

# Passive Voice as a Means of Impersonal Presentation of Facts in English Quality Press

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**Abstract.** The current paper presents the analysis of passive constructions as means of impersonal presentation of facts in English quality press. The article gives the definition of the passive voice as a grammatical category and describes the use and purpose of impersonalization strategies. The data for the research were taken from *The Financial Times* (UK), the leading international English daily broadsheet newspaper, which has millions of both print and online subscribers worldwide. The articles on political, business, economic, and social issues were chosen on a random basis and scrutinized for passive constructions as a means of impersonal presentation of facts. 173 cases of impersonalization were chosen for the analysis. The most and least often used types of passive constructions were identified and compared. The results of the current study may be useful for editors, journalists, writers, as well as for further study of impersonalization strategies in the English language.

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**Keywords:** *passive voice, agentless passive, pseudopassive, impersonalization, impersonal presentation, quality press*

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## Introduction

Since the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, broadsheet newspapers have been associated with the highest quality of news presentation (Tongsibsong, 2012). Broadsheet newspapers, published in the UK, USA and other English speaking countries, are still being considered to be the most popular and reliable source of news and stand for what is called 'the quality press'. This category of press presents both hard and soft news, which is related to political, economic, and social events, as well as gossip, scandals, and entertainment. While hard news is intended to draw the reader's attention to both home and foreign events presenting the crucial facts of the story at the beginning of the article by means of formal language and vocabulary, soft news aims at people's entertainment, is driven by sensationalism, centers on personalities, as well as is time-bound, practical, and incident-based (Patterson, 2000, 4).

When reading daily English quality press, one may often notice abundant cases of the impersonal strategies used in both headlines and articles (news articles, feature articles, also editorials, columns and opinion pieces) with no direct indication to a person or an institution. This is an intentional strategy employed by journalists to disguise the agent, to mystify, as well as to avoid responsibility and / or culpability, especially when presenting political or economic issues in articles (Fairclough, 1995; Givon, 1993). Such mystification, in many cases, results in the reader's incapability to guess or retrieve the agent from the context of an article.

There are various means of impersonal presentation of facts in English, such as agentless passive, nominalization, *ed*-participle, resultative, impersonal pronouns, inchoative, infinitive clauses, existentials, metonymy, etc. The term 'impersonal' is considered as very broad and is viewed from semantic, syntactic and morphological perspectives by some linguists (Van Leeuwen, 1996; Marin-Arrese et al., 2001; Fairclough, 1995; Siewierska, 2008; etc.). The current paper employs the semantic approach to 'impersonality' and focuses on the absence of agentivity as well as non-specified person in English quality press articles.

The **object** of the research is news articles on business, economic, political and social issues in English quality press.

The **aim** of the present paper is to investigate common patterns of the use of the passive voice as a means of impersonal presentation in British and American broadsheet newspapers.

The **objectives** of the current paper are: 1) to define the passive as a grammatical category and means of impersonal presentation in the English language, 2) to determine the most frequently used form(s) of the passive as a means of impersonal presentation in English quality press, 3) to identify the reasons for the use of this impersonalization strategy in quality press, and 4) to estimate the frequency of the use of the passive as a means of impersonal presentation.

The **data** of the current research comprise 173 cases of impersonalization in articles on political, economic, and social issues from the international English quality newspaper *The Financial Times* (UK). *The Financial Times* (hereinafter, FT) is a leading daily broadsheet newspaper published six days a week with the main focus on business, politics, economy and social issues, is distributed internationally, and has millions of both print and online subscribers worldwide. An equal number of articles covering various topics has been chosen on a random basis with the aim to analyze the use of the passive in English quality press.

The following **methods** were used for the current study: quantitative analysis, qualitative analysis, content analysis, and contrastive analysis.

