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STYLISTIC DIFFERENCE IN THE USE OF PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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In this article the passive voice, its use and stylistic difference it makes within a sentence have been observed and explained. Passive voice is very often used in the English language. It denotes a situation in which the subject suffers the action expressed by its verb. A passive sentence may be formed only with transitive verbs, those with which the action moves from a subject to an object. The meaning in the passive sentence does not change in relation to the active sentence, but what changes is the style because the object of an action gets situated in the first place in the sentence; the emphasis is placed on the object and not on the subject or the doer of an action. Such a phenomenon is common in the language of law, informative writing or with the instructions in the use of technical means because they all put the emphasis on the object and not on the subject of an action that are either known from the context, or implied.

Key words: *passive, voice, verb phrase, clause, doer, sufferer.*

1. Introduction

Before saying what passive voice is, how we form it and when and why we use it in front of an active voice, it is important to clarify the term voice itself. English finite verbs, more commonly called also main verbs are used in main clauses specifying:

- a) A grammatical tense (Simple, Past, future...);
- b) the person (first, second, third, plural or singular);
- c) the aspect (by using simple forms; if a user wants to underline just the pure fact, or progressive forms if a speaker or writer wants to underline the durability of an action by using or by using perfect forms if he or she wants to view events retrospectively);
- d) the mood (indicative, conditionals, modals, subjunctive);
- e) the voice (active, passive).

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English language is characterised by the complex possibility of combining the grammatical aspect and the voice and that is one of the major differences between English and Croatian language.

2. Passive voice as a grammatical category

Voice is a grammatical category which makes it possible to view the action of a sentence in two ways (as an active and a passive one); without the changes in the facts repeated.

<u>A different teacher</u>	<u>presents</u>		<u>different subjects.</u>
S/agent	v		object/recipient/sufferer
<u>Different subjects</u>	<u>are presented</u>	by	<u>a different teacher.</u>
object/recipient/sufferer	v		subject/agent

Moreover, the voice is a special characteristic of a verb saying whether the subject is a doer/ performer of an action or whether it is someone who receives or suffers an action. (In this case we are talking about the passive form of a sentence).

In other words we can notice that the change occurs in two levels:

- a) the whole verb form changes;
- b) the whole sentence structure changes.

For that particular reason we may say that the active – passive relation involves two grammatical levels; the verb phrase and the clause.

Directors of the company attend board meetings.

Board meetings are attended by the directors of the company.

In the verb phrase (attend/are attended) the difference between the two voice categories (active/passive) is that the passive adds the form of the verb to be and the past participle of the main verb (are attended).

At the clause level the passivization (the transformation of an active to a passive sentence) occurs by rearranging the clause elements by adding the preposition by.

John eats an apple.

An apple is eaten by John.

On this simple example we can analyse that:

- a) active subject becomes the passive agent;
- b) active object becomes the passive subject (occupying the place of an active subject);
- c) preposition "by" is introduced before an agent or performer of an action.

As it was already mentioned at the beginning, the structure of a sentence changes under the voice transformation, but its meaning remains the same.

The question second English language learners may ask themselves is why it is used and if the meaning remains the same.

What actually occurs is more some kind of stylistic change in the way the speaker or the writer wants to transmit the message. It depends on the fact he/she wants to put the stress on. The writer, speaker wants to stress the performer of an action or the action itself with its outcome or goal.

3. Active – passive transformation

We are going to analyse some of the main reasons of using the passive voice in English language.

The active voice is usually more direct and forceful than the passive voice.

It is also more common in English despite the huge usage of the passive (especially if we compare it to the common use of the passive voice in Croatian language). The passive voice is much more commonly used in informative rather than in imaginative writing, in the objective, non personal style of scientific articles, textbooks, texts related to the law, technical or business reports, because the nature of scientific and technical report writing emphasizes the results and the object of an action.

3.1. The form

As it was already mentioned, the passive sentence construction is formed as following:

- a) by putting the object of an active sentence in a subject position of a passive sentence;
- b) by putting the verb to be in the active verb tense (the tense needs to respect the active sentence tense) and by adding the past participle of the main verb.

