

**The Use of Active and Passive Voice  
in the News Language**  
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**Abstract:**

Active and passive verbs are a problematic style faces the journalist of news reports ,because sometimes he tries to make agency invisible and he may change the role of participants in the constructions of texts, when the actions come to negative situation or related to political parties or politicians. The current study aims at : 1- exploring the active and passive forms in written media language and their grammatical structures 2- showing the role and uses of passive forms as one of the techniques used by the journalists . The study has put two hypotheses:

1-active forms are used more than passive in news writing.

2- modal verbs are commonly used by the journalist more than other types. The theoretical part is presented before tackling the practical part of this study ,.Alexander model ( 1997) has been adopted in this study since this model is comprehensive and adequate to achieve the purpose of analysis . After analyzing the data , the results verified the hypotheses. On the basis of findings ,The study has put some results and recommendations .

**key words** :news , active, passive , reports, functions

### **1-1-Introduction**

Media language including news and political reports have great impact and influence on our daily life because of the political events and situation happened all over the world .This influence of mass communication led the researchers to focus on the linguistic ,social, and psychological aspects of news . Grammatical devices of language in press news is a significant technique used by the journalist to expresses his point of view such as using active and passive forms in writing news reports . When the journalist omits the agent of the action deliberately and change the word order of the sentence he makes the statement impersonal and the participants of action vague for the readers .

### **1-2-What is News?**

Mass media are generally considered to include the press , radio, television, news , websites , and so on all that communication media , as Mey ( 2009: 572) suggests , helping to organizes the ways we understand our society and culture . Wikipedia defines news as a package of information about current events happening somewhere , and news moves through many different media , based on word of mouth, printing, postal

systems, broadcasting, and electronic communication. Wikipedia.org .2011:internet)

Crystal (2003:380) argues that media reflect the language commonly used by the public from different fields. *Online Oxford Dictionary* defines news as newly received or noteworthy information, especially about recent or important events. In this respect, news is not simply what happened, as Fowler (1999:13) argues, but news can also be considered and presented as a newsworthy. Broadcast and print media have developed response channels, which differ in kind immediately, and effect as a result of the technology they are based on. Stranza (2005:658) notices also they are often referred to as news media since they normally carry news, current affairs, and sports, but news need not be a defining criterion as music, film, or weather channels show, although they will be ignored, as Stranza (ibid) adds, the linguistic effects of entertainment media may surpass those of their informational and educational media and may further endanger and endangered languages.

## 2-Types of News

Linguists as Van Dijk (1988:171,280,27); Bell (1991:13-16); Aitchison (1999:145) and Mey (2009:781-1013) classify news into two types:

**a-Hard News:** includes two concepts

1-Seriousness: Politics, economics, crime, war, and disasters are considered serious topics, as are certain aspects of law, science, and technology.

2-Timeliness: Stories that cover current events—the progress of a war, the results of a vote, the breaking out of a fire, a significant public statement, the freeing of a prisoner, an economic report of note, etc.

**b-Soft News:** is sometimes referred to in a derogatory fashion as infotainment and includes two concepts

1-The least serious subjects: Arts and entertainment, sports, lifestyles, "human interest", and celebrities.

2-Not timely: There is no precipitating event triggering the story, other than a reporter's curiosity

Timely events happen in less serious subjects—sporting matches, celebrity misadventures, movie releases, art exhibits, and so on. Sometimes, soft news is written about some aspect of a hard news story. When one reads that *a tsunami has killed thousands around the Indian Ocean*, that's hard news. When one reads about the personal stories of a

*team of rescuers digging out tsunami victims* that is soft news *The Wikipedia* <http://en.wikipedia.org>

### 3-Structure of News

The structure of news articles is hierarchically ordered categories ,in this respect , Van Dijk ( 1988: 3) comments that news story can be divided into two parts :headline and lead , these elements are the basis of how story is developed. This can be summarized as the following :

**a-Headline** : this part of the news is a short title above a newspaper report that usually summarizes the most important information of the story .Van Dijk ( 1988: 36, 40) and Swan ( 1995: 395)

