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## A Syntactic-Semantic Study of Agentive Passive by-phrase Constructions in English context with reference to their Comprehension in Arabic

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### Abstract

Passive voice refers to a syntactic phenomenon which is widely used in a language. The agentive passive construction which refers to a passive with overt agent is considered as one of the types of passive constructions which have great significance due to the role it does with regard to syntax, semantics and even to discourse. Its own consequence in these linguistic fields is reflected in its being a cohesive device which makes information appear in a logical order in which given and short information is put at the beginning provided that new and long information is placed at the end. It also helps to create a new sentence topic, moreover it completes the meaning of sentence due the important information it denotes. There are some problems to be met with regard to the agentive passive construction. It is worth mentioning that difficulty and ambiguity may be resulted in through both the deletion and retention of the agent. The other problem is that unacceptability can be created as a result of lack knowledge of semantic roles. This study aims at showing the appropriate comprehension of English agentive passive. It also aims at disambiguating situation caused by the omission or the retention of the agent besides knowing where to add or remove the agent in passive voice.

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This study hypothesizes that the importance of information affects the way agent is mentioned in passive constructions.

**Keywords:** Passive Construction , Agentive Passive , Syntactic Device, Comprehension

دراسة نحوية-دلالية لتراكيب نائب الفاعل في عبارة "من قبل" في المبني للمجهول في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية بالإشارة إلى فهمهم باللغة العربية

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كلية القلم الجامعة - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

**المخلص :** يشير تركيب المبني للمجهول إلى ظاهرة نحوية تستخدم على نطاق واسع في اللغة. يعتبر نائب الفاعل المبني للمجهول الفاعل الذي يشير إلى أحد أنواع التراكيب السلبية التي لها أهمية كبيرة بسبب الدور الذي تقوم به فيما يتعلق بالنحو والدلالات وحتى الخطاب. تتعكس نتيجتها الخاصة في هذه المجالات اللغوية في كونها أداة متماسكة تجعل المعلومات تظهر بترتيب منطقي يتم فيه وضع المعلومات المعطاة والمختصرة في البداية بشرط وضع معلومات جديدة وطويلة في النهاية. كما أنه يساعد في إنشاء موضوع جملة جديد. علاوة على ذلك ، فإنه يكمل معنى الجملة بسبب المعلومات المهمة التي تشير إليها. هناك بعض المشاكل التي يجب مواجهتها فيما يتعلق بتراكيب نائب الفاعل في المبني للمجهول. وتجدر الإشارة إلى أن الصعوبة والغموض قد ينجمان عن كلاً من حذف نائب الفاعل والاحتفاظ به. المشكلة الأخرى هي أن عدم القبول يمكن أن ينشأ نتيجة نقص المعرفة بالأدوار الدلالية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار الفهم المناسب للغة الإنجليزية المبنية على الفاعلية. ويهدف أيضاً إلى توضيح الموقف الناجم عن الحذف أو الاحتفاظ بنائب الفاعل بالإضافة إلى معرفة مكان إضافة أو إزالة نائب الفاعل في صيغة المبني للمجهول. كما وتفترض هذه الدراسة أن أهمية المعلومات تؤثر على طريقة ذكر العامل في التراكيب السلبية.

**الكلمات الدالة:** تراكيب سلبية ، نائب الفاعل المبني للمجهول ، أداة نحوية ، فهم .

### **1. The Concept of Agentivity**

The notion of Agentivity implies particular features which may or may not all be available in the entity responsible for the action. Kearns (2000:189) illustrates that responsibility, intent and decisions as well are tightly associated with the notion of agentivity in addition to the idea of controllability plays a great role in agentivity besides that of volition. Thus, in a sentence like *John made Bill eat*, both John and Bill are regarded as the agent regarding controllability but with respect to volition, only John can be involved.

Perez-Guerra et al. (2007:376) emphasize that stative situations are excluded from the notion of agentivity. They confirm that although agentivity consists of volition, cause and intimacy, the feature of control seems to play a crucial role in agentivity since it differentiates agentive situations from non-agentive ones. Control over a situation by inanimate entities can take the role of agent, given they lack intimacy or humanness.

