Semantic Functions of Passive Constructions in the Holy Qur'an

Khalil Hassan Nofal
Department of English/Language Centre, Philadelphia University, Jordan

Abstract—This study seeks to give a comparative account of passive constructions in terms of semantic functions in the Holy Qur'an where they are widely used in its chapters and verses. A comparison and contrast is indirectly made between what grammarians stated in their books and the cases found in the Holy Qur'an. This is to identify the functions stated by the grammarians and not mentioned in the Holy Qur'an and those found in the Holy Qur'an but not stated by the grammarians. This situation highlights an essential need to have Arabic revised in the light of investigation of the Holy Qur'an as it has been revealed in the straight Arab tongue.

Index Terms—brevity, instructions, prohibition, permission, confirmation, suspense, versification, assonance, thematization, presupposition

I. INTRODUCTION

The active or passive turn is used according as our viewpoint is shifted from one primary to another in the sentence. Active and passive sentences mean essentially the same, yet they are not exactly synonymous. It is therefore redundant for a language to have both turns. As a rule, the person or thing that is the centre of interest at the moment is made the subject (or the theme) of the sentence, and therefore the verb must in some cases be put in the active, in others in the passive.

Most grammar books, if not all, contain lists of functions of passive. The corpus (The Holy Qur'an) revealed that in the vast majority of cases the choice of passive turn is due to one of the following: (i) goal prominence, (ii) agent (actor) prominence, (iii) constructing agentless (short) sentence i.e concealing or de-emphasizing the agent, (iv) elaboration on the agent, (v) retaining the same grammatical subject in successive sentences, (vi) more suitable in complex sentences, and (vii) producing suspense. See (Jespersen (1933) and (1951), Thompson (1960), Palmer (1965), Halliday (1967), Corray (1967), Huddleston (1971) and (1984), Quirk et. al (1972) and (1985) Leech and Svartvik (1975), Allen (1983), Celce - Marcia et.al. (1983) Van Ek (1984) Palmer (1987)


II. SEMANTIC FUNCTIONS

In the Holy Qur'an, the agent is omitted and the passive is used for one of the following reasons: (i) unknown agent, (ii) explicit agent, (iii) implicit agent, (iv) interest in goal / action, (v) concealment or de-emphasizing of the identity of the agent, and (vi) suspense, among others:

I. Passive constructions are used for brevity and conciseness through the ellipsis of the agent participant (actor).

1. "وَأَنَّكَ عَلَيْهِمْ فَقَاتَلْتُمْ بِمِثْلِ مَا قُلْتُمْ بِهِ" (البقرة: 126).
   "And if ye punish, let your punishment be proportionate to the wrong that has been done to you". (Al- Nahl: 126).

2. "وَقَلِّئ表现为 أَرْضَ أَلَّهُم مَا أَدْعُوْنَ فِي مَآ مَعِينَ مَا أُبَلَّوْنَ عَلَى الْجُنُودِ وَقَلِّئ بِقَدْ قَالَ الْمُتَّقِينَ" (هود: 44).
   "Then the word went forth: O earth! swallow up thy water, and O sky! withhold (thy rain)!" And the water abated, and the matter was ended. The Ark rested on Mount Jūdi and the word went forth: "Away with those who do wrong". (Hūd: 44)

The rhetorical advantage of passivization is achieved through brevity and conciseness because it intensively affects the recipient as the attention is focused on the process rather than the details. See (Al- Siyuti: Al-Itgan fi ٥lulum Al-Qur'an, Vol. 3, P. 170).

The sayer of the first past passive verb (قُلِ) in verse (2) above is the Almighty Allah, whereas the sayer of the second past passive verb is either the Almighty Allah when he means cursing and evicting tyrants, or the Prophet Nūh when he means supplicating Allah to curse / evict tyrants. See (Al- Razi: Mafatih Al- Ghaib Vol. 8, P. 539). Moreover, all the passive verb forms are used to indicate the excellence and perfection of the system and symmetry used. See (Ibn Al- Jawziyyah: Al Fawā'id Al- Mushawwiqa ?îlā ٥lûlm Al- Qur'an, P. 264-65).
2. Passive is used when Allah instructs man about matters related to their dealings with one another as illustrated in the following verses:

3).

