

The Use of Passive Voice in News Reports for Political Purposes

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Abstract—This study aims to identify the purposes of passive construction in political news reports. The study also examines how the use of passive voice affects readers' attitudes towards political issues. The use of passive voice can lead to ambiguity, affecting the clarity of meaning by hiding the identity of the doer of the action. However, being vague about the doer of the action is primarily deliberate in political news to serve particular purposes. To collect data, the researchers refer to three newspapers, namely The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and The Guardian. Some articles discussing political issues were carefully chosen from those newspapers. The analysis of the results reveals that the passive voice is used in the selected political news reports to fulfill four main purposes; first, when the journalist emphasizes the action rather than the doer of the action, he omits by phrase, replacing it with marginal information. Second, when the subject of the sentence is the core of the discussion, the journalist ends the passive sentence with by phrase. Third, passive construction is used when political news writers avoid assigning responsibility to anybody. Fourth, the passive is used in political reports with modal auxiliaries when the writers want to express their opinion clearly about what is possible, necessary, or prohibited. The analysis of results also reveals that the use of passive voice can contribute actively to changing the attitudes and views of the recipients.

Index Terms—passive construction, political news, by phrase, modal auxiliaries

I. INTRODUCTION

Language researchers indicate that the relationship between a subject and a verb is manifested in two main forms, namely, the causative form which involves the presence of a subject participant, causing the action, and the inchoative form which rules out the subject "doer of the action", substituting it for the object so that the action is viewed as spontaneous (Almahameed et al., 2018; Dziemianko, 2006). The inchoative structure in the English language and passive voice is deemed a two-sided coin because of their similarity in inverting the syntactic positions of the subject and the object. Both constructions place the object in the position of the subject, and the subject is viewed as slightly or never participating in the action (Tabib-Zadeh, 2006).

Passive voice is the grammatical construction where the subject of the sentence, the head of a noun phrase, becomes the recipient of the action rather than the doer of the action so that the action is performed upon it and the object occupies the syntactic position of the subject (Amadi, 2018). Syntactically speaking, constructing a passive voice sentence requires a noun phrase subject and noun phrase object inversion in which the object noun phrase moves to the position of the subject noun phrase. The passive voice is expressed in English in two major forms; the first form is constructed by using auxiliary (verb to be or verb to have) followed by past participle verb. The second form is exhibited in the use of (get passive) followed by the past participle verb. The two forms of passive voice are illustrated in the examples below.

1-The flowers in the garden were destroyed by the wind. (Standard passive)

2- The employee has worked at the company for five years, but he got sacked. (get passive)

It is noticed that the passive in sentence one is formed by placing the object in the place of the subject and using the verb to be (were) followed by the past participle (destroyed). In sentence two, the passive is formed by employing (got) followed by the past participle (sacked). Passive voice does not appear in all tenses in English, meaning that constructing a passive sentence is illicit in present perfect continuous, future continuous, future perfect continuous, and past perfect continuous. This can be attributed to the fact that having two auxiliaries in a row is confusing to the speaker and the listener equally. A sentence like " The plants have been being watered by the farmer" sounds odd, poorly constructed, and awkward because of using two forms of the verb to be (been/ being) (Cowan, 2008; Biber et al., 1999; Celce-Murcia & Freeman, 1999).

Two types of passive voice can be distinguished; viz. the long passive, using a "by phrase" that aims at revealing the doer of the action. The long passive is chiefly utilized when the speaker/writer prefers to highlight some information at the end of the sentence. In addition, the long passive assigns less responsibility to the object, giving it little attention. The other type is the short passive, in which the subject is implicit and unspecified. The short passive is more commonly used in academic and scientific writing than any other genre because it helps keep distance between the researcher and his findings (Biber et al., 1999). The two examples below illustrate the case of the short passive.

3- The Mercedes is manufactured in Germany.

4- Cotton is grown in Egypt.

The short passive is utilized in language to draw the attention of the reader to the action itself rather than the doer of the action as exhibited in examples three and four. In sentence three above, there is no mention of the subject or the persons who manufacture Mercedes cars as the main emphasis is placed on the action of manufacturing rather than the causers of the action. In a similar vein, sentence four reveals only the action of growing cotton in this sentence the "by phrase" which shows the doer of action is unnecessary.

