

**THE WARS OF THE ROSES:
ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE VOICE IN MODERN ENGLISH**

*Anxious, inexperienced authors obey rules.
Rebellious, unschooled writers, break rules. Artists master the form.*
(Robert McKee)

The author seeks to shed light on the current debate on passive vs. active voice in modern English, to give some of its history and rationale, and to explain why there will and always should be such a debate. We emphasize the importance of the passive voice in general (lay) English and in the language of science. The study applied mixed methods to reveal several specific cases of passive vs. active voice preference and the combination of both. Finally, we discuss relevant editing techniques and make recommendations for improving teaching the category of voice in EFL classroom.

Key words: active voice, passive voice, variation, coherence, editing.

У статті зроблено спробу розгляду деяких спірних питань функціонування пасивного стану порівняно з активним у сучасній англійській мові. Надано побіжний огляд історії питання та з'ясовано причини такого стану справ. Увага акцентується на важливості пасивного стану як у загальнонародній мові, так і у мові науки. Проаналізовано конкретні складні випадки переважного вживання пасивного або активного стану та їх комбінування. Запропоновано відповідні прийоми редагування та шляхи поліпшення викладання категорії стану тим, хто вивчає англійську як іноземну.

Key words: активний стан, пасивний стан, варіативність, когерентність, редагування.

В статье предпринимается попытка рассмотрения некоторых спорных вопросов функционирования страдательного залога в сравнении с действительным в современном английском языке. Дается беглый обзор истории вопроса и выясняются причины такого положения дел. Внимание концентрируется на значимости страдательного залога как в общенародном языке, так и в языке науки. Проанализированы конкретные сложные случаи предпочтительного употребления действительного или страдательного залога, а также их комбинирование. Предложены соответствующие приемы редактирования и пути улучшения преподавания категории залога тем, кто изучает английский язык как иностранный.

Key words: страдательный залог, действительный залог, вариативность, когерентность, редактирование.

The problem of the category of voice in linguistics is not new. What makes it special is the mere fact that it belongs to the so-called «eternal» problems in language studies. There have been fundamental studies of this category since ancient times. Aristotle, in his work «The Categories» (part of a bigger treatise called «Organon») deals with all kinds of things that can be the subject or the predicate of a proposition. The last but not least category he suggests is the category of «being affected» (the other categories are: the category of substance, of quality, of quantity, of relatives, of place, of time, of position, of condition, of having, of doing) (Aristotle, 2014). Since then, there have been numerous studies that dealt with the issues of the passive vs. active voice in various languages. In English linguistics, especially noteworthy is W. Mathesius's work on the passive voice who emphasized not only verbal, but also nominative, adverbial, possessive and perceptive types of

passive predication (Mathesius, 1915). But perhaps the best and most comprehensive theoretical treatise of the passive voice in English belongs to professors Lyudmyla M. Medvedeva (1983) and Alla D. Belova (1988). Other studies of the passive voice deal mostly with translation studies and pedagogical implications and classroom applications (Hinkel, 2004). A recent fundamental corpus analysis has revealed the diachronic and synchronic trends in academic writing in terms of grammatical complexity. Specifically, it notes the increasing use of get-passive overall, the decreasing use of the be-passive and the development of progressive-passive (Biber 2016, p. 31). Here, we rely on analyzing discourse production and comprehension in terms of context interpretation and focus on concrete practical issues.

Opting for active voice, whenever possible, has become commonplace in today's authoritative grammar and style books (Strunk & White, 1999; Zinsser, 2016). On the other hand, June Casagrande writes on myths about the passives, especially this one: «passive structure is bad». She notes that passives are quite useful when used wisely. Also, we can't convert the sentence into active voice if we don't know the new sentence's subject. She gives a good example:

Professor Persimmon is considered a leading expert.

People consider professor Persimmon a leading expert. (What people?)
(Casagrande, 2010).

Still, in scientific discourse, with its traditional abundance of passive voice constructions of all sorts, we are constantly being told to avoid it at all costs. But is it really worth doing so?

Let's start with some important basic things. If the verb can be followed by a direct object (transitive verb) it can be made passive. Some verbs can be used **only in the active voice**: *exist, happen/occur, rise, arise, fall, depend (on), consist (of), and result (from)*. The passive voice is believed to create the so-called «objectivity effect», to concentrate on the subject itself, especially in the language of science. In such cases, it is put in the very beginning of a sentence:

The models were developed from scratch.