"And Hell, that Day, is brought (face to face)". (Al-Fajr: 23) instead of saying

b. "وصـِحِبَ اللَّهُ الْمَكْرَاءَ إِلَّا عَلَى الْمَكْرِ" (Qasas: 20)

7.

"حَرَّمَتْ لَكُمُ اللَّهُ مَا خَلَّفَتْكُمُ السَّنَّةُ وَمَا أَهْلَهَا لَخَفْرَ اللَّهِ بِهَا وَخَفْرَ الْأَرْضِ وَالْمَسْتَفْعَةَ وَالْمَكْرَاءَ وَالْمَكْرِينَ" (النساء: 23) "Forbidden to you (for marriage) are: your mother's, daughters, sisters; father's sisters, mothers sister" (Al- Nisâ?: 23)

5. When indicating humbleness, as Prophet Yusuf did when he interpreted the dream to his colleagues in prison:

12).

"(So) hath been decreed that matter whereof ye twain do enquire". (Yusuf: 41) and he did not say

b. "قضيت لكم الأمر الذي فيه تستفتيان" "And the question is (thus) settled? But to Allah do all questions go back (for decision)". (AL-Baqara: 210)

The past passive verb form "قضيت" "is settled" is used to show verification and confirmation. This is to say, this verb indicates what this verse includes will occur for sure. See (Al- Shawkani: Fath Al-Qadir Vol. 1, P. 313).

7. The passive is also used to glorify or dignity the agent participant, in this case the Almighty Allah:

14. a. (الْخَرَاصُونُ "النذاريات": 10)

"Cursed be the conjecturers". (Al- Zâriyât: 10) instead of saying

b. "وجَّهَ اللهُ الْمَكْرَاءَ" (فَجْرٌ: 23)

"And Hell, that Day, is brought (face to face)". (Al-Fajr: 23) instead of saying

b. "وجاء اللهُ بِمَثَلِ الْخَرَاصُونَ"
"And Allah that Day brought Hell\"]. (face to face).

8. Explicit Agent: The passive is used when the agent (the Almighty Allah) is already known and there is no need to mention Him. That is to say, the agent can be easily recovered from the linguistic / situational context:

16. "ذلك الإنسان من فعل الإبادة" (37).
17. "أَثَْٛاثَُٙب َٔىُٓ َِعَ اٌْمَبعِذِ٠َٓ" (الناءمة : 28).
18. "For man was created weak (in resolution)" (Al-Nisā : 28).

The rhetorical advantage of the passive verb in (16) is verification / confirmation, whereas it is ratification / approval in (17).

The agent does not exist in these two verses, and the action (process) is concentrated on. See (Ibn Jinny: Al - Muhtar Vol. 1, p. 66). "If the verb is passivized, this is not because the agent is implicit, but to know that the process actually takes place\". See (Al - Zarkashi: Al - Burhan Vol. 3 .P .144). In the following verses, the passive verbs are used to concentrate on the process, but not on the agent.

19. "When the Qur'an is read, listen to it with attention, and hold your peace: that ye may receive Mercy ". (Al- Afrāf: 204)

9. Passive is used to concentrate on the process, but not on the agent. That is to say, the agent can be easily recovered from the linguistic / situational context:

