

The Passive-Aggressive Voice: Teaching the Grammar of Evasion

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Philip Whitcomb Essay Contest
13 April 2007

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One Wednesday afternoon in January, having reviewed last week's grammar lesson with Tyler, the high school junior I tutor in Latin, I moved on to the topic of the day: the passive voice. I began by explaining the difference between active and passive in standard textbook terms. Subject as agent v. object of action. *Dog bites man* v. *man is bitten by dog*. Action verb v. to-be verb plus past participle. After a few minutes, Tyler's vacant expression and slightly ajar mouth signified that I was going to have to bring the topic a little closer to home.

"OK. Just think...politician speak," I tried again. "Bureaucrats can't get enough of the passive voice. 'This important issue will be addressed promptly –' 'Great strides have been made towards our goal –' See how you can't tell who is performing the action in either of those statements? It's how politicians keep talking when they don't really have anything to say."

"Oh!" Tyler's face suddenly reanimated. "That's easy. It's, like, the B.S. voice."

"Well – well, yeah. That's definitely one way to look at it."

Tyler, it turned out, was much more familiar with the passive voice than he had realized. It was, he confessed, a tool all the most successful slackers he knew relied upon. He himself had scraped his way through many an essay test by enlisting its help to avoid gracefully the necessity of stating the names of historical figures that had slipped his mind. He even boasted that one of his buddies had completed an entire term paper on the French Revolution without cracking a single book – the passive voice was all he had needed. Sure, his teachers had docked him a letter grade or two for lack of concrete evidence, but he'd passed. After all, a vague paper is better than no paper, right?

Japan's Ministry of Education has proven itself a savvy player at the game Tyler and his friends are using to get through their high school classes, but with a much more distressing aim. Since its establishment at the end of the U.S. occupation of Japan following World War II, the Ministry's Textbook Authorization Research Council has been reviewing privately written textbooks and often requiring that the authors make specific changes before adding the books to the list of those approved for use in public schools. Critics have long charged that the required changes constituted drastic rewriting of history to whitewash Japanese atrocities in World War II. Japanese historian Saburo Ienaga spent thirty-two years in a legal battle with the Ministry over the hundreds of changes imposed on a textbook he wrote for high school.¹ Ienaga won a partial victory in 1997, when the Japanese Supreme Court ruled in his third lawsuit that the Ministry could not censor his description of the Nanking Massacre, during which Japanese soldiers, on

¹ Saburo Ienaga, trans. Richard H. Minear. *Japan's Past, Japan's Future* (New York: Roman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001) 9.

order to kill the entire population of Nanking, murdered over 200,000 Chinese civilians.² The Ministry frequently has drawn protests from its neighbors, especially China and South Korea, for omitting mention of, euphemizing, and even denying the role of the Japanese government in procuring prostitutes for the in-camp “comfort stations” it established for its soldiers during World War II.

Apart from outright omissions of historical episodes, the changes imposed by the council have often consisted of superficially minor grammatical changes whose implications can amount to radical revision of history. The most recent results of the council’s annual screening of textbooks, announced by the Japanese government in March 2007, revealed a withdrawal into the passive voice designed to rescind an already weak earlier admission of Japanese responsibility for civilian deaths at the Battle of Okinawa. Japanese soldiers showed utter disregard for the safety of Okinawan citizens during the battle, which began in April 1945, even using them as shields against the Americans. Over 150,000 Okinawan civilians died in the battle, a full quarter of Okinawa’s population, many having committed suicide after Japanese soldiers convinced them that the victorious Americans would treat them with terrible brutality.³ According to an April 1 article in the New York Times, a textbook approved before this year’s review had dealt with the issue by stating, “There were some people who were forced to commit suicide by the Japanese Army.” The newly amended text will read, “There were some people who were driven to mass suicide.”⁴

² Nozaki Yoshiko and Inokuchi Hiromitsu. “Japan’s Education, Nationalism, and Ienaga Saburo’s Textbook Lawsuits.” *Censoring History: Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States*. Ed. Laura Elizabeth Hein and Mark Selden (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) 119. Estimates of the Nanking death toll vary widely; by some accounts, the figure 200,000 is quite low. Iris Chang, *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997) 100-101.

³ Norimitsu Omishi. “Japan’s Textbooks Reflect Revised History.” New York Times. 1 April 2007.

⁴ Omishi.

The extreme weakness of both these statements is immediately apparent. The first account does identify the party that forced the civilians to suicide, but only as a sort of afterthought tacked onto the end of the sentence. The explicit construction “there were” seems to hem and haw about broaching the subject at all, striking the knowledgeable reader as a grudging forced admission. “Some people” plainly steers around the fact that those who committed suicide were innocent civilians, not soldiers as a schoolchild might reasonably assume in a textbook section on World War II. The passive construction “were forced” withstands, although weakly, the usual criticism that it obscures the agent of the verb, immediately followed with “by the Japanese Army.” To the reader caught up in imagining the fierce, relentless brutality required to force a person to end his own life, the flimsy prepositional phrase has the distinct feeling of something muttered under the breath or muffled beneath a cupped hand.