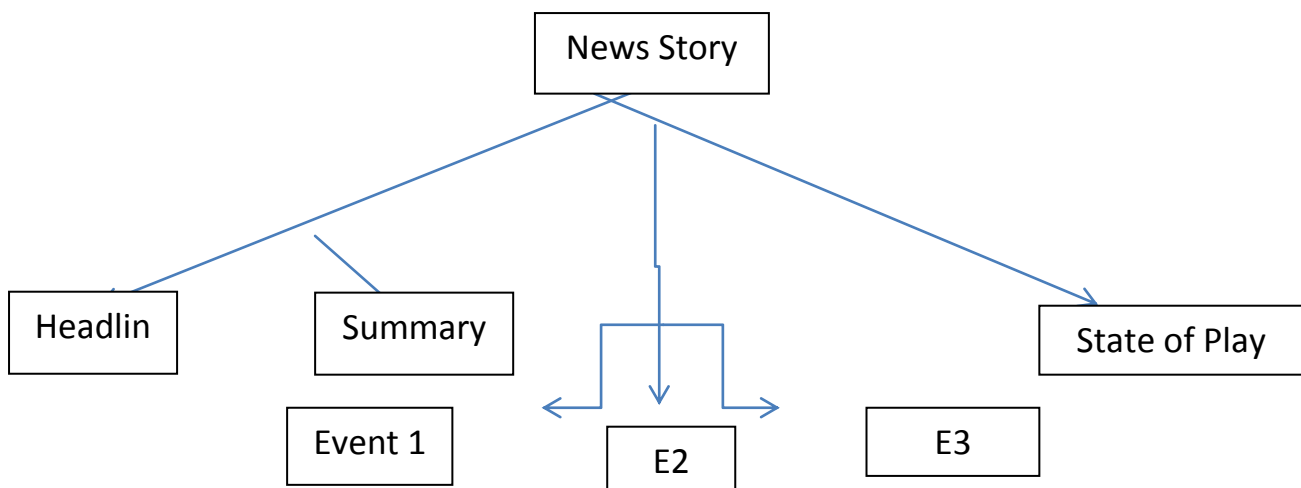
e.g. *RUSSIANS WOMAN LAND ON MOON* . Pap and Featherson (2005:28)

**b-Lead**: this part follows the headline ,often written in bold font contains the main idea of the story ,it gives all of *W's who?, what , where when? and why/ who ?* . ( Bell 1991: 179) ;Van Dijk (1988:52-53) and Aitcheson (1999:154) recommend that within the lead, the most important information is put at the beginning of paragraph not at the end to attract the readers' interest to read the whole text ,as in the following example:

*at least 26 people were killed and more than 200 injured when a huge car bomb ripped through the Centre of Omagh , county Tyrone , yesterday afternoon* . Aitcheson (ibid)

Van Dijk (1988:178) uses the term *installment structure* , it means that news topics and their schematic categories are delivered in parts throughout the article , the most important ,high - level information of each topic comes first, followed by less important , lower-level information . Aitcheson (ibid) describes the news story as the following :

#### Diagram ( 1)



#### 4-Syntax of News

Generally speaking, grammar and syntax are very important in the news analysis, since different syntactic choices motivate different reactions from the readers and the hearer, so journalists use the grammatical devices in writing news articles. One of the grammatical devices used in writing newspapers articles is transitivity, which is the main interest of this piece of work, this term is used by (Fowler 1991: 71) to describe an event from different aspects. Alexander (1997: 241), Turton and Heaton (1999: 375), Radford (2009: 137-305) agree that active and passive refer to the form of a verb, in the active, the subject of the verb is the person or the thing doing the action,

*1-John cooked the food last night.* In the passive, the action is done to the subject, as in the following example: *the food was cooked last night* Alexander (1997:241)

In this respect, Griffiths (2006:164) adds that grammarians call the unmarked transitive type as active when contrasting them with passive clauses (see Miller 2002:26). A passive is longer than the corresponding active, he gives the reason behind that as passives are marked by a greater number of morphemes for example, the preposition *by* notice the following example:

*2-The police shot a demonstrator*

*A demonstrator was shot **by** the police.* Griffiths (ibid)

In the relation between subject status and functional role, as Cruse (2000: 190) notices, in the active voice, the subject is typically the *most active participant* while in the passive voice, the subject is typically the *least active participant*. It means that changing the voice of a transitive sentence does not change its *truth conditions*, but does change what the sentence is *about*. He gives the following example: *Peter painted this picture* . *this picture is painted by Peter* .

