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**The Frequency of the Passive in Indian English**

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### **Abstract**

The frequency of the passive in English has attracted the attention of many grammarians. Most analyses of the passive in English are based on Svartvik's study (1966) of the same. He finds out the frequency of the passive in various registers in his analysis and one of his main findings is the centrality of the agentless passive type in English. After applying his model to data collected from the two corpora of Indian English, it is found that the overall frequency of the passive in Indian English is almost the same as in British English. It is also found that the agentless passive type is the central passive type in Indian English, too. Another finding is that the frequency of the passive depends more on the formality scale and less on the medium (spoken or written). More formal types of register contain more passive clauses.

### **Introduction**

The passive voice construction – usually referred to as 'the passive' in grammar books – is one of the sub-systems of the grammar of English which have attracted grammarians a lot. Especially, the frequency of the passive in English has been a matter of considerable interest for grammarians. Grammarians have been making an observation for a long time (e.g. Jespersen (1933)) that the agentless passive type (i.e. the one that does not contain any agent phrase, such as one beginning with the preposition *by*) is most common in English.

### **Svartvik's Findings**

Svartvik (1966) is the first grammarian to make an empirical, corpus-based study of the passive in English. He analyses the data of the passive collected from a corpus of 3, 23,000 words. On the basis of over 3500 instances of the finite passive he draws conclusions about the use of the passive in English, one of them being about the frequency of the passive in English. He points out that there is considerable variation in overall frequency in the individual texts. The frequency is measured in terms of the number of finite passive clauses per thousand words.

According to Svartvik (1966), the major determining stylistic factor in the frequency of the use of the passive lies "in a distinction such as that between informative and imaginative prose, rather than in a difference of subject matter or between the spoken and written language" (p. 155). He adds that within the category of informative prose, passives are most commonly found in scientific exposition. At one end, the highest frequency of the passive is in science (23.1 occurrences of the passive clause per thousand words). At the other end, the lowest frequency is in advertising (3 passive clauses per thousand words). The frequency in news (15.8 passive clauses per thousand words) is less than that in science. Speech occupies an intermediate position

between the extremes, with a frequency of 9.2 occurrences per thousand words. The frequency in novels and plays is less than that in speech.

Svartvik (1966) gives a classification of the types of passive in English. The classification is as follows.

- i) Animate agent passives: The agent phrase is present in the clause, and the agent is animate.
- ii) Inanimate agent passives: The agent phrase is present, and the agent is inanimate.
- iii) Janus agent passives: Sometimes prepositional *by*-phrases may be interpreted either as agents, in which case they are class  $\beta$  passives, or as adjuncts, in which case they are class  $\gamma$  (i.e. agentless) passives. The following is an example.

1. It advises a wise man to straighten his mind as an arrow *is straightened* by a fletcher." (Kolhapur Corpus, D 10, 1660-1670)

In one interpretation, the fletcher straightens the arrow (therefore an inanimate agent passive), and in another interpretation someone straightens the arrow with a fletcher (making it an agentless passive).

The above three types have a direct transformational relationship with the active, as they can be converted into the active without any further changes.

iv) Agentless passives: It has no expressed *by*-agent, but may have direct agent extension with subsequent systemic potential active transformation. The word 'direct' denotes that agent extension and active transformation are possible within the same tense. For example,

2. Scientific progress *is misused* creating nuclear bombs & not for betterment but to extinguish the lovely & beautiful God's creativity. (ICE-IND:W1A-002#94:2)

It is possible to give an agent extension such as *by man* to the above sentence. Subsequently, it is also possible to make an active transformation in the same tense, as in the following.

3. Man *misuses* scientific progress...

v) Quasi-agentive passives: It holds an intermediate position on the passive scale, as it has both adjectival and verbal features. Its verbal character is found in its potential transformation into an extensive active clause, as in the following example.

4. And I must say that all *have been impressed* with the fresh view points which he has been presenting. (ICE-IND:S2A-026#14:1:A)

It can have the following active transform.

5. The fresh view points which he has been presenting have impressed all.

The adjectival nature is seen in its potential transformation into an intensive active clause, and in its ability to take coordination with adjectives, qualification, and lexically marked auxiliaries such as *feel*, *become*, *seem* and *get*. The following is an example of potential transformation into an intensive active clause.

6. Ajay, I *am worried* about Priti. (*Kolhapur Corpus*, K 31, 0490)

It has the following potential transformation into intensive active clause.

7. "Ajay, Priti makes me worried."

In the two examples given above, the prepositions used in agent phrases are *with* and *about* respectively. Such prepositions other than *by* are called 'quasi-agents'. *That*-clauses and *to*-clauses can also function as agents.

This class has two sub-classes – 'attitudinal passives' and 'emotive passives'. The following are examples of the attitudinal passive.

8. He *was fully entitled* to his opinions against birth control. (*Kolhapur Corpus*, J 31, 0440-0450)

9. We *feel inclined to ask* how long this lovely lamb is being slain. (*Kolhapur Corpus*, D 04, 1290-1300)

Unlike emotive passives, the attitudinal passive cannot have the following kind of active transformation.

