

English–Japanese Contrasts in Event Construal: A Case Study of the Passive in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Klara and the Sun*

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Abstract: This study examines how events and states are construed in English and Japanese, focusing on cases in which a passive construction in English corresponds to a nonpassive construction in Japanese. A corpus of about 150 passive clauses was compiled from a contemporary English novel, using their published Japanese renderings as reference points for native-speaker intuition, rather than as translation data. While English passives typically foreground the affected element and place the agent in the background, Japanese frequently construes the same events using intransitive clauses or adjectival and nominal predicates. The classification and quantification of these correspondences reveal that Japanese does not merely avoid passives but reflects a distinct event-construal strategy, in which changes of state or the absence of an explicit subject have more salience than the affected participant. This analysis draws on established frameworks of transitivity and passive typologies, and concepts from cognitive grammar are used heuristically to clarify observed patterns. The study thus presents descriptive findings that highlight cross-linguistic differences in the construal of passivity.

Key Words : contrastive study, event construal, event representation, passive construction, transitivity scale

1. Introduction

Passive constructions have long attracted attention in linguistic research, but the central question of how their meaning is realized across languages remains unanswered. This paper focuses on Japanese renderings of English passives, examining how they shift along the transitivity scale proposed in typological and functional studies. Rather than treating the passive as a mere formal device for backgrounding agents, I approach it as part of a broader continuum of event construals that range from highly transitive to low-transitivity expressions.

This analysis is grounded in two complementary frameworks. First, Tsunoda’s^{1), 2)} and Nomura’s^{3), 4)} transitivity scales, which evaluate clauses in terms of parameters such as volitionality, affectedness, and patient salience, are adopted. Second, this study follows Ikegami’s^{5), 6)} distinction between *sur(u)*-type (“do”-construal) and *nar(u)*-type (“become”-construal) expressions, highlighting how languages may prefer to construe events either as actions or as changes experienced by a patient. These perspectives serve as a useful background for understanding how events expressed through English passive constructions—

which suppress or background agents and assign subjecthood to patients, thereby spotlighting the latter as the semantic center of the event construal—are represented in Japanese with formally active but semantically diverse expressions. Using examples from Kazuo Ishiguro’s⁷⁾ *Klara and the Sun*, this study shows that English passives are often mapped onto Japanese constructions that exhibit low semantic transitivity while preserving the affectedness of the patient. These observations illustrate structural tendencies in English and Japanese, although these patterns may interact with the translator’s individual style and contemporary linguistic norms.

This study asks how English passive meanings are realized in Japanese and what strategies are employed to preserve their discourse functions. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes the data and methodology. Section 3 introduces the theoretical frameworks of transitivity and event construal. Section 4 presents the analysis of Japanese renderings of English passives, with particular attention being paid to low-transitivity outcomes. Section 5 concludes with implications for cross-linguistic studies of

transitivity and outlines directions for future research.

2. Data and Methods

The data analyzed in this study are drawn from Kazuo Ishiguro's⁷⁾ *Klara and the Sun* and Tsuchiya's⁸⁾ translation of this work. All instances of English passives were collected manually and examined in terms of their semantic and discourse functions. This study draws on Tsuchiya⁸⁾ to explore how such meanings can be rendered in Japanese. While this analysis does not seek to systematically compare the two texts, the translation provides a useful guide for identifying natural Japanese expressions corresponding to the English passives. In this sense, the Japanese translation is not treated as a parallel corpus but as a professional reference consulted to ensure interpretive validity.

For the purposes of this analysis, I adopt a broad definition of passive constructions, including both change-oriented and state-oriented expressions. Idiomatic or lexicalized forms (e.g., fixed collocations that no longer transparently reflect passive meaning) are excluded, as they function as separate constructions rather than true passives. In total, 154 tokens were identified across the novel.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, the English examples are categorized according to their Japanese renderings, with attention paid to the formal status of transitivity. Second, the semantic transitivity of these renderings is evaluated in relation to existing scales and frameworks. This procedure makes it possible to identify systematic patterns in the representation of English

passive meanings in Japanese. The overall distribution of types of Japanese expression for English passives is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1 presents the distribution of English passive constructions through the corpus in relation to their renderings in Japanese. The data, drawn from a single novel, are intended to merely illustrate general tendencies, not demonstrate statistically robust patterns. As indicated, nonpassive renderings are more frequent than passives, with intransitive constructions being particularly prevalent in the former. The subsequent sections examine these tendencies in greater detail, describing how English passives are realized via various nonpassive constructions in Japanese. Instances of Japanese passives, including literal and modified types, are acknowledged but are not analyzed in the present study.