Crystal (2003:339) points out that in the active voice, the focus is upon the subject which does the action, whereas in the passive voice, the focus is upon the object. Mey (2006:585) adds another remark, he comments that passivation and nominalization are ideological problematic, he reasoned that in the following statement:

*" this kind of grammatical devices used in newspapers may make agency invisible and obscure who did not what to whom or significantly change the relative prominence of the participants"*

Concerning the headlines of newspapers, Swan (1995:360) argues that auxiliary verbs are usually dropped from the passive structures, leaving past participle, he gives the following examples to illustrate his point of view:

3-MURDER HUNT : MAN HELD (= ... a man is being held by the police)

4-SIX KILLED IN EXPLOSION (= six people have been killed ...)

Swan (ibid) explains the above examples as the following forms like *held*, *attack* are usually past participles with passive meaning, not past tense and this type of headlines are very rare in newspapers, compare the following example :

5-AID ROW :PRESIDENT ATTACKED : (= ... the president has been attacked)

6-AID ROW :PRESIDENT ATTACKS CRISIS : (= ... the president has attacked her crisis)

## 5-Analysis

The main task of this work is to analyze the newspapers articles from two prospectus, the first is to investigate the grammatical forms of active and passive voice as a deliberate style used by the journals, and the second part of analysis is to find out the main uses and functions of passive voice in news reports of . The reasons behind choosing news corpus as data for the present work is that most of linguists, such as Bell (1995 : 23) encourages the researchers to do their works in this field, for some reasons a- accessibility of media texts as a source of language. b- Media use some language in feature found in ordinary speech. c- media is easier to collect than conversation. d- the importance of media for evidence of language use and language attitudes in a speech community . So, (20 ) articles selected from the common British newspapers namely *the Independent*, *the Guardian*, and *the Morning star*. Alexander's model (1997) has been adopted in this study, since it is comprehensive and adequate to achieve the purpose of the this study

### 5-1 –The Grammatical Forms of Passive Voice

#### a-Passive Voice of Two Objects

Some verbs like *bring* and *give*, *offer* which can have two objects, direct and indirect, the direct object is animate on which the writer focuses, and the indirect is an animate which is less important than the person who performs the action, the study has showed that such kind of verbs come in active forms more than in passive according to this data of news language

6-*This will give them a small boost in daytime energy.*

7-*Little attention has been given to take back programs at post consumer stage*

8-He had been widely expected to give MPs a free vote on the issue due to the strength of feeling.

9-Offer their treatment advice to help you get back...

The active form of example (8 ) is *someone gave MPs a free vote*

Mps is the direct object which is usually a person and the indirect object is usually a thing or inanimate such as *a free vote* in the above example ,the direct is preceded the indirect object since people are more interested in persons or people more than things ,so the direct object is the persons as the above example. The study revealed that this form of active is found in this study more than passive voice see (1 ) table

**Table (1 ) Distribution of passive Voice with two Objects**

Passive with two objects	active	Passive
Give	7	3
Bring	5	0
Offer	4	0
Total	16	3

#### **b-Using *by* + the agent after a passive**

One of techniques used by the reporters in writing news reports is using the article *by* or *with* , which makes the readers focus or to draw the reader's attention to the subject of the action

10-Oil spills **are often cleaned with** large "snakes " that are **made with** combination of lyophilic and hydrophobic used fibers

If the doer of the action is a thing the particle *with* is used as in the above example. When the agent or the doer affected by the action is a people the particle *by* is generally used , both articles *by* or *with* + agent followed by passive voice . The study has showed that this style is used by the journalist to focus on the doer or the subject -*who or what* did the action . Notice the following example, *the Islamic state* as called by journals or terrorists are the subject of this action who did all the sabotage and horrible things

11-Valley in eastern Afghanistan- **has been gutted by the Islamic State militants** who overran three months ago, most of the **houses have been looted, burned or simply taken over by the fighters**, and the 80 of the **families have been forced to seek refuge**.

