An Investigation of the Frequency of Occurrence of Passive Structures in Classical and Modern Persian Literature

Ahmad Sabouri Kashani
Educational Development Center, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

Marzie Taheri
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Elham Fallah
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Fatemeh Niknezhad
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Saeideh Mansouri
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Farzad Mahmoudi
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Maryam Bagheri
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Fereshte Rahnavard
Tonekabon Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

Abstract—This paper investigates the frequency of occurrence of the passive and impersonal structures at two different periods of Persian literature, namely, classic and modern literature to decide on the tendency of their language use. To do so, a number of texts from the two periods were selected and analyzed. The quantitative study of the data shows that the occurrence of the impersonal structure is much more frequent in both classic and modern texts. The results indicated that Persian writers tend to use impersonal structures rather than the passive voice is not used. The findings also indicated that the passive voice is not so common in Persian.

Index Terms—passive structure, impersonal structure, classic prose, modern prose

I. INTRODUCTION

Languages have different classifications of grammatical voice. English uses active, middle and passive verbs. The active voice is most common in many languages and represents the normal case where the subject of the verb is an agent. According to Keenan & Dryer (2007), the main function of the passive is topicalization of a semantic role like patient in the sentence. In other words, it moves this semantic role, which was originally part of the rheme, to the beginning of the sentence and so presents it as the theme.

In English syntax, a passive structure occurs when the grammatical subject of the verb is functionally the object or the result of the action articulated by the verb. The agent or source of the action may be inserted in a prepositional phrase (Hubbuch, 2006). The passive voice is a grammatical construction that the subject of a passive sentence or clause is the recipient of the action rather than the performer (Arianna, 2001).

According to Perlmutter & Postal (1977), universal phenomena are engendered for transition of a clause from the active to a passive voice:

a. Subject of a passive sentence is direct object of an active one.

b. Subject in an active sentence is neither the subject nor the direct object of the corresponding passive.

c. A passive clause is an intransitive clause in the absence of another rule permitting some further nominal to be the direct object of the clause. (p. 76)
There is still no agreement about passive structure in Persian and this structure has always been controversial e.g. Vahidia-Kamyar (2003) claims that the occurrence of the passive in Persian is not frequent but is used only in the following cases:

- When the agent is unknown or the speaker does not want to name him/her.
- When the addressee knows the agent already.
- When the speaker takes the information for granted; e.g. ‘zamin va aseman afaride shod’ (Heaven and earth were created.).(p. 53).

Some scholars believe that there is no passive structure in Persian and what is called passive is in reality ‘inchoative structure’ (Moyne, 1974). Inchoative structure expresses a change in the state of things e.g. the verb yellow in ‘The leaves yellowed’(Richards, 1999). Lambton (1983) states that in Persian, the passive voice will not be used if it is possible to use theactive one e.g. the sentence ‘I was hit by him.’ can be translated as ‘He hit me.’ i.e. [ou mara zad]. Some other scholars in this field limit the use of passive structures to cases where there is no agent. According to Soheili (1976) the direct object is extraposed to the place of the subject and the subject is omitted through the process of passivization.

Moreover, Keenan (1985) suggests that there is a kind of grammatical structure which uses a third person with the third person verb. He called this structure ‘impersonal’, since the plural sign in these structures does not refer to definite people. Keenan adds that in languages with the main passive structures we also find this impersonal structure.

With all controversies that exist regarding the structure and use of passive voice and other forms which are preferred in Persian, very few studies have investigated the subject.

A. Statement of the Problem

In Persian there are different perspectives about passive voice which is a common grammatical voice in English. Several comparative studies have been carried out on the use of passive structures in English and Persian translated texts. Moreover, to the best of researchers’ knowledge, there has been little work on the structure(s) other than the passive structure (e.g., impersonal constructions) in Persian.

B. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is twofold: to investigate the frequency of passive structure in Persian classic and modern prose and to study the impersonal construction as a substitute structure for passive voice and its occurrence in Persian to see whether it is the passive voice that is commonly used in Persian or the instances that are extracted from Persian texts are mostly impersonal construction. Therefore, the present research attempts to gain a better understanding of the frequency and context of the passive and impersonal constructions in classic and modern texts.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The passive voice has long been a controversial sentence construction. Linguists have varied opinions about its general merit as a rhetorical device and about when and how it should be used. For decades, passives as a major grammatical category in both English and Persian have been subject to much research. There is no agreement about the existence of passive voice in Persian among linguists. Some linguists (Khayampour, 1973; Moyne, 1974; Vahidi Langeroudi, 1998) argued for the existence of passive structure in Persian. They believe that active voice seem more ‘advisable’ than the passive voice. However, in English language the passive voice is used regularly because it is a common feature in different texts. Many authors agree that English speakers have a tendency to use passive voice more frequently especially in formal texts (Zhonghua Xiao, 2007). In English, Passives are used more in written texts than spoken ones.

