



Passive Voice in Medical Writing

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Abstract:

Many writers consider the passive voice to be the standard form of scientific writing, the thing that affects the other writers' choice of language structure along with the readers' perception. In this paper, the writer discusses the notion of passive voice in scientific writing with reference to the medical writing as a case study.

The writer built this paper on an objective to prove that the standardization theory of passive voice in scientific writing is just a fallacy. To achieve that, the quantitative method is used through selecting a random group of Medical Sciences students who are in their graduate year. The group had a test to know if they can easily deal with passive voice or not. Then they have read two passages that one of them consists of passive voice sentences and the other one contains only active voice sentences. The examinees have drawn a comparison between the two sentences according to the given questions.

The results have shown that only 33% have passed the test leaving 67% behind.

Nevertheless, the questionnaire has come to cement the results of the test by showing the preference the examinees have for the Active voice writing over the Passive.

Keywords: *Passive Voice, Active Voice, Scientific Writing, Medical Writing, Objectivity, Language Structure*

استخدام المبني للمجهول في الكتابة الطبية

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مستخلص:

يرى كثير من الكُتَّاب أن استخدام المبني للمجهول يُعد الشكل القياسي في الكتابة العلمية، وهو ما يؤثر في اختيار الكُتَّاب للبنية اللغوية وكذلك في إدراك القراء للنصوص. في هذه الورقة يناقش الباحث مفهوم المبني للمجهول في الكتابة العلمية مع التركيز على الكتابة الطبية بوصفها دراسة حالة. بنى الباحث هذه الدراسة على هدف يتمثل في إثبات أن اعتبار المبني للمجهول معياراً ثابتاً في الكتابة العلمية ليس سوى افتراض غير دقيق، ولتحقيق ذلك، تم استخدام المنهج الكمي من خلال اختيار عينة عشوائية من طلاب العلوم الطبية في السنة النهائية. خضعت المجموعة لاختبار لقياس مدى قدرتهم على التعامل مع المبني للمجهول، ثم قاموا بقراءة نصين؛ أحدهما يحتوي على جمل بالمبني للمجهول، بينما يحتوي الآخر على جمل بالمبني للمعلوم فقط. بعد ذلك أجرى المشاركون مقارنة بين النصين وفقاً لأسئلة محددة. أظهرت النتائج أن 33% فقط اجتازوا الاختبار، بينما لم يتمكن 67% من اجتيازه. كما دعمت نتائج الاستبيان نتائج الاختبار، حيث أظهرت تفضيل المشاركين للكتابة باستخدام المبني للمعلوم مقارنة بالمبني للمجهول.

كلمات مفتاحية: المبني للمجهول، المبني للمعلوم، الكتابة العلمية، الكتابة الطبية، الموضوعية، بنية اللغة

Overview

A long time ago and in the period of the royal society, about 400 years ago, between the 17th and the 18th centuries, people started to use a verb form who they have called (passive voice). This form of the verb is based on omitting the subject (agent) or pushing it backward in the sentence. It also requires the use of the verb to be in accordance to the tense.

Since that time, writers began to use the passive voice; however, it became very popular among two camps: the politicians and the scientists. The first ones use the passive to hide or to conceal a part of the truth, for instance the President Ronald Reagan's non-apology for the Iran contra scandal states that "Mistakes were made" without mentioning who has made those mistakes. In 2002, a missile fired in Afghanistan and caused in killing three civilians. The next day, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld addressed the public on the attack. He declared that "a decision was made to fire the Hellfire missile. It was fired. It apparently hit three people, one or more people. There is an investigation under way."

Rumsfeld ignores mentioning who made the fatal decision to fire the Hellfire missile, taking away the blame from himself and the Bush administration. It is clear that he used the passive to his own interest.

On the other hand, we have the scientists especially those who are in the medical field who adopt the passive voice to their writings; Hyland (2004) maintains that "writers always use the conventional grammar and style of the scientific field. That is, writers who ignore the dominant language choice risk not just being unpublished, but also losing credibility, missing job promotions, having trouble of gaining positions of power within their fields. Nevertheless, Flower (1926) in the Dictionary of Modern English Usage warns against transforming active voice forms into passive voice forms, because doing so "...sometimes leads to bad grammar, false idiom, or clumsiness."

What has mentioned above summarizes the idea that, 'being a good writer means paying attention to community norms and knowing when to follow those norms.'

From The Other's point of view, those who support the passive voice constant usage may think or believe that using this form of a verb can create a sort of 'objectivity' (which is to focus on the action more than the doer) however, as North (1987 p.27) argues that even the idea of the passive objectivity is rather controversial. Which means the idea itself is still under investigation? This fact again divides scientific writers into two groups those who support the idea of passive and those who stand against it.

Significance of the paper

This paper seeks to clarify the argument between the two groups depending on should the passive voice be used in Medical writing or another form of a verb. That leads the writer to discuss the idea of using the Active Voice as a replacement to the passive voice and to try to find out which one of the two forms may serve better and has more effectiveness in medical writings. The paper also searches after the notion of Objectivity and tries to state if it is truly of a benefit for the reader.

Though this paper, the writer seeks to achieve one *objective* which is to prove that the

standardization theory of passive voice in scientific writing is just a fallacy. Nevertheless, passive voice is a complicated form of a verb for many writers; the thing will lead to a misuse by the writers and misunderstanding by the readers. Above all, using passive voice excessively will create a dull piece of writing that is even some of the readers may avoid or not prefer reading.