Sometimes, the writer puts the article *by* at the beginning of the sentence to tell the reader who must be blamed

*12-When I was told by the police he had been arrested, it was like I was back in China again*

So the action is very important in any news report , the journalists know how to make their stories interesting, they believe, if there is no action or story , there is no news at all .

**Table ( 2 ) Distribution of Using *by* or *with* + the agent after a passive**

Types of passive voice	number
Using <i>by</i> + the agent after a passive	31
Using <i>with</i> + the agent after a passive	8

### c-Passive with Phrasal Verbs

This kind of passive voice come with different forms :

a- *verb + adverb phrase*

b- *verb + preposition*

c- *verb + particle + preposition*

*13-The warmth of the reception shows that people have been desperate for something different for a long time. We now have an opposition party*

*14-A reception was being held for the Chinese President, Xi Jinxing.*

*The two women, Sonoma Choden, 30, and Jamphel Lhamo, 33, were also dragged from the scene*

*15-Britain has been accused of doing the bidding of the Chinese regime after UK police raided the family home of a Tiananmen Square survivor where he was questioned for up to 16 hours a day*

**Table ( 3 ) Distribution of Passive Voice With Phrasal Verb**

phrasal verbs	Active	Passive
Accused of	2	9
Call for	3	7
Departed for	0	2
Dragged from	0	1
Come for	2	3
Decided to	6	2
Aimed at	4	1
Delay in	0	4
Questioned for	2	2
Forced to	9	12
Held for	8	5
Moved to	2	3
Total	38	49

### d-Passive Voice with Model Verbs

Most reporters believe that pure objectivity is impossible. 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* in the (16) example, or possibility like *can*, *could* (17), or prediction by using *will*, *would*, or probability as *may*, *might* as in (18). The journalists know that the reporters' judgment should enter the news story.

**16-I should not be silenced in my own country by an orchestrated show of power from the Chinese embassy**

**17-They could be obscured by pro-Chinese supporters.**

**18-You may be born poor but you don't have to stay**

**Table (4) Distribution of Passive Voice with Model Verbs**

Passive of model	Active	Passive
Should	8	6
Might	7	5
Will	16	4
Would	8	7
Can	4	16
Likely	7	5
Certainly	5	2
May	5	7
Could	6	11
Total	66	62

### e-Passive Forms with Reporting Verbs

Reporting verbs are very common in news reports as active forms, as this study has showed, the typical reporting in this study are: *say*, *allege*, *expect*, *know*, *believe*, *claim*, *consider*, *think*, see table (4), such kind of verbs are important in writing news reports to let the source talk, notice the following examples:

**19- Campaigners say Shao Jiang was “brutally manhandled” by police after...**

**20-She says she was “singled out by three official-looking Chinese men.. protested with her husband outside Downing Street, said: “When I was told by the police he...**

To achieve accuracy, the reporters, sometimes resort to use quotations to convey the speakers exact words, and put peoples words between quotations, as in the above examples, in order to convince the reader since, inaccurate information or biased stories make the readers stop reading the news. If there is no guarantee no trustee. This form of passive occurs with different grammatical constructions:



a-It ( + passive + that clause ) with reporting verbs

b-There ( + passive + to be + complement ) with a limited group of verbs as :believe , acknowledge , allege, consider, understand ,report

c-Subject other than it ( + passive + to infinitive ) with few verbs like acknowledge , know , believe, consider ,declare, say , suppose ,think

21-An outspoken critic of China’s human rights record, **he had earlier called for British politicians to be** “bold in raising concerns over...