20. "وَلَفِى الْحُرْسِ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِن فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّمَا يَفْتَخُونَ فِيهِ إِلَّا هُمُ الْعَظِيمُ وَلَيْسُ الْأَرْضُ بِهِ يَدُ الْأَشْرَى" (النَّبِيِّ 23).
21. "وَلَفِى الْحُرْسِ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِن فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّمَا يَفْتَخُونَ فِيهِ إِلَّا هُمُ الْعَظِيمُ وَلَيْسُ الْأَرْضُ بِهِ يَدُ الْأَشْرَى" (النَّبِيِّ 23).
22. "وَلَفِى الْحُرْسِ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِن فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّمَا يَفْتَخُونَ فِيهِ إِلَّا هُمُ الْعَظِيمُ وَلَيْسُ الْأَرْضُ بِهِ يَدُ الْأَشْرَى" (النَّبِيِّ 23).
23. "وَلَفِى الْحُرْسِ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِن فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّمَا يَفْتَخُونَ فِيهِ إِلَّا هُمُ الْعَظِيمُ وَلَيْسُ الْأَرْضُ بِهِ يَدُ الْأَشْرَى" (النَّبِيِّ 23).
24. "وَلَفِى الْحُرْسِ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِن فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّمَا يَفْتَخُونَ فِيهِ إِلَّا هُمُ الْعَظِيمُ وَلَيْسُ الْأَرْضُ بِهِ يَدُ الْأَشْرَى" (النَّبِيِّ 23).
25. "وَلَفِى الْحُرْسِ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمِن فِي الْأَرْضِ إِنَّمَا يَفْتَخُونَ فِيهِ إِلَّا هُمُ الْعَظِيمُ وَلَيْسُ الْأَرْضُ بِهِ يَدُ الْأَشْرَى" (النَّبِيِّ 23).
"She said: "What is the (fitting) punishment for one who formed an evil design against thy wife, but prison or a grievous chastisement?" (Yusuf: 25)

The passive verb form "is torn" is used to degrade satan because he is the only one who adorns or decorates the bad deeds. The active verb "is torn" (we have decorated their bad deeds for them) does not occur in the holy Qur'an absolutely where the pronoun "we" refers to the Almighty Allah. The verb "is torn" is passivized to humiliate Prophet Yusufl by Zulaykha, the wife of Al-Aziz.

12. The passive is used when the agent/door of the action is unknown or unspecified:

"He said: "It was she that sought to seduce me – from my (true) self". And one of her household saw (this) and bore witness, thus: "If it be that his shirt is torn from the front, then is her tale true, and he is a liar! But if it be that his shirt is torn from the back, then is she the liar, and he is telling the truth! 'So when he saw his shirt, that it was torn at the back, - her husband said: 'Behold! It is a snare of you women! Truly, mighty is your snare'" (Yusuf: 26-28).

The verb "is torn" is passivized because the spectators who were absent from the scene do not know who tore Yusufl's shirt. Is it Zulaykha who was in defense or is it Zulaykha who emboldly upon Yusufl?

28.

"When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

It is not important for the spectators to know who brought them the bad news. The most important is the action itself.

29.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

30.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

31.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

32.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

33.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

34.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)

35.

"Wa'ada ya'far 'inda al-ashli lilaj dzan'ud waahu sawda waahu fitrez "al-ajli" (58).

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief" (Al- Nahl: 58)
The past passive verb form (فعل ماضي مرفوع) is used in (34) because it is preceded by the past active form (فعل حاد) in (35) in which the agent is explicit. Al- Razi (Mafāth-u Al- Ghayb Vol.2, P.92) ascribes this variety in the first context (34) to two reasons: disambiguity and the previous linguistic context, i.e. mentioning the special flavour or the special favour the Almighty Allah bestowed upon Children of Israel:

"And amongst them will be passed round vessels of silver and goblets of crystal" (Al- Insān: 15).

"And round about them will serve youths of perpetual (freshness). (Al- Insān: 19).

In (37) passive verb form is used because the most important for the audience is the description of what is roamed with, whereas the description of the roamers is the most important in (38) where active verb form is used.


16. Sometimes passive verb forms are used before the active forms. This refers to the fact that Arabs prefer the most important for them is what is mentioned first. See (Sibawayh : Al- Kitāb Vol.1, P. 15) and (Al- Iskafi : Durat Al- Tanzil, P. 1316). Consider the following verses:

"And amongst them will be passed round vessels of silver and goblets of crystal" (Al- Insān: 15),

"And round about them will serve youths of perpetual (freshness). (Al- Insān: 19).

In (37) passive verb form is used because the most important for the audience is the description of what is roamed with, whereas the description of the roamers is the most important in (38) where active verb form is used.

