

6

The Use of the Passive Voice for Diplomatic and Polite Formal Communications

By

HAPPY DUMBI OMENOGOR PhD
Department of English, Delta State University, Abraka,
Affiliated Programme, Agbor Campus

Abstract

This paper is focused on the use of passive voice in diplomatic and polite communications. The purpose of this study is to examine this voice category in detail and point out the features which make it useful for polite, non- confrontational and non- committal communication. The linguistic framework that this study is based on is the use or contextual theory of meaning which was proposed by a German scholar called L. Wittgenstein (1953) and made popular by J.R Firth (1957). As Wittgenstein opined ‘the meaning of any linguistic expression (be it a word, a phrase a sentence) is determined by the context in which it is used as re-echoed by Ndimele (1997). The Neo Firthian Systemic Grammar as indicated in M. A.K Halliday (1961), Halliday and Hasan (1976) and James Muir (1972) is our grammatical model of analysis. The Neo Firthian Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) examines human language and emphasizes surface structure and deep structure. Deep structure is realized in systemic grammar by recent stress on sentence relation beyond the surface level. Texts analysed are drawn from the Nigeria police force, selected tertiary institutions of learning, West African Examination Council (WAEC), Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB) and Institute of Personnel Management. Some of the texts in our data have reference numbers while others do not have. This paper X-rays the passive construction and discovers the sentence types and patterns peculiar to it. The findings on the nature of the passive construction which ensures its tactical, polite, non-confrontational and non-committal effects are as follows: emphasizing actions rather than agents, usage concealing agents of actions as situations necessitate, disseminating pieces of information that are more important to their recipients than their agents and beginning some passive constructions with reported imperatives.

Keywords: Passive voice, diplomatic, polite formal communications.

INTRODUCTION

Voice is the syntactic category that refers to the feature of verb forms which indicates whether the subject is 'the doer' or the 'recipient' of the action (Crystal, 2008; Finch, 2000).

The following clause complexes are identified with respect to voice categories in English.

Middle i. The door opened.

Active ii. John opened the door.

Effective iii. The door was opened by
John.

Passive iv. The door was opened
(Halliday, 1968).

The understanding of the meaning expressed in sentence one makes the action appear like a natural process, such as a change in weather or season. The choice of the middle voice category portrays a different reality as if the action were an act of God. In sentences two and three, the choice of the active and passive voice categories makes the agents clear. However, the agent is only insinuated in sentence four since the event is presented as caused by an unspecified agent.

We can say then that 'voice' is the form of verb which indicates whether the person or the thing denoted by the subject acts or is acted upon.

Another important term in this paper is 'diplomacy'. Let us therefore examine it briefly. Diplomacy in this paper refers to the act of phrasing statements in a polite, tactical, non-committal and non-confrontational manner. It entails the use of tact to gain strategic advantage or to find mutually acceptable solutions to a common challenge. 'Diplomacy' in this paper is used in the informal sense. We will examine the features that make the passive construction polite, tactical, non-committal and non-

confrontational as well as the types and patterns of the sentences involved. While examining the patterns of the sentences in our data, our analyses will be hinged on the four basic elements of clause structures in systemic linguistics which Halliday labels **S** (subject), **P** (redicator), **C** (omplement) and **A** (djunct). Butler (1961) observes that the passive construction is just one of the voice categories in English language. Let us therefore examine the voice categories briefly before focusing our attention on the passive construction.

The sentence elements used in this paper have been explained as stated below. The four basic elements of clause structure recognized in Systemic Linguistics are as we have pointed out below. 'Clause structure' here, it is used synonymously with 'sentence' because an 'independent clause' means the same as 'sentence'.

Subject: This is what the sentence says something about. In most cases, it appears in the initial position but at other times, it can be found in any other position. It is a compulsory element of a sentence. The subject is underlined in the sentence below:

Education is light.

Predicate: This is the part of the sentence that says something about the subject. It is also a compulsory element of a sentence. It can be made up of only the verb in a sentence or the verb and some other words in a sentence. The predicate is underlined in the following sentences.

The man died.

Time is money

Amaka has been very patient.

Complement: This is the part of the sentence that completes the sense made in it. The complement is not a mandatory element of the sentence.

Butler (1985) notes that Halliday uses the terms ‘complement and Adjunct’ more widely than in some other accounts: the former covers the direct and indirect object of traditional grammar as well as complements of coupla-type of verbs, and that the latter covers a wide range of groups with ‘adverbial’ functions.

There are subject complement and object complement. Examples will make them clearer.

What we need in Nigeria is peace.

