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## PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH

*Hüseynova Şəhla Ələkbər qızı, Həsənova Səma İmamverdi qızı**Gəncə Dövlət Universiteti**hsehla744@gmail.com,**nerinehesenova@gmail.com*

**Annatrasion:** *The aim of the article is to shed light on the use and development of passive voice in American English. Empirical, corpus methods are employed in order to examine the syntactic, semantic, and stylistic preferences of three English passive constructions across time and genre in American English. The corpus data span the years 1870–2010 and come from genres of widely varying formality. The three passive constructions investigated in this article are:*

- 1. The canonical be-passive, as in she was sent home.*
- 2. The informal, relatively infrequent get-passive, as in she got sent home.*
- 3. The typologically rare prepositional passive, as in she was sent for.*

*In Article the frequency of be- and get-passives in very recent, speech-like material suggests both colloquialization and prescriptivism as influences on the language. The results indicate little difference between the two passives except in terms of frequency, highlighting the importance of comparing get-passives to a control group of be-passives.*

**Keywords:** passive voice, be-passive, get-passive, prepositional passive

**Açar sözlər :** məchul növ, be –məchul növ, get-məchul, sözünü məchul

**Ключевые слова:** пассивный залог, be - пассивный , get- пассивный, предлог пассивный

**Passive voice**

Quirk et al. (1985: 159) define voice as “a grammatical category which makes it possible to view the action of a sentence in either of two ways, without change in the facts reported.” English has two grammatically- 11 marked voices: active and passive. Assuming that active is the default voice category, a passive sentence is a sentence in which an object noun phrase (NP) has been “promoted” to subject position. Example (1), from the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) (Davies 2010), is of an active sentence, with the direct object in its “usual” place, and the constructed example in (2) gives the passive version of that sentence, in which the active object is found in subject position. The subject of the active sentence may or may not be present in passive voice; if present, it is found at the end of the sentence in an optional by-phrase, as in (2). For ease of reference, verb phrases in example sentences are underlined. Noun phrases of interest, such as subjects, objects, and prepositional complements, are in bold.

(1) Well anyway, the governor nominated her. (COHA Fiction 1958)

(2) Well anyway, she was nominated (by the governor).

Students of English are usually taught how to form a passive sentence in the following way: they are to place the object at the beginning of the sentence, then use auxiliary BE plus a past participle followed by an optional agent prefaced with by, as in sentence (2). The full range of options for English passives is a little wider, and encompasses, besides the passive with BE (the book was sold), the GET-passive (the book got sold), and the prepositional passive (the book was sent for). Each of these kinds of passive is described in greater detail in the separate sections which follow. English also includes a construction with similar object-promoting properties known as the mediopassive, as in the book is selling well: this

construction is beyond the scope of this thesis, but readers who are interested in finding out more about mediopassives are directed to Hundt (2007) for a helpful guide.

Despite the well-documented “fear and loathing” of the English passive (Pullum 2014; cf), from an information-structural standpoint, passive voice enables English speakers (and writers) to convey a useful shift in focus where necessary. Biber et al. (1999: 477) write that “one of the major functions of the passive is that it demotes the agent of the verb (often the person doing the action of the verb), while giving topic status to the affected patient (the entity being acted on).” Passives are thus often used where the agent (the NP that would be the subject of the active version of the sentence) is either uninteresting or very obvious (in which case it is normally omitted); or where it makes sense to place it at the end of the sentence for discursive reasons such as “given vs. new information” (Pullum 2014: 64). Consider the longer examples in (3) and (4), taken from the TIME Magazine Corpus (Davies 2007):

(3) Mr. Vauclain is a solemn looking man, tall and well set up. He wears a “cutaway” as a uniform and looks not unlike a bishop. He works from 7 A.M. to closing and can be seen by anybody at any time. Born in Philadelphia in 1856, **he** was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and began work at the Altoona shop of the Pennsylvania Railroad. (TIME 1920s)

(4) The real question between the nation and the Stuarts was whether the king or the Parliament should rule. **That question** was settled, after a series of convulsions, by the Revolution of 1688. (COHA Magazines 1870s)

In example (3), not only is the existence of Mr. Vauclain “given information” by the time we get to the passive he was educated, but it is entirely uninteresting to the reader to know who educated him; we assume based on our background knowledge of the world that it was educators at the University of Pennsylvania, and it would be nothing short of weird to have it spelled out for us. Sentence (4), which includes a by-agent, also exemplifies the common cohesive technique of “given vs. new.” That question, which refers back to the preceding sentence, is given information. It would have been slightly more difficult to process the text if the sentence had begun with new information and instead read: The Revolution of 1688 settled that question after a series of convulsions. These corpus examples further illustrate what Pullum (2014: 73) has already clearly demonstrated: namely, that “the claims about why you should avoid passives—the allegations about why they are bad—are all bogus, and the interesting point (the discourse condition) is always missed”

### **The BE-passive**

The most canonical of the English passives is of course the BE-passive, formed as described above, with auxiliary BE followed by a past participle, as in examples (2)–(4). The BE-passive has been in use for a good deal longer than the GET-passive and even the prepositional passive, and seems to have descended from a similar construction in Old English that could be formed with the auxiliaries BEON and WESAN (Denison 1993: 414–415). The BE-passive also differs greatly from the GET-passive in its association with formal, written language, as clearly shown in Biber et al. (1999: 397). This formality, however, does not seem to be the cause of the vociferous condemnation that the construction has recently fallen under.

