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THE USE OF ACTIVE AND PASSIVE VOICE IN MEDIA LANGUAGE (BASED ON NEWSPAPER HEADLINES)

Abstract: Media is considered to be the source of the latest information. It is used to manipulate the society and make psychological impact. Media language has always attracted the attention of linguists, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. Due to this greatest interest, we have decided to look into media language, actually, to find out the newspaper headlines containing active and passive voice constructions. In addition, our goal was to reveal some peculiarities of newspaper headlines in terms of passive voice utilization. The paper also emphasizes the preferable assignment of passive voice and its impact on readers. For our study, we have collected articles from the following papers: *The Independent*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*. According to the research findings, it becomes obvious that most of the newspaper headlines contain active or passive voice forms, but it is worth mentioning that many of them use passive voice constructions. The study also examines how the use of passive voice affects readers' attitudes towards some issues. The use of passive voice can lead to ambiguity, affecting the clarity of meaning by hiding the identity of the doer of the action. However, being vague about the doer of the action is primarily deliberate news to serve particular purposes. The analysis of results also reveals that the use of passive voice can contribute actively to changing the attitudes and views of the recipients. Therefore, newspaper headlines are quite tricky. They can also be a great way to study the passive voice.

Key words: media language, newspaper headlines, active and passive voice, peculiarities, ambiguity, linguistic features.

Language: English

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Introduction

In modern society the system of mass communications has become an accompanying and essential part of our daily life. The media undoubtedly has a significant impact on society. This is a two-way process, where the addresser and the addressee are involved. It is quite incredible for us to spend a single day without magazines/newspapers, television, radio or internet. The media has the greatest impact on our consciousness, formation of opinions, because it is through the media that we familiarize with the current events taking place in the world. The media is considered to be the source of the latest information. It is used to manipulate the society and make psychological impact. Nowadays, it is because of the

efforts of the media that we make decisions not only about participating in elections and purchasing different products, but also in any field including our everyday life.

Media language has always attracted the linguists' attention, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. There are four practical and principled reasons for this interest. First, the media provide an easily accessible source of language data for research and teaching purposes. Second, the media are important linguistic institutions. Their output makes up a large proportion of the language that people hear and read every day. Media usage reflects and shapes both language use and attitudes in a speech community. Third, the ways in which the media use

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language are interesting linguistically in their own right; these include how different dialects and languages are used in advertising, how tabloid newspapers use language in a projection of their assumed readers' speech, or how radio personalities use language - and only language - to construct their own images and their relationships to an unseen, unknown audience. Fourth, the media are important social institutions. They are crucial presenters of culture, politics, and social life, shaping as well as reflecting how these are formed and expressed.

An English linguist and a journalist Allan Bell (1991) explains scientists' interest in media language with the following reasons:

1. The media is more accessible for studying various features of the language.
2. There is a growing interest in certain aspects of media language and, especially with regard to newspaper article headlines.
3. Interest towards those linguistic features we find in society except for media is too raised.
4. The Media has a great influence on speech.
5. The language of the media reflects the views and culture of the society.
6. The media has a huge influence on public opinion.

Mass media are generally considered to include the press, radio, television, news, websites, and so on. That entire communication media, as Mey (2009:572) suggests, helping to organize the ways we understand our society and culture.

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.

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

1) *Hard news* - covers topics such as politics, [international affairs](#), [economics](#), and [science](#).

2) *Soft news* - which tends to blur the line between information and entertainment. The term soft news originally referred to feature articles, but it has since been applied to a wider range of news, usually including human-interest stories.

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** (a short title above a newspaper report that usually summarizes the most important information of the story) and **lead** (contains the main idea of the story). These elements are the basis of how story is developed.

General Overview of Some Peculiarities of Newspaper Headlines

The media contains different aspects and the specific characteristics of newspaper headlines are amongst. Headlines in newspapers are very short. They usually do not include punctuation, articles, and auxiliary verbs. They are characterized by specific nature, different vocabulary, laconic wording, frequent omission of phrases. We all know that the title creates a mood about the text, if the title is not properly refined, the desire to read the text is lost, that's why the entire editorial board works together for selecting a valid and accurate title that has something to say and contains intrigue elements at the same time. The purpose of a headline is to attract potential readers. A lot of people only look through the newspaper pages and headlines and decide whether to read a particular text or not depending on the title. A good headline is important, it is the headline that makes the newspaper marketable or vice versa. The function of the title is complex. The title should contain a clear and if possible intriguing message to arise interest in the reader who will look at the newspaper and stop at the article the title of which catches the eye.