A. Passive Structure in English

Passive voice constructions can be divided into various groups by using different criteria. For example, focusing on the presence or absence of a by-phrase, Huddleston and Pullum (2002) distinguished short from long passive. Accordingly, the distinction is derived from the presence or absence of the agent in the passive clause.

SHORT: His plan was rejected.
LONG: His plan was rejected by the board.

The short passive, also called ‘agentless’ (Biber et al, 1999), is realized by the omission of the agent. The most frequent passive structure in finite clauses is short dynamic be-passive. The main function of the short dynamic passive is to leave the initiator of an action (the agent) unexpressed because it is unknown, redundant, or irrelevant. Veselovská and Emonds (2005) call this process as ‘deagentivisation’. Short dynamic passives are most common in the academic prose (Biber et al, 2002).

In the long passive the agent is expressed in a by-phrase (Biber et al, 2002). As can be seen in the example, the agent of the action in the long passive is expressed through a by-phrase. However, Biber et al. (2002) point out that in some cases the by-phrase will specify a different semantic role (Biber et al, 1999).

There is another type of passive where their past participle behaves, to a greater or lesser extent, like an adjective. This passive type acts as a passive case despite their active equivalent. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) refer to this type
of passive as adjectival passives. Later, Quirk(1985) classifies them into semi-passives and pseudo-passives, however, in English grammar some of them are defined as stative passive to differentiate them from real passive and when you call something pseudo passive you mean it is not really passive though, in the first sight, one might take them for passive.

Prepositional passive is the other type of passive structure which, according to Alsina (2009), has all features of an acceptable passive construction except that the subject does not agree to an object of the verb in active form. In other words, in this type of passive the object is a prepositional complement. In Huddleston and Pullum (2002) terminology, prepositional passive can be divided in to two categories: (a) prepositional passive with preposition specified by the verb or verbal idiom and (b) prepositional passive where the preposition is less constrained.

Although passive structure normally includes be + past participle, it is also possible to use get + past participle. In informal language, Siewierska (1984) maintains that the English get-passive is described as colloquial or social dialect, with “be” -passives usually considered more formal than “get”-passives. Pullum (2014) believes that the intrasitive verb get, which is not an auxiliary, has developed a special grammaticized use in marking an additional type of passive.

Last but not least, Contemporary English grammar, based on generative linguistics, (for instance, Quirk et al(1985) describes English verb group as:

$$\text{Tns (M) (have-en) (be-ing) (be-en) V}$$

With ‘tense’ as the only obligatory element within the AUX. Applying the relevant phrase structure rule for past tense, modal may, verb eat lunch, for male third person singular produces: he might eat his lunch, and perfect aspect: he might have eaten his lunch, adding progressive aspect: he might have been eating his lunch. While for the past tens, modal may, perfect aspect, prog aspect, passive produces: his lunch might have been being eaten.

**B. Passive Voice in Persian**

There are various perspectives on passive structure in Persian. Moyne (1974) points out that the passive voice does not exist in Persian but the distinction of passive and active voices are intransitive verbs which are accompanied by the verb shodan, (become). Similarly, Khayampour (1973), rejects the existence of passive voice since he believes that there is no specific form in Persian to express such a construction. He adds passive voice and the deputy of the doer “ndib fāː’i’il” in Ali was killed (Ali koshte shod) is an incomplete verb and killed (koshte shod) is the complement for the subject. In addition, Vahedi Langeroudi (1998) questioned the existence of passive voice in Persian. He considered the passive voice with the verb become (shodan) as a kind of compound verb. Lambton (1983) argued that “if it is possible to use the active structure, the passive one will not be used” (p.50). For example, the sentence B is more acceptable than A in the following example.