Still, to a Ministry of Education now professedly convinced that there is no clear evidence of coercion on the part of the Japanese Army, this statement was too strong. The newly amended version – “There were some people who were driven to mass suicide” – reads like an excerpt from a high school world history essay dashed off at the lunch table with no books in sight. Some elements remain the same in the revised account: we still only have “some people” – who knows who they were – and a passive verb construction. The changes, however, are extremely significant. “Mass” in “mass suicide” is a curious addition, a strikingly strong adjective suggesting that the “some people” who took their own lives were actually quite a significant number. The use of one telling adjective, however, is inadequate compensation for the fact that the verb, if not its voice, has been changed for the weaker. There can be no question in the earlier

account that “forced” refers to something physical and undeniably beyond the control of “some people.” The change from “were forced” to “were driven” deliberately intimates that the cause of the suicides lay within “some people” themselves: they might have been driven to despair or madness rather than compelled to kill themselves by someone else – like the Japanese Army. The most significant change, however – the one that drew immediate international criticism – is of course that instead of the belatedly illuminating “by the Japanese Army” telling us who drove “some people” to suicide, in the revision we have only a blank. The removal of the prepositional phrase unleashes the full power of the passive voice to obscure agency – in short, to speak with an aim to say as little as possible.

The great irony of this new retelling of the tragedy of Okinawa, of course, is that the passive voice, by silencing the truth, actually speaks volumes to the historically aware reader. By removing agency from its account of the Okinawa suicides, the Ministry has made a devastatingly ironic statement: when it comes to education, it’s important to make sure children don’t learn too much. Choosing to dissociate the Japanese military from the suicides passively rather than confronting the controversial issue openly or deleting reference to the suicides altogether – both options sure to draw political and media attention – the Ministry has opted for a transparently devious strategy for removing the blame. It has decided, in essence, to obscure the issue and hope – presume, even – that Japanese schoolchildren won’t think to ask questions. The decision is not only cagey but irresponsible. Beyond simply failing to advance the assumed goal of education – to impart knowledge – the newly revised account of the Battle of Okinawa actually works against it.

This anti-educational strategy threatens vast harm to students. If limited to the hollow version of the Battle of Okinawa that the government provides, Japanese children will not learn the history of their country; neither, however, will they be able to understand the present. World War II atrocities for which Japan was responsible have played a fundamental role in shaping the country's current relationships with its neighbors and the rest of the world. What it means to be Japanese in 2007 in part depends upon, for example, how Japanese soldiers behaved at Nanking in 1945. If China to some extent views the Japanese people as descendants of the soldiers who murdered 200,000 of its citizens, the Japanese people cannot ignore this perception of themselves. The current generation of Japanese students must have an accurate understanding of history in order to fully realize its own identity and to engage peacefully and meaningfully with other nations in the future. Faced with the challenge of overcoming an impediment to developing such an understanding, students who encounter the recently revised version of the Battle of Okinawa in their history textbooks will have to exercise critical reading and inquisitive thought in order to see the necessity of asking the questions that the Ministry of Education hopes they will not. And, as the revision itself shows us, the ability to read critically requires an understanding of the power of grammar.

When my classmates and I arrived at our English classroom on the first day of the eighth grade, a short, stout woman with a mop of salt-and-pepper hair handed each of us a stapled packet of several photocopied pages as we walked through the door. After we took our seats, Mrs. Renick, the notorious Grammar Nazi of Southwest Junior High

School, came to the front of the room and held a packet dramatically aloft, her bright blue eyes shining wildly out at us.

“This,” she announced, “is your Spouse. You will bring your Spouse to class every day. You will take him or her with you wherever you go. And you will never, ever lose your Spouse.”

The packet was nothing special to look at. It contained, quite simply, everything we would ever need to know about English grammar. The front page featured a list of all the prepositions. It explained subjects, verbs, direct objects and indirect objects, pronouns, and participles. The final page, last but not least, explained the difference between the active and passive voices. Mrs. Renick actually taught from our Spouses, bucking the trend of other English teachers who preferred to expose their students to the nuances of language and literature by popping in worn VHS tapes of A&E Shakespeare productions. We spent our afternoons labeling all the parts of speech in zany sentences she had made up. By the midpoint of the first semester, we knew all of our prepositions in alphabetical order and hardly needed to refer to our Spouses at all.