Although a newspaper should be impartial and provide the reader with facts without expressing own attitude, it is rare to publish a title/article without subjectivity. There are many linguistic features which can manipulate the text. One of them is using passive voice forms. When the journalist omits the agent of the action deliberately and changes the word order of the sentence, he/she makes the statement impersonal and the participants of action vague for the readers.

"Newspaper is a reflection of the world through language." (Fowler 1999:4). According to Fowler, the newspaper adopts a conversational style to create an illusion of informality, familiarity and friendly attitude, because conversation implies cooperation, agreement among the participants.

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, for instance: 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

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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.*

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 (2009:585) 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".

As for the use of passive voice itself, it prevailed during the 20th century because of the growing need for scientific research to be objective, unbiased, and fair. Nowadays, passive voice is the favored choice in many language genres, particularly academic writing, and news reports (Unver, 2017). One of the fields where passive voice is commonly used is media in the sense that passive forms are used on television programs, in news reports, and on social media networks. In the media, a news reporter intentionally deletes the doer of the action, changing the word order to make facts obscure and unclear (Qassim, 2016). In some situations, the use of passive voice is preferred over active voice. Olukpe (1981) reveals three cases where the passive form is the favored option. First, when the subject of the sentence is unknown or cannot be easily identified as in the sentence *"A child was kidnaped"*. Second, when the subject of the sentence is easily identified from the context as in the sentence *"The singer was praised"*. Third, when a sense of emotion is needed as in the example *"We should have been informed"*. Also, the passive can be used in the following situations: First, to discuss a general truth. Example: *Regulations might be violated*. Second, to focus on the object or recipient of the action rather than the subject. Example: *Mona Lisa was painted a long time ago*. Third, to attempt to be vague about the person responsible for an action. Example: *Mistakes have been made. Others will be blamed*. Fourth, to conform to the norms of writing in news reports.

Example: The study was carried out to investigate the correlation between the two variables.

Within media context in general and news reports in particular, passive voice is very common. Qassim (2016) argues that passive voice is used when the identity of the doer of the action is unimportant as in the example. *Example: Oil spills are often cleaned up with large snakes that are made with a combination of lyophilic and hydrophilic used fibers*. In addition, passive voice is a favored option in news reports when the emphasis is placed on the action or the process itself rather than the doer of action as in the example. *Example: Processes have been developed whereby soft- drink bottles which are made from the same chemical materials*. Passive voice can also be used to impose the power of law or regulations upon employees, students, and citizens as illustrated here. *Example: Littering is forbidden*. Passive voice is used in news reports when the journalist avoids assigning responsibility to anybody as in the following example. *Example: Shao Jiang, 47, a pro-democracy activist, was arrested in the street outside Mansion House.*

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

According to the overview of active and passive voice regarding their forms, types, and usage in newspaper articles, particularly in headlines, this study aims to highlight the use of grammatical category of voice in some selected newspapers and to determine the reasons for utilizing those constructions.

Research Analysis and Methodology

The main goals of the presented paper are:

1. To study and analyze newspaper articles, in particular, the newspaper headlines and investigate the usage of the grammatical forms of active and passive voice as a deliberate style.
2. Our attention is also paid to the preferable assignment of passive voice and its impact on readers.

We have collected the data for our study and used 50 articles from the following papers: *The Independent, The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Guardian*. The selection of articles was based on two criteria: 1. The article discusses hard news. 2. The headline of the newspaper article

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contains instances of the use of active or passive voice. After selecting the articles, headlines with the examples of active/passive voice constructions were listed and then analyzed.

The analysis of data was quantitative and qualitative in nature. We have made *quantitative research* because our main concern was to find out which forms were mostly used in newspaper headlines – active voice forms or passive ones. Which were predominant forms in the selected headlines. As for qualitative research, we have made a deep and thorough analysis of the passive voice constructions in newspaper headlines in order to clarify the reasons for their preferable use and their influence on the attitude of the reader.

Research Findings

Based on our study we have come up to the following findings:

1. Most of the newspaper headlines contain active or passive voice forms, but it is worth mentioning that many of them use passive voice constructions. It turned out that from the selected articles (50), **active voice** forms were only used in 20 of them, while we find passive voice constructions in the rest of them. Some example headlines are given below:

Active Voice forms

1) **Washington, D.C.: Protesters struck a journalist with his own microphone.** (The New York Times, June 2, 2020).

