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Pragmatic Functions of the Agentless Passive in News Reports of the 1990 Helsinki Summit

1. Introduction

In this paper I intend to show how the ideology used in constructing a news text is articulated through linguistic structures. I will concentrate on one specific structure, the English agentless passive, and see what pragmatic functions it has in news discourse.

By pragmatic function I mean implicit aspects of a message which derive from the writer's conscious or subconscious discourse intentions. When we study implicit aspects of meaning and communication in general, inference plays a major role: whereas explicit aspects of a message are obvious both to the speaker and the hearer, implicit aspects are only potentially acknowledged by the addressee. Thus, what becomes just as important as a writer's or speaker's intentions is the effect the message has on addressees.

The present study is a condensed version of Huttunen (1993), where news reporting from the Helsinki summit meeting between the former United States President George Bush and the former President of the former Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev was investigated. The meeting was summoned as a reaction against the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq in August 1990, and represents a situation that can be expected to reflect different news writers' ideological backgrounds. The crisis, and the war between Iraq and the allied forces, was not merely about the relationship between Iraq and Kuwait, but it was also about the new world order created after the superpower *détente*.

The data have been collected from several British and American newspapers and magazines (for details, see Huttunen 1993). The United States was more directly involved in the crisis than Great Britain, and one particular area of interest is therefore whether this shows up in the language structure, in particular, in

the use of agentless passives. Although many of the news articles investigated are also concerned with the actual crisis in the Persian Gulf, the subject matter is fairly constant. Having one common topic is thus seen to considerably ensure comparability between instances of the agentless passive in the different news articles and newspapers.

In my definition of an agentless passive in English, I have considered semantic and pragmatic aspects to be basic: an agentless passive is thus any '*be* + past participle' construction where the idea of an agent is relevant, and which could be transformed into an active clause (cf. Huttunen 1993). Although the English agentless passive omits reference to the controlling actor(s) of an event, the agent is — at least theoretically — present pragmatically. The existence of some agent responsible for the activity talked about is (presented as if it can easily be) understood and recoverable, sometimes more unambiguously than at other times.

Both linguistic, co-text based sources and more pragmatically based sources of information are important in making it possible for the reader to supply a missing agent. Still, in 82% of all occurrences in my corpus of agentless passives the underlying agent was recoverable.¹ The fact that the actor is only implied, and not overtly stated, inevitably, however, brings about a certain degree of indeterminacy, and sometimes the underlying agent cannot be unambiguously supplied. This indeterminacy of reference can easily also be exploited by the writer.

The agentless passive is usually assigned four (structural) functions related to its use:

- a. agent deletion, i.e. suppressing the controlling actor;
- b. object promotion (or thematization) — Granger (1983: 305-7) argues that this feature seems to play a lesser role in agentless than in *by*-passives;
- c. focus on the verbal element (which is typically in end position); and

¹ For a detailed categorization of agentless passives, e.g. with respect to manner of recoverability of the agent, see Huttunen (1993).

- d. stativization, which shows up in the similarity of passive participles to copula + adjective constructions. (Cf. Givón 1981, 1985.)

Agent deletion and thematization seem to be generally recognized; focusing on the verbal element and stativization are less often dealt with in the literature.

The structural functions have ideological significance in the sense that they can be said to 'contribute' to the pragmatic implications conveyed by the agentless passive. I will concentrate only on agent deletion, and especially the indeterminacy of reference, where the specific agent of a clause is not important for the discourse purpose at hand. Huttunen (1993) suggests that at least thematization and stativization, too, contribute to implicitly expressing the writer's point of view. In an agentless passive, all these forces are naturally at work simultaneously.

In the next section I will argue for and exemplify two pragmatic functions that are predominant for the agentless passive in news reporting: persuasion and avoidance of responsibility. Both of these functions are socio-culturally related to the purposes of news reporting in the first place. The main purpose of news reporting is naturally to convey factual information. In newspapers all information is assumed to be factual unless explicitly marked otherwise. In other words, press reports are taken to be reportage of fact and thus, journalists are not always required, nor even usually expected, to explicate their sources. But at the same time, journalists can use this indeterminacy to hedge responsibility for what they are saying.

