Passive and Agency in Shuswap Narrative Discourse

by

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"If we refuse to consider and interpret the surprising
facts of device, design and performance inherent in the
words of the texts, the Indians who made the texts, and
those who preserved what they made, will have worked in
vain" (Dell Hymes, 1981: 5).

One of the striking features of textual materials in Shuswap
and other Interior Salish languages is the frequent use of
passive voice constructions in these narratives. As with
other languages that allow for passive constructions, the
Shuswap passive is an optional grammatical device. Sherzer
(1987) has shown that optional grammatical categories as they
are used in discourse, whether it is verbal dueling, poetry,
political rhetoric, or myths and legends, illuminate the
relationship between language and culture. Discourse, Sherzer
notes, is an embodiment and transmitter of culture, but also
an embodiment of language: "Grammar provides a set of
potentials. Since these potentials are actualized in
discourse, they can only be studied in discourse" (Sherzer
1987:307). Therefore, the full meaning of grammatical forms
only emerges when studied in discourse, that is, in their
social and cultural context.
        As I will show in this paper, the Shuswap use of the
passive in oral narrative as an optional device combines a
grammatical and semantic function with a poetic and cultural
one. Its use in narrative discourse must be explained in
relation to extralinguistic criteria, and must be related not
only to the textual but also to the cultural context. ¹)

        Shuswap or Secwépemc is one of the Interior Salish
languages spoken among native people of the British Columbia
Interior Plateau. It bears close resemblance to the
neighbouring Interior Salish languages, i.e. Nlakapmx or
Thompson (75% cognates), Lillooet and Okanagan, and is less
closely related to the Salish languages of the Columbia
Plateau. Kinkade (1976) and Thompson (1979a) have described
and compared the areal features of Salishan languages,
including categories of control and non-control (Thompson
(1979:736b) and passives. The latter appear as both
agentless passives and passives where both agent and patient
are indicated (op.cit.:740-41).

        The occurences of passive voice constructions analysed
below were taken from narratives. Hence, they are not
elicited forms, but they occurred in the context of
discourse. They invariably feature third person singular
passives, by far the most frequent passive constructions
occuring in natural speech. Like most passives, the passive
constructions used here can be converted into corresponding
active voice constructions through elicitation. However, the
point I will be raising in this paper regards not so much
"What is said", but "how and why" certain utterances are
produced.

Passive constructions in Shuswap are formed as follows:
Verb-stem + transitivizer + passive suffix. Transitivizers
can be simple ones (/nt/; /t/), causative ones /st/;/ntes/,
or those implying direct affectedness /mins/ or involuntary
or accidental action /(n)went/, they can also be further
combined with other affixes, such as reciprocals /wecwt/,
beneficatives /c/; /cit/. Since most verb stems can be
transitivized in this way to form a derived meaning, most
verbs can be turned into passive forms.
Examples are:
kitsc²= to arrive   - kitscens = he takes someone to a place
ṗum = to break wind,  - ṗentés = to break wind on ·s·o.
ḱúlem- to make  - ḱulctmes - she had it made for her
qwetséts = to set out  - qwetsétstem = he is taken somewhere

It should also be noted that most transitive or transitivized
verbs which appear in passives are derived from strong
control roots Thompson 1979b).

1. The Passive as a Focusing Device:
Keenan (1987) has discussed the primary function of the
passive as a "foregrounding operation", allowing the speaker
to draw attention to an element in a sentence. In this
sense, passives are similar to topicalizations (e.g. BEANS is
what I like) or left-dislocations, both of which are options
of Shuswap syntax. As we will see below, "foregrounding" or
"focusing" is indeed one of the poetic or stylistic functions
of the Shuswap passive. However, while topicalizations and
left-dislocations operate at the syntactic level, passive
constructions operate at the Verb-Predicate level.
   Kuipers has drawn attention to the function of the
Shuswap passive in narrative as "focusing". For instance,
Example #1 is taken from a short story Kuipers recorded from
David Johnson of Alkali Lake. The entire story translates
literally as follows (Kuipers 1974:92):
"Fox met Coyote. He (Fox) was eating skimmings. He (Fox)
was told by his brother, 'Where did you get that?' Fox said
to him, 'Oh, you can find them over there, in the well, if
you lean over, that's where it is, that's where I get· it.'
Coyote set out, leaned over, there were skimmings on the
bottom. But really it was the reflection of the moon that was
visible there. He jumped and plunged in. He thought it was
skimmings. He was tricked by his brother.
Example #1: (Kuipers op.cit.)
m-tsúntmes       t'e     uqẃis,     the7e k-tskwéncwes?'
PAST-tell-PASS.ART. brother-POSS. where hyp.ART you-get