22-After agreeing a position with police for a peaceful demonstration outside Buckingham Palace **protesters were surprised to find the position had been moved to** a less prominent place where they could be obscured by pro-Chinese supporters

**Table (5 ) Distribution of Passive Voice with Reporting Verbs**

Reported verbs	Active	Passive
Said	15	2
Believe	17	5
Know	7	0
Claim	4	0
Consider	7	2
Discover	5	2
Expect	3	0
Report	6	3
Think	8	0
Told	7	0
Hope	3	0
Insist	19	0
Surprised	3	5
Total	114	19

#### **f-Some Verbs Which Are Used in Passive**

Some verbs like *born, locate, married, obliged* come in passive more than active forms

*companies are often located in large metropolitan are.....* 23-

24-*He was born in 1994.*

This type of passive is rare in this corpus ,only few examples of this form see table ( 6) .

**Table (6 ) Distribution of Some Verbs Using in Passive Voice**

Passive forms	Number
Born	6
Married	3
Located	2

### g-Adjectives Similar to Passive Form

There are some adjectives like *shocked* are similar to passive form ,when they are followed by past participle tense , as in the following examples :

25-...*but said they were genuinely shocked the “battleground” for human rights had moved to the UK.*

26-*As a British Tibetan, I am shocked the Metropolitan Police would*

#### Table (7) Adjectives similar to passive form

Passive	Number
Shocked	4

### h-Stative Verbs are Never Used in Passive

Stative verbs like *Love , hate ,see...*never used in passive even when they are transitive ,this type of verbs is not found in this corpus.

### i-Prepositions ( *on , after*) Before the Passive

Conjunctions such as *on* and *after* can be used after passive forms , as in the following example:

27-*yesterday, after it had been searched and items confiscated*

Campaigners say

This construction of passive is also very rare , they form only four examples in this corpus .

#### Table ( 8) Distribution of Prepositions Before the Passive

Passive	Number
Prepositions - <i>after</i> before the Passive	4
Prepositions – <i>on</i> before the Passive	.....

### 5-2-Uses of Passive

In this part of analysis ,The researcher highlights the most important uses of passive forms in this corpus ,though active and passive are necessary and useful in writing reports , and they give a chance to the journalists to consider whether each choice is appropriate according to the purpose of the sentence .The study has revealed that passive voice has a lot of uses, and preferable in most of contexts , as the following:

#### a-Unimportant Subject

Sometimes ,the doer of the action is not important to the readers ,as in the following example:

*28-Oil spills are often cleaned up with large snakes that are made with a combination of lyophilic and hydrophilic used fibers*

### **b-To Express Scientific Method**

passive form structure is preferable by the writer when he wants to focus on the process or materials ,rather than the actor , notice the following examples:

*29-Processes have been developed whereby soft- drink bottles which are made from the same chemical materials*

### **c-To Impose Power or to Create an Authoritative Tone**

passive voice is preferable in such situation ,when it is used to impose authoritative power upon students to follow the principles and school laws

*30-Fingerboard shouldn't be allowed in class*

*31-The toys shouldn't even be brought into school*

### **d-The Doer is Known**

Passive voice is used when the journalist tries or does not want to mention the doer of the action , especially when the doer is the police who have arrested people , the journalists of British news reports usually hide the police if the situation is negative and the arrested people are the minorities , such as in the following examples :

*32-Shao Jiang, 47, a pro-democracy activist, was arrested in the street outside Mansion House where a reception was being held for the Chinese President, Xi Jinxing They assured*

*33-M Government accused of doing China's bidding as activist who was arrested after protesting against Xi Jinxing's visit has his home searched and his computer seized*

### **e-When the Action is General Passive Voice is also Used**

passive structure is deliberately preferable to be used in such context

*34-Four different types of medications can be used*

### **f- When the Agent is Obvious**

*35-The Hubble Space Telescope is the size of a school bus and was launched April 24,1990*

### **g-Passive Used in Instructions**

By using passive forms, the writer knows what the readers want ,so he precedes the content before the subject

*36-Stretch for five minutes of each day until you **are able to be** more to reduce muscles stiffness and the development of patients knots.*

### **h- The Doer of the Action is General**

37-Clothing **is often made of** a high content of synthetic fibers or blended fibers

*38-Four different types of medications **can be used...***

## **6-Results**

**The study has come up to the following results:**

1-Passive forms with two objects form (16) occurrence in the corpus as active form and only 3 cases as passive form which is very rare .

