

English Passive Voice: An X-Bar Theory Analysis

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ABSTRACT

English passive voice has its own pattern. Some says that the pattern comes from the active form then it is changing. However, it is rather difficult to memorize the pattern, especially for the non-native people. X-bar theory is one way that can be used in understanding the passive form. By using X-bar diagram, the D- structure of the sentence can be seen and then moved into certain position which makes the S-structure of passive form. This study aims to see what movements exist in the English passive constructions and if there is any of special case. By giving the examples and the X-bar diagrams of basic form of passive, passive form of future tense, passive form of continuous tense, the special case inserting the word 'by', and also the use of word 'get'; the construction of passive form will be clearly and easily understood.

Keywords: *D-structure, movement, passive voice, S-structure, X-bar theory*

INTRODUCTION

One well-known theory in Linguistics is Universal Grammar. According to Borsley, Universal Grammar or UG is a theory which "aims to develop a general theory of syntax, specifying what languages have in common in this area and how they can vary" (1999). Developed mainly by Chomsky, one theory from UG is X-bar theory which is "the theory for the formation of phrases and has a universal value" (Dwijatmoko, 2002). This is a syntax theory which can be applied to any language in the world since it owns the principle of UG that all language shares same grammar.

As an example, the study conducted by Fanselow and Lenertova about mismatches between syntax and information structure of Czech and German. They say that in many languages, including those two, part of semantic focus can be moved into the left periphery which is triggered by unspecific edge feature of C by Chomsky (2011). This proves that the syntactic

theory is applicable for any languages. There is also a study by Al Aqad about syntactic analysis of Arabic's adverb in Arabic and English using X-bar theory (2013), which indicates that X-bar theory can be used by any language.

In X-bar theory, one rule that should be followed is that the a syntactic unit which is used is either head or phrase and phrase is the maximal projection or the biggest chunk of category (Dwijatmoko, 2002). Then in X-bar theory, there are three elements which a clause consists of: a Complementizer Phrase (CP), Inflection Phrase (IP), and Verb Phrase (VP) (Chomsky, 1986b in Dwijatmoko, 2002). However, this study will not use the *I* to indicate tenses and agreement, but use TP (Tense Phrase) instead.

Other common terminologies are S-structure (surface structure) and D-structure (deep structure). S-structure is the structure of ordinary sentence and D-structure is the most basic structure (Borsley,1999). So, it can be said that D-structure only consists of

the most basic or required elements without any tense or agreement and then S-structure is the sentence which already has tense and agreement. Then, how to make a D-structure into S-structure? It is the job of *movement*. This term allows the head from D-structure to move to certain position so the tense or agreement can be added and in the end form the S-structure (Baltin & Collins, 2001). It will be easily seen in a X-bar tree diagram.

One advantage from using x-bar theory is that complicated construction such as passive constructions can be explained clearly. English passive construction may be a difficult thing, especially for non-native English because there are some formula or rules which should be memorized. By using x-bar diagram, the rules can be seen in form of movement and it will give clearer understanding rather than just memorizing the rules.

Passive constructions can be recognized by some characteristics which are:

1. The subject of the passive clause is a direct object in the corresponding active
2. The subject of the active clause is expressed in the passive in the form of an agentive adjunct or is left unexpressed
3. The verb is marked passive (Siewerska, 1984).

A passive construction can be noticed easily from the verb form which usually using the past participle such as *finished*, *walked*, *written*, and *done*, also the existence of auxiliary verb such as *be* and *have*. Wanner defines that passive requires “a passive participle, an implicit external argument that is not in subject position, and a propositional content equivalent to that of its corresponding active sentence” (2009 in Mondorf, 2012).

Passive constructions also have some classifications. According to Siewerska there are several categorizations of passive based on the existence of subject; personal or impersonal, periphrastic or synthetic, and plain or reflexive; on the involvement in state or action or commonly said as stative and non-stative; and on the agent presence; agentive, quasi-agentive, and agentless (1984). Those grouping are not based only on in syntax term but also in scope of morphology and semantic. Betty Schramper Azar also gives some divisions for passive, based on the tenses; simple present, simple past, present perfect, and future tenses. From this division, the passive constructions are formed in several ways and they will be explained more in this study.