## Theoretical Background

### *The passive voice as a grammatical category and means of impersonal presentation in the English language*

As maintained by Marin-Arrese, Martinez-Caro and Perez de Ayala Becerril (2001, 369), the means of impersonal presentation in the English language are as follows: agentless passive, nominalization, *ed*-participle, resultative, impersonal pronouns, inchoative, infinitive clauses, existentials, metonymy, etc. These linguistic strategies are used for variation in mystification degrees. In addition, they are used to avoid responsibility for one's words and to disguise the agent of the action.

The voice, as a grammatical category, denotes the action and the person (or non-person) relationship, marked by the verb and the subject of the sentence, respectively. While the active voice indicates the subject of the implemented action and is used in the English language as the most common construction, the passive voice, in contrast, shows that action is subject-directed and such constructions are fundamental in various formal situations, i.e. formal speeches, written forms and documents, newspapers, articles, etc (Kobrina et al., 1999; Biber et al., 2002).

The passive constructions are formed by the verb *to be* and the past participle, may have almost all the aspect, tense and perfective forms with the exception of future continuous and perfect continuous, and generally fall into three main types: *short passives*, *long passives*, and *get-passives*. Both *short* and *long passive structures* are most common in the expository registers, in which the agents are often either unknown or unimportant, as in academic prose or news reports. In the first case passive structures are used to refer to scientific methods and / or logical relations, whereas in the second case, these structures are used to report negative events. In contrast, *get-passives* are rare and mostly used in conversations (Kobrina et al., 1999; Biber et al., 2002).

The use of the passive voice is determined by several reasons. Many scholars (Kobrina et al., 1999; Biber et al., 2002; Givón, 1979; Halliday, 1970; and others) distinguish the

following uses of the passive: 1) to avoid mentioning the agent, 2) when the reference to the agent is not necessary, as it is obvious from the context, unimportant, or unknown, 3) when the agent is an inanimate object, 4) when the relationship between the sentences determines that the new information has to come last. Moreover, it is indicated that the passive has a topicalizing function, is used for markedness to emphasize certain details and / or to stress the most important information by putting it at the beginning.

As maintained by Douglas Biber, Susan Conrad and Leech (2002), who have studied the use of passive constructions across various registers, the use of the passive voice in news is similar to academic writing where the agent has less prominence. According to the scholars, the main focus of any news story is an event, which unfolds around a certain person or institution; therefore, the agent is unimportant or easy to guess and, thus, is omitted. The omission of the agent may also be determined by the practical reasons of space saving and presentation of the new

information, which, according to the scholars, is desirable in this type of writing (Biber et al., 2002). Moreover, the greatest part of verbs most commonly used in the passive voice in the news are used to report unpleasant and dramatic events, which makes the agent unimportant, unknown, or obvious in such sentences (or clauses) (as in case when the agent is previously mentioned in the context of the story) (Biber et al., 2002).

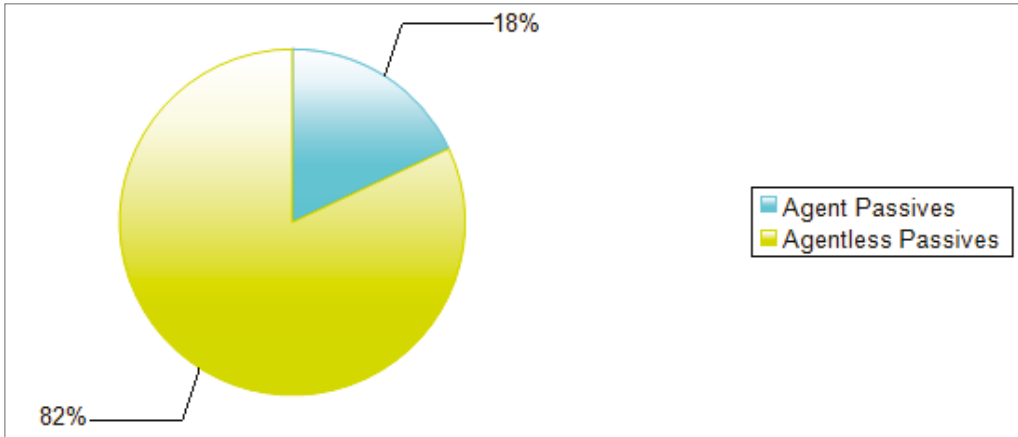
All the above mentioned scholars claim that the greatest part (almost 90 %) of the passive constructions in written English discourse includes the *agentless passive*, which suppresses the identity of the agent. The main reasons for the omission of the agent are as follows: 1) the doer of the action is not clear (from the context), 2) the doer of the action is unimportant, 3) the doer of the action is obvious from the context, thus, unnecessary to be mentioned, 4) the doer of the action is not mentioned deliberately or out of politeness, 5) the doer of the action is not mentioned to avoid (possible) criticism, and 6) in case the action is performed by a group of nameless individuals.