3. Transitivity Scale and Nonpassive Japanese Renderings

As noted, the passive construction highlights a subject that is undergoing change or being in a resultant state, typically as a patient affected by an external agent. This semantic requirement accounts for the acceptability contrasts in (1) (Nomura⁴⁾: 129–30), where “?” marks marginality:

- (1) a. ? I *was approached* by the train.
 b. I *was approached* by the stranger.
 c. ? Chicago *has been lived in* by my brother.
 d. The house *has been lived in* by several famous personages.

Table 1. Japanese Construals of Events Expressed by English Passive Sentences

Type	Count	Category	Count	Subcategory	Count
Nonpassive	92	Intransitive	48	Subject explicit	34
				Subject nonexplicit	14
		Transitive	25	Subject & object explicit	7
				Subject explicit, object nonexplicit	2
				Subject nonexplicit, object explicit	8
				Subject & object nonexplicit	6
		Causative (included in transitive count)	2		
Noun predicate	12	-	-		
Adjective predicate	7	-	-		
Passive	62	Literal Passive	45	-	-
		Modified passive	17	-	-

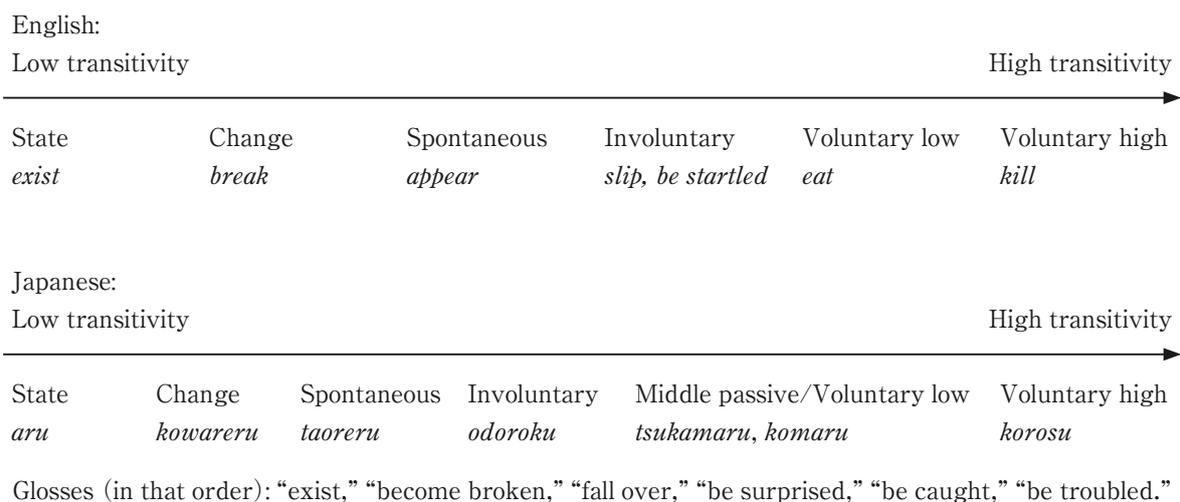


Figure 1. Schematic of a transitivity scale

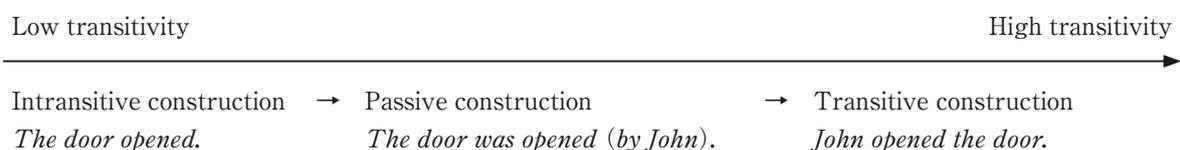


Figure 2. Passives on the transitivity scale

In (1a), the subject is a mere bystander to the train and undergoes no notable change, thus remaining marginal. In (1b), the subject is affected by the approaching stranger, which makes the passive natural. The oddness of (1c) arises because Chicago is not construed as undergoing any change in this scenario. In (1d), the house acquires a new status by being inhabited by prominent figures, and the passive is acceptable.