Downing and Locke (2006:130) point out that agentivity includes certain properties such as intention, motivation, responsibility and the use of one's own energy in order to instigate processes. Though earthquake, lightning, wind, flood and electricity can influence human beings and their possessions, they initiate a process without controlling it. Therefore, they are not considered as an agent. Although the agent is typically human animate, non-human animate being can also be included within the notion of agentivity and sometimes inanimate entities as in:

- (1) Our dog bit the postman
- (2) The computer virus destroyed all our files and sent copies of itself to everyone on our mail list

Kearns (2000:244) denotes that consciousness, sentience as well as perception tend to be the familiar properties of agentive entities. As far as agentivity is concerned, Renouf and Kehoe (2009:341) show that weak agentivity can be represented by verbs which do not include any material action. That is to say, with verbs denoting sensing (thinking, feeling, perceiving) and state of being. Conversely, strong agentivity is adhered to verbs which express the notion of doing, bodily, physically, materially or of behaving physiologically. This type of verbs indicates actions to be instigated by someone and have the capacity to influence other entities. Kreidler (1998:73-74) illustrates the divergence between agent and actor. As for the agent, it has the ability to affect another entity such as:

- (3) I break the window

Here, the window is influenced by the act of breaking done by the agent because it changes from one state to another.

Regarding the actor, it does not necessarily affect another entities as in:

- (4) Fiona entered the room

The room in this sentence is not affected by the act of entrance.

### **2. Agentive Passive Voice**

It is known that every construction in a language has particular importance to do in that language. The significance of agentive passive in English is reflected through the achievement of many linguistic tasks that agentless may fail to achieve.

Brinton and Brinton (2010:394) define agentive passive as the construction which has an overt by-phrase denoting the performer of the action as in:

- (5) Adele was given a commendation **by the council**

Quirk et al.(1985:159) stress that changing the active voice into the agentive passive requires certain changes; the active object occupies the position of the passive subject while the active subject becomes the passive agent which is preceded by the preposition

by besides changes in verb phrases as in the below example. They state that agentive passive is called a central passive since a direct active-passive relation is achieved through mentioning the agent explicitly as in:

- (6) a-My father made this violin  
b-This violin was made **by my father**

The agentive passive construction is utilized when the agent is introduced for the first time provided that the non-agent argument or the object is evident from the context. (ibid:167)

### **3. Function of Agentive Passive Voice**

The overt mention of agents in passivization cannot be included unless it has something to do regarding syntactic, semantic or discursive functions.

Siewierska (1984:222) says that the agentive passive voice performs the function of topicalization since it places non-agentive nouns in the position of the subject. It also has a focusing function for it puts the agent in the focal position.

Allan (1986:110) states that the main reason behind using passive with an overt agent is observed when the agentive is more important and heavier than the passive subject such as:

- (7) He was met by the acting head of department

The use of passive with an overt "*agentive by-phrase*" has the function of shifting the focus of sentence to the agent as in the below example:

- (8) All problems could be solved by human ingenuity

The *human ingenuity* takes the attention of the sentence since it is very prominent.

Downing and Locke (2006:254) say that the agentive passive is used in appropriate conditions. They confirm that when the agent is too long, it must be put at the end. That is, the principle of end-weight "the shortest first and the longest last" is followed and in such a case, the agent will be weightier than the passive subject such as:

- (9) The goal was scored by Raul, the player with most goals to his credit this season

It is worth emphasizing that new participants who are presented onto the scene of discourse need to be explained in more details than known ones. Since they are very important, it is appropriate to put them in the final position.

Agentive phrase can possess transitory interest for discourse as in:

- (10) In 1996 she was chosen musician of the year by Orchestra Board

The speaker mentions the agent in this sentence because he believes it to be of transitory interest to discourse. It was confirmed that the "*agentive by-phrase*" can be required when it creates a new sentence topic, that is, it can be used to shift topics as in:

- (11) I was never home as a kid...I was always roaming around. I was born out of wedlock so I was raised by my grandfather, who was very hard with me at times. But he was a strong influence because he was very politically oriented.