Of the sentence in #1, Kuipers notes that "coyote speaks to
Fox, but the focus of the preceding sentence (fox) is
maintained by using a passive form, of which fox is the
subject." In other words, the passive maintains the focus on
a particular character, even though another character
intercedes by acting. The first half of the story is focused
on fox; however, with the sentence, "coyote set out...", the

focus switches to coyote, and is maintained on his until the
end through the passive construction, "He was tricked by his
brother. The two passive constructions involved thus also
add an element of symmetry to the story.

   Another example of this kind is the first sentence of
Example #2, Coyote and Fox's wife, a story I recorded with
Ida William of the North Thompson Band. This story, again,
revolves around Fox, along with his wife, travelling with
Coyote: Coyote wants to run off with Fox's wife, but Fox
catches them and beats up Coyote. The story unfolds with Fox
wanting to set out, but Coyote wanting to stay on /with Fox's
wife, which is rendered as:

Example #2:

Ta7   k  skélnmentem      t'e senxwúxwlucw.
NEG ART+NOM+listen-PASS ART coyote
"He (Fox) wasn't listened to by coyote"

which maintains the focus of this portion of the story on
fox.

2. Perspective and Control
In addition to marking focus, however, the narrator's use of
the passive  provides a way of identifying with, or
narrating, a story from the POINT OF VIEW of the protagonist,
to whom something happens. As Keenan (1987:268) has noted,
"the subject of a passive is never less affected by the
action than when it is presented as the object of an active
transitive verb". In other words, the passive combines
focusing with affectedness or "not being in control" of the
situation. The protagonist who is emphasized is subjected to
something. Sentences 2-5 of the story about Coyote and Fox's
wife illuminate this aspect: The reason Coyote won't listen
to fox is that he wants to be with Fox's wife and run off
with her. The focus then switches to the woman: She had tied
a ribbon around her jowls to look younger (the pack-rat's
version of a face-lift!). Focusing on the woman, the story
continues: the woman was told/wanted to be embraced, but she
didn't listen, or in other words: "He wanted to put his arms
around her but she didn't want him to." What happens here is
that the sensation of the threat of a forced embrace is
related from the woman's perspective. Similar, in the next
sentence, which gives the reason why she didn't want to be
embraced.: "She was afraid that she would be subjected to him
feeling where she had tied it on her back." After fox catches
up to them, the focus changes back to coyote as the sufferer:
"He was caught up by his brother, was beaten and had the
woman taken away from him."

Núxwenxw tsúntem re stúkwentem,   ta7 k skélnmens.
woman tell+Pass ART embrace+PASS NEG ART listen-she
"The woman was told to be embraced, but she didn't listen.

i.e."He wanted to put his arms around her, but she didn't listen"

Nexell res͜musentwéctem          the7n re tsrats t'e tekmikens
afraid PART feel+TRANS+REC+PASS where ART tie-she ART back
"She was afraid that he would feel where she had tied it on her back"

Kitsentmes t'e úqwis,          púlstem,
reach+PASS ART Brother+POSS, beat+PASS
"He was caught up by his brother, was beaten,"

m-kwectmes          t'e núxwenxw t'e ri7
PAST+take+forPASS ART woman     there.
"He had the woman taken away from him.