To achieve that objective, some questions have to be answered. Those questions are: First, to what extent is passive voice popular in Medical Writings? Second, can the Objectivity be achieved without using the passive voice? And finally, what effectiveness does the Active Voice have over the Passive Voice?

Method

This paper adopts the quantitative method to collect the data, through selecting a random group of Medical Sciences students who are in their graduate year. The group will have a test to know if they can easily deal with passive voice or not. Then they will read two passages that one of them consists of passive voice sentences and the other one contains only active voice sentences. The examinees will draw a comparison between the two sentences according to the given questions. The aim is to see what form of writing (passive or active) is easier to comprehend and to deal with.

The method is to prove the hypotheses above that first, passive is a complicated form of a verb and it is somehow difficult to deal with. Second, reading articles where passive is excessively used is dull and it is even avoided by some of the readers.

Results:

The test and the questionnaire have taken place at three medical sciences' colleges. Those colleges are; Pharmacy, Nursing and Dentistry. The distributed papers were 30 among the final year's students.

The test has held 10 Active Voice sentences for the examinees to change to Passive Voice with the target to see if the examinees can easily deal with the sort of verb they are 'supposed' to use in their medical writings.

The result has revealed what was already expected; that the majority finds it difficult to deal with the passive voice. Only 33% have passed the test leaving 67% behind.

Not far from that; the questionnaire has come to cement the results of the test by showing the preference the examinees have for the Active voice writing over the Passive. The examinees have read two paragraphs with the same content; one of them is in the passive voice and the other is in the active voice. Then they had five questions to draw the comparison between the two texts. They were asked which text is more understandable than the other, and the result was that 83% have settled on the active voice as more understandable than the passive. The second question was that which text do you think is easier? And again the result has come to lift the active over the passive voice, that 93% have found the Active easier than the Passive. Then the examinees were asked which text you felt relaxed while reading and the result was that 90% felt more relaxed to read the Active voice paragraph than reading the Passive one. The examinees were then asked a direct question

that; which text would you prefer to read and the result was that 76.6% have preferred the Active voice over the Passive voice. Finally, the examinees were asked about the text they find harder to understand and again 90% of them have selected the passive voice as being more complicated than the active form.

Discussion

Passive Voice Complication

Many studies have proven that the verb form under discussion is hard to use as well as to comprehend. It is clear from the results showed above that this study also proves the complication of the passive voice.

The examinees found it difficult to change the given passive voice sentences to active, which means that they have a problem in making sentences using this form of the verb. In other words, most of the examinees cannot deal with the verb structure that is essential in their medical writing.

What is mentioned above raises a question, that if those examinees find it difficult to deal with passive voice form, how could be able to use it in their medical writing?

Two suggestions are there for those examinees, it is either to undergo training on how to use Passive, or to shift to the other form which is active voice.

Preference of the other form

Anitra Peebles Sheen and A.P. Sheen in their book *Breathing Life into Medical Writing* stated that,

Passive voice is the bane of medical writing. It pervades medical literature with the haze and heaviness of stagnant air. Writers sometimes use passive voice in an attempt to make their work sound scholarly and scientific, when actually they are perpetuating a writing tradition that is fraught with ponderous and obscure language.

For the above mentioned heaviness, many writers and readers as well avoid the passive voice form and follow the path of the active voice. There were five questions the examinees were asked in the questionnaire they had. Those questions had the target to discover the form the examinees prefer over the other. They had two paragraphs with the same content; one of them is in the passive voice and the other is in the active voice. Then they were asked a direct question that is, which text of the two would you prefer to read? The result was that 76.6% have preferred the Active voice over the Passive voice. This shows the readers tendency to read in the Active voice the thing that will initiate a question that, if the Active voice text can deliver the message clearly and the readers already prefer it, why would writers insist on using the passive voice?

The questionnaire also covered areas of understanding easiness and complications while reading; the examinees have proved that unlike the active voice, the passive voice is more difficult, more complicated and harder to understand.

Passive Voice Objectivity

The idea of objectivity is that the writer should have a standpoint away from the experiment or the text, giving the chance to the reader to focus on the action more than the doer. One of the writers who encourage that notion of objectivity is Simon R. Leather (1996) who argues that,

Using the passive voice in scientific writing allows the researcher to stand at a distance from his or her work. By standing at a distance, an unbiased viewpoint is much more likely to be reached. An unbiased viewpoint encourages a world view and an open mind, surely prerequisites for good science.

R. Leather argues that if the writer wants to stick to the "Good science" he has to use the passive voice the thing that leads to an 'unbiased viewpoint'.

That sounds scientific; however the whole idea of objectivity is still just an opinion which no one proves useful.

Those examinees who participated in the questionnaire could understand the Active voice text fully without the need to be 'one-eye blinded' by the help of the objectivity. After all it is the reader's selection to focus on the action or the doer for his/her own personal reasons. The writer has the obligation to unfold the whole truth for the reader to select what to focus on.

Conclusion

The argument of passive voice or active voice is still one of the most controversial arguments in scientific writing in general. However, this paper proves that Passive voice does not have a good popularity or preference among the scientific articles' readers. Nevertheless, the writers who are supposed to use it in their scientific writing find it difficult to deal with.

We are in front of a language structure that is not preferred by the readers nor the writers and still people encourage the use of it in scientific writing with no scientific standpoint. Even the claim that passive enriches the text objectivity is still 'a claim'.

Finally, I would recommend that passive is to be used when it is needed without being looked at as the standard form of writing in medical texts. Moreover, writers should target on the people understanding not on the 'scientific norms', because after all, science is there to serve people not the opposite.

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