10. \*His position made him *entitled to*...

The feature of lexically marked auxiliary (*feel* in this case) can also be seen in 9. The possibility of active transformation is less normal in attitudinal and emotive passives as compared with agentive passives explained above.

vi) Non-agentive passives: Svartvik (1966) finds it the most multifarious class of all. In most non-agentive passives, no agent is conceived of. For instance,

11. The intermediate type of parenchyma cells *are formed* in the same manner as has been described for phloem. (*Kolhapur Corpus*, J 11, 1480-1500)

Some non-agentive passives are such that an agent is identifiable, but an active construction is not possible, as in the following example.

12. Drinking of water having more than 15 ppm of fluorides *is said to cause* dental as well as skeleton forms of fluorosis. (*Kolhapur Corpus*, H 10, 1610-1620)

It is possible to guess, in general terms, who says it, but the following active transform is not possible.

13. \*We say the drinking of water having more than 15 ppm of fluoride *to cause*...

Some non-agentive passives are not exactly non-agentive, but their direct active transformation is not possible. The active transformation has to be accompanied by a change of aspect.

14. Hence it is true that though religion is an abstract thing & it *is invented by man* ... (ICE-IND:W1A-003#53:1)

Even if there is an agent phrase in the passive clause, a direct active transformation is not possible. It is possible only after a change of aspect.

15. \*...man *invents* it...

It is possible to have an active transform after a change of aspect – *has invented*. This is what is sometimes called 'statal passive'.

vii) Compound passives: The compound verbs are morphologically isolated, in the sense that they do not have active counterpart.

16. Catchwords and slogans, programmes and pamphlets, constitutions and manifestos, have no intrinsic and practical value unless the mind of the ruler *is untainted* by selfishness. (Kolhapur Corpus, J 39, 0430-0460)

There is no such verb as *untaint* and therefore, an active transform like "*\*selfishness untaints* the mind of the ruler" is not acceptable. The most frequently used type of the passive in Svartvik's corpus (1966) is the agentless passive.

### Findings of Other Grammarians

Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) provide a corpus-based description of the grammar of spoken and written English as used by British and American speakers. They find that passives are most common in academic prose, occurring about 18,500 times per million words. If this is converted into frequency per one thousand words, following Svartvik's method (1966), it comes to a frequency of 18.5 occurrences of finite passive clauses per thousand words in academic prose. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) also mention that passives are also common in news, occurring about 12,000 times per million words, which comes to a frequency of 12 occurrences per thousand words. They find that agentless passives are far more common than the ones containing agent phrases (i.e. agentful passives), and are widely used in academic writing to omit mention of the specific researcher(s).

Fernald (1977) uses the model of analysis of the passive employed by Svartvik (1966) to study the comparative frequency of passives in some college texts. It is also a corpus-based study, though the sample size is not very big. The findings based on her corpus also indicate that the

agentless passives are the most common type of the passive. Another significant finding of her study of the passive is that the frequency of the passive is high not only in science but also in economics and history.

### **The Frequency of the Passive in Indian English**

In order to find out the frequency of the passive in (IE) Indian English, more than 20,000 instances of the passive collected from the two corpora of IE currently available (*The Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English* and the Indian component of *The International Corpus of English*) were collected. In Svartvik's corpus (1966), the overall frequency of the passive is 11.3 passive clauses per thousand words. In the registers from *Kolhapur Corpus* selected by the author of this article, 7081 instances of the passive are found in 5,00,000 words, which means that the frequency per thousand words is 14.16. In the registers from *ICE-IND* (i.e. the Indian component of *The International Corpus of English*) selected for the analysis, 5897 instances of the passive are found in 5,00,000 words, which means that the frequency of the passive per thousand words is 11.79 occurrences in that corpus. The frequency in *ICE-IND* is almost as much as in Svartvik's corpus (1966). The overall frequency of the passive in *Kolhapur Corpus* is a little higher than in the other two corpora, as there are only registers of written English and no component of spoken English in the corpus. The overall frequency of the passive in written Indian English (13.97) is more than in spoken Indian English (10.34). Another reason for the higher frequency in *Kolhapur Corpus* is two registers that have more frequency of the passive than news – religious writing (15.5) and government reports (23.6).

If the frequencies in various registers found in these three corpora are compared, it is found that there is not much difference in the frequency in science. Its frequency in *Kolhapur Corpus* (21.5) is a little lower than in Svartvik's corpus (1966) (23.1) but its frequency in *ICE-IND* (23.8) is close to that in Svartvik's corpus (1966). The frequencies in speech (i.e. conversations and unscripted speeches as they are called in Svartvik's corpus (1966); and private dialogues, telephone conversations and monologues, as they are called in *ICE-IND*) are close to each other. The frequencies in novels are also close to each other – 8.2 (Svartvik's corpus (1966)), 7.05 (*Kolhapur Corpus*) and 7.52 (*ICE-IND*).