These examples indicate that not all transitive verbs can easily occur in passives, while some intransitives can do so. This pattern aligns with Tsunoda's^{1), 2)} view of transitivity as lying on a continuum rather than being a binary property. Figure 1 provides a schematic transitivity scale for English and Japanese (adapted from Hopper & Thompson⁹⁾; Tsunoda^{1), 2)}), where Japanese examples are positioned according to the author's interpretation. Transitive clauses occupy the highest positions and intransitives a lower one, often describing changes or events affecting a patient. Some English passives, e.g., *be startled*, align with involuntary experiences. Japanese equivalents of expressions in this intermediate range include so-called middle passives, a type of construction that profiles the patient without invoking a strong external agent, as well as other low-impact events (e.g.,

tsukamaru “be caught,” *komaru* “be troubled”), which profile the patient without strong agentive force. Figure 2 simplifies this scale and shows passives in an intermediate position, profiling affected patients while backgrounding agents (adapted from Nomura⁴⁾). For example, the data that were collected for this study comprise a number of passive constructions, including the verb *fill*, which is inherently a highly transitive verb and, in Ishiguro's novel, frequently appears in active transitive constructions in which an agent physically or psychologically fills a patient, as shown in (2).^{*1, *2}

- (2) a. ... there was the danger of loneliness creeping into her day, no matter what other events *filled* it. (p.70)
- b. Do you suppose that's why he *filled* the bubble that way? (p.167)
- c. ... I recognized Manager, and happiness *filled* my mind. (p.397)

In its passive uses, *fill* exhibits reduced transitivity, situating it between intransitive and transitive clauses. A comparable pattern occurs in the Japanese translations in (3).^{*3}

- (3) a. ... each one of them *was filled* with kindness ... (p.143)
 Hitotsu hitotsu ga shinsetsu-shin to omoiari de *mitasarete* iru
 each each-NOM kindness and compassion with fill-PASS PROG
- b. ... Much of the sheet *was filled* with sharp-looking objects ... (p.186)
 Pēji no kanari no bubun ni togatta kanji no buttai ga *egakarete* ite
 page-GEN considerable part-LOC sharp-like object-NOM draw-PASS PROG

In (3a), both the English and Japanese texts describe a resultant state having no explicit external intervention. In (3b), English focuses on *the sheet* as the patient, while in Japanese, the sheet (*pēji*) serves as the location, and the objects (*buttai*) on it are foregrounded as patients, reflecting a subtle shift in event construal.

It should be recalled from Table 1 that English passives in the corpus were not predominantly rendered as passives in Japanese. Of 154 tokens, only 62 were translated using passive constructions, while as many as 92 were rendered nonpassively. Among these, 25 involved transitive clauses, while 48 were intransitive clauses and an additional 19 took the form of nominal or adjectival predicates. In other words, two-thirds of the nonpassive renderings were nontransitive in nature. This broader tendency also surfaces in the case of *fill*, which is one of the most frequent verbs in the corpus, having both passive and nonpassive realizations. This distribution indicates the central tendency of Japanese to construe the meanings of English passives through intransitive or stative expressions rather than through straightforward transitive alternations. To illustrate the way in which such variation appears in attested language use, consider the Japanese renderings of the examples with *fill* in (4).

- (4) a. The eye ... was ..., but both *were filled* with kindness and sadness. (p.37)
 b. ... Josie *was filled* with anxiety. (p.89)
 c. ... the hall *was filled* with strangers ... (p.89)
 d. ... her eyes were ..., but in the next they *were*

- filled* with sadness. (p.139)
 e. ... she *was filled* with fear. (p.235)
 f. ... the mood *was* now even more *filled* with tension. (p.269)
 g. *Had* my mind *not been* momentarily *filled* by the Mother's words and her embrace, ... (p.283)
 h. The last days before Josie's departure *were filled* with both tension and excitement. (p.392)

Figure 3 schematically summarizes the range of Japanese renderings that correspond to the passive clauses in (4a-h). In the figure, the upward-pointing arrow indicates the relative degree of transitivity, where lower transitivity is at the bottom and higher transitivity at the top.

As noted, all the English examples (4a-h) employ passive constructions that occupy a middle position on the transitivity scale. Their Japanese counterparts tend to shift lower on the scale, often being realized as intransitive, stative, adjectival, or nominal clauses, with the latter three potentially lying at the lower end of the scale or even beyond it. This confirms that English passives that highlight an affected patient while backgrounding an external agent are frequently rendered in Japanese by constructions that construe the event in terms of the patient's resulting state or property, often without reference to an agent.

This shift is not arbitrary but reflects a more general typological contrast between English and Japanese. As Ikegami⁵⁾ observes, English is a *suru*-type language, in which events are typically construed in terms of actions carried out by an agent, whereas Japanese is a *naru*-type language, where events are depicted more naturally as changes that happen to a patient. Accordingly, what is expressed in English by a passive construction—appearing roughly at the middle of the transitivity scale—is often realized in Japanese by constructions that are located lower on the scale. Illustrative examples of the *suru-naru* contrast (Nomura⁴⁾) are given in (5).