The underlined word serves as a subject complement because it explains the sense of the subject.

The Governor appointed my brother commissioner.

The underlined word is the object complement because it completes the sense of the object which is ‘my brother’.

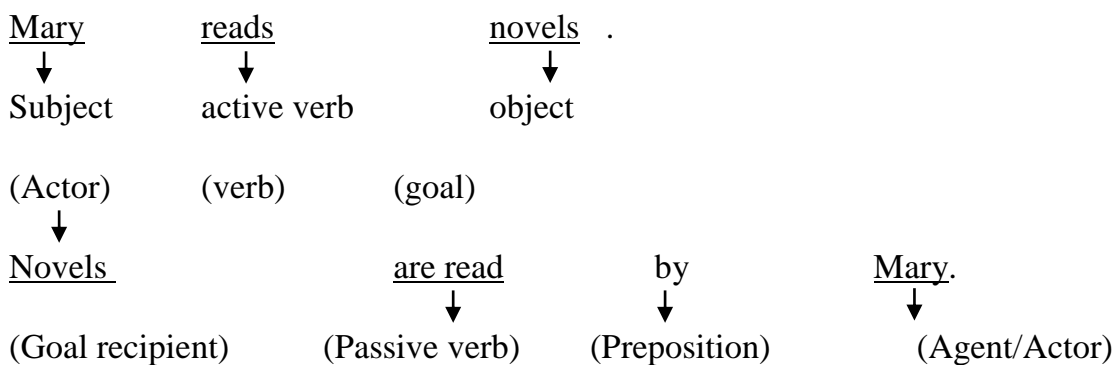
Adjunct: As earlier explained above, the adjunct covers a wide range of groups with adverbial functions. For example,

Mary will pay you as soon as you finish the job.

The underlined expression is an adjunct of time. The adjunct is not a mandatory element of a sentence.

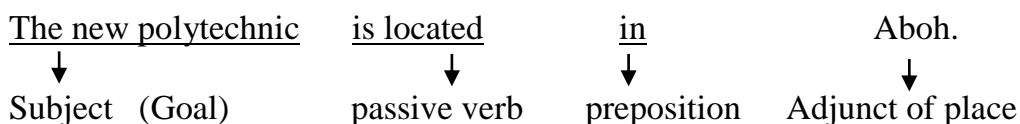
VOICE CATEGORIES IN ENGLISH

Active Voice: It is the form of construction which indicates that the actor (initiator) is the subject of the clause (Leech, 1994; Afolayan in Tomori, 1977). If an active sentence is transformed to a passive one, the original subject becomes the agent of the passive sentence introduced with ‘by’ (Fromkin et al., 2007). This is illustrated as follows:



This illustration makes it clear that the subject of the active (original) sentence (Mary) remains the subject of the transformed (passive) sentence.

The Passive Voice: This indicates that the subject is acted upon. It is also the voice which indicates that the N P bearing the theme role is encoded as subject (Pink and Thomas 37; Dobrovolsky and O’ Grady (2009:530). For instance,



Middle Voice: The subject in this voice can neither be classified as an actor nor a goal hence it is called ‘the middle voice’. The subject in this voice representation has features of the active voice and those of the passive voice. An intransitive verb, which appears active but expresses a passive action is a good example of an English verb in the middle voice. Consider the following sentence.

Water-yam cooks fast.
 ↓ ↓ ↓
 Actor/goal middle verb adjunct

‘Water-yam’ is the actor while it is also the goal (sufferer). ‘Cook’ in our illustration above is syntactically active but semantically passive. Having examined the various voice representations in English, let us examine the features of the passive voice that ensure their tactical, polite, non-confrontational and non-committal nature.

CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Emphasizing actions rather than agents because they (agents) are unimportant or obvious.

a.

CD NO.	TIME	DETAILS OF ENTRY
427 of 29/12/2002	1810 Hrs.	<p>ARMED ROBBERY: One Happy ‘M’ of No.3 Uti street extension back of Anastasia school, off P.T.I. Road Effurun, came to the charge room today 29/12/2002 and reported that same date at about 1000 hrs, at the above address some armed men numbering about seven broke into his house and robbed him of his video set valued N20,000.00...</p> <p>ACTION: ^SCase// ^Precorded and referred [referred// to <u>Anti-crime section for investigation</u> Insp. XYZ</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Compound sentence</p>

The underlined construction in the text above and the ones underlined in the sentences below are the passive constructions that are analyzed in this section.

b.