2) **Michigan Charges 16 in False Elector Scheme to Overturn Trump's 2020 Loss.** (The New York Times, July 18, 2023).

3) **Scientists find vital missing ingredient for healthy vegan diet – algae.** (The Guardian, July 15, 2023).

4) **Hundreds flee wildfires for third day as Greece braces for extreme temperatures.** (The Independent, July 18, 2023)

5) **Senators propose crackdown on retired military work for foreign powers.** (The Washington Post, June 20, 2023).

Passive Voice forms (some grammatical elements are omitted)

1) **Minneapolis: A photographer was shot in the eye.** (The New York Times, May 30, 2020);

2) **Woman jailed for killing man by pushing him under Manchester tram.** (The Guardian, October 31, 2017);

3) **Burglar who murdered former navy officer jailed for 27 years.** (The Guardian, November 01, 2017);

4) **Hidden details of ancient Egyptian paintings revealed by chemical imaging.** (The Independent, July 13, 2023);

5) **Charlottesville tiki torch marcher charged in Jan. 6 Capitol riot.** (The Washington Post, July 18, 2023).

2. The results of the analysis revealed that the passive constructions are used in newspaper headlines for many reasons and performing several functions. These reasons can be briefed as follows: 1- when the doer of the action is unimportant, 2- when concentrating on the action in place of the subject, 3- to impose authoritative power, and 4- when the doer of the action is very well known.

Many news reporters use the passive voice with modals when the writer desires to interfere in the events and expresses his opinion to change the reader's mind. 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 ...*, or possibility like *can, could*, or prediction by using *will, would*, or probability as *may, might*. The meaning of the sentence "*Smoking must be forbidden in here*" is deferent from the sentence "*Smoking might be forbidden*". In both sentences, the writer expresses his opinion about what is necessary or possible by using modals. Reporters use passive forms with *by* phrase and other times without. This fact can be attributed to the desire of the journalists to emphasize some truths and hide others. More specifically, whenever the writer uses *by* phrase, he wants to draw the attention of the reader to the doer of the action rather than the action itself, and when *by* phrase is omitted, the action is the focus. Such employment of a *by* phrase in the passive voice aims at changing the reader's behavior or opinion by focusing on one thing and ignoring another.

Journalists also attempt to influence their audience or changing viewpoints by being vague about the doer of the action in the sense that they hide the identity of the doer of the action to shift emphasis to the action itself. This is done by omitting a *by* phrase and replacing it with the preposition with +noun as in the example: *The bank was robbed yesterday with guns and knives*. In this sentence, the writer tries to shift the attention of the readers from the doer of action to the action itself. In this sentence, nothing is said about the robber, instead, the focus is on the robbery and the weapons used in the robbery. Such use of passive voice immerses the reader in details while neglecting the doer of the action, which is understood. Thus, the passive voice is not used aimlessly in newspaper headlines, but, rather, journalists use it to serve several purposes such as focusing on one part of the discourse and ignoring another or avoiding assigning responsibility to anybody. Consequently, the ultimate purpose of using the passive is to affect the perspective of society towards a specific issue.

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Conclusion

The specificity of the title is the most important component when analyzing an article. A lot depends on the title, because it is through the title that cooperation with the reader is carried out. Readers pay more attention to the title than to the article. This is due to the use of certain linguistic features that make the title effective. Journalists use sharp headlines, sharp phrases, emotional vocabulary, rhetorical and graphic techniques to arise the reader's interest.

Grammatical devices of language in press news are a significant technique used by the journalist to express his/her point of view such as using active and passive forms in writing news reports. Many news stories are about action. You want to capture that in

your writing and seize the attention of your audience. One of the ways is by choosing the active voice. The active voice is a basic part of a journalist's toolkit. It is the default way of writing an interesting story. However, the passive voice is not all bad. Sometimes it is the right choice. People in the public eye, particularly politicians, sometimes use the passive voice to obfuscate, confuse and mislead.

When the journalist omits the agent of the action deliberately and changes the word order of the sentence, he makes the statement impersonal and the participants of action vague for the readers.

Therefore, newspaper headlines are quite tricky. They can also be a great way to study the passive voice.

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