17. Passive verbs forms are used in the Holy Qur'an to show mockery / irony / sarcasm. (Al- Naysaburi: Ghra'ib Al- Qur'an Vol. 1, P. 324) and (Abu Hayyan: Al- Bahr Al- Muhit Vol. 1, P. 346). In the second context (35) the ambiguity is eliminated as the agent is stated previously in (34) and this suits the meaning more.

18. Thematization

The choice of passive is a mode of expression. That is "the notion of passive is fundamentally pragmatic" (Givon, 1990, P. 566). Since every speech event takes place in a social context, the passive offers speakers a way of "information packaging" which allows prominence to fall on participants affected by the process rather than the actors (cf. Foly and Van Valin, 1985). The passive enables the speakers to place the agent and participant affected in the structure of information in "new" and "old" slot respectively (cf. Halliday, 1994). In this context, the passive construction is, like topicalization, a case of foregrounding which draws our attention to an element preminently placed, namely, the affected participant. (cf. Keenan, 1985, P. 243). The passive is used when the attention of the reader / hearer is directed to the person / thing (done – to) affected by the action rather than the doer (agent) of the action i.e. preposing the "done to" to be the departure point.

19. Passive is also used when the function is not to bring the doer (agent) into view, but to highlight the action (process) itself.

"A Book revealed unto thee, so let thy heart be oppressed no more by any difficulty on that account, that with it thou mightiest warn (the erring) and a reminder to the Believers." (Al- Afrāf: 147).

"If they (the wrong – doers) implore relief they will be granted water like melted brass that will scold their faces". (Al – Kahf: 29)

Ordinarily, the passive verb forms (بِعَدَةٍ) and (بِعَدَةٍ) are collocationally used with right – doers, but they are used with (بِعَدَةٍ) (those who reject Our Signs) in (39) and (بِعَدَةٍ) (tyrants) in (38) because they are mocked.

20. Passive constructions are also used to depict the invisible / supernatural scenes of Garden and Fire in the

45. And fear the Fire, which is prepared for those who reject Faith. (Al- Imrān: 131).

46. "Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord and for a Garden whose width is that (of the whole) of the heavens and of the earth prepared for the righteous". (Al- Imrān: 133)

The passive verb form (عَدَّلَ) is used when the Almighty Allah talks about the garden (Garden) and Hell (Hell) with their general names. The active verb form (عَدَّلَ) is used when Allah uses other names of the garden (Garden) and (Hell) or their properties or their signs / meanings or indications.

47. "Verily Allah has cursed the unbelievers and prepared them a blazing Fire" (Al- Ahzāb: 64).

48. "The Wrath of Allah is on them: He has cursed them and got Hell ready for them, and evil is it for a destination". (Al- Faith: 6)

49. "Gardens of Eternity which they will enter: beneath them flow (pleasant) rivers". (Al- Nahl: 31).

50. "And caused their people to descend to the House of Prediction" (Ibrāhīm: 28).

51. "Soon I will cast him into Hell – Fire!" (Al-Muddaththir: 26)

52. "Who has, out of His Bounty, settled us in a Home that will last". (Fatir: 35)

53. "I will make set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgment, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly" (Al-Namūdż: 65).

54. "But take witnesses whenever ye make a commercial contract; and neither scribe nor witness suffers harm". (Al- Baqara: 282).

55. "O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah and leave off business" (Al- Jumāt: 9).

56. "The answer of the believers, when summoned to Allah and His Messenger, in order that He may judge between them, is no other than this: They say, "We hear and we obey." (Al- Nūr: 51).

57. "And cause them to be measured a Day of Life comparable to that of which We have made you a witness" (Al- Nisā': 47).

58. "We shall set up scales of justice for the Day of Judgment, so that not a soul will be dealt with unjustly" (Al- Nābūt: 47)

59. "The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger, and strive with mighty and main for mischief through the land: execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides, or exile from the land."

60. "It is prescribed, when death approaches any of you, if he leave any goods, that he make a bequest to parents and next of kin" (Al- Baqara: 180).