Despite its information-structural usefulness, the BE-passive has been declining in frequency in written genres over the last century, especially in American English (Mair 2006a: 190; Leech et al. 2009: 153). The BE-passive, as the canonical English passive, is the passive construction that people are most likely to recognize and the one that is most explicitly proscribed. The decrease in the use of the BE-passive in writing is varying

attributed to prescriptivism and to colloquialization. Even though the BE-passive is decreasing in frequency, it is still by far the most common expression of passive voice in English, and is used in a wider variety of syntactic and semantic contexts than GET- and prepositional passives are. For this reason, BE-passives are often used as a control group in the studies in this thesis: claims made about GET- and prepositional passives are checked against data sets of BE-passives, the more established construction, in order to find out whether proposed constraints on these newer passives really are particular to them alone.

### **The GET-passive**

The GET-passive, as in example (5), while much rarer than the BE-passive, has been increasing dramatically in frequency in written English over the last few decades (Mair 2006a: 113, Leech et al. 2009: 156).

(5) The girl who gets rescued from the fire, and who indirectly caused it, is Susan Hayward. (TIME 1940s)

The GET-passive is a relatively recent innovation compared to the much more established BE-passive. The first attested example of a GET-passive that is currently suggested by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), shown in (6), is from 1568.

(6) 1568 T. North tr. A. de Guevara Dial Princes (rev. ed.) ii. 114 (OED s.v. get v.29b) If hee bee not his kynseman, or neere allied, let him yet at least get acquaynted with him. Example (6), however, is not really an example of a passive sentence and must be disqualified as there is no active version of this sentence which is not reflexive (see also Denison 1993: 420; ). The two examples with get loosed from 1584 and 1628 which follow are also not examples of true, verbal passives. The first clear example of a GET-passive given in the OED is from 1665, and is reproduced in (7).

(7) 1665 J. Winthrop Let. in H. Oldenburg Corr. (1986) XIII. 403 (OED s.v. get v.29b) These are a small black Caterpillar that breed in the very bud of the tree... Some [trees] alsogetkilledbyit.

It was earlier thought that passive uses of GET + past participle such as (7) arose from transitive-reflexive uses of GET such as get oneself dressed/introduced. However, a more recent corpus-based study by Fleisher (2006) has shown that the GET-passive has its origins in GET + adjective constructions like get sick, where ambiguous participial adjectives (get worried) paved the way for purely verbal participles (get killed). The fact that passive GET has its origins in adjectival constructions has implications for the grammaticalization trajectory of the GET passive.

The three major contemporary grammars of English (Quirk et al. 1985; Biber et al. 1999; and Huddleston & Pullum 2002) agree that GET can be used to form true, verbal passives such as (5) and (7). However, as grammaticalized as this use of GET might be, it is still not possible to count GET among the primary auxiliary verbs of English. I have been calling GET an “auxiliary” for the sake of convenience, as do Quirk et al. (1985: 160) and Biber et al. (1999: 475). However, GET is not a true auxiliary verb, as it does not display the “NICE” properties (Negative, Interrogative, Code, Emphasis) and thus does not qualify as an operator (Palmer 1965: 15, 21; Huddleston 1976: 333–334). “Auxiliary” GET cannot precede not in negative sentences or precede the subject in interrogative sentences (the N and I of NICE, as shown in (8) and (9)); it cannot be a place holder in cases of ellipsis (the C, or “code” test, example (10)); and it supposedly cannot carry emphasis (the E, example (11)). Instead, dummy operator DO must be used in the NICE functions.

(8) She wasn't selected for promotion.

Shegotn't selected for promotion.

She didn't get selected for promotion.

(9) Was she selected for promotion?

\*Got she selected for promotion?

Did she get selected for promotion?

(10) Was she selected for promotion? She was.

Got she selected for promotion? \*She got.

Did she get selected for promotion? She did.

(11) She was selected for promotion.

She got selected for promotion.

She did get selected for promotion.

