

# Lecture Notes on the Passive Construction

December 3, 2008

## 1 Transformations Continued: The Passive Construction

We have already analyzed questions in English as involving two movement transformations. One transformation moves the element in T up to C, while the other moves the *wh*-word (if present) to the specifier of CP. These are not the only movement transformations in English. In this section we will look at one other construction whose analysis involves movement.

Consider the relationship between the following pairs of sentences:

- (1) a. Bill kicked the cow.  
b. The cow was kicked (by Bill).
- (2) a. The professor taught the students.  
b. The students were taught (by the professor).
- (3) a. The students sued the university.  
b. The university was sued (by the students).

The first sentence in each of these pairs is no big deal; we know how to generate these **active** sentences with our phrase structure rules. The second sentence in each pair deserves further attention. First, notice that the NP that was the direct object of the verb (i.e. the sister of V) in the original sentence is now the subject (i.e. Specifier of TP) in the second sentence. Also notice that the second sentence contains the verb *to be* (realized with tense as *was* and *were*) in addition to the main verb.<sup>1</sup> Finally, notice that the subject NP in the original sentence disappears in the second sentence; if present at all, it is found inside of a PP headed by the preposition *by*.

The second sentence in each pair is an example of a **passive** sentence. We saw in class that passive sentences can be generated in a straightforward way with a movement transformation taking the NP from a position next to V up to the specifier of TP. The analysis is illustrated by the following tree:

<sup>1</sup> The main verb appears in a special form known as the *past participle*. We will ignore this in the discussion that follows.



(5)