2-Using *by + the agent* after passive is commonly used by the journalists in this study which reflect the importance of this style in newspapers to attract the readers to the main event .The journalists know that the readers has no time to read the details ,and this proves that the news story is like a pyramid form ,the most important event comes ,then the details .

3-The study has showed that passive with phrasal verbs in passive form is relatively more than active ,this form represents ( 38 ) frequency in the corpus as active form ,whereas passive structure has (49 ) occurrence in this study , the reason behind that is such verbs like accused for and question to are used by the journalists to describe the police measurements towards people or demonstrators

4-Active and passive voice of modal verbs with passive form is relatively the same proportion , they are (66 ) and ( 62 ) respectively . This study has showed that modal verbs like *will* used by the journals to express their prediction about people or events . They represent (16) frequencies of the modal verbs , another forms are adjective and adverbs that can be used as *certainly* and *likely* . This indicates that the newspapers has a great power and a wide range of views presented in press .

5-Verbs of reporting followed by passive forms constitutes very high percentage in this study , they form (114 ) occurrences as active forms and (19) as passive . This proves that the journalists resort to this type of active construction to convey the exact words of the speakers especially when

quotation marks are used , the journalists know that trustee is very important in news and the readers always look for the true events therefore they let the main source speaks with own words.

6-Verbs like *born* , *locate*, *married*, *obliged* are very rare in the corpus since news language are more interested in conveying stories of political events and hard news more than life social affairs.

7- Another types of active and passive verbs like adjectives are similar to passive ,and stative verbs are also very rare in this study for the above mentioned reason.

## **7-Recommendations**

1-ELTs should encourage their students to read daily newspapers every day to enhance their vocabulary and English skills.

2-Teachers should give the students chance to speak about their favorite magazine or newspaper for about five or ten minutes every lecture and discuss their opinion about the article they have read or attracted their attention.

3-ELTs should ask the students to read a paragraph or sentences then the teacher should explain the common idioms or words used in news language.

4-Teachers should ask their students to write a summary about interesting article they like and discuss the difficult vocabularies or unknown phrases.

5-Ask the student to speak about the most important events in the news all over the world and list the most important news headlines.

6-ELTs should be given newspapers to read, then ask them to find the active and passive sentences in news reports.

7-ELTs should explain the difference between active and passive sentences and encourage the students to use passive forms in the necessary conditions.

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## استخدام المبني للمعلوم والمبني للمجهول في لغة الاخبار

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### الملخص:

يعدُّ الفعل المبني للمعلوم او المبني للمجهول احدى المشاكل التي يعاني منها الصحفي عند كتابة التقارير الاخبارية كوسيلة لإخفاء دور وكالة الانباء احيانا او ربما يحاول اخفاء دور المشاركين في الحدث احيانا اخرى ولاسيما اذا كان الحدث الاخبار سلبى او يتعلق بالسياسيين او اطراف سياسية اخرى. تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى:

١- بيان اشكال الفعل في حالة المبني للمعلوم والمجهول وتراكيبه القواعدية .

٢- شرح الدور الوظيفي والمهام التي يؤديها الفعل المبني للمجهول باعتبار صيغة المجهول واخفاء الفاعل احدى الاساليب التي يستخدمها الصحفي في اللغة الصحفية كمحاولة لجذب القارئ الى الحدث. وضعت الدراسة فرضيتين للتحليل الاولى مفادها ان الافعال في صيغة المبني للمعلوم اكثر استخداما قياسا بالأفعال المبنية للمجهول. والثانية ان Modal verbs هي الاكثر شيوعا واستخداما في اللغة الاخبارية مقارنة مع باقي انواع الافعال المستخدمة للمبني للمجهول وبناءً على التحليلات التي قامت بها الدراسة الحالية اعتمادا على نموذج Alexander 2007 والتي كانت تتصف بالشمولية والموضوعية ،واخيرا .فقد اثبتت الدراسة صحة الفرضيتين المذكورتين انفا .كما ان الدراسة توصلت الى بعض النتائج و التوصيات التعليمية على ضوء النتائج التي توصلت اليها الدراسة.