**A:** the window was broken by Ali (shishe tavasote Ali shekaste shod)

**B:** Ali broke the window (Ali shishe ra shekast)

Some Iranian scholars (Dabir moghadam, 1985; Meshkatodini, 2005) define passive structures as past participle of the verb and the auxiliary verb shodan. Others have considered other structures, for example, the structures of the verbs in third person plural (Bateni, 1969; Vahidian Kamyar, 1992; Tayyeb, 2001; Pakravan, 2002) as passive, which has led to more confusion when readers are not so careful about the difference between passive voice (an element within the AUX in verb phrase) and passive meaning, which commonly expressed by passive voice in English and may be expressed by other constructions in a certain language.

**C. Passive Structures in Traditional Grammar**

In the earliest traditional grammar for Persian language, a distinction was made between active and passive cases. The active verb was defined as a verb connected to the subject (Ahmad neshast); however, passive verbs referred to the object (Sohrab koshte shod). Ahmadi Givi (2005) mentioned, after omitting the subject of the sentence different structures of the verb become (shodan) and the participle of main verb will be constructed in the common process of passivization. Then, passive will be transformed to the subject position and the proposition “ra” as the symbol of passive will be dropped in the sentence. There should be an agreement of the structure in the passive voice and the new subject or previous passive. In a nutshell, for constructing participle “h-eh” should be added to the past form of the verb and (become) shodan is inflected for the past. For example: Ali brings the book (Ali ketab ra avard) should change to the book was brought (ketab avardehand). Farshidvard (2005) labeled ‘passivied’ verb for the verbs become (shodan) and coming (amadan)

**D. New Perspective to the Passive Structure**

Reviewing the related literature would reveal that there are some additional points despite what discussed earlier. In the traditional Persian, Sometimes the structure of passive is used in a number of verbs such as become (shodan), come (amadan) and turn (gashhtan), Shariat (1988) postulated that sometimes in the structure of passive voice some supplementary Persian or Arabic word (such as pasand amad; gereftar shod) conveying the meaning of participle will be used instead of (PP+ h-eh).

Some linguists (Bateni, 1965; Vahidian Kamyar, 2003) exemplify that the sentence Ali was killed (Ali ra koshtand) include the third person plural verbs without subject which is regarded as a kind of passive. Ahmadi Givi (2005) points out that some specific Persian verbs like avaredehand, naqīl kardand, miguyand are classified in this passive voice.
Additionally, some other linguists believed that there is an even middle structure in Persian as well as passive structure. They considered the second verb in the following pairs as middle verbs: baz kardan/baz shodan, gool zadan/gool khordan, shekast dadan/shekast khordan. However, Rasekhmahand (2007) and Haspelmath, (1993) denied the existence of middle verbs in Persian. They called such verbs anti-causative verb. In fact, such structures are neither Persian nor middle but belong to a more general process called transitivity alternation.

E. Syntax and Reference
The theory of syntax and reference was first established as a theory at the beginning of the 80s by linguists such as VanValin and Foly. According to this theory, language is a system of social communicative action in which grammatical structures are used to express meaning. According to Van Valin (2005), while all languages meet the same communicative purposes, different languages employ different tools to achieve this goal. An important aspect of these differences is related to different ways of interacting syntax, semantics and pragmatics in different languages. That is why this theory has paid particular attention to the typology and language universals. Role and reference grammar verifies the existence of two kinds of passive structures in Persian language.

In role and reference grammar a passive structure is identified according to the privilege of syntactic argument. In active cases, the affecting factor appears as privileged syntactic argument while in passive sentences the affected factors serves this position. Shariat (1988, p.165) believes that “a passive verb is attributed to the direct object like: Hassan was seen (Hassan dide shod) in which the verb phrase “was seen” (dide shod)” is a passive case that attributes to the direct object, “Hassan”. Accordingly, Khanlari (1985) argue that the difference between active and passive lies in the attribution of the verb to the subject and object respectively. He also believes that the theme is the subject in the active sentence and object in the passive sentence respectively.

Anvari and Ahmadi Givi (1996) define passive case as a verb whose subject is not known. For instance, the sentence “the teacher was seen in the street” the verb is attributed to the object. It is due to the transitive verb that can bear an object. The passive verbs comprised past participle and an auxiliary verb. A number of verbs such as release, be lost and be seen are transitive form of the passive verb.

F. Main Passive
The main passive is the common passive structure of Persian. It consists of past participle plus the verb shodan. In this type of passive, the undergoer noun phrase will be placed in the subject position and the actor noun phrase will be either omitted completely or be placed periphery in the prepositional phrase. Consider the following examples:

a. Ahoo be daste shekarchi koshte shod.
   b. Ahoo koshte shod.