## Discussion and Results

### *Most frequently used forms of the passive in English quality press*

As it was discussed above, the use of the passive constructions is one of the means to make sentences impersonal. The bulk of passive constructions is made of agentless passives. In the majority of cases, the reason for this is that the agent is retrievable.

In the analyzed articles, there are 141 (82 %) items of *agentless passive* constructions and 32 (18 %) items with the agent mentioned. The ratio of agentless passives and the ones with the agent mentioned is presented in Figure 1.

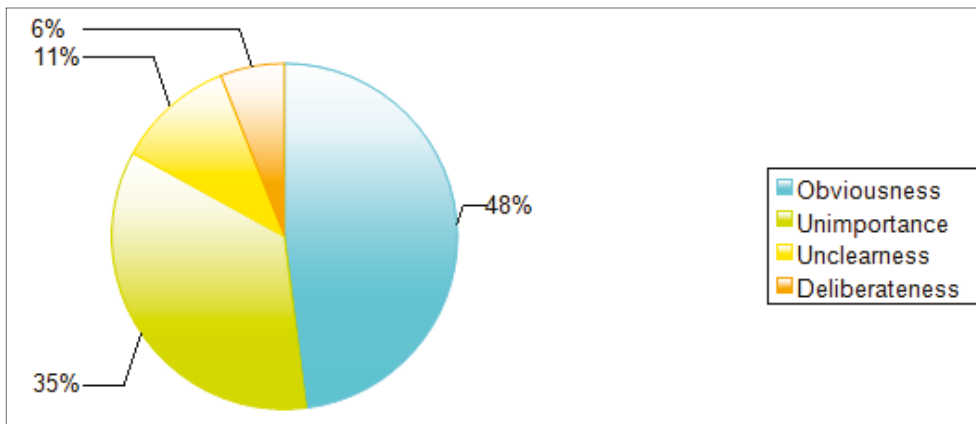


**Figure 1.** The ratio of agent and agentless passives

The obtained data prove that the most frequently used type of passive constructions is the agentless passive and supports other researchers' claims that this type is identified in almost 90 % of passives in the written English discourse (see the *Theoretical Background* above).

***Reasons for the agent omission and the frequency of the agentless passives use as means of impersonal presentation***

The analysis of the sampled sentences shows that there are four reasons for the omission of the agent: 1) when the agent is obvious; 2) when it is unimportant; 3) when it is not clear; and 4) when it is omitted deliberately or because of politeness. Figure 2 below illustrates the ratio of reasons for the agent omission in the sampled sentences.



**Figure 2.** The ration of reasons for the agent omission

As it can be seen from Figure 2, among 141 analyzed agentless passive constructions, the agent is most frequently omitted due to its obviousness in 67 sampled sentences, which makes 48 % of the total number. The omission of the agent due to its unimportance is identified in 35 % of the sentences (49 cases). The least frequent reasons for the agent omission are unclearness and deliberateness, which are identified in 16 (11 %) and 9 (6 %) analyzed cases respectively.

