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FRANKLY SPEAKING

A DISCUSSION OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

BY FRANK BRAMLETT, PH.D.



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Sentence Forms and Corporate Responsibility

On Monday 10 March, National Public Radio aired a story by Jack Speer about corporate America's financial situation. Speer said that since some companies have had a difficult time with their profit margins, they reduced retiree benefits — in other words, people who had worked for many years and had retired from the company lost some of their hard-earned benefits to ensure healthy stock performance.

Lately, we have heard several of these stories. A CEO/CFO takes home a record-setting multimillion dollar paycheck because he fired workers for profit, a practice epitomized by ENRON and WorldCom. What caught my attention, though, was the language that the reporter used to describe these companies' practices. Here is an excerpt of the report (available through the NPR website archives):

Companies that file for bankruptcy can eliminate their retiree health benefits entirely. And even companies that are still in fairly good shape, like General Electric, Motorola, and Sears, have in many cases been forced to cut back on the benefits offered to their retired workers. At GE, employees recently went on a nation-wide strike for sever-

al days over health care related issues.

In effect, Speer said that these companies had no other choice but to lay off workers. But if companies were forced to cut back on benefits, who forced them to do so? Who held their feet to the proverbial fire and made them swear to downsize the company for profit's sake? One way to know is to examine the evidence, in this case, the way that the reporter constructs sentences.

Variety in Sentence Structure

In middle- and high-school English classes, many students learn that sentences generally begin with subjects, continue with verbs, and end with objects. When the subject of the sentence is also the doer of the action, that subject is referred to as the *agent*, and the object of the verb is frequently called the *patient*. For example, in *The baker cleaned the oven*, *baker* is the agent, *cleaned* is the verb, and *oven* is the patient. We call this type of sentence *active voice*. An important variation of this, the *passive voice*, occurs when the agent and the patient switch positions and the verb changes forms. For example, *The oven was cleaned by the baker* has a subject and a verb and an object of a preposition, differing significantly from its active voice version.

English speakers frequently use the passive voice in everyday conversation, like when the speaker wants to focus on the person or object affected by the action of the verb. For example, if a young child comes home from school crying, the parent will want to know what happened. The child might choose the

passive voice to explain:

I was chased by the dog.

I was bitten by Mrs. Lucifer's cat.

The child wants understanding, comfort, and empathy to calm her nerves. This is all expressed by the passive voice because the child has put herself in the first position of the sentence, the subject position. Conversely, if the child wants to assign responsibility to the person or thing that committed the affront, then she will use active voice:

The dog chased me.

Mrs. Lucifer's cat bit me.

In these scenarios, both parties are clearly identified. The speaker assigns blame to the criminal and clearly identifies the person who was wronged.

In many instances, the agent in a sentence is a being with the will to do something, *the dog chased me* or *the cat bit me*. Sometimes, though, the agent can be something other than a person or animal, especially in poetry. Stevie Nicks, in one of her most famous songs, "Rhiannon," relies on passive voice to describe a mysterious Welsh witch: *All your life you've never seen a woman taken by the wind*. The agent at the end of the sentence,

wind, is a force of nature rather than a person with volition.

Manipulation of Passive Voice

When we wish to express an event but we don't know who the agent is, we can very effectively use the passive voice:

Zeke: What happened?

Hope: The window was broken.

(Another common form is *The window got broken*.) Sometimes, we also use the passive voice to hide the identity of the agent, the person or being responsible for doing the action. This is called the *agentless passive*:

Your computer monitor was knocked off the desk.

Your wedding band was dropped down the garbage disposal.

For whatever reason, the speaker in these sentences has not revealed the person responsible for what happened.

Who's to Blame?

The problem, of course, is that if we wish to conceal an identity or reason for less than honorable purposes, then the agentless passive voice works quite well:

Mistakes were made.

Tuition was raised.

Thousands of gallons of oil were spilled.

Purposely or not, the speaker erases the agent from the overt picture. The situation seems less tangible because the events are reported to have happened, as if out of the blue.

We Had No Choice!

In the NPR report about corporate finances, a sentence in the passive voice tells only part of the story. Passive voice in this instance reveals that groups of people (i.e., *Companies*) were affected by outside, unidentified agents. By using the agentless passive construction, the reporter suggests that the CEOs had no other choice: that someone or something (unnamed and unidentifiable) forced them to cut those benefits. This is of course nonsense. The CEOs chose to take this particular action. They could have made any number of decisions to keep the stock holders happy, but they didn't. The effect of the agentless passive voice in this case is that no one has to take the blame.

A Suggestion for Writers

I don't mean to lay blame at the feet of the reporter who wrote the NPR story. After all, we use passive voice on a daily basis. But writers must use a style of sentence construction that clearly and accurately tells their readers who did what to whom and why. We must expect no less of the people we rely on for trustworthy information.