In the above verses neither scribe nor witness (whoever they are) should suffer harm, the Believers, (whoever they are) and (whoever the caller is) should leave off business and hasten to Remembrance of Allah, the Believers (whoever they are), when summoned to Allah and His Messenger should say "We hear and obey", no one (whoever he is) will be dealt with unjustly, those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger (whoever they are) should be punished through execution, or crucifixion, or the cutting off of hands and feet from opposite sides or exile from the land, and it is prescribed to you (whoever you are) when death approaches, you should make a bequest to parents and next of kin.

22. Passive constructions are used for Allah to express His disapproval, criticism, reprimand, dispraise and blame. The following are illustrative examples:

61. "Do you think that he will be left uncontrolled, (without purpose)?" (Al- Qiyāmā: 36)
"Were not My Signs rehearsed to you, and ye did but treat them as falsehoods"? (Al- Mu?minûn :105).

"Does he not know and that which is (locked up) in (human) breast is made manifest when that which is in the graves is scattered abroad?" (Al- Nââyât: 9-10).

"Which is better? – he that he is cast in the fire, or he that comes safe through, on the Day of Judgment" (Fusilat: 40).

"Is he, then, to whom the evil of his conduct is made alluring, so that he looks upon it". (Fâtîr: 8).

"Be their hands tied up and be they accused for the blasphemy they utter" (Al- Mâ?ida: 64).

"Was not the covenant of the Book taken from them, they would not ascribe to Allah anything but the truth". (Al- A?râf: 169)

"What! Has the Messenger been sent to him – of all persons among us? But they are in doubt." (Sâd: 8).

"They say "Why is not a sign sent down to him from his Lord!" (Al-An?âm: 37)

"Say: "I but follow what is revealed to me from my Lord". (Al-A?râf: 203).

"Ye people of the book! Why dispute ye about Abraham, when the Torah and Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have ye no understanding?" (Al- Imrân: 65)

Communicatively, the above passive construction could be an answer to the question "What happened?" what is presupposed, therefore, is, in Enkrist's words (1979, P. 137), "information that the speaker (His Almighty Allah in this context) believes that the recipients of the message already have." Thus the? unzilat" (were revealed) is presented as theme and old information and "? al – tawrah" (the Torah) and al - ?injîl" (the Gospel) counts as " new " information. Therefore, the passive form "? unzilat" (were revealed) coincides at the message, whereas the affected participant occurs as " new " within the rheme.

III. Conclusion

The facts presented in this paper demonstrate that voice is a grammatical category that exists in Arabic in general and in the Holy Qur'an in particular for certain purposes intended by the Almighty Allah. They also
prove it is one of the options available to native speakers of Arabic to express their viewpoints, value system, beliefs and assumptions through the semantic functions used to convey certain communicative functions.

Qu'anic discourse is linguistic scenery characterized by a rainbow of syntactic, semantic and rhetoric features that are distinct from other types of Arabic prose.

Through this study we tried to investigate the semantic and stylistic functions of the passive constructions in the Holy Qur'an. Such semantic functions are sometimes similar to those stated by the grammarians and sometimes they are different.

IV. IMPLICATION

Although this study is linguistically descriptive and is not pedagogically oriented, it may have, nonetheless, pedagogical implications for foreign language teachers, to diagnose and remedy the difficulties their students may encounter, translators, textbook writers, test makers, as well as syllabus designers.

Moreover, this study may be of great help to ESP practitioners, who are interested in preparing ESP teaching materials based on the analysis of this authentic text (The Holy Qur'an) and concerned with the semantic functions and meanings which are conveyed by the syntactic passive structures.

REFERENCES


© 2013 ACADEMY PUBLISHER
Khalil Hassan Nofal obtained his Ph.D from Jordan University in 2002. He occupied some educational, administrative and academic posts: School Supervisor (English), EDC, Administration Officer, and General Education Specialists / UNRWA – UNESCO. He has been working as chair / Department of English and Director/ Language Centre – Philadelphia University- Jordan. He is Editorial Board member in (IJSST), (IER), and (EJBSS) and APETAU member.