S/NO.	TIME	CR.	DETAILS OF ENTRY: AN AFFIDAVIT
79 of 28/12/2001	1610 Hrs		<p>AS TO CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP:</p> <p>One Mr. Happy Dumbi Omenogor ‘M’ residing at No.50 Mission Ishikaguma – Amai, Ukwuani Delta State, came to the station with a sworn affidavit dated 1/11/2001 and reported that he is now the rightful owner of one Nissan Laurel saloon car... ^S</p> <p>ACTION: <u>Complainant //advised to report//</u> _P <u>same to M.L.A for action// while affidavit</u> _A <u>recorded for record purposes.</u></p> <p>W/PC XYZ</p> <p>Compound sentence</p>

In text *a*, under ‘ACTION’, there is ‘case recorded and referred to Anti-crime section ...’ The agents of the actions are not stated. This is because the action is what is important to the audience. Besides, the agent is not stated since it is obvious that the police officer on duty at the particular time of the action performed it. The statement is also non-committal because the action of referring the case to anti-crime section is not credited to or associated with anybody. Certainly, the suspects of the incident will not have any negative feelings towards any one for referring the case to anti-crime section. This technique enhances economy of words and enables the reader to concentrate his comprehension task on only what is significant. In text *b*, there is, ‘complainant advised... while affidavit recorded ...’, in the text, the agent of ‘advised’ was not disclosed just as the agent of ‘recorded ...’ was not also stated. The above passive constructions are used for the same reasons as advanced for text *a*.

The Use of Recipients (Goals) of Actions as Subjects

c. Information relating to the date of registration, schedule of fees, ^Saccommodation facilities and medical examination //should be obtained // _P from the registrar ^A of the University

Ref. No. JAMB/ADMS/88/
25474 simple sentence

- d. ^S I //am pleased to inform// ^P you ^C //that ^S approval// ^P has been given //for your ^C promotion// to the Rank of Senior Asst. Registrar on ^C CONTISS II step 1 with effect from 1st January, 2008, notionally and financially.

Ref. No. CEA/428/78

simple sentence

As an effective communicative strategy, the main fact to be communicated is placed at the initial position. The fact that the portions containing the important messages in texts *c* and *d* are placed in the initial positions results in passive constructions. The messages in the texts i.e. *c* and *d* are centred on the portions placed at the initial positions. These portions are therefore referred to as the focuses of information in the sentences. This technique ensures effective understanding of the messages, since it makes the important part of the sentences (subject matters) register first and quickly in the audience's brain. Other texts that illustrate the above features are as stated below:

- e. ^S Your response //should be addressed// to the provost through your Head of Unit, //to reach the undersigned within 24 hours of the receipt of this letter. ^P

Ref. No. CEA/PER/428

Complex sentence

- f. ^S Your early approval// ^P would be appreciated.

Longe (93) simple sentence

- g. ^S Continuous assessment// must be professionally administered // in line with the NCCE guidelines. ^A

Simple sentence

- h. ^S The contract is for teachers// to teach examine and publish // results // before ^A payments are effected. ^P ^C

Compound sentence

- i. Prepared results// should be submitted// three weeks after the examination//
to the director. Simple sentence
- j. Students// will not under any condition be compelled or intimidated// to buy books. Simple sentence
- k. Only books that have been approved// can be sold// within the institution. Simple sentence
- l. The issuance and sales of handouts in the programme// is// completely banned. Simple sentence
- m. The committee// is given// two weeks// with effect from 7th May 2018// to submit// its report// its report// to management, please. Simple sentence
- n. Her appointment with the college// was confirmed// on 20th October 2011. Simple sentence

Concealing Agents of Actions for Diplomatic, Non-committal, Security and Non-confrontational Reasons

- o. The Provost observed with dismay that you were not on duty while other staff of the unit were all involved in the on-going examination.

S A P A P C
Your action//to say the lest [least]// is //seriously//frowned//at being the next in line to the head of the unit and was supposed to be actively involved in the supervision of the on-going examination. Simple sentence.

- p. You//are//therefore//requested//to
state in writing//why//appropriate
disciplinary action//should not be taken//against you for malingering. Simple sentence

S P

q. It//has been discovered some examiners farm out scripts to those// who have not been invited// to mark//. Any examiner//found//practicing this ^C act// will not ^P only be black-listed// permanently//but//will also be reported//to the appropriate ^C authorities...

Complex sentence

Ref. No. L/EX/ARR/COORD/SES/70/VOL.IV

S P C
Who//have not been invited//to mark

S P C
Any examiner//found//practicing

P A Conj.
This ... //will not only be black-listed//permanently//but

P C
//Will also be reported//to the appropriate authorities...