The use of passive voice in English is not always a favorable choice, as passive is illicit with some verbs even if they are transitive. In English, state verbs such as *belong, have, lack, resemble, suit, consist, die, seem, and more* cannot be made passive (Azar, 1989). On the contrary, some verbs in English only appear in the passive form such as *"be born, be deemed, and be located"*. In addition, some expressions in English are only used in the passive voice, as in the following examples.

5- I have no idea where Tom is. He is lost.

6- I am done with my housework.

7- Where is my mobile phone? It is gone.

It is obvious in the examples that the idiomatic expressions "he is lost, it is gone, and I am done" are only used in the passive voice construction in English.

The use of passive voice prevailed during the 20th century because of the growing need for scientific research to be objective, unbiased, and fair. Researchers were heavily dependent on the use of passive voice as it helped keep a considerable distance between the researcher and his/her conclusion, as scientific research should focus on the findings and conclusions of the work rather than the researchers. This is in line with a study conducted by Alvin (2014) who states that most students who participated in a survey about the use of passive voice believe that passive voice should be the prevailing norm of academic writing. He adds that the participants in the study argue that passive voice helps the writers become more objective and professional.

Nowadays, passive voice is the favored choice in many language genres, particularly academic writing, and news reports (Unver, 2017). One of the fields where passive voice is commonly used is media in the sense that passive forms are used on television programs, in news reports, and on social media networks. In the media, a news reporter intentionally deletes the doer of the action, changing the word order to make facts obscure and unclear (Qassim, 2016).

In some situations, the use of passive voice is preferred over active voice. Oluikpe (1981) reveals three cases where the passive form is the favored option. First, when the subject of the sentence is unknown or cannot be easily identified as in the sentence "A child was kidnaped". Second, when the subject of the sentence is easily identified from the context as in the sentence "The singer was praised". Third, when a sense of emotion is needed as in the example "We should have been informed". Also, the passive can be used in the following situations:

First, to discuss a general truth.

Example: Regulations might be violated

Second, to focus on the object or recipient of the action rather than the subject.

Example: Mona Lisa was painted a long time ago.

Third, to attempt to be vague about the person responsible for an action.

Example: Mistakes have been made. Others will be blamed.

Fourth, to conform to the norms of writing in academic papers, news reports, and instructions.

Example: The study was carried out to investigate the correlation between the two variables.

Within media context in general and news reports in particular, passive voice is very common. Qassim (2016) argues that passive voice is used when the identity of the doer of the action is unimportant as in the example below.

Example: Oil spills are often cleaned up with large snakes that are made with a combination of lyophilic and hydrophilic used fibers.

In addition, passive voice is a favored option in news reports when the emphasis is placed on the action or the process itself rather than the doer of action as in the example below.

Example: Processes have been developed whereby soft-drink bottles which are made from the same chemical materials.

Passive voice can also be used to impose the power of law or regulations upon employees, students, and citizens as illustrated below.

Example: Littering is forbidden.

Passive voice is used in news reports when the journalist avoids assigning responsibility to anybody as in the following example.

Example: Shao Jiang, 47, a pro-democracy activist, was arrested in the street outside Mansion House.

Based on this overview of passive voice in terms of its forms, types, and usage in all language genres and in news reports this study attempts to highlight the use of passive voice in some selected newspapers for political purposes and to determine the reasons for utilizing this construction.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study raises two research questions:

Q1- Do newspapers use the passive voice to fulfill political purposes? If yes. How?

Q2 How does the use of the passive voice for political purposes affect the attitudes of the reader?

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Passive voice occurs when the writer or speaker deliberately omits the doer of the action, replacing it with the object of the sentence. Passive voice is used in all fields including the political field. The use of passive form in politics occurs chiefly when political news writer avoids assigning responsibility to anybody. Such use of passive voice in political news reports does not enhance understanding of the text because of its lack of clarity. The problems resulting from using passive voice led some researchers to call for using active voice in all fields.

This is consistent with Kirkman (1975), who argues that utilizing the passive voice makes the language abstract, difficult to understand, and ponderously roundabout.

This notion is well expressed by Alvin (2014, p. 1), who states that "Many writing guides favor the use of the active voice for reasons of clarity and conciseness". It is fitting to indicate that the use of passive by news reporters is mostly intentional, making the language of reports blur and vague to serve specific purposes related to focusing on the event itself rather than the doer of the action. It is of paramount importance to indicate that most previous studies examined the use of passive voice in terms of errors committed by language learners when using this language structure (Yannuar et al., 2014; Unver, 2017; Princess et al., 2018; Amadi, 2018) excluding Qassim (2016) who investigated the use of passive and active voice in news language. However, none of the studies has been devoted to exploring the use of passive voice for political purposes, which is the main concern of this study.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

A wide range of research has been implemented to examine the use of passive voice. These studies aim primarily at exploring the difficulties that second language learners encounter when using passive voice, in the sense that those studies come up with statistics and figures pertinent to the correct use of passive by the learners (Yannuar et al., 2014; Unver, 2017; Princess et al., 2018; Amadi, 2018).

