why the passive meaning of “Be” passive is expressed by its structure. It also accounts for its syntactic features and overt state.

Quite contrary to its counterpart, Chinese enjoys much more favorite environment with vast lands and moderate climate. Therefore unlike westerners, Chinese view the relationship between man and nature as cooperating and harmony. Thus Chinese classical philosophers view the world as a unity or a network in which all things are interdependent with others. But the relations between things are complicated and flexible. It undoubtedly leads to the ambiguity of Chinese such as the meaning of words, the word class of words, and the relation of constituents of sentence and so on. Besides, Chinese is short of grammatical inflections. It adopts word order and functional words as its grammatical means. Therefore, Chinese centers on parataxis which depends heavily on metaphor, metonymy, image etc. It explains why the passive meaning of “Bei” passive is expressed by the meaning of “被”, and why the grammaticalization of the word “被” is covert. It also accounts for the mechanisms working in the grammaticalization.

Besides, western philosophy stresses the separate distance between man and nature. It believes that only from a certain distance can a thing be analyzed calmly. Therefore, English lays emphases on objectivity. It is for this reason that “Be” passive is used more impersonally and more frequently. Quite contrary to the westerners, our ancestors feel being the center of the world because of the vast continent. Consequently, they regard human being as the most important part of the world. What’s more, Chinese philosophy emphasizes the participation of the subject. Therefore, it is considered natural that instead of the object itself, man is the performer of an action. This accounts for the reason why active form and unmarked passive are used much more frequently than marked passive (primarily “Bei” passive). Accordingly, the lower usage frequency of “Bei” passive leads to the lower degree of its grammaticalization.

This paper not only explores the respective characteristics of “Be” passive and “Bei” passive, it also induces their commonness and the underlying mechanisms and thus induces further the general rules of English and Chinese in the hope of verifying or improving the theories of general linguistics. However, the thesis mainly examines the grammaticalization of “Be” passive and “Bei” passive systematically so it is by no means comprehensive. There are many passive comparisons that have not yet been studied. We still need more investigations with a wider range and further analysis based on proper corpus to provide more scientific and reliable explanations for future studies and made us aware of the evolution of language more clearly.

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