This study aims to see the use of X-bar theory in passive sentences. In forming the S-structure of passive sentence, there are several movements in X-bar diagram that should be made from the D-structure. The D-structure and the movements which exist in the passive sentences are analysed and explained in this study. However, this study only limits the passive constructions case based on Azar and common appearance.

DISCUSSION

This section discusses the use of X-bar theory in several English passive sentences. The discussion is divided into four sections which are basic form of passive, passive for future tense, passive for continuous sentences, inserting *by*, and the use of *get*.

Basic Form of Passive

The basic form of passive according to Wanner is in the formula (NP *BE* Ven *by* NP) which means that passive constructions normally will be noun phrase followed by certain *be* form (depends on the tenses), a verb in past participle form, then sometimes followed by the word *by* and noun phrase when it is necessary (2009 in Mondorf, 2012). Azar also explains the

same notion but focuses in the verb which is *be* + *past participle* (2003).

It will be clearly seen in the example of X-bar diagram on the sentence

- (1) a. Somebody finishes the task (active)
- b. The task is finished. (passive)

The verb *be* here carries the tense indicator which can take present, past, future, or continuous tense. As can be seen in the diagram below the word *be* appears under the V head and move to T head which means Tense, become *is* because of the singular and plural subject-verb agreement. Then, the word *finish* as the main verb moves to the Part (participle) to get the past participle form (*-en*) as the formula. Those are two verb head movements that commonly appear in English passive construction.

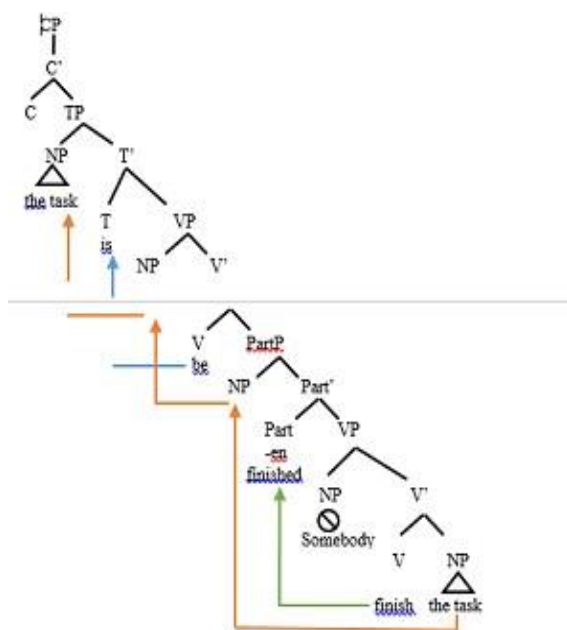


Figure 1. X-bar Diagram of Basic Passive Construction

As can be seen in the diagram, the D-structure of the sentence consists only the word *finish* and the phrase *the task*. The subject in the active form of the sentence is *somebody* which means there is no significance to be mentioned in the passive form, so that is why under the subject NP there is

a “no” symbol, indicating that in the S-structure the subject *somebody* is not necessarily mentioned. However, in the passive form, the object of active form will take place as the subject, so that the phrase *the task* moves in to the subject position under the TP.

Passive Form of Future Tense

Future tense has two forms which by using *be going to* form or with modal *will*. In the *be going to* form, the passive construction of the verb will be *be going to+ be+ past participle*. The changes from active into passive can be seen in the example bellow.

- a. Somebody is going to finish the task. (active)
- b. The task is going to be finished. (passive)

The movements are similar to the previous X-bar diagram, which are from V into T (*be* becomes *is*), from V into Part (*finish* becomes *finished*) and later the omission of subject *somebody* also the movement of *the task* into the subject position. However, the difference is in the verb *go* and also there is another TP below the first V' as can be seen in the diagram below.