Another good example is #3, told by Louisa Basil of Bonaparte. It is extracted from a spetekwll (story) about a supernatural skunk in Pavilion Lake (Npetkwe7ten), whose smell was so strong that it could kill humans. When the skunk was killed by coyote and released its scent into the lake, the lake turned a peculiar dark-blue colour.

Example #3 The People at Upper Hat Creek and Skunk

Nexell res spentém     me7 qwtséqes
afraid PART fart+PASS FUT die-happen
"They were afraid they would be farted on, and would die"

The above gives a different emphasis and perspective on the story as the corresponding active voice construction nexell es spu7s, "they were afraid of his farting", since the agency of the skunk is related from the point of view of the affected patient.

A final example of the combination of perspective and non-control is
#4, also recorded from Ida William of the North Thompson Band:
Example #4 Tessie: This is from the narration about a young Shuswap woman who was kidnapped by the Blackfoot Indians, taken to their country, and eventually escaped. It is told entirely from her perspective by the protagonist's great-granddaughter, Mrs. Ida William.

pelqentém     t'e tmicws     t'e kist t'e qelmúcw
return+PASS ART land+POSS ART bad ART people
"They were returned to the land of the bad people" (i.e. after they were attacked by the Blackfoot, some young girls were taken to their country)

Tíqwentem t'e ri7 s7i7llcw
kill+PASS ART there some of them

"Some of them were killed there"

Kúlctmes        t'e túmes     cw7it t'e silltsu7
make-for+PASS ART aunt+POSS many ART shoes
"her aunt made many shoes for her" (so the girl could escape her captors)

m-séwentmes t'e kweséltktens
PAST+ask+PASS ART relative+POSS
"She was asked by her relatives" (how she managed to escape)

Thompson and others have drawn attention to the notion of control in Interior Salish languages, mainly through suffixing and transitivizing, and through a limited set of non-control verbal roots. I think the optional use of the passive, at the level of the verb-phrase is an additional device for marking control, by focusing on the non-control or patient-status of the grammatical subject of the passive phrase.

3. Cultural Aspects of Control and Causation:
As far as the notion of passivity, causation and control is concerned, it is useful to move to the extralinguistic context. In other words, what are the cultural implications of agency, or the cultural conventions guiding the pointing out of control. In Example #1, the Coyote and Fox story, the sentence "He was told by his brother, 'Where did you get that'", is pivotal to the unfolding of the story. This is because of the implied or alluded content, i.e. the cultural message underlying it. First of all, in being addressed as Coyote's brother, Fox can't refuse him, but must share his food and knowledge with him. Moreover, "he was told by his brother" indicates Coyote pressing him into action. In a cultural context, Fox being told by somewhone who is his brother "where did you get that" implies, "hey, give me some of that!"

While the above examples include an agent, agentless passives are, in fact, the more frequent ones and sometimes have intricate implied or alluded meanings. "If there is any one function that is common to the passive in all the languages that are customarily said to have a passive voice, this is that it makes possible the construction of agentless sentences," Lyons (1968:378) noted. While passive constructions - as opposed to the middle - always imply the existence of an agent (Keenan 1987:254), it is a particular property of agentless passive sentences that the agent goes unmentioned and is therefore only alluded to. When the agent is a narrator himself, or the "I" of the story (especially in direct speech), the use of the passive draws attention away from him and is a way of communicating politeness, humbleness, both culturally important values. (note for example the difference between "I made it" - where the maker takes credit - and "It was made", with the implied agent "by

me" - where the maker is too polite or humble to take credit, although the implied message "by me" is understood by the audience.

Passive sentences without named agents allow to defer agency and accountability of action to an unspecified source or person. Brown and Levinson (1978), as well as Lakoff (1971) have discussed the social functions of the use of passive voice constructions from this point of view. For the English language, Brown and Levinson note, "The passive coupled with a rule of agent deletion is perhaps the means par excellencein English of avoiding reference to persons involving /face-threatening actions/" (op.cit.:194). They cite the English "get" constructions ("It got wrecked") as phrases used to avoid the blaming of explicit others including oneself. In this sense, then, the passive serves the function of de-focusing on a subject, and de-personalizing action "Our functional hypothesis claims that the basic motive is subject demotion and possible deletion, and not object promotion" (op.cit.:274). The rationale for these kind of constructions are therefore social and cultural conventions, and they allow the speaker to avoid naming the agent responsible for what action in a potentially embarassing situation (ibid.).