Greenbaum and Nelson (2002:222) state that the agentive passive voice is largely used in sport commentaries such as:

- (12) It is knocked back by Danny Maddox

- (13) It is flicked forward by Fustin Channing

The name of the player, agent, in active voice occupies the first position in the sentence whereas the agent in the passive clause is shifted to the end of the sentence. Therefore, the use of the agentive passive provides commentators with a lot of time to characterize exactly the name of the player involved in the action. This function, in effect, cannot be easily achieved by active voice. Here, the agentive passive voice is regarded as delaying tactics that can bring great benefits to sport commentators.

Cowan (2008:399) states that the agent can be mentioned in passive voice when it has a strong effect on the theme or patient like causing annoyance or harm as in:

(14) I was kept up all night by my screaming neighbors.

Similarly, the passive subject and the event can be interesting just because they have a connection with the agent which is very famous as in: e.g. This bed was slept in by George Washington, our first president.

(ibid:396)

Wanner (2009:11) shows that cohesion can be created through using agentive passive construction when a non-agent entity possesses higher thematicity than the agent. Mentioning the agent in passive voice relies on its capacity to convey unusual information as in:

(15) Last night, my car was stolen by a man dressed like the Green Goblin. The unusual appearance of the thief deserves mentioning.

Teschner and Evans (2007:104) maintain that the agentive passive voice is required when the speaker or the writer believes it to represent new, unexpected or surprising information for listeners or readers:

(16) A sixty-megaton neutron bomb was dropped on the Greater Los Angeles area yesterday by Hartzavian Air Force, killing twenty million people.

The agentive passive voice is also demanded when the agent represents a particular person, author, composer, inventor, etc. who is very important or too famous to be mentioned as in:

(17) Hamlet was written by Shakespeare.

#### **4. Nature of "Agentive By-Phrase"**

The "*agentive by-phrase*" in passive voice has a specific nature which distinguishes it from other by-phrases. The involvement of agentive by-phrases in passive construction is not without obstacles.

Keenan and Dryer (2006:342-343) illustrate that the "*agentive by-phrase*" does not have the function of a syntactic subject. Instead, it symbolizes a semantic subject. Generally, the "*agentive by-phrase*" is not restricted to passive voice, but it can take place in active constructions such as:

(18) The university forbids the cheating by student during exams.

Here, *by student* functions as the agentive phrase.

Storoshenko (2009:4) says that the "*agentive by-phrase*" in passive voice excludes reflexivization and pronouns as shown respectively:

(19) a-\*Bob was hit by himself

b-\*Bob was hit by him

In terms of the voice of the sentence, the omission of the preposition "by" from active voice can be possible but in passive voice it is not as in:

(20) a-Roger baked the cake by himself

b-Roger baked the cake himself

(21) a-The cake was baked by Roger

b-\*The cake was baked Roger)

In spite of the fact that many languages lack passive with an overt "*agentive by-phrase*", the "*agentive by-phrase*" has certain significance in English when it is present. Thus, mentioning a participant explicitly will bring direct attention to it. The absence of explicit agent in passive is usually shown when it has low prominence. (ibid:9-115)

Givon(2001:174) points out that by-phrase can have the role of manner in passive voice as in:

(22) It was found *by chance*

It is to be confirmed that the passive by-phrase is not peculiar to agent, but it can assign many semantic roles. Certainly, Context is of great importance in determining which semantic role is involved. Since the by-phrase in passive has many semantic roles, resorting to context is crucial in disambiguating words. Nearby words can have closely connected meaning. That is to say, the meaning of by-phrase can be determined by neighboring words like:

- (23) a- The lost children were found *by mountain* (locative)  
b-The lost children were found *by searchers* (agentive)  
c- The lost children were found *by the afternoon* (temporal)

Culicover and Jackendoff (2005:60) , on one hand, argue that by-phrase in passive voice has the semantic role of recipient as in:

- (24) The present was received *by my mother*

Dowty, on the other hand, (2000:13) maintains that when the passive occurs with stative verbs, the by-phrase carries the role of experiencer as in:

- (25) This rumor has now been heard *by every voter*

This means that the experiencer role is not associated with dynamic situations that the agent is adhered to. By-phrase can also take the role of instrumental as in:

- (26) The hammer was seized *by handle*.