Complex sentence

r. If//it//is discovered//at any time// that you// do not possess// any of the qualifications//which you claim to have obtained// you// will be required// to withdraw// from the university Complex sentence Ref.

JAMB/ADMS/88/25474

C

Do not possess// any of the Qualifications upon which this

C

Offer of admission has been

S P C A
Made, //you//will be required//to withdraw//from the university

Ref. NO. AAU/FA/DE/102

Complex sentence.

In texts *e*, negative actions, which will occasion some degree of discomfort for the recipients are expressed. As a diplomatic and non-committal device, the agent is concealed or rather not-emphasized. Consequently, the recipient of the actions might not have any direct negative feelings towards the agent. The statement is purely non-committal. This is one major advantage of the passive construction over its active counterpart. In texts *e* for instance, the officer that seriously frowned at the action of the addressee is not stated. In the same vein, the officer that requests him to state why appropriate disciplinary actions should not be taken against him is not stated. Concealing the agents in such passive constructions ensures that the negative feelings which the goals of the actions would have towards the agents are either drastically reduced or outrightly

removed. For instance, the recipient of text *e* would definitely have very negative feelings towards the Provost of the College who issued the directive that occasioned the query if it had read:

“To say the least, the Provost seriously frowns at your action.

The Provost therefore, requests you to state ...why ... disciplinary actions should not be taken against you”.

Similarly, the person that will blacklist and report examiners found farming out their scripts is concealed in text *q*. Furthermore, the officer that will ensure the student’s withdrawal from the university if he is found unqualified is not stated just as the person that will not entertain any application for change is concealed. The agents in texts *q* is concealed for the same reasons as we have explained for texts *s* and *r*.

Dissemination of Piece of Information that are More Important to Their Recipients than

Their Agents are

Let us examine the following texts.

S P A P
s. Notice//is//hereby//given...

S P
//the monthly general meeting//...will be held... - Complex sentence

Ref. No. CIPMN/DSB/PPCA/AS/250

S P A P S P
t. ...I//am//further//directed...Your resignation//is accepted// Complex sentence

Ref. No. IPER/979/31

S P C
u. ... approval//has been given//for your promotion ... Simple sentence

Ref. No. CEA/428/78

- S P C
- v. ...you//have been offered//provisional admission ... – Simple sentence
Ref. No. GS/FA/MA/004/10

In texts *s*, the pieces of information disseminated are what matter to the addressees. In text *s* for instance, the members of the concerned body will be satisfied to know that a general meeting has been scheduled. The agent of the action is not important. Similarly, what is important to the decoder in text *t* is that his or her resignation is accepted. What will be of interest to the addressee in text *u* is the fact that he or she has been promoted just as the addressee in text *v* will not bother to know who has offered him or her admission. All that matters is that admission has been

gained. This is particularly so in the culture of the English people.

Beginning Some Passive Constructions with the Reported Imperative ‘I am directed’. The public servant, who always writes in response to one issue or the other, often conveys the decisions of his boss to the recipient. This is why some of such texts start with ‘I am directed’. Besides conveying information, usage of the reported imperative enables him to invoke the authority of his superior and make it clear to the addressee that he is not the originator of the message he conveys.

The following texts display the above features.

- S P C C
- w. I//am directed// to refer to your letter// and to forward ...
Compound sentence
(Longe, 1995:96)
- S P C
- x. I//am directed//to refer to your letter dated 3rd August 2007 on the above subject matter
Simple sentence
Ref. No. DELSU/A/EST/037

In texts *w* and *x*, the ‘to infinitive’ expresses the directives from the superior officer which should be implemented by the subordinate.

4. TABLE OF SENTENCE TYPES IN OUR DATA

S/Nos.	Types	No. of sentences	Remarks
I	Simple	14	Dominates
Ii	Compound	3	Sparsely used
Iii	Complex	9	Next to simple sentence

Conclusion

Passive constructions manifest as simple, complex and compound sentences. The simple passive construction disseminates singular official information, compound passive construction, conveys two related official information while the complex passive construction discloses related official pieces of information. SP, SPCCA, SPC, SAPAC, SPCA etc. are among the sentence patterns noticed in our data. The subject element appears at the initial position in most of the sentences. This agrees with the intention of the passive construction, which is to emphasize the subject by presenting it first and not emphasizing the agent. This is particularly so if the action is an unpleasant one so that diplomacy and the much desired non-committal nature of the passive construction can be realized. The various sentence types and patterns enhance variety of expressions and so, avoid monotony in this discourse type. Lastly, this voice category protects the user, mitigates the nature of unpleasant information conveyed and creates harmony as well as anonymity in the communication process.

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