There are considerable differences found in the frequencies in news writing. The passive used in news writing in Svartvik's corpus (1966) is more than that in *Kolhapur Corpus* by 2% and more than that in *ICE-IND* by 4%. The frequencies in arts are also different. In Svartvik's corpus (1966), the frequency is 12.7, whereas the frequencies in *Kolhapur Corpus* and *ICE-IND* are 13.55 and 16.1 respectively. That is why the frequencies in learned writing (*Kolhapur Corpus*) and academic writing (*ICE-IND*) are 17.81 and 20.46 respectively. Here, too, it is possible that the frequency in arts might have increased in the course of time between the compilation of *Kolhapur Corpus* and *ICE-IND*, but it cannot be ascertained easily. The overall frequency of the passive in Indian English is almost the same as in British English. This is a significant finding, because the overall impression that Indian speakers of English use the passive more frequently than native speakers is also not supported by the findings of the present study.

## The Frequency of the Various Types of Passive in IE

The frequency of the agentless passives in Svartvik's corpus (1966) is regarded as one of the major findings of his study. He shows that the percentage of agentless passives in agentive passives (animate agent, inanimate agent, Janus agent passives and agentless passives) is about 80. However, he does not mention the percentage of agentless passives in all the types including quasi-agentive and non-agentive passives. But it is clear that even those who do not accept emotive passives and non-agentive passives as passives have to accept that among agentive passives in Svartvik's corpus (1966), 80% belong to the type of agentless passives. In Fernald's corpus (1977), too, agentless passives cover 71% of the data of passives consisting of agentive, quasi-agentive and non-agentive passives.

In *Kolhapur Corpus*, the agentless passives cover 84.13% of agentive passives and 69.65% of all the passives (including emotive and non-agentive passives). In *ICE-IND*, they cover 87.72% of agentive passives and 66.52% of all the passives (including emotive and non-agentive passives).

In general, it is found that animate agent and inanimate agent passives, which are considered the central passives by some grammarians, cover only 9% of passives in *ICE-IND* and around 12% in *Kolhapur Corpus*. Non-agentive passives are a substantial number, their percentage being as much as that of agentful passives in *Kolhapur Corpus* and double the percentage of agentful passives in *ICE-IND*. Emotive passives are especially frequent in literary writing. Janus agent passives, attitudinal passives and compound passives are minor types of the passive. But the emotive and non-agentive passives, which differentiate Svartvik's model (1966) from that of other grammarians, are considerable in number. The statistics drawn on the basis of the two corpora of Indian English also confirm his finding that agentless passives are the central type of passives.

## The Determining Stylistic Factor in the Frequency

Svartvik (1966) observes that the frequency of the passive is more in informative prose and less in imaginative prose. This may explain why the frequency of the passive in public dialogues (14.58 occurrences of the passive clause per thousand words) in *ICE-IND* is more than the frequency in news writing (11.2) in spite of the spoken medium. Svartvik (1966) observes that the factor determining the frequency of the passive is not the medium (spoken or written) but a stylistic one. But this approach cannot explain why religious writing has such a high frequency (15.5 occurrences per thousand words) in *Kolhapur Corpus*. Therefore, it may be helpful to take into consideration the views of Granger (1983). Taking 'field', 'tenor' and 'mode' as the dimensions of the use of language, she finds that low passive users share the following stylistic features.

i) The field is unrestricted and primarily personal. It involves the speakers as 'private persons' with their own thoughts, feelings and experiences, not as 'public persons' (such as politicians and lecturers).

- ii) The texts with low frequency of the passive display a spontaneous mode.
- iii) Such texts also show an informal personal tenor.

Heavy passive users display a restricted field (which is primarily non-personal or factual); and they are non-spontaneous and formal. Putting these three factors together, Granger (1983) makes a single factor – colloquial or non-colloquial style. She points out that, for instance, oration shows '-personal' and '-spontaneous' features; and therefore, in spite of the spoken medium, there is a very high frequency of the passive in oration. The same is true of discussions, too. This approach can help us explain the high frequency of the passive in religious writing, scripted speeches and public dialogues in Indian English. It is found that the more formal the nature of communication is, the more frequent is the use of the passive in that register. Private dialogues are more informal in nature and therefore, they contain less number of passive clauses. Public dialogues, such as parliamentary debates and legal cross-examinations, are more formal in nature and therefore contain more number of passive clauses.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Thus, the findings of the present study show that as in British English, the agentless passives are very clearly predominant in Indian English, too. It is also found that the overall frequency of passive clauses in Indian English is almost the same as in British English, though it is generally believed that Indian users of English tend to use the passive more frequently. The passive occurs less frequently in news writing in Indian English than in British English. The passive occurs most frequently in formal registers (irrespective of spoken or written medium) such as learned/academic writing and government reports. The more formal the nature of communication, the frequent is the use of the passive.

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