This brings us to another instance of the use of passives in Shuswap narratives, namely those that are agentless, or rather, defer agency to unspecified sources. Example #5 is taken from a lengthy narrative by the late Christopher Donald sr. of the North Thompson Band. It involves an adolescent girl who is mute and therefore marginal to human society. Her only sounds are like the howling and barking of a dog, even her appearance is likewise. Her parents cannot cope with her and decide to take her into the mountains to abandon her there. This is, in fact, an act of forced etsxem or spirit questing, but most of all, challenges her to become a self-sufficient member of the social group or else perish. All she, however, does, once alone, is to bark and howl like a dog, whereupon a medicine man (tekwilc) turns her into stone. In examining the uses of the passive voice, the interesting passage in this story revolves around the parents' decision to abandon her: The act of abandonment is expressed as a set of agentless passives. This is in marked contrast to the reflexives used to describe her action, which emphasize her causation of and responsibility for those actions. The passages in question are as follows:

Me7 qwetsétstem re7 st'emkélt t'e t'he7n t'kllúne
FUT die-PASS    your daughter ART where DEICT-invisible
"Your daughter will be taken somewhere out there"

Me7 llwélentmes    t'e ri7    t'e sqeltús
FUT abandon-PASS ART there ART mountain

She will be left there in the mountains

Me7 plépes    re qwetsetútes    t'e ri7 the7n
FUT get lost ART set out REFLEX there  somewhere
"She will get lost when she wanders off somewhere

Ta7  k    sxwexwistéten re spúpelsten
NEG HYP. like -I      ART kill-I
I don't like to (don't want) to kill her

Put kwekwstsut, neri7s
Just save-REFLX that's it
If she saves herself, that's it."

This passage indicates that the parents externalize the agency of leaving her and put it in the hands of someone/something unspecified. The use of the passive voice is a device which shows the parents distancing themselves from control and causation as to the girl's fate. At the same time, through the use of the reflexive suffix /tsut/, which emphasizes control over action, they emphasize that she has the chance to better herself and save herself. It is also noteworthy that the verb stem plep- is a (- control) active rather than a passive.

Further on in the story, the "non-agency" of the parents is re-iterated when the medicine man comments on her abandonment. When he notices her, he says,

t'e rey wits'in plép-enke ri7
"That over there, evidently is lost"

m-llwélentem-enke
he/she/it was evidently abandoned.

Therefore, in the narrative, the medicine man also defers agency to other sources, rather than saying explicitly (although he very likely is aware of the circumstances) who abandoned her, or "they abandoned her."

This function of deferred agency is moreover an interesting one in light of Scollon and Scollon's (1981) work on North American Native narrative structure, interaction and the social construction of reality. Using the example of Athapascan modes of communication, the authors stress that maintaining the integrity of the other and maintaining others' (and hence one's own) face are important strategies of interpersonal discourse (see also Boelscher 1989). I assume that the Shuswap use of the passive, in at least some of its aspects, functions in a similar manner.

In summary, I have pointed out three interconnected functions of the use of the passive in Shuswap narrative discourse. They involve the focusing or foregrounding of

pivotal characters, the emphatic perspective from the point of view of the subject of the story, which adds non-control to the focus. Finally, the third function adds the deferral of agency from within a social and cultural context. While all three are optional categories, and may perhaps be considered aspects of literary style, the last one, particularly, is only understandable within the cultural context of what is said and what is meant by it.

NOTES:

2) For more ease with word-processing, transcriptions are here rendered in Kuipers' practical alphabet for the Shuswap language. /c/ is an unvoiced velar fricative rendered as /x/ in NPA, ll is an unvoiced alveolar lateral fricative, /r/ is a voiced velar fricative, /x/ is an unvoiced uvular fricative (see Kuipers 1974a/b).

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