In the example (a) above, “Aadoo”, undergoer noun phrase, plays the role of privileged syntactic argument. This sentence indicates a syntactic agreement. The word shekarchi plays periphery in the prepositional phrase. On the other hand, the example (b) the word shekarchi was omitted and only undergoer noun phrase replaced as subject. What is common in Persian is that the second example is more relevant. According to Mahootian (1997), we use passive structures in Persian when the agent is unknown or we do not want to mention it. Consider the following examples:

a. Name neveshte shod.
   b. Shishe shekaste shod.

As it is clear in these examples, these passive structures completely follow the role and reference theory. This kind of passive is the most common structure in languages all over the world.

G. Impersonal Constructions
Linguists have sometimes considered another type of structure as passive. This structure includes sentences with no subjects which include third person plural verbs. For example:

a. Mashin ra dozdid/ Mashin dozdideh shod.
   b. Khane ra kharab kardan/ Khane kharab shod.

Bateni called this structure “semantic passives”. However, Tayyeb (2001) viewed such sentences as passives having fixed person. According to Keenan (1985), there is a kind of grammatical structure in many languages which lack the main passive structure. This structure is used instead of passive structures. He mentioned that the most common tool to express this structure is third person plural verb. He called this structure “impersonal”, since the plural sign does not refer to definite people. Keenan (1985) added that this structure is also found in languages which have main passive structures. Anyway, Keenan viewed such structures as a kind of passive structure. The interesting point is that using the third person singular form of the verbs will change the sentences into an active voice. For example:

a. Mashin ra dozdid.
   b. Khane ra kharab kard.

Rezai and Tayyeb (2006) argued that in these sentences, the noun phrase subject is omitted because it is not related to new information but presupposed, as a result they are naturally omitted.

III. METHODOLOGY
A. Instrumentation

As the purpose of this study was to analyze the passive and impersonal structures and their frequencies in Persian, suitable data was needed. In selecting the texts for the study, two issues were taken into account. First, the selected texts were not a translated text of other languages into Persian. The main reason is that translated texts are vulnerable to the structures of source text; as a result, they can not provide reliable data for this study. Second, two types of texts, namely, classic and modern Persian prose were selected as the source of data collection. The selection of classic and modern Persian prose would present robust evidence on the use of such structures in Persian literary texts. The sources of data collection are presented in the following table.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classic prose</th>
<th>Modern prose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Golestan – e - saadi</td>
<td>By Saadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tazkirat al-Awliya</td>
<td>By Attar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahri Chon Behesht (city like paradise)</td>
<td>By Sadeq Chubak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Żan-e Ziaedi (The superfluous woman)</td>
<td>By Jalal Al-e Ahmad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Šahne-mah-bâzi (the puppet show)</td>
<td>By Sadeq Chubak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordeh kharha and Atash Parast</td>
<td>By Sadeq Hedayat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. Procedure of Data Collection and Data Analysis

In order to collect the samples of passive and impersonal structures, the two type of literary prose were read meticulously and instances of each type of structure were jotted down. To ensure that all the instances of the passive and impersonal structures have been covered, the researchers reexamined the text. After collecting the data, the frequency of each type of structure was used to discuss the construction of each structure in Persian. The extracted sentences are presented in the appendix.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

As already mentioned, this research aims to investigate the frequency of occurrence of the passive and impersonal structures in Persian. To achieve the objective of this study, the researcher extracted the main passive and impersonal structures and considered the frequency of the passive structures in the texts. The number of passive structures in the samples of the aforementioned texts were counted. The following table shows the frequency of passive and impersonal structures in the classic prose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of sentences</th>
<th>Total number of the main passive</th>
<th>Total number of the Impersonal constructions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Golestan – e - saadi</td>
<td>3382</td>
<td>2 (0.05%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tazkirat al-Awliya</td>
<td>4096</td>
<td>6 (0.14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7478</td>
<td>8 (0.1%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1 indicates, there were 2 passives and 26 impersonal structures among the 3382 sentences selected from the book Golestan –e Saadi; and 6 passives and 53 impersonal structures have been identified among 4096 sentences selected from the book Tazkeratol oliya. In sum, there were 8 passive structures and 79 impersonal structures among 7478 sentences in the two texts. Statistically speaking, in the classic texts, the percentage of the passive sentences was 0.1%, and the percentage of the impersonal sentences was 1.05%, i.e., over 10 times. The results indicate that Impersonal constructions frequency is more than ten times as frequent as that of the passive in Persian classic texts.