- (5) a. kekkon-suru koto-ni narimashita (p.168)
 marriage-do NML-DAT become-PST

Type	Japanese	Gloss	English
Transitive	... kanashimi-o ippai ni tataete imasu.	sadness-ACC full-LOC hold PROG-PRS	(4d)
	... kūki ga issō kinchō-o haranda mono ni natte iru ...	air-NOM even more tension-ACC hold-PST thing become PROG-PRS	(4f)
Intransitive	... tomoni yasashisa to kanashisa ni michite imasu.	both kindness-ACC and sadness-ACC be-filled PROG-PRS	(4a)
	... rōka wa mishiranu hito de ippai deshita.	hall-TOP unknown person with full COP-PST	(4c)
	... Melania-san jishin ga totemo kowagatte iru ...	Melania-NOM self very afraid PROG-PRS	(4e)
	... kokoro ga bōzen to natte inakatta ra ...	mind-NOM stunned become NEG PST	(4g)
Adjectival	... Josie wa totemo fuansō deshita.	Josie-NOM very anxious COP-PST	(4b)
Nominal	... sūjitsu kan wa kinchō to kōfun no mainichi deshita.	days period-TOP tension-ACC and excitement-GEN every day COP-PST	(4h)

Figure 3. Distribution of Japanese counterparts for English passive clauses with *fill*

- ‘It has been decided that we will get married.’
 b. kimatta (p.168)
 decide-INTR-PST
 ‘(It) was decided.’

Thus, the *suru-naru* distinction underpins the systematic divergence between the two languages: English foregrounds agentive action, while Japanese emphasizes the spontaneous unfolding of situations.

In this section, I have examined cases in which the changes and resultant states that are expressed by English passive clauses are rendered in Japanese with intransitive clauses or other low-transitivity constructions. These patterns were analyzed here in terms of the transitivity scale and the broader typological contrast between *suru*-type and *naru*-type languages. In the next section, I briefly consider the opposite tendency, i.e., cases in which English passives are rendered by Japanese clauses having higher transitivity.

4. English Passives Rendered as Japanese Transitive Clauses

Let us now turn to the upper part of Figure 3, where the Japanese renderings appear higher on the transitivity scale. In particular, two cases, (4d) and (4f), feature Japanese clauses that are syntactically transitive but

have relatively low volitionality. This may appear at first to invert the expected relationship, as English passives highlight the patient, not the agent. Closer inspection, however, suggests that these Japanese transitive clauses are in an intermediate zone on the transitivity scale: while they employ active morphology and could include an explicit agent, the patient's affectedness remains foregrounded in discourse, thus preserving a core aspect of the English passive.

The examples shown in (6) present English passive constructions that are rendered using Japanese transitive clauses.

- (6) a. ... they *could be taken* somewhere better, and quieter, ... (p.52)
 b. ... it *can all be fixed* with a nice picture. (p.187)
 c. Mr Capaldi's work on the portrait *may be temporarily impeded*. (p.273)
 d. ... her eyes *were closed* ... (p.282)
 e. ... that was perhaps why Rick *was reminded* of that day. (p.381)

Figure 4 schematically presents the placement of these Japanese renderings on the transitivity scale. The vertical placement shown in Figure 4 reflects the relative semantic transitivity of these examples; it does not

Type	Japanese	Gloss	English
Transitive	... shizuka de motto ii basho ni utsushite agete hoshii ...	quiet-LOC more good place-DAT transfer CAUS-PRT* ⁴ want-PRS	(6a)
	... ii e-ichi-mai de chōkeshi ni dekiru ...	good picture one-CLF-LOC fix LOC POT* ⁵ -PRS	(6b)
	... Kaparudi-san no shōzōga mo ichiji chūdan sezarū o enai deshō ka.	Capaldi GEN portrait-NOM also temporarily impede not-do-NEG- POT-PRS ACC cannot-POT-PRS probably Q	(6c)
	... sore-ga Rikku-ni ano hi no koto-o omoidaseta ...	that-NOM Rick-DAT that day- GEN thing-ACC remind-CAUS- PST	(6e)
	... me-o tojite ite ...	eye-ACC close PROG-PRS	(6d)

Figure 4. Japanese renderings of English passives as transitive clauses

suggest that any are highly transitive in an absolute sense. Across the five cases in (6a–e), Japanese renderings use various strategies—including an omission of agent or patient, desiderative or potential expressions, backgrounded agency, causative constructions, and state-oriented descriptions—producing clauses that are formally active but semantically low in transitivity. These examples show how Japanese systematically maps English passive semantics onto such constructions and adapts event construal to discourse and stylistic needs while maintaining the core aspects of affectedness.