Much has been written about various aspects related to standards and standardization.

This technology is widely used nowadays.

It can be concluded that the argument is valid.

Still, there are cases when active and passive voice may be used interchangeably:

One can conclude ...

I / we conclude ...

You can conclude ...

The conclusion is ...

One more important point about passive voice preference: it is widely used when subject is either unimportant (e. g. *the agenda was changed yesterday*) or undesirable (for some reasons) to mention (e. g. *authorization is required; the project was rejected; the document isn't filled out correctly*). Here, passives can be used to «hide» the agent for some reason, say, the agent may be unknown, redundant:

Potatoes are grown in almost every country.

English is spoken worldwide.

or ... someone to blame:

The message was misinterpreted.

On the other hand, sometimes the authors specifically emphasize who is NOT to blame, as in the book by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson (2008), entitled «Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts.» Here, «by» is somewhat hidden in the brackets, which sort of reflects current trend of not using «by» in passive constructions.

It is also preferable to use modal verbs (specifically, can, could, may, might) in passive constructions, especially when writing about examples and conclusions:

A simple example can be used to illustrate the approach described here.

It could be concluded that this is less important.

The matter may be elucidated by further analysis.

Also, Polish scholar D. Lachowicz (1981) noticed that the so called «active» verbs (e. g. conduct, connect) are «neutralized» by Passive voice. On the contrary, «passive» verbs (e. g. indicate, reveal) tend to be used in Active voice.

The next important thing to consider is word order. Examples:

How many friends were invited by you?

(Emphasis is on «how many have **you**, personally, invited).

How many friends were you invited by?

(Emphasis is on how many **people** were interested in inviting you).

Let's look at one more case: the phrase *to have/get something done*:

I had my printer fixed. (the agent is implied).

I got my printer fixed. (basically, the same as above, only less formal).

In academic writing, the passive voice is still widely used, moreover, passive voice verbs are important for distinguishing academic prose in English, that is, most written academic texts (regardless of specific field) will use passive voice verbs to a greater extent than conversational English, though in engineering and natural science texts, as compared to humanities, passives are especially common (Biber & Gray, 2016, pp. 71–72).

The debate on active vs. passive voice preference seems to be perennial. First, because the subject matter is so complex. Second, because it is often misinterpreted. Geoffrey Pullum (2014), in his seminal paper «Fear and Loathing of the English Passive» points out that writing advisers have been condemning the English passive since the early 20th century. However, the only problem is actually *what* should be avoided. He argues that it is not just the verb that exhibits passive voice in English, but larger units, specifically the verb phrase (VP) and the clause, and focus should be NOT on «receiving action». Professor Pullum says there are many kinds of passives in English, namely:

- **short** passives and
- **long** passives (the ones with by-phrase),
- **be**-passives and
- **get**-passives,

- **prepositional** passives (**idiomatic** and **locative** types),
- **bare** passive clauses (e. g. *That said*),
- **embedded** passives (e. g. *manufacturers saw themselves pushed to the brink of going out of business*),
- **adjectival** passives (e. g. *the island was uninhabited by humans*), and **concealed** passives (e. g. *the situation needs looking into by experts*).

The most important point made by Pullum is this: passives are sensitive to discourse conditions and information-structure constraints. He gives several examples:

- a. *Have you heard the news about YouTube? It was bought by Google. [acceptable because the subject is old and by-phrase NP is new].*
- b. *Have you heard the news about Google? YouTube was bought by it/them. [unacceptable because the subject (YouTube) is newer in the discourse than the by-phrase] (Pullum, 2014).*

For that matter, we'd like to stress one important point, aptly expressed by Stan Carey «whenever someone complains about the passive voice, see if they're misidentifying or oversimplifying it. There's a very good chance of both.» (Carey, 2014). G. Pullum gives numerous examples of this: cases that do not contain passive at all, but are mistakenly perceived as such (e. g. *there was a ceasefire agreement; mistakes happened; when a boy*, and many other cases of that ilk) (Ibid.). We agree with him on this point, with the exception of just one specific case that he mentions in his article. He says there is no passive clause in the following example of a Reuters headline: *Palestinian not named as perpetrator; Israeli not named as victim*. We tend to disagree on this one, because, apparently, here we observe a special linguistic device that might be called «hidden passive», so typical of media headlines (full version of the title is obviously *Palestinian was (not) named as perpetrator*).