To indicate the frequency of passive and impersonal structures in modern prose, several texts have been examined. The following table shows the frequency of the two structures in the modern prose.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of sentences</th>
<th>Total number of the main passive</th>
<th>Total number of the Impersonal passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boof –e- Kour</td>
<td>1302</td>
<td>2 (0.15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahri Chon Behesht</td>
<td>1168</td>
<td>1 (0.08%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Żan-e Ziaedi</td>
<td>987</td>
<td>5 (0.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gohar Morad</td>
<td>1338</td>
<td>2 (0.14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bozorg-e-Alavi</td>
<td>616</td>
<td>4 (0.64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Šeyma-šab-bâzi</td>
<td>1056</td>
<td>2 (0.18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordeh kharha and Atash Parast</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>1 (0.15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7129</td>
<td>17 (0.23%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As table 2 indicates, 17 passive and 43 impersonal instances were found in the corpus of modern prose. Accordingly, except for one text (Ḵeyma-sab-bāzi) where the number of main passive was 2 but no impersonal structures were found, in the other texts the number of impersonal constructions was greater. Statistically speaking, in the modern texts, the percentage of the passive sentences was 0.24%, and the percentage of the impersonal sentences was 0.60%, which means impersonal constructions were almost 3 times more frequent.

V. CONCLUSION

As already mentioned, the frequency of impersonal structures was shown to be much higher than the frequency of passive structures in the two periods. The findings revealed that Persian writers prefer to use more active voice than passive or impersonal structures. However, when Persian writers feel the necessity to express passive meaning, they tend to use impersonal structures rather than main passive ones.

One implication of this study might be that in translation from English to Persian, active voice should always be the first choice; changing to passive must only occur appropriately. On the other hand, overuses or misuses of passive voice will also lead to poor translation.

APPENDIX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main passive</th>
<th>Impersonal passive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Golestan-e-Sadi</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. در رعايت خاطرش هرچه تمام</td>
<td>1. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. تر سعی كرده شود</td>
<td>2. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. جوان دیگ یحقق شد.</td>
<td>3. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tazkirat al-Awliya</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. آن میآید یک زمینه از جمله هنری</td>
<td>1. آن را گفتند که مصلحت تو آنست که</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. یک زمینه از جمله هنری</td>
<td>3. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. یک زمینه از جمله هنری</td>
<td>4. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. یک زمینه از جمله هنری</td>
<td>5. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. یک زمینه از جمله هنری</td>
<td>6. چون گوشند</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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موردی عکس ندارد.

1. به صداي سايي مختراعک‌ها شنده‌شد.
2. یک صفحه به محض همه مهارگان اضافه شده‌بوشد.
3. نگاه‌هايی که جز بی علاقگي نسبت به همه‌چيز در آن
4. همه را شمرده بودند.
5. در اين صبح که از خانه واخسته گردند.
6. چه درک‌هاي از خاک‌رو به انداخته باشند.

References


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Her area of interest includes language teaching and learning techniques and strategies.

Marzie Taberi is a PhD candidate in TEFL. She is currently teaching English at schools and universities in Mazandaran, Iran. Her area of interest includes language teaching and learning techniques and strategies.
Elham Fallah is a PhD candidate in TEFL. She is currently teaching English at universities in Mazandaran, Iran. Her area of interest includes language assessments.

Fatemeh Niknezhad is a PhD candidate in TEFL. She is currently teaching English at universities in Mazandaran, Iran. Her area of interest includes language teaching and learning techniques and strategies.

Saeideh Mansouri is a PhD candidate in TEFL. She is a faculty member of Chalous Islamic Azad university, Mazandaran, Iran. Her area of interest includes language teaching assessment.

Farzad Mahmoudi is a PhD candidate in TEFL. He is currently teaching English at universities in Mazandaran, Iran. His area of interest includes language Teaching and Translation.

Maryam Bagheri is a PhD candidate in TEFL. She is currently teaching English at universities in Gilan, Iran. Her area of interest includes language Teaching and Translation.

Fereshte Rahnavard is a PhD candidate in TEFL. She is currently teaching English at universities in Gilan, Iran. Her area of interest includes language Teaching and assessment.