In the first group, the agent is omitted because it is obvious and there is no need to mention it. The following example illustrates the case:

- (1) *The Home Office seeks to deport foreign nationals who **have been sentenced** to longer than four years, except in “exceptional circumstances”. Mr Adoboli **was sentenced** to seven years and served more than half time.* (FT, 12 October 2015, p.1)

In the example above, the agent is omitted because it is clearly understood that the doers of the actions are institution officials (court officials) who are responsible for the verdicts of the convicted.

In the sentences below, mentioning of the doer is not necessary because the action is performed by the country's politicians or other authorities:

- (2) *The German lender is in talks with US and UK authorities to settle the allegations and an agreement **could be reached** by the end of April, the people said.* (FT, 10 April 2015, 15)
- (3) *Legislation that would encourage such exchanges **is again being considered** in Congress.* (FT, 2 April 2015, 1)

In example 2, it is clear that the action will be performed by the USA and the UK authorities. In the latter instance, the action is performed by the Congress authorities and there is no need to mention them.

The second reason to omit the agent is its unimportance. There are 49 instances found in the articles. Consider the examples:

- (4) *But Dame Colette said: “The banks know that it **has to be seen** as independent from them and it **cannot be seen** as their creation.”* (FT, 2 April 2015, 4)
- (5) *Only a few dozen Syrians and Iraqis, recognized as refugees from a conflict zone, **have been allowed** to enter Macedonia since Sunday.* (FT, 2 March 2015, 2)

The agent is not important as the action is more prominent. In example 4, it is supposed that people are implied by the doers of the action but it is not important by whom it has to be seen independent and cannot be seen as their creation. It might be ordinary people, banks or economists. In sentence 5, it is not significant who allows

the refugees to enter Macedonia, the fact that a few dozen Syrians are recognized as refugees and could escape from a conflict zone is of greater importance.

One more group of examples concerning the omission of the agent is the case when the doer is not clear. There are only 16 instances of this kind found in the articles.

(6) *To put it mildly, the results **have been mixed**.* (FT, 2 March 2015, 2)

(7) *Although tens of thousands of Muscovites joined a march last month condemning the murder of opposition politician Boris Nemtsov – the place where he **was shot** in central Moscow has also become an unofficial memorial site – his violent death failed to rekindle the broad-based protest movement which shook Moscow in late 2011 and early 2012.* (FT, 10 April 2015, 21)

Sentence 6 presents the results, which have been mixed, and it is not clear by whom. Example 7, refers to the case of a Russian politician, who was shot in 2015, and it is still not clear by whom. The agentless passive construction is used as the agent is not clear.

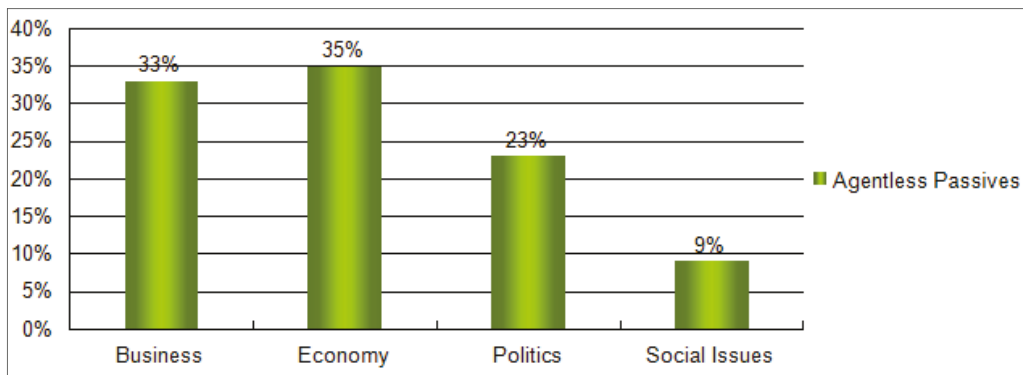
The last reason for the omission of the agent is its deliberateness. It might be done on purpose in order to be polite and not to insult anyone. For example:

(8) *The UK **was outvoted** on the issue in 2013 and **defeated** in the EU's top court the following year.* (FT, 2 March 2015, 14)

(9) *Mr Harrison **has been** widely **tipped** as Mr Dobson's heir since he **was appointed** to the Schroders board in 2014 and has been agitating for the top job, according to shareholders.* (FT, 2 March 2015, 14)

Example 8 presents an unpleasant situation of the UK and the author tries to avoid mentioning the doer in order not to aggravate the situation. In the latter case, it might not be appropriate to indicate the doer of the action and present him / her directly, that is why the agentless passive construction is delicately used here.