In addition to reigning as Southwest’s Grammar Nazi, Mrs. Renick was well known as the teacher who assigned the longest papers in school. Around Halloween, we received with hushed reverence the assignment for our first of four Book Analyses, which were to stretch to an unheard-of fifteen pages. The length requirement, however, was soon eclipsed by a more terrifying stipulation. In the last three of our Book Analyses, she forbade us to use any form of the verb “to be.” We received this announcement first with silent shock and then a flood of protests. *It can’t be done!* We argued with the petulance of children whose pacifiers have been snatched. Far from entertaining her prediction that

adhering to this restriction would actually improve our writing, we didn't even think it possible. Her prediction, of course, came true: with the passive voice placed beyond my reach and active, forceful verbs left as our only allowed tools, we found ourselves forced to be precise and specific, to delve into our chosen books and come up with cogent ideas rather than facile generalizations. When, six years later in my college Shakespeare course, the professor announced that every ten uses of the passive voice in our term papers would cost us a letter grade, I didn't break a sweat. I listened nostalgically as he explained, at the request of several members of the class, what the passive voice was, and I later wrote a letter to Mrs. Renick thanking her for daring to impress the power of grammar upon fourteen-year-olds.

By adhering to obsessive grammar restrictions, my classmates and I became better writers, but more importantly, we became better thinkers. Being confined to the active voice forced us to recognize exactly who was doing what in our sentences and to express ourselves in clear, concrete language. We learned to make our words count, to trim away the excess verbiage that often clings to passive constructions, and to bring our meaning into unhindered clarity. We learned that if we had very much trouble conveying a thought in active terms, this was more than likely a sign of good grammar resisting muddled thinking. We began to recognize weak writing when we saw it, pausing over unclear agents and recognizing the vacuity of phrases like "It has been noted." We began to hold ourselves accountable for our thoughts and to expect the same of others.

The great achievement of Mrs. Renick was her ability to promote critical, inquisitive thought simply by insisting upon the use of a grammatical construction. The

failure of the Japanese Ministry of Education is that it has displayed in its latest textbook revision both Mrs. Renick's acute awareness of the power of the passive voice and an aptitude for discouraging critical thought by exploiting it. Beyond simply providing students with information, education must help them to develop tools to analyze and evaluate information. Educational theorist John Dewey writes in *Democracy and Education*, "The sole direct path to enduring improvement in the methods of instruction and learning consists in centering upon the conditions which exact, promote, and test thinking."⁵ If this is so, the Ministry of Education has gone astray by employing confused expression to conceal an issue of grave historical importance and acting in a manner calculated to stifle free thinking and prevent an environment open to inquiry. Beyond failing to stimulate critical thought, the ministry's failure to set an example of direct, meaningful expression will have the graver consequence of encouraging similarly confused writing and thinking in students.

Childhood is a critical period for developing habits that will last as lifetime. Kids pick up cues as to how to behave from their surroundings, whether by learning to brush their teeth and comb their hair from their parents' nagging or inferring from watching MTV that smoking and saying four-letter words must be cool. Intellectual habits develop in the same manner, and schools bear a great deal of the responsibility for overseeing their formation. Just as kids uphold their parents as the last word on personal hygiene and TV as an authority on pop culture, they learn to respect school textbooks as unimpeachable repositories of knowledge and wisdom. As their first required reading, and as sources whose content they are often called upon to memorize and reproduce,

⁵ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*. "Chapter Twelve: Thinking in Education." World Wide School. 2 April 2007.
<<http://www.worldwideschool.org/library/books/socl/education/DemocracyandEducation/chap12.html>>.

textbooks are likely to be what students read most carefully and take most seriously. Accordingly, the manner in which they find information presented will become as familiar as the information itself, although they may be much less consciously aware of style than content. George Orwell points out that exposure to sloppy writing begets sloppy thinking, which in turn begets sloppy writing – a never-ending cycle. “The slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts,” he writes in *Politics and the English Language*⁶. When writing is not only sloppy, but deliberately and deviously so, the effect upon the thinking and writing of those who are constantly immersed in it can only be so much the worse.

Students who have been trained on texts that use passive language to steer around inconvenient truths may quite naturally adopt this method for themselves. They may first apply it almost unconsciously in school assignments, as my eighth-grade classmates and I suddenly learned we had been doing when Mrs. Renick forcibly removed the to-be crutch from our writing. Students may later graduate to using passive constructions quite purposely, as Tyler’s friend prided himself on doing in his term papers. A habit of circumventing agency that may seem relatively harmless among children in school, however, takes on a much more serious aspect when it begins to degrade social and political discourse. At its best, the tendency to weaken grammar in order to gloss over what most needs saying, whether in personal relationships or international diplomacy, precludes meaningful dialogue and hinders effective communication. At its worst, calculated use of passive language facilitates deception and denial in matters of grave importance while maintaining the guise of honesty.

⁶ George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language.” 2 April 2007. <<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/orwell46.htm>>.

How students and teachers will respond to the latest efforts by the Textbook Authorization Research Council remains to be seen. The Ministry of Education may be surprised to find its aims thwarted by public protest and media coverage that draws more attention to the responsibility of the Japanese military for the suicides at Okinawa than the original weakly passive admission that it has revised. As for the fate of Japanese students, the revised textbook can only prevent them from learning the truth about Okinawa if a number of other sources of information fail them as well. Those who are lucky will have grammar teachers responsible enough to teach them the power of the passive voice. And, we must hope, some will get a more complete account of the suicides from parents, the news media, or other texts that will dare to tell them exactly what happened – in active terms.