As Tsunoda^{1), 2)} has argued from a typological point of view, and as is emphasized in cognitive-linguistic research, transitivity is best understood as a continuum. Formal transitivity (with the grammatical classification of verbs as transitive or intransitive) and semantic transitivity (including volitionality, affectedness, patient prominence, obligation, potential, and state descriptions) could diverge. Figure 4 demonstrates this divergence, showing how Japanese exploits this to reshape event construal. Additional instances of formally transitive clauses having unexpectedly low semantic transitivity further support this point. Collectively, such patterns underscore the flexibility of Japanese in mapping English passive semantics onto active constructions while adjusting the profile of transitivity for discourse and stylistic purposes.

This discussion has focused on a limited set of cases, but a comprehensive analysis of passive-to-active correspondences across the breadth of Ishiguro’s *Klara*

and *the Sun* is needed to determine whether these tendencies can be generalized. This analysis would allow a systematic comparison of the ways in which transitive and intransitive renderings differ in event construal, clarifying the cross-linguistic contrasts that appear between English and Japanese. This broader perspective is adopted in the concluding section, where directions for future research are outlined.

5. Conclusion and Future Research Directions

This paper collected 154 instances of passive constructions drawn from a single novel and examined how the changes that the subject undergoes and the resulting states conveyed in these sentences are rendered in Japanese. This analysis showed that more than half of the examples are expressed in nonpassive constructions in Japanese, and over half of these nonpassive sentences are intransitive. This indicates that the changes and results expressed in English passive sentences—which already reduce transitivity relative to active constructions—are conveyed in Japanese with the use of constructions of even lower transitivity. The typological contrast present between Japanese as an intransitive language and English as a transitive one, previously observed in studies of active constructions, is thus further corroborated in the domain of passive constructions.

It is worth noting, however, that Japanese passives are not absent from the data examined here. Among the 62 instances where English passives were rendered using Japanese passive constructions, 45 largely maintained

the English subject–verb structure, while 17 involved modifications such as shifting the subject from human to nonhuman or adopting lexical and experiential passive constructions. These patterns indicate that while the events expressed by English passives can also be presented in the form of passive constructions in Japanese—especially when the subject is nonhuman or when the focus is on resultant states—human subjects tend to trigger alternative strategies. A fuller analysis of Japanese passives, including their distributional tendencies, will be left for future research.

Future studies should expand the dataset to include examples from other novels by the same author and from different genres, which would clarify general usage patterns and reveal author-specific tendencies. In addition, cross-tabulation of multiple factors—such as whether the subject and object are overt or implicit, whether the given instance is of a main or subordinate clause, whether the sentence is negative or affirmative, and whether the case is of a past or nonpast tense—would allow for a more fine-grained examination of patterns and constraints. This approach could also capture cases in which Japanese expresses changes or states that are described by English passives using either passive constructions of comparable transitivity or active constructions with apparently high transitivity. These analyses are expected to elucidate the semantic and pragmatic functions of passive sentences across languages.

Further, theoretical perspectives such as those of Ohori^{10, 11} on Japanese syntactic constraints and Goldberg¹² on construction-specific meanings could further illuminate how English passive semantics are systematically mapped onto Japanese constructions. Integrating these approaches could enhance our understanding of cross-linguistic differences in encoding change, result, and agency. Ultimately, the findings of this paper indicate that English and Japanese diverge not only in how they construct active sentences but also in how they encode passives, pointing to deeper cross-linguistic differences in the construal of change, result, and agency.

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Notes

- *¹ All English examples from Ishiguro⁷ are cited with page numbers.
- *² Ellipses (...) indicate material omitted for readability without affecting analysis, and relevant active and passive verb forms are italicized.
- *³ Glosses follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Japanese morphological units, such as inflected verb forms and copula (abbreviated as COP), are treated as single units in the object–language line and may be segmented in the gloss line where necessary. Hyphens are used to indicate independent morphemes or to link multiple grammatical categories expressed by a single morphological unit. Therefore, the mapping between the original language line and the gloss line is not always one-to-one, and some morphological units are treated differently depending on context. Morphemes that are semantically recoverable but do not carry independent meaning are not glossed.
- *⁴ PRT is a conventional abbreviation used in Japanese linguistic studies for auxiliary- or modal-like suffixes/particles that express speaker attitude or volitional nuance. It is not part of the official Leipzig Glossing Rules.
- *⁵ POT is a conventional abbreviation used in Japanese linguistic studies to indicate the potential/ability of a verb. It is not part of the official Leipzig Glossing

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