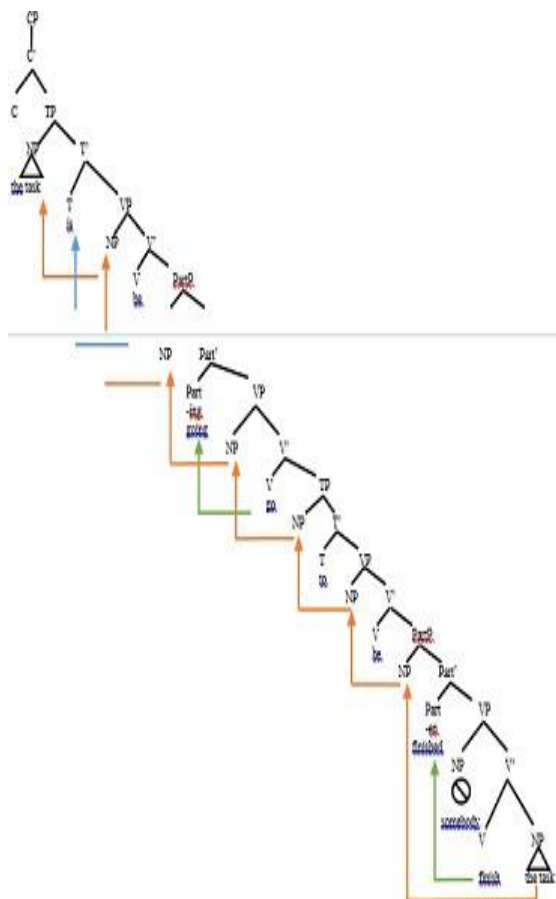


Figure 2. X-bar Diagram of *be going to* Future Passive Form

The verb *go* moves from V into the Part and becomes *going*. Then there is another TP and the position is under the V'. This TP exists to accommodate the word *to* which is functional word and does not have any specific meaning. The word *to* there is just the grammatical part of *be going to*. Then, after TP, there is VP which consists of the V head *be*.

As for the future form using modal *will*, the examples are as follows.

- a. Somebody will finish the task. (active)
- b. The task will be finished. (passive)

The modal *will* will directly under T position and the word *be* will also directly under the V without any movement. The only movements exist in this form is the word *finish* from V into Part and becomes *finished*; also the object *the task* into subject

position. Apparently this pattern also can be used by other modal verbs.

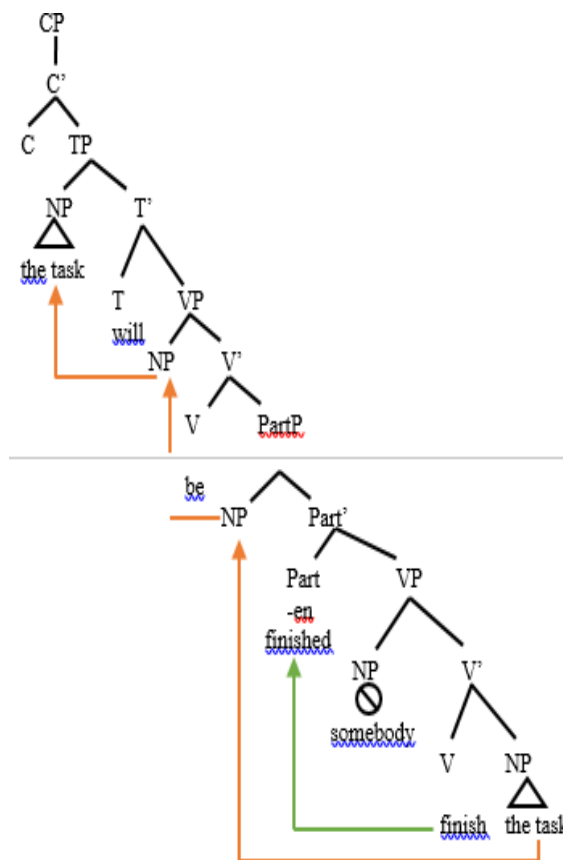


Figure 3. X-bar Diagram of *will* Future Passive Form

Passive Form of Perfect Sentences

A perfect sentence form is usually *have* then followed by past participle form of verb. The passive construction of continuous tense will be *have + been + Ven* (past participle), as can be seen in the examples

- a. Somebody has finished the task. (active)
- b. The task has been finished. (passive)

The movements in the X-bar diagram are not too different from the basic ones, but there are additional movements as can be seen in the diagram below.