Descles et al.(1985:47) show that the "*agentive by-phrase*" in passive functions as a modifier of the passive predicate stressing that since it is the counterpart of active subject, it can have its own importance in the passive voice. Quirk and Greenbaum (1972:378-379) show that the agent can be a relative pronoun as in:

- (27) The glass was broken *by the girl (who(m),that) I met*

or a verbless clause as in:

- (28) Mary was hit *by the man standing there*

or it can be a nominal or an adjectival clause as it is shown respectively:

- (29) a-The article was published *by Mr. Jack who was the author*  
b-The article was published *by Mr. Jack who was famous*

Concerning the position, Siewierska (1984:227) affirms that in rare cases the "*agentive by-phrase*" can occupy the initial position, but the subject will not come post verbally as in:

- (30) By its many migrant residents Mona Vale is called Monna Wile

This sentence proves that the motive behind using passive is not only shifting non-agentive entity to initial topic position. The agent is not associated to the final positioning, but it can come in a medial position as in:

- (31) Which is also by other called Maranon

or it can appear in a final position as in:

- (32) It is written by Lopez

### **6. Non-Optionality of "Agentive By-Phrase" in Passive Voice**

It is emphasized that ungrammaticality tends to be involved with constructions lacking necessary information required for completing the meaning of the sentence. In fact, different analyses with respect to the obligatoriness of the "*agentive by phrase*" have been tackled by linguists.

Grimshaw and Vikner (1993:144-146) say that one of the analyses denotes that passive verbs with obligatory adjunct are said to have two-sub- events which both need to be identified rather than one . The other analysis denotes that expressions which appear obligatory in passive voice function as arguments instead of obligatory adjuncts. Thus, the phrase would satisfy a position in the structure of the predicate when it is argument which means that its existence is demanded by theta-criterion. Verbs of

creation as in (a), (b) as well as change of state verbs in (c) require an obligatory *agentive by-phrase* in passive voice:

(a)- Draw (a picture), knit (a sweater), dig (a hole)

(b)- Make, build, create, construct, erect, manufacture

(c)- Cook (a turkey), paint, fix, freeze, broil, fry, saute, develop (a film)

All these verbs require two-part event structures to complete their meaning. Transitive change of state verbs fall into two types: one takes obligatory adjunct and the other does not as in:

(33) a- Guess what? John was murdered

b- Guess what?\*syntactic structures was written

As a matter of fact, verbs that involve obligatory adjuncts differ from ones which do not in the sense that verbs requiring obligatory adjuncts have a "constructive" interpretation. This "constructive" interpretation is linked to verbs of creation, or tantamount to creation in which the object exists only after the event as in *build*. As for the verb "cook", the event of cooking a turkey does not mean creating a turkey but it indicates creating a turkey dish. "Non-constructive" accomplishment functions in a different way in which the object exists before the event as in the destructive verbs *destroy, kill, break, shoot, ruin*, etc. which can occur with optional adjunct.

Valeika and Buitkiene (2003:93) demonstrate that not all passive constructions can be done with the omission of agentive by-phrase. There are cases where the "*agentive by-phrase*" cannot be deleted because it completes the meaning of the sentence such as:

(34) a-The letter was posted *by Mary*

b-\*The letter was posted

(35) a- The plane was driven *by a propeller*

b-\*The plane was driven

The "*agentive by-phrase*" will be obligatory if it carries new information, therefore, when it is the answer to the question who by? as in:

(36) a- By whom the child was killed?

b- He was killed *by the thief*

Grimshaw and Vikner (1993:143) emphasize the fact that passive predicates will not have a complete sense without the presence of the agent represented by the adjunct and this, in effect, makes the belief that adjuncts are always optional is not precisely true such as:

(37) a-\*This house was built/designed/constructed

b-This house was built/designed/constructed *by a French architect*

(38) a-\*The best tomatoes are grown

b- The best tomatoes are grown *by an organic farmer*

However, adjuncts of time, place, manner or purpose can contribute to the acceptability in case the "*agentive by-phrase*" is not present as in:

(39) This house was built *yesterday /in ten days /in a bad part of town/ only with great difficulty*

(40) The best tomatoes are grown *in Italy/organically*

They denote that the negative morpheme-un in particular instances can make passive without obligatory agent acceptable since it lets the stative reading possible as in:

(41) a-\*The paper was written

b- The paper was unwritten

(ibid:151)