Moreover, other studies investigated the use of passive in the corpus of academic and scientific fields (Alvin, 2014; Qassim, 2016). The current literature review displays some previous studies conducted on the passive voice and the most prominent conclusions.

Yannuar et al. (2014) examined the use of active and passive voice forms by Indonesian students. As a secondary purpose, the study attempted to explore the implications resulting from active and passive constructions. To collect the data required for the study, the researchers referred to a corpus of theses written by undergraduate students in the Department of English Language at the State University of Malang during the academic years 2011-2013. The researchers found that using of active voice accounts for (64.8%) of all constructions outperforming the passive voice. The study suggests that the overuse of active construction can be attributed to the fact that Indonesian students are influenced by their native language.

In line with this study, Unver (2017) conducted a study on passive and active voice constructions. The study aimed primarily at investigating the methods that assist second language learners' understanding of voice and raising their awareness of the correct use of active and passive voice in written and spoken language. The results of the study indicated that the incorrect use of active and passive voice by the learners can be ascribed to native language interference, which stems from the differences between the first and the second language. Besides, the improper use of active and passive voice also results from the fact that the learners are unaware that passive and active voice cannot be used interchangeably all the time.

In a parallel way, Princess et al. (2018) explored the use of passive construction in the academic writing of university students. The study examined the errors the respondents committed when writing about academic subjects. The study also attempted to categorize the types and the causes of errors made by the respondents. A total of nineteen second-year English students participated in the study. The collection of data was based on the theory of Surface Structure Taxonomy proposed by Dulay et al. (1982). To find out the causes of errors, the researchers adopted the theory proposed by James and Brown. The findings of the study revealed that the students committed a total of 369 errors: 59% of errors were omission errors, 28% misinformation errors, 9% addition errors, and 4% disordering errors. The researchers concluded that interlingual and intralingual interference are the main factors responsible for the occurrence of errors.

To investigate the difficulties that Nigerian learners of English encounter in learning English passive voice, Amadi (2018) conducted his study on Nigerian university students. The impetus for implementing this study was that most university students in Nigeria are heavily dependent on the use of active construction rather than passive construction. The sample of the study consisted of (30) students from the department of English and Communication Arts at the University of Education. To collect data, the participants were instructed to write a composition about the problems of their daily lives and how they overcome them. The research shows that the participants encounter great difficulty with the passive voice and the greatest difficulty is with tense changes of the voice.

To explore the use of active and passive voice in news reports, Qassim (2016) carried out a study. The study aimed primarily at examining the purposes for using this construction in news reports. The researcher referred to a corpus of articles to collect data for the study. More specifically, the researcher selected (20) articles from some British newspapers: the Independent, the Guardian, and the Morning Star. The results of the analysis revealed that journalists use passive construction for many reasons and to perform several functions in discourse. These reasons can be briefed as follows; 1- when the doer of the action is unimportant, 2- when concentrating on the action in place of the subject, 3- to impose authoritative power, and 4- when the doer of the action is very well known.

All of these studies (Yannuar et al., 2014; Unver, 2017; Princess et al., 2018; Amadi, 2018), excluding (Qassim, 2016) placed emphasis on the use of passive voice among foreign learners of English and focused on the difficulties they encountered when using passive voice. However, Qassim (2016) investigated passive and active voice from another angle, that is news reports. Qassim (2016) aimed at gaining insight into the reasons for utilizing the passive in news reports. It is worth mentioning that the present study expands the scope of this investigation by looking into the purposes and functions of using the passive voice in news reports from a political perspective, which has rarely been the subject of previous studies.

V. METHODOLOGY

Extensive critical analysis for utilizing the means of passive construction in news reports is carried out. The analysis of the use of passive voice is made with the aim of determining the reasons for employing this structure in the news. The analysis of data was qualitative in nature. Qualitative analysis is defined by Ulhoi and Neergaard (2007, p.383) as "a study that focuses on understanding the naturalistic setting or everyday life of a certain phenomenon or person". In qualitative research, the researchers are required to get close to a certain phenomenon and attempt to understand it. In this study, a deep and thorough analysis of the passive voice in news reports is conducted to clarify the reasons for its use. In collecting the data for this study, the researchers referred to articles in the following papers: The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and The Guardian. The selection of articles was based on two criteria.