Figure 3 below presents the distribution of agentless passives according to the types of articles it was identified in. The selected articles focus on business, politics, economy and social issues.



*Figure 3. The distribution of the agentless passive in the articles*

The data in the figure demonstrate that agentless passives are most frequent in articles on economy (35 %) and business (33 %), i.e. 49 and 46 instances of all 141 analyzed cases respectively. Besides, this kind of passive constructions is quite frequent in reports that cover political issues, i. e. 23 % of the analyzed examples (i. e. 34 items). These constructions are least common in the articles on social issues and are identified only in 9 % of the analyzed examples (i.e. 12 items). To sum up, agentless passive constructions are rather frequently used in articles reporting news on economy and business. The reason for this could be that there are fewer quotations in such articles. The frequency of the use of passive constructions in oral speech is rare.

## Conclusions

1. There are abundant cases of impersonal strategies used in English quality press with no direct indication to a person or an institution, especially when presenting political or economic issues in articles seeking to disguise the agent, to mystify, as well as to avoid responsibility and / or culpability.

2. The impersonal strategies are often implemented by the use of passive constructions, especially the agentless passive. The research findings show that the agentless passive is used in 141 instances (82 %) of the 173 sampled passive constructions.

3. Passive constructions are least frequently used in the direct speech or citations seeking to avoid mentioning of concrete entities, to achieve a generic interpretation with the reference to any individual, and to achieve an obscure interpretation with reference to specific unidentified individuals. The analysis of the agentless passive distribution in different types of newspaper articles has shown that this type of the passive is most common in business and economy articles (33 % and 35 % respectively); it is also quite



frequent in articles on politics (23 % of all the cases); whereas the agentless passive is least common in reports on social issues (9 %).

4. The most common reasons for the omission of the agent are the doer's obviousness from the context or their unimportance (identified in 48 % and 35 % of the analyzed cases respectively), while the least frequent reasons for the omission of the agent are unclearness and deliberateness (identified in 11 % and 6 % of the scrutinized excerpts respectively).

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## Source

*The Financial Times*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ft.com>

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# Neveikiamoji rūšis kaip beasmenio faktų pateikimo priemonė anglų analitinėje spaudoje

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Straipsnyje analizuojamos neveikiamosios rūšies konstrukcijos kaip beasmenio faktų pateikimo priemonė anglų analitinėje spaudoje. Teorinėje straipsnio dalyje yra pateikiama neveikiamosios rūšies kaip gramatinės kategorijos apibrėžtis ir aprašomi beasmenio pateikimo strategijų tikslai ir vartojimas. Tyrimo duomenys rinkti iš angliškosios analitinės spaudos (*The Financial Times* (JK) laikraščio – Jungtinės Karalystės dienraščio, turinčio milijonus prenumeratorių visame pasaulyje). 173 beasmenio faktų pateikimo pavyzdžiai suskirstyti į grupes pagal gramatinę kategoriją. Vėliau nustatyti ir palyginti dažniausiai ir rečiausiai vartojami neveikiamosios rūšies konstrukcijų tipai ir jų vartojimo priežastys. Šito tyrimo rezultatai gali būti naudingi redaktoriams, žurnalistams, rašytojams, taip pat tolesniems beasmenio pateikimo strategijų anglų kalboje tyrimams.

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**Reikšminiai žodžiai:** *neveikiamoji rūšis, nuasmeninta neveikiamoji rūšis, pseudoneveikiamoji rūšis, nuasmeninimas, nuasmenintas pateikimas, analitinė spauda.*

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