The agent, or the performer of an action is often not mentioned, but in the case it is mentioned, gets introduced by the preposition **by** and placed at the end of a sentence.

My grandfather built this house.

This house was built by my grandfather.

Was = because the active verb tense is in the Past Simple tense, (The house was...) + past participle of the main verb to build which is built. In this way we get a passive construction was built. Both sentences are written in the Past Simple tense.

Generally speaking, we can notice that the active – passive transformation is possible only when the main verb is a transitive verb; the one that connects the performer of an action with the actual object in the sentence by letting the subject the possibility of passing an action to a final goal or to an object.

John has bought a house. *in this case the object receives the action*

A house was bought by John. *(passivization is possible)*

The thieves have broken the window. *in this case the object receives the action*

The window has been broken by the thieves. *(passivization is possible)*

John arrived in Šibenik yesterday. *in this case there is no object receiving an action; no passivization possible.*

The tense in the passive sentence must clearly respect the tense of the active sentence. So if we want to transform the sentence from active to passive voice, we need to take care of the tense used in the active sentence; the verb to be must respect the active verb tense before adding the past participle. In the same way, if we want to use it deliberately in spoken or written language (without the transformation of the verb which makes part of the passive learning at the very early stage), we must pay attention to the correct use of the verb to be

which respects the tense we want to express ourselves with after which the main verb must always be changed into past participle.

Table 1 Active tenses and their passive equivalents

Tense/verb form	Active voice	Passive voice
Simple present	Ann reads a book.	A book is read by Ann.
<i>Present continuous</i>	Ann is reading a book.	A book is being read by Ann.
<i>Simple past</i>	Ann read a book.	A book was read by Ann.
<i>Past continuous</i>	Ann was reading a book.	A book was being read by Ann.
<i>Present perfect</i>	Ann has read a book.	A book has been read by Ann.
<i>Past perfect</i>	Ann had read a book.	A book had been read by Ann.
<i>Future</i>	Ann will read a book.	A book will be read by Ann.
<i>Conditional</i>	Ann would read a book...	A book would be read
<i>Perfect conditional</i>	Ann would have read a book...	A book would have been read ...
<i>Present infinitive</i>	... to read...	..to be read...
<i>Perfect infinitive</i>	...to have read...	...to have been read...
<i>Present participle/gerund</i>	...reading...	...being read...
<i>Perfect participle</i>	...having read...	...having been read...

3.2. Situations where passive voice is not possible

3.2.1. Tenses

Not all tenses can be changed into passive voice. It refers to: Present Perfect Continuous Tense; Past Perfect Continuous Tense; Future Continuous Tense; Future Perfect Continuous Tense.

3.2.2. Verbs

As it was already mentioned intransitive verbs cannot be changed into passive voice since they are not followed by an object.

4. The use of passive voice

There are some specific situations in which the passive voice is preferred:

- a) When the performer of an action is unknown or irrelevant, obvious, or when it is unimportant who the doer is/are/was/will be;

This car was made in Japan. the doer is irrelevant

The exams have been corrected. Obvious

Your lungs will be x-rayed. Obvious

This house was built in stone. Unknown

The journalist was murdered. Forgotten The performer is not normally mentioned in these sentences.

- b) For expressing the impersonality

Sometimes we may use the passive voice intentionally to avoid naming the doer/performer of an action;

It has been decided that all bonuses will be cut off.

She was fired.

- c) When the subject of the active sentence is the indefinite pronoun (someone, something, everyone, one...);

ACTIVE: Someone has stolen my bike.

One can see this kind of advertisements everywhere.

PASSIVE: My bike has been stolen by someone.

This kind of advertisement can be seen everywhere.

- d) When focus of the sentence changes; in the passive sentence the focus is on the receiver (object), not on the performer (subject) of an action;

Elliot was hit by a car.

The mistake was discovered (by her teacher).

Every day business decisions are taken at board meetings.

In these sentences the performer can be either mentioned or omitted.

- e) We use passive voice also in situations of social and historical significance, when the work resulting from the action is well known, or better known than the performer, as in the case of famous music, writing, paintings, scientific findings and inventions in general sense;

"Hamlet" was written by Shakespeare.

The Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo da Vinci.

The method for producing an alternative current was invented by Nikola Tesla.

In these kinds of sentences the agent or the performer must be mentioned in order to complete the statement.

- f) We use it also when we want to describe certain process; the focus here again is on the action (result) and not on the performer.

First, the tree is cut down. Then, the branches are removed. After that, the trunk is taken to sawmill. Here, the bark is removed from the trunk and the trunks are sawn into logs. The logs are taken to the paper mill and placed in the shredder. Here they are cut into small strips and mixed with water. After that, they are heated and crushed.²

5. Special uses of the passive

- a) The passive may be used to avoid ungrammatical sentences. This is usually done by avoiding a change of subject:³

² <http://www.admc.hct.ac.ae/hd1/english/writing/wtgpassive2.htm>

³ A Practical English Grammar, A.J. Thomson, A.V. Martinet, Oxford University Press

When John arrived home a detective arrested him.

would be better expressed

When John arrived home he was arrested (by a detective).

b) have + object + past participle construction

We may use this sentence construction for the following;

“I asked someone to do something for me”, in other words; instead of saying: “I asked someone to clean my apartment” we can also say “I had my apartment cleaned.” Instead of saying “I’ve got some people to pick my olives”, we may also say “I’ve got my olives picked.”

It is extremely important to pay attention to order of words (have + object + past participle), as otherwise the meaning would change; “Jake had his grass cut” means that he had employed someone to do that for him. But if we change the word order by saying “Jake had cut his grass” means that he had cut it himself.

c) get can be used instead of have but it is more colloquial.

Get something done is more common where there is a feeling that something must be done, in orders and imperatives and when we have a feeling of managing something;

I must get my car cleaned. a feeling that something must be done

Get your homework done! orders and imperatives

Mary always gets things done. a feeling of managing something

In spoken language *get* can also be used in the passive voice instead of *to be*:

The windows got (= were) broken.

John will soon get (= be) fired if he continues to be late for work.

6. Conclusion

The intention in this paper was to give a general overview of the basic elements in the formation of the passive voice as a grammatical form. The stress is on its use in the spoken language. The importance of having one clear and understandable structure in mind may help the student, learner of English as a second language to be more self-confident in speaking, writing and understanding of the language itself.

Despite the fact that mother tongue may be a barrier in a second language learning, learners will always automatically compare the second language with their mother tongue, so one clear grammatical structure at this stage can help to strengthen their knowledge and to gain confidence in using the foreign language.

LITERATURE

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Sažetak

STILISTIČKA RAZLIKA U KORIŠTENJU PASIVA U ENGLISKOM JEZIKU

U ovom je članku sagledan i objašnjen pasiv kao glagolsko stanje s aspekta njegove uporabe i stilističke razlike koju predstavlja u rečenici ili u nekom određenom kontekstu. Pasiv odnosno trpno stanje glagola je učestalo korišteno u engleskom jeziku. Objašnjava situaciju u kojoj subjekt više nije vršitelj radnje (kao u aktivnoj rečenici), već u pasivnoj rečenici trpi radnju izraženu od strane glagola. Pasivna se rečenica može dobiti samo ukoliko se radi o prijelaznim ili tranzitivnim glagolima; onima koji omogućuju prijelaz radnje sa subjekta na rečenični objekt. Značenje se u pasivnoj rečenici ne mijenja u odnosu na aktivnu rečenicu, već dolazi do promjene u stilu jer objekt biva smješten na početak rečenice baš zbog činjenice što se na njega na taj način želi staviti naglasak, a ne više na subjekta kao vršitelja radnje. Takav je fenomen učestao u jeziku zakonodavstva i raznog informativnog pisanja ili pak u uputama za korištenju tehničkih naprava jer u njima prevladava stil koji naglasak uglavnom stavlja na objekt, a ne na subjekt radnje koji je ili poznat iz konteksta, ili se pak podrazumijeva.

Ključne riječi: *pasiv, stanje, glagolska fraza, rečenica, vršitelj, trpitelj.*