Still, currently, the overall trend in English is opting for active voice wherever and whenever possible. With the ubiquitous mantra «choose the active voice, do not use passive» it sometimes looks – speaking figuratively and literally – like the war on the passive voice. But are there going to be any winners in, figuratively speaking, «the Wars of the Roses»?

Let's see. On the one hand, writers, such as George Orwell (1946) used to complain about the passive (but used it extensively themselves, nonetheless). On the other hand, some of the greatest literary and science writings do start with the passive voice constructions. Consider the following:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

(Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

The story of our world is a story that is still very imperfectly known. A couple of hundred years ago men possessed the history of little more than the last three thousand years. What happened before that time was a matter of legend and speculation. Over a large part of the civilized world it was believed and taught that the world had been created suddenly in 4004 B. C., though authorities differed as to whether this had occurred in the spring or autumn of that year.

This fantastically precise misconception was based upon a too literal interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, and upon rather arbitrary theological assumptions connected therewith. Such ideas have long since been abandoned by religious teachers, and it is universally recognized that the universe in which we live has to all appearances existed for an enormous period of time and possibly for endless time.

(H. G. Wells. A Short History of the World (1922).

And the recent example of a cool beginning with passive:

What if the world we knew was subtly being replaced with a new one? Would we notice immediately, or would it only be evident in hindsight? According to the World Economic Forum, the «Fourth Industrial Revolution» is here. It's a change as significant as any modern revolution before it. And if we look, we'll see the signs.

(O'Keefe II (2016).

The famous, almost 100 % passive voice-laden, Intel's Andy Grove quote contains three passives: «*There is always more to be done, more that should be done, always more than can be done.*» (Kruse, 2016). More past and current examples? One of the well-known Ernest Hemingway's books uses semi-passive in its title: «*The Moveable Feast*» (1964). In science, we have «*Speakable and Unspeakeable in Quantum Mechanics*» (1988), and «*Quantum [Un]Speakeables II*» (2017). Obviously, «*Orwell was not always right*» (Skapinker, 2017).

Implicit semi-passives – mostly adjectival (but there are nouns, too) are abundant in English (e. g. *the unsinkable» ship (the Titanic), understandable, irreplaceable* etc.). Here are recent additions, adjectives:

a demonstrable product

an implementable idea

a readable book

pre(-)loved / pre-owned (secondhand)

searchable

ungoogleable

huggable

kissable

salvageable

more easily digestible

It's a doable task.

The author's characters are believable.

We've put together this manageable list of suggestions.

Modest bragging is a learnable skill.

How to be instantly likeable / loveable?

It doesn't matter if something I buy turns out to be a mistake and unreturnable, because three years ago I found fifty dollars on the street, so THAT BALANCES EVERYTHING OUT!

Here come several novel and trendy nouns:

usability

writability

tellability

ambient findability (the property of being findable at all times)

(digital deliverable(s)) (a tangible or intangible good or service produced as a result of a project that is intended to be delivered to a customer).

Some things in the English language can be expressed only with the help of the passive voice. Simply because there *are* cases when only passive voice will do:

a.k.a. – also known as

She was born in December / in 1987 / thirty years ago.

They got married last year.

«Everything which is not forbidden is allowed.» (a constitutional principle of English law).

To say nothing of:

made in...

made from

shipped by

much spoken about

(X) was first discovered

forbidden / not permitted / access denied

banned from travel (укр. невіізний, рос. невыездной)

taken-for-granted context

a truth universally acknowledged

a lie universally hidden

What needs to be done?

It is not unheard of.

You must not be seen.

S/he doesn't need to be told again/twice.

I was invited to the conference/party.

This technology is widely used.

It can/could be concluded that... .

The book was printed on acid-free paper/last year.

Never leave a burning candle unattended.

Not much is known about... .

It has long been known...

You are all set.

Well done !

I'm done. (I'm ready.)

Are you done? (Are you ready?)

Are we understood?

Duly noted.

Much appreciated.

It seems they can be trained. Who would think?

Twas meant to be. (It was meant to be.)

We are very easily fooled.

Get lost! (Go away!)

Just get it done!

Get more done in less time.

He wants his new project to get green-lighted.

It remains to be seen.

Much remains to be done.

Everything must be done with love.

When all is said and done. (at the end of the day/sooner or later)

What's done cannot be undone.

Lessons must be learnt!