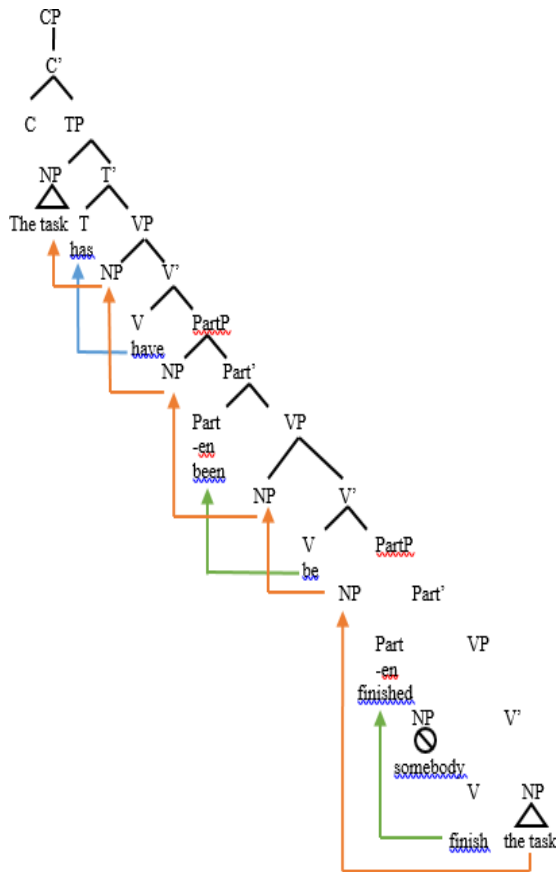


Figure 4. X-bar Diagram of Perfect Passive Form

In the diagram there are two movements which are the characteristics of passive form of continuous sentence. The first one is the movement of the word *have* to the T which results *has* (or *had* if it past continuous). The second one is the movement of the word *be* to the Part position and becomes *been*. Then the rest will be the same as the basic movements of passive form.

Inserting by

Previously the subject in the active form is omitted in the passive form because the subject is unimportant to be mentioned. However, there is the case that the subject is important and should be mentioned. The passive form usually inserts the word *by* before mentioning the subject, as the examples follow.

- a. He finishes the task. (active)
- b. The task is finished by him. (passive)

As can be seen from the examples above, there are position changes between subject and object. In the active form the subject is *he* and the object is *the task*. However, in the passive form, the subject is *the task* and the object is *him* (the object pronoun form of *he*). This change should be shown in the S-structure. It may be noted that the D-structure of active and passive sentences may be the same as can be seen in the diagram below.

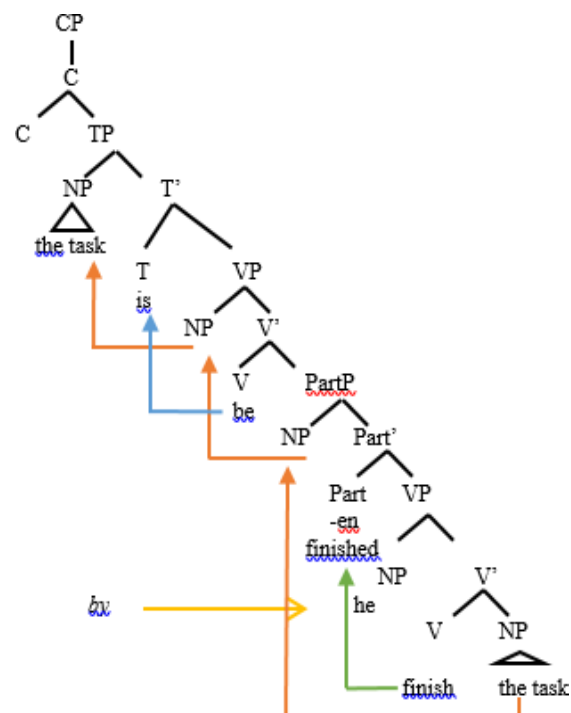


Figure 5. X-bar Diagram, Inserting by

From the D-structure (*he, finish, the task*) then the word *the task* moves into the subject position and the word *finish* move to the Part position, but the word *he* remains in its position which makes it in the last position.