News discourse should also meet the requirement of objectivity and neutrality. Journalists are expected to avoid explicit expression of opinion and commitment towards the message in their news report. However, ideology structures the linguistic representation of an event, and implicit opinions and beliefs are, as van Dijk (1988: 124) points out, signalled even in the most factual news reports. This can be called persuasion in the sense that journalists attempt to bring their readers in agreement with the ideology of the newspaper they write for.

2. Persuasion and Avoidance of Responsibility

Reporters cannot always be sure of the reliability of their sources, and the agent is sometimes omitted for that reason. Consider (1) (passive constructions referred to are henceforth underlined for ease of reference):

- (1) The Egyptians are said to be committing two mechanised divisions to Saudi Arabia, in addition to the commandos already there. The Turkish parliament has given its government powers to send forces abroad.
(*The Economist* 15.9.1990)

The writer is uncertain about the truthfulness of this piece of information and has presumably not got any official confirmation concerning the role of Egypt in this matter (cf. the active in the following sentence: here the writer does not mitigate his/her statement in any way, so presumably s/he has received definite information about Turkey's intentions). By leaving out the agent, the writer can also protect both him/herself and the source.

Example (2) illustrates how by using the agentless passive the writer can implicitly impose his/her own opinion on the reader.

- (2) Summits still divert and capture world attention, even if one party is no longer recognized as a superpower. (*The Independent* 4.9.1990)

Here, *one party* obviously refers to the Soviet Union. The article is about the renewed relations between the Soviet Union and the United States, and how the geostrategic changes in the international balance are affecting the Gulf crisis. The writer is optimistic that a military option will be backed up in the United Nations, and plays down the Soviet Union's role in the crisis. The agentless passive is used to support this view implicitly: the writer claims that while we can no longer call the Soviet Union a superpower because of its decreased influence in world politics, the United States is still naturally entitled to the appellation. This is, of course, not a view unequivocally held. It is true that the situation in the Soviet Union was chaotic, but one viewpoint is that NEITHER the Soviet Union NOR the United States are superpowers in the sense that they were regarded during the decades after the Second World War. Rusi (1992: 8-9) supports

this view and claims that the limits of the U.S. economic power became apparent when it was forced to actively look for financing of its expeditionary force from the Western industrial nations and the oil-producing countries of the Gulf region.

Thus, while we could say that ultimately the journalist is presenting his/her own personal opinion on the role of the Soviet Union (and the United States) in world politics, the statement also (at least to some extent) reflects the Western cultural and ideological framework within which s/he is writing.

Example (1) would thus be a clear case where the function of the agentless passive is to allow the writer to avoid taking responsibility for what s/he is saying; and the function of the agentless passive in (2) is clearly that the writer attempts to implicitly persuade the reader of his/her own point of view. These two motivations for the use of an agentless passive — avoidance of responsibility, and persuasion — cannot, however, always be easily kept apart. Consider the following example:

- (3) For the Soviets, their gains from the summit came in the field of foreign policy and not, as had been widely expected, in the form of economic aid.
(*The New York Newsday* 10.9.1990)

In (3) the agent is again indeterminate. The reference may be general (everyone was expecting this), extralinguistic (especially the Americans had been eager to link the Soviet policy on the Gulf to the question of economic aid; but in some papers the linkage was attributed partly to the Soviets); finally, the reference could be linguistic: it was the Soviets who were expecting dollars, as an exchange for their renewed policy on the Gulf, but ended up not getting any.

Example (3) can be said to illustrate a strategy of politeness — if by politeness in very general terms we understand that a writer avoids to say things as bluntly as they could be said. Realizations (like the agentless passive) of different kinds of politeness strategies can be used to indicate avoidance of responsibility for what one is saying. So while the writer is polite in not spelling things out — or rather, s/he wants to give the impression that s/he is being polite — s/he is at the same time trying to make

the reader think according to his/her own beliefs; but these, in turn, may or may NOT be the truth about the matter.