### **The prepositional passive**

English is one of the few languages which allow for the prepositional passive, as in (12), where the object of a preposition is found in subject position rather than following the preposition, as it would be in the active version shown in (13). (12) Shall this grammarian be listened to in his own words? (COHA Fiction 1810, spelling original) (13) Shall we listen to this grammarian in his own words? The only other languages in which prepositional passives are attested are the Scandinavian languages (excepting Icelandic), Vata and Gbadi (spoken on the Ivory Coast), and some varieties of North American French (Koopman 1984 and Abels 2003 as cited in Findlay 2016: 256). Because prepositional passives are so typologically rare, linguists have been interested in the conditions that allow them to exist in languages at all. The prepositional passive first appears in English documents from the Middle English period, and only seems to have become widespread in Early Modern English (Seoane Posse 1999; Goh 2001; and Dreschler 2015).<sup>11</sup> While Denison (1993: 143) argues that the loss of case marking in English is not behind the innovation of the prepositional passive, he argues that it did, at least to some degree, allow for its propagation (or spread) in the language. Further support for this idea is found in the fact that the one Scandinavian language which does not have prepositional passives, Icelandic, is also the one Scandinavian language which remains comparatively synthetic.

A major issue in analyzing prepositional passives is determining constituency: [verb + preposition] [noun phrase] or [verb] [preposition + noun phrase]. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 276) argue for these being two wholly discrete categories: Type I prepositional passives (passives in which the verb + preposition form a lexicalized unit); and Type II (passives in which the preposition is selected by the noun phrase). Findlay, on the other hand, (2016: 257) argues (a) that this divide is unsatisfactory in that prepositions have some meaning in and of themselves, and (b) that Huddleston & Pullum's two Types "are two sides of the same coin, rather than totally separate phenomena." Representing a middle ground between Huddleston & Pullum and Findlay, Quirk et al (1985: 1164–1165) and Brinton & Traugott (2005: 128) suggest gradient scales wherein the preposition may be more or less closely associated with the verb.

It is possible that corpora can be of some help in investigating whether or not the verb + preposition in prepositional passives form one lexicalized unit. In his early work on prepositional passives, Bolinger (1975: 59) suggests that the frequency of occurrence of verb + preposition combinations could offer a measure of their degree of lexicalization; a question that is much easier to investigate in modern-day computerized corpora than it would have been at the time he suggested it. However, Bolinger (1975: 58–59) also argues that the status of the verb + preposition as a lexicalized unit should not be the focus of too much attention, and that other factors may be of importance in predicting the acceptability of prepositional passives.

Specifically, Bolinger (1975) argues that certain discourse characteristics and semantic features promote the acceptability of prepositional passives. The discourse features that were supposed to enhance the interpretability and thus acceptability of prepositional passives include coordination with another passive verb, and [light verb] + [noun] + [preposition] combinations such as *made use of*, where the light verb is supposed to lead to an expectation that a noun will follow.

The main semantic feature that Bolinger treats is “affectedness.” Bolinger writes that a prepositional passive sentence is possible when “the subject [...] is conceived to be a true patient, i.e., to be genuinely affected by the action of the verb.” This assertion is echoed in Quirk et al (1985: 1164– 1165), who write that, rather than proving that the verb + preposition form a lexicalized unit, “the passive is primarily an indicator of the fact that the prepositional complement is being treated as an affected participant in the clause.” This affectedness requirement is supposed to explain why example (14) is felicitous, but example (15) is not (both from Quirk et al. 1985: 1165).

(14) The problem was gone into.

(15) \*The tunnel was gone into.

Examples (14) and (15) also highlight the fact that prepositional passives tend to have abstract rather than concrete subject NPs.

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- İngilis dilində məchul növ.

### PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH

*Hüseynova Şəhla Ələkbər qızı, Həsənova Səma İmamverdi qızı*  
*Xülasə*

Məqalənin əsas məqsədi ingilis dilində məchul növün istifadəsini təsvir etməkdir. BE-məchul növ, GET məchul növ və sözünü məchul növ haqqında sintaktik və semantik iddialar müxtəlif zaman dövrləri və janrlardan ciddi şəkildə toplanmış detallarda araşdırılır.

BE-passiv istifadənin azalması kimi inkişaf və GET passivinin yüksəlişinin ingilis dilində dramatik olduğu göstərilmişdir.

**ПАССИВНЫЙ ЗАЛОГ В АНГЛИЙСКОМ ЯЗЫКЕ***Гусейнова Шахла Алекпер кызы, Гасанова Сама Имамверди кызы**Резюме*

Основная цель статьи — описать употребление неопределенного артикля в английском языке. Синтаксические и семантические утверждения о BE-инфинитиве, GET-инфинитиве и предложном инфинитиве рассматриваются в тщательно собранных деталях из разных периодов времени и жанров.

Такие изменения, как сокращение использования пассивного залога BE и рост использования пассивного залога GET, оказались весьма существенными в английском языке.

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