The conference was well-attended.

The book is dedicated to...

Modern electronics is based on semiconductor transistors.

Vanderbilt is located in the heart of Nashville, home to a diverse population of 1.6 million and marked by its unique blend of cosmopolitan flair and small town appeal.

This website is not currently being updated. For current news and latest information please visit the new website that is being developed.

The book sells well. (a rare case of implicit passive).

404! This page was not found.

Interestingly, in German, in the last example, this very idea is expressed either via active or passive voice – 404! *Diese Seite existiert nicht.* 404! *Seite nicht gefunden.*

Modern book reviews abound with emphatic recommendations containing passives, e. g.: «*Could. Not. Put. Down. It must be read!*» or, to convey a similar idea, with semi-passives like «*an unputdownable book*».

And here are some examples from modern songs:

Pink «Get the Party Started».

Miley Cyrus «Can't Be Tamed».

Maroon 5 «She Will be Loved».

In manuals and all kinds of guidelines, passive voice is traditionally more preferable. However, what we observe today, is rather the **interplay** of both passive and active voice, even in guidelines and regulations:

Successful conferences are based on the strong cooperation of more than one IEEE organizational unit, such as technical/professional and geographic units. The earlier these units are involved in the conference, the better. These arrangements must be made before the selection of the conference location.

Use this form to provide IEEE with details about your conference as soon as you have basic information such as the dates, location, and sponsors of the conference set. You can later provide IEEE Conference Services with updates or additional information when it is available.

A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) is required when two or more entities agree to co-sponsor a conference. These entities may all be IEEE organizational units or IEEE and non-IEEE organizations that are legally registered as a not-for-profit. (IEEE).

The following spreadsheets list all IEEE conference titles found (or soon to be found) in IEEE Xplore. These lists are fully searchable and include data such as:

Conference titles.

Meeting dates and locations.

ISBNs (if applicable).

These spreadsheets are updated frequently; the last update is listed for each spreadsheet. Each list is available to download as an Excel file, can be sorted or customized, and is fully searchable. (IEEE).

Still, generally it is advisable to seek active voice alternative whenever possible, even when it comes to abstracts, traditionally dominated by the passive constructions. Example:

This latest monograph challenges and disrupts traditional notions of the anthropology of Britain as simply the practice of social anthropology «at home» by illuminating the ways in which this area of inquiry is outward looking in terms of its inter-disciplinary scope, theoretical, philosophical and social policy perspectives. Crucial to this endeavour is an exploration of the ways the ethnographic study of Britain contributes to issues and concerns that are central to anthropology and more broadly to sociological inquiry. This monograph will not only affect the ways sociologists think about the potential contribution of the anthropology of Britain to their empirical and theoretical concerns, but will also impact upon how anthropology thinks about itself and its relationship to other disciplines.

(Reconfiguring the Anthropology of Britain, 2017).

When speaking about passive and active voice in research setting (and elsewhere) we have to make a choice from the editing perspective. Below we suggest **editing** tips for applying in your writing, with several before-and-after examples. Such revisions have also proved useful in our teaching practice:

This volume, ~~that was~~ edited by two professors, contains twenty-one chapters ~~that are~~ divided into five roughly equal parts.

Keynote speakers ~~who had been~~ invited at these events have often gained nationwide fame.

*Your order ~~will be delivered~~ in
3 working days.*

*We will deliver your order in
3 working days.*

~~As can be seen from table 7 ...~~

Table 7 shows ...

~~recently done~~ research

recent research

~~(it) is analyzed~~ ...

we analyze ...

Some authors suggest the notion of «strategic editing» when it comes to choosing active vs. passive voice, as in this example of rejection letter:

Although ~~you were not selected for~~ we filled the position for which you applied, ~~the interview committee was impressed with~~ your credentials and experience impressed the committee. We're offering you the opportunity to interview for a second job opening as a sales representative in our company. (ProsWrite, 2015).

On the other hand, it is noted that passive rather than active voice is preferable in the language of science, namely, when reporting about some potent drug that *«has*

been discovered» at some university, «*has been shown to work*» by clinical trials, and «*is likely to be approved*» for clinical use. Here, passive voice constructions focus on the subject matter – the drug itself (as it is mentioned in the beginning of the sentences) rather than the university, number of clinical trials or other details (Freeman, 2013). Moreover, passive voice may be more than welcome in some situations – like when it's necessary to maintain thematic flow. Active voice is better suited to establishing a personal style or tone. The choice should be strategic and depend on the rhetorical context (the purpose, the reader's needs, and the content of the message. (ProWrite 2015).