Then, where should be the word *by*, which should be followed by the object, inserted? According to Radford, the word *by* is an “internal argument of the verb” (2009). So the word *by* should be inserted to the Verb

after the word moves into its final position. It will produce the S-structure as the example where the word *by* is before the object.

The Use of *Get*

Actually in Betty Azhar's book, this kind of construction is not explained in detail, but she only explains the differences in using the word *get*, whether it is followed by adjective or by past participle. It turns out that instead of using *be* then followed by past participle, the word *get* can also be used to form passive construction, as the examples follow.

- a. Something wounds him. (active)
- b. He gets wounded. (passive)

The active construction such as 6(a) is not common since the subject *something* here is not really important to be mentioned. The passive form such as in 6(b) is more common where *something* is omitted. For clearer explanation, it can be seen in the X-bar diagram below.

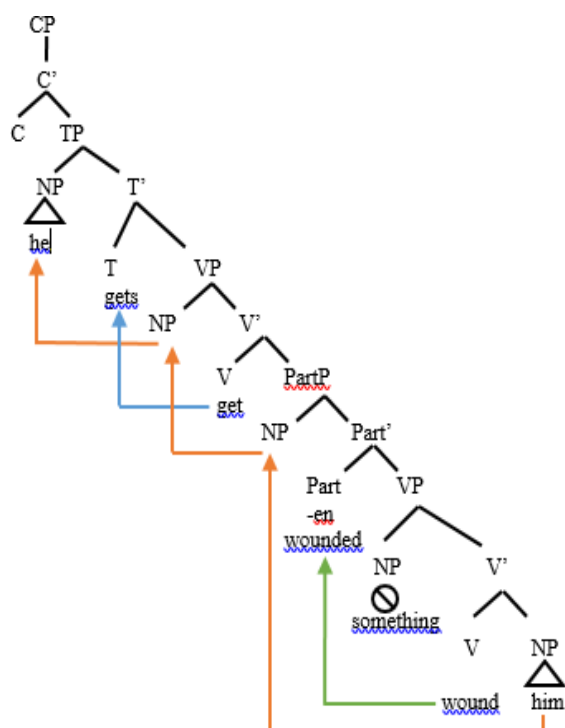


Figure 6. X-bar Diagram, the Use of *get*

The word *get* takes over the position of *be* in which is under the V and moves up to T to form the tense. The other components' movements are similar to other passive constructions; the object *him* moves to the subject position and become *he*, the V *wound* moves to Participle and becomes *wounded*. The subject *something* in the D-structure is omitted because it is not important.

CONCLUSION

This study on x-bar theory of English passive can be concluded into four conclusions. First, basically there are three movements in English passive construction which are V to T movement (*be* gets the subject-verb agreement), V to Part (verb gets the past participle form), and NP movement (object moves to subject position). Second, in the future tense, the passive can be in the form of *going to be* and also modal *will*. In *be going to be* form, the additional movement is the word *go* into the Part and becomes *going*. There is also another TP for accommodating the word *to*. In the form of modal *will*, there is no new movements because the modal *will* is directly place under the T.

Apparently this pattern can also be used by other modals besides of *will*. In the continuous tense, there are two distinct movements which are the word *have* from V to T (becomes *have*, *has*, or *had*) and also the word *be* into Part position and becomes *been*. The case of the word *by* which does not exist in the active form. The word *by* is inserted to the verb, after it moves into its final position, since the word *by* is "an internal argument of the verb" (Radford, 2009). The last is the case of the word *get* which can be used in passive construction too, by taking the *be* position in other passive constructions.

This study is not the final one, which means that other researchers can improve

this study by adding other theories of passive constructions or X-bar. However, from the findings of the study, they prove that X-bar theory can be used to understand the pattern of certain form of grammar. From the movements, the pattern can be understood, how a word has the tense or other agreement and in the end form the S-structure as the real sentence.

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