De Mattia-Vivies (2009:104) confirms that particular sentences cannot convey enough information unless the "*agentive by-phrase*" which is always rhematic is overtly mentioned as in:

- (42) a-These open areas of Australia are mainly populated *by farmers*  
b-*\*These open areas of Australia are mainly populated*
- (43) a- This thought was immediately supplanted *by another*  
b-*\*This thought was immediately supplanted*

### 7. Types of Agentive in Passive Constructions

Agentive can be divided into many types. First of all ,the presence or absence of agent in passive voice depends mainly on the context. Each type has its own involvement with a certain context. Givon(1993:48) presents them as follows:

#### 1- Anaphoric Agentive

It is discovered by the preceding context as in:

- (44) The soldiers invaded the village; soon the entire place was burned down

#### 2- Cataphoric Agentive

It is figured out in the following context such as:

- (45) There was no telling what might have happened if he had not been interrupted.  
The dog had been whimpering and whining.

#### 3- Unknown or Unimportant Agentive

It can be exemplified in:

- (46) He was killed in the Boer war

#### 4- Known or Stereotypical Agentive

This type of agentive can be embodied in:

- (47) The plane was brought down safely

It is known that pilots are the agent in this sentence.

Downing and Locke (2006:130) divide the agent into:

#### 5- Central Agent

It includes all features of agentivity as in:

- (48) The man was murdered by Peter

#### 6- Unwitting Agentive

It has only some of the features of agentivity such as:

- (49) We are splashed with mud by the horse as it is passed

Here, it is illogical to think that the horse did it deliberately besides that responsibility and motivation are also excluded from the horse.

They illustrate that agentive may be the writer of the text as in:

- (50) This point will be dealt with in a later chapter

## Discussion

SL Text

(The thief was arrested by the police)

TL Text Renderings

الشرطة أَلت القبضَ على اللص  
الاصُّ القِي القبضَ عليه مِنْ قَبْلِ الشرطة  
قَبِضَ على اللص  
قَبِضَ على اللص. قَبِضَتْ عليه الشرطة

As far as English syntax is concerned, the subject position is occupied by the noun phrase "the thief". This subject is followed by the passive auxiliary "was" plus the past participle of the verb "arrest". "by the police" is formally recognized as a prepositional phrase. With respect to the semantic analysis, *the thief* functions as the patient which undergoes a change of state as a result of the action instigated by the agent which is



characterized by the noun phrase "the police". It is to be stressed that the agent is mentioned since it adds extra essential information.

As for the linguistic terms Theme and Rheme, it is essential to emphasize that the subject of this sentence, the thief, lies in the theme of the passive. Conversely, the agent "the police" exists in the rheme of the passive. Concerning the first Arabic translation, it begins with the noun 'الشرطة' which works as the nominal subject. The active past verb 'القي' which is associated with 'تاء' of femininity 'تاء التأنيث' is followed by the object 'القبض'. Regarding 'على اللص', it denotes a prepositional phrase which carries the meaning of the object. Semantically, the subject 'الشرطة' has the role of the agent whereas the role of the patient is denoted by 'اللص'. In fact the agent here is the topic that receives the attention of the sentence. Linguistically speaking, the word 'الشرطة', which is characterized in English in the rheme of the passive, exists in the theme of active in Arabic. The word 'اللص' is recognized in the rheme of Arabic active but in the English sentence above it lies in the theme.

The second Arabic translation starts with the nominal subject 'اللص'. What comes after this nominal subject functions as the predicate. This predicate includes the passive past verb 'القي' which precedes the noun 'القبض' that acts as the pro-agent. With respect to 'عليه', it is a prepositional phrase that can be followed by the other prepositional phrase 'من قبل الشرطة' which carries the meaning of the subject. As for semantics, there are two roles-the role of the agent is referred to by 'الشرطة' and the role of the patient that is assigned to the 'اللص'. This Arabic translation is compatible with the English sentence above concerning theme and rheme. In fact, Mentioning the agent in this sentence violates the aim behind which Arabic passive is formulated because as it is known that passive voice is formed when the agent is hidden or unknown. Thus, this sentence tends to be unacceptable for most of Arabic linguists. With respect to the third translation, it is has merely the passive past verb 'قبض' which linguistically represents the theme that the sentence is about plus the prepositional phrase 'على اللص'. This prepositional phrase stands as the pro-agent which semantically has the role of patient. The agent here may be omitted because it is known, that is, it is the police who always catch thieves. The other reason which seems to be involved is that it is not mentioned for the sake of magnifying the police, whose mission is to maintain people's own life and their possessions, to be mentioned with thieves whose work is associated with dishonesty. This translation differs from the English sentence above regarding theme and rheme. The word 'قبض' which is grasped in English in the rheme exists in the theme of Arabic passive, so, it receives the focus of the sentence. As for the word 'اللص', it exists in the rheme of Arabic passive though it is part of theme in the English sentence.