3. Indeterminacy

Since the two functions of persuasion and avoidance of responsibility cannot always be easily kept apart, this state of affairs can be deliberately exploited by a writer. Let us consider the following example:

- (4) President George Bush will meet the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev next Sunday in Helsinki to discuss the Gulf crisis at a time when the White House is now said to be resigned to war with Iraq.
(*The Sunday Times* 2.9.1990)

The underlying agent in (4) is again indeterminate. White House officials are cited frequently later on in the article but example (4) cannot be unequivocally linked to such sources. The writer of (4) is probably protecting his/her sources; the interpretation that the underlying actor is not known, or irrelevant, is hardly plausible. This is the opening sentence of the article and thus inevitably sets the tone for the rest of the text. Actually, example (4) presents the content of the article in a nutshell: the writer tries to give evidence for the claim that Mr Bush has made up his mind to go to war. While the writer is protecting him/herself and his/her sources, s/he is at the same time trying to convince the reader of the inevitability of a military solution. The agentless passive gives an air of generality to the statement. If the source were cited, the reader could argue that it is only an opinion of the person who said it. However, without a closer scrutinization into the reasons for leaving out the agent, the agentless passive gives a more solid basis for the claim.

Although the summit meeting sent a clear message to Saddam Hussein that his aggression would not be tolerated, it was, nevertheless, vague about the key question of using military force. Instead of highlighting the ambiguity surrounding Mr Gorbachev's remarks about the possible use of force against Saddam Hussein, several British newspapers, like *The Times*, tended to underline the fact that the communiqué did not specifi-

cally rule out a military option. This is reflected in the use of the agentless passives in a front page news report from *The Times*:

- (5) The communiqué was seen as a success for Mr Bush, whose aim in asking Mr Gorbachev to meet him was to show President Saddam Hussein that attempts to sow divisions between the superpowers would be futile ...
(*The Times* 10.9.1990)
- (6) The communiqué said ... This was seen as a hint that a UN force was not ruled out.
(*The Times* 10.9.1990)

(5) is the opening sentence of the actual article: it comes right after the Lead, the initial summary. Thus, it inevitably sets the tone for the rest of the text. The article passes over the differences that arose at the press conference and concludes that Bush reserved the right to use force in the future. This is congruent with the stand that Britain took in the crisis right from the start: to strongly support the U.S. policy not to yield an inch to Saddam Hussein. In fact, Britain pursued this policy with even more warlike disposition than the United States itself (cf. Stenwood & Peacock 1990). (6) is from the same article as (5), five paragraphs later. Here the passive is used to reinforce the interpretation that the summit was a success for Mr Bush, who came to Helsinki to get Soviet support in the Gulf crisis. In other words, the Soviet leader would not 'throw a spanner in the works' if the U.S. decided to authorize military measures against Iraq.

4. Conclusion

How often do journalists then use the agentless passive for their own purposes? Out of the 405 passives in my corpus, only 50 have been considered as having pragmatic implications in the sense that they reflect the writer's own ideology and beliefs, and human interactional relations in general. However, the small number of passives with indeterminate reference is not in proportion to its importance. The fact that in most passives the obvious, unambiguous agent is readily detectable retains the impression that this would be the case in each and every one of them. As Östman (1986: 22) demonstrates, the power of persuasive language is based on the fact that the addressee does not realize that

s/he is being persuaded to do something. Thus, it could be argued that the less readers perceive that the writer is in fact trying to impose his/her own opinion and beliefs on them, the greater the effect.

One final point should be made. As many as 34 out of 50 sentences deal with only three topics: first, the question of U.S. economic help to the Soviet Union; secondly, the question of military action, and when and how it should be exercised; and thirdly, the role of the Soviet Union in the Gulf crisis and in world politics in general. And it was these three issues that had a central role in the Helsinki summit meeting in September 1990. We thus see that the indeterminacy of reference is used especially to communicate the writer's point of view on important issues. Generally speaking, it is not 'wasted' on trivial matters.

All in all, this analysis indicates that different pragmatic functions cannot be easily separated and that writers can exploit this indeterminacy. Journalists write within the framework of their own culture and ideology, and by using the agentless passive they can reinforce their own ideology and also try to convince the reader of its plausibility. So while the agentless passive superficially gives a neutral tone to an assertion, at the same time it allows the writer to implicitly communicate his/her own interpretation of the state of the affairs.

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