- 1- The article discusses a political issue.
- 2- The article contains many instances of the use of passive voice.

Having selected the needed articles, examples of passive voice constructions in each article were listed and then analyzed.

VI. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The critical analysis related to the use of passive voice in news reports for political purposes starts with revealing the results pertinent to research question one. The analysis of results depicts instances of passive use from the selected articles. In addition to revealing the cases of passive voice in those articles, a deep analysis of the purposes for its use is made.

A. Results Pertinent to Research Question One

The first research question is formulated as follows;

Do newspapers use the passive voice to fulfill political purposes? If yes. How?

The beginning of the analysis is with an article chosen from Washington Post that discusses the US presidential elections in 2020.

"Many said that any candidate should be allowed to request election reviews as many times as they want".

Modals in the English language are normally utilized to express a person's opinion, perspective, attitude, or mood about what is probable, permissible, and prohibited. In the example, the passive phrase "should be allowed" expresses the notion of mild necessity. In other words, it is the reporter's opinion or somebody else's about the necessity for secretary of state candidates to request election reviews.

"The election results could continuously be called into question with no end in sight".

In this example, the passive with modals is also used "could continuously be called into". The writer uses the modal *could be* with the passive form to express the possibility of election fraud. The writer attempts to express his opinion about interference in the election. In other words, the writer tries to change voters' minds about the validity of the election by using the passive construction "could be called into question".

Mark Finchem, is a leading driver of a conspiracy theory that the election was stolen in Arizona's second-largest county, Pima County.

In this example, the passive form *"the election was stolen"* is used because the doer of the action is obviously known. In other words, the supporters of the former president of the United States, Donald Trump, strongly believe that the results of the election were fraudulent, and the people who changed the results are the Democrats. Thus, the use of the passive form rather than the active form in this sentence is a suitable option.

Trump's false election-fraud claims were underpinned by citing the changes to how people voted in 2020.

In this example, the writer uses the passive form because he wants to focus the reader's attention on the action rather than the performer of the action. The claims of election fraud are more significant and are prioritized over the identity of those who support such claims.

Raffensperger declined and got threatened by Trump and received death threats from Trump's supporters.

In this example, the writer uses the passive with the verb *got*. As mentioned previously, the passive voice appears in two forms: the auxiliary+ past participle and *get*+ past participle. In this example, the passive *got threatened* is used together with a *by phrase* because the writer wishes to draw attention to the performer rather than the action. For the writer, placing emphasis on the identity of the doer of the action is prioritized over the action. In doing so, the writer exposes the person who threatened Raffensperger.

The second article in this critical analysis of passive voice is selected from The Wall Street Journal. The article covers the issue of American airstrikes against the Syrian regime in 2019, which killed women and children.

U.S. strike in Syria that killed dozens of people, including women and children, but that wasn't publicly acknowledged by the military until this year.

In this sentence, the writer uses the passive phrase *"wasn't publicly acknowledged"* alongside *by phrase* to highlight the doer of the action. The writer wants to communicate the notion that despite the military's killing dozens of women and children, there was no public acknowledgement of the event until this year. In this quote, the emphasis is on the military as the body responsible for the action.

The military was "not unreasonable" and no international laws were violated.

The passive construction is employed in this example for two reasons: first, to emphasize the notion that laws were not violated, and second, to avoid assigning responsibility. More precisely, the passive form is used because the writer does not want to blame the US army for killing women and children in Syria, and in so doing violating international law.

It is unclear whether the new report will be released upon completion.

In this sentence, the use of passive voice is justified because the doer of the action is obvious and needless to reveal. As previously mentioned in the article, the army defense chief led the investigations and issued the report.

The third article, discussing issues related to Pegasus spyware, appeared in The Guardian.

Government agencies in Mexico are believed to have been among NSO's early customers.

The passive construction *"are believed"* is used in this sentence because the writer highlights the action rather than the causer of the action. The passive implies that it is unimportant to know "who believes"; the importance is knowing the names of the countries benefitting from this technology.

And those governments – it can be assumed – make predictably heinous uses of it.

The passive expression *"it can be assumed"* is used because the writer thinks unveiling the identity of the "assumer" is not of paramount importance or because the writer does not want to assign any responsibility to the assumer.