Another important issue is **cohesion** and **information flow**. Kenneth D. Mahrer points out that in modern technical writing, we advise writers to use the direct, active voice and avoid the weak and indirect, passive voice. He gives the following example (two sentences are: (1) active and (2) passive):

(1) *Fluid injections in deep wells in which the downhole fluid pressure sufficiently reduces the effective frictional stress across a plane of weakness induce microseismicity.*

(2) *Microseismicity is induced by fluid injections in deep wells when the injected fluid pressure sufficiently reduces the effective frictional stress across a plane of weakness.*

While some would automatically advise using the active voice in the following case:

Geophysicists are finding some astonishing new results about fracture and joint growth by studying microseismicity. [insert sentence (1) or (2)] By reducing the frictional stress below the in situ shear stress, we generate a local slip or dislocation that grows into a microseismic event.

Mahrer suggests that coherence dictates using (2), not (1) – simply because in the last part of the first passage microseismicity is some *new* information. If we use the active voice sentence, microseismicity is not mentioned until the end of the second sentence. This distance between introducing and discussing microseismicity makes the passage incoherent (Mahrer, 2001).

Also, it is very important, especially in the language of science, to give priority «to those features of style that make our discourse seem cohesive, those features that help the reader organize separate sentences into a single, unified whole», to prepare your readers for new and important information, to move «from the known to the unknown» (Williams, 1995, p. 48). Joseph Williams stresses the topic of a sentence is its «psychological subject», i. e. the idea we announce in the first few words of a sentence: «it is almost always a noun phrase of some kind that the rest of the sentence characterizes, comments on, or says something about» (Ibid., p. 50). In a similar vein, Joshua Schimel writes about the passive voice in scientific discourse: «it's a tool that weakens a single sentence, but in a way that can allow it to fit more snugly into a paragraph, strengthening the whole» (Schimel, 2012, p. 135).

One more important point is using the passive voice with the word pairs «because of» and «due to». Though often mistakenly considered otherwise, they are

not interchangeable. «Due to» has adjectival nature, and can modify only nouns and pronouns, while «because of» is an adverb and therefore can modify verbs

*His reward was **due to** hard work.*

*He was rewarded **because of** hard work.*

Useful hint for choosing «because of»: He was rewarded could be a complete sentence, unlike His reward. One more example:

*Rutherford B. Hayes **was nicknamed** «His Fraudulency» and «Rutherfraud» ~~due to~~ **because of** the highly contested – and some think stolen – presidential election of 1876.*

Both active and passive voice can be used with «because of»; however, our own counts tend to show preference for passives.

When it comes to teaching the passive voice, one thing is evident: artificial, unnaturally sounding constructs (frequently found in instructional materials – various textbooks and grammar books) should be avoided at all costs. Examples? While «*English is spoken here*» or «*the Internet is dominated by English*» are perfectly acceptable, *«*English is spoken by Kate and Bill*» is not. As is «*it will be remembered by me*» (the transform of «*I will remember it*»). Instead, lists of set-phrases and collocations with passive voice are more than welcome in the EFL classroom.

Eventually, it all boils down to two points: linguistic and pedagogic. When it comes to passive vs. active voice in English, we should speak not of «either..or», but rather, of «both..and» approach. That is, about the interplay of active and passive voice to add variety and elegance, like in the following example: *If you really want to impress someone, then be impressed by them.*

Or:



The issues of coherence and information flow should not be overlooked, either. And, I must admit, that while I, too, prefer the active voice as much as possible, I strongly believe that those who learn English as a second language (non-native speakers at large) and even native speakers (especially editors), should have a firm understanding of the passive voice: the structure, logic, and grammar behind it. They

should be able to recognize it and adjust to various discourses and discursive conventions, and to observe variation and current trends in language development.

We could conclude that passive voice is still a topic of interest today, and this offers an insight into just how enduring its «legacy» is. And just like the Wars of the Roses eventually ended in the cordial union between the rivaling clans, there is a bright prospect for coexistence of passive and active voices in English. There isn't a one-size-fits-all formula for properly crafting the perfect sentence, paragraph, or text, but there are always effective linguistic devices that help making oral and written communication more effective. The list is open, and the possibilities are endless.

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