The fourth translation tends to be one of the alternatives for comprehending English agentive passive when the verb is characterized by the speaker as the theme which takes the focus of the sentence. Logically speaking, it is not acceptable to use a translation which consists of agentless passive as well as active voice which makes the agent known. For this translation to be acceptable, it is appropriate to use either the agentless passive or the active voice instead of the two.

#### **SL Text (1)**

**The meeting was canceled by the manager**

#### **TL Text**

ألغى المدير الاجتماع  
ألغى الاجتماع

In terms of the syntactic analysis, this sentence starts with the noun phrase "the meeting" which is composed of the modifier "the" plus the head noun "meeting". This

noun phrase has the syntactic function of the subject. The auxiliary verb "was" which is immediately followed by the past participle verb "canceled" shows concord, tense and voice as well. Regarding the concord ,it is appropriate with the subject since it is singular. As for the tense, it shows the past tense of the sentence. Concerning the voice, it denotes a passive construction which is usually formed from one of the forms of "to be" verbs plus the past participle of the main verb. "by the manager" denotes a prepositional phrase which is headed by the preposition *by*. The noun phrase "the manager" which contains the modifier "the" plus head noun "manager" functions as the object complement of the preposition "by".

With respect to semantics, it is to be confirmed that two semantic roles are involved. "The meeting" has the semantic role of patient whereas the semantic role of agent is assigned to "the manager". On the basis of information, *the meeting* represents old information ,that is, information which is known to hearers or readers. The new information ,on the other hand, is represented by *the manager*. Therefore, the agent in this sentence is not omitted because it symbolizes new information that the attention of the sentence is directed about.

As for the first Arabic translation, it consists of the passive past verb ' الغى ' , the subject ' المدير ' and the object ' الاجتماع ' . Semantically, it has an agent which is ' المدير ' and patient that is ' الاجتماع ' .The structure of sentence in terms of information is recognized in a way different from English. The word ' المدير ' is the old information while the word ' الاجتماع ' denotes new information which readers or listeners find essential to know.

Regarding the second translation, it has only the passive past verb ' أُلغِيَ ' whose tense and voice is marked by the declension marks and the pro-agent ' الاجتماع ' . It is worth emphasizing that this sentence has an implicit agent in the deep structure of the sentence but it is ellipted either because of the fear of the agent especially if it is arrogant or the fear for him from falling in troubles.

## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions that this thesis highlights can be stated as follows: The mention of agent in passive constructions relies basically on its ability to express new, unexpected information or other linguistic reasons. Ellipsis of agent in particular instances causes ambiguity, however, the retention of the agent in specific cases results in ambiguity. Certain agentive phrases are obligatory in passive voice but others may be optional. The shift from the active to agentive passive may lead to a change in theme and rheme realization besides that it may lead also to a change of meaning. Agentivity plays a great role in the formulation of successful passive constructions which are different from bad passives that are usually connected with non-agentive situations. The use of passive with overt agents tends to create cohesion in which old information is placed at the beginning while new information is put at the end. It is also a means for new topics to be created in addition to its other influential uses including its involvement with the principle of end-weight in which short information precedes long information. The use of agentive passive in most cases brings direct attention to the agent besides achieving honesty. Choosing the passive rather than the active can achieve politeness besides avoiding embarrassing situations or responsibility. Passive in English is divided into agentive, agentless and quasi agentive but in Arabic, it tends to be agentless except few Glorious Quranic sentences as well as sentences used in the press which contain an overt agent in passive voice. Passivization is a complex process whose formulation depends on many factors such as affectedness, definiteness, etc.

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