The Israeli government is outraged about this, possibly because of revelations that phones of Palestinian human rights defenders have been "Pegasused".

The passive construction in this sentence *"have been 'Pegasused'"* is used to focus the reader's attention on the action, spying on Palestinian activists. In addition, the passive voice is also used because the perpetrator is Israel.

For this analysis, one more article was selected from *The Guardian*, discussing the new amendments to the laws of protest in Britain.

Anyone who resists being searched could be imprisoned for – you guessed it – up to 51 weeks.

In this sentence, the writer uses the passive with the modal *"could be imprisoned"* because the doer of action can easily be identified, and the use of the modal expresses the notion of possible imprisonment. Thus, the passive is used because the performer, the police, is known.

Black and Brown people, who are six times as likely to be stopped as white people.

In this example, the writer employs the passive *"to be stopped"* to draw attention to the action. The writer believes revealing how heinous and scandalous the action is much more important than focusing on the performer, who can be easily determined. Therefore, highlighting the act of detaining people based on their color takes priority.

Protesters have tried valiantly to draw our attention to this tyrant's gambit, and have been demonised for their pains.

With the aim of being vague about revealing the identity of those who demonize the protesters, the writer uses the passive voice. The writer does not want to bear the responsibility of revealing the identity of the doer of action whether it is the police or the media.

When driven by fear of losing the support of his core vote, the prime minister is unpersuaded that human rights law, or moral obligation to desperate people.

One of the most prominent methods of placing emphasis on a specific part of discourse is called *fronting*. In this example, the writer fronts the *phrase* "by fear" in the passive construction as it is the part of the sentence, the writer wants to draw attention to. Besides, not only is the *by phrase* fronted but also the whole passive construction is fronted

and reduced for the purpose of emphasis. The passive construction in this example is reduced the subject of the sentence together with the auxiliary are omitted.

As illustrated, the passive voice is commonly used in news reports to serve political purposes depending on the writer's intention and attitude. Having answered the first research question, it is fitting to respond to the second research question.

B. Results Pertinent to Research Question Two

How does the use of the passive voice for political purposes affect the attitudes of the reader?

The use of passive voice in politics is very frequent and fulfills several objectives based on the writer's perspective. Many news reporters use the passive voice with modals when the writer desires to interfere in the events and expresses his opinion to change the reader's mind. This is consistent with Qasem (2016, p.164), who argues that "The journalists in writing news reports do not only convey the information, but they also express their points of view, such as necessity like should, must, or possibility like can, could, or prediction by using will, would, or probability as may, might". The meaning of the sentence "Smoking must be forbidden in here" is deferent from the sentence "Smoking might be forbidden". In both sentences, the writer expresses his opinion about what is necessary or possible by using modals.

Based on the discussion related to research question one, reporters use passive forms with *by phrase* and other times without. This fact can be attributed to the desire of the journalists to emphasize some truths and hide others. More specifically, whenever the writer uses *by phrase*, he wants to draw the attention of the reader to the doer of the action rather than the action itself, and when *by phrase* is omitted, the action is the focus. Such employment of a *by phrase* in the passive voice aims at changing the reader's behavior or opinion by focusing on one thing and ignoring another.

Journalists also attempt to influence their audience or changing viewpoints by being vague about the doer of the action in the sense that they hide the identity of the doer of the action to shift emphasis to the action itself. This is done by omitting a *by phrase* and replacing it with the preposition with+noun as in the example below.

- The bank was robbed yesterday with guns and knives.

In the above sentence, the writer tries to shift the attention of the readers from the doer of action to the action itself. In this sentence, nothing is said about the robber, instead, the focus is on the robbery and the weapons used in the robbery. Such use of passive voice immerses the reader in details while neglecting the doer of the action, which is understood.

Thus, the passive voice is not used aimlessly in political news reports, but, rather, journalists use it to serve several purposes such as focusing on one part of the discourse and ignoring another or avoiding assigning responsibility to anybody. Consequently, the ultimate purpose of using the passive is to affect the perspective of society towards a specific issue.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present study aims chiefly at identifying the purposes of using passive construction in political news reports. The study also attempts to explore how the passive voice contributes to changing the mind of readers of news reports. It has been shown that the passive voice serves multiple purposes in political news reports, and journalists use it as an alternative to the active voice to fulfill these purposes. The use of passive construction in political news reports contributes actively to affecting or changing the minds of readers by shifting the emphasis from the action to the doer of the action or vice versa.

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