

PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH AND BULGARIAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract: *In this paper we will cover the usage and peculiarities, mainly of passive voice, and secondly of active, in both English and Bulgarian language. The differences will be pointed out and then compared. Summarization of occasions when passive voice is more appropriate is given, as well as creative ways to use it, forms in some English tenses, forming of questions, personal and impersonal passive, and at the end there are few advices for correct, precise and exact usage of passive voice.*

Keywords: *passive voice, tense, action, receiver, comparative analysis*

INTRODUCTION

Active voice and passive voice are grammatical constructions that communicate certain information about an action. Specifically, APA (American Psychological Association) explains that *voice* shows relationships between the verb and the subject and/or object. Writers need to be intentional about *voice* in order to ensure clarity. The usage of *active voice* often improves clarity, while *passive voice* can help avoid unnecessary repetition. The same principle goes in Bulgarian language: the grammatical category that determines on whom is the action exercised is called “залог” and the passive form is called “страдателен залог”.

EXPOSITION

Form of passive voice in English and Bulgarian language

Таблица 1 Forms for passive voice in English and Bulgarian language

in English	in Bulgarian
subject + finite form of to be + past participle	подлог (subject) + бях/съм/бъда (to be) + гл. от свършен или несвършен вид
Example: The letter was written.	Example: Писмото беше написано.

**It is important to know that there is no such grammatical category as „вид“ in English. Although, it is not so crucial to the passive construction, it changes the length and the meaning of the sentences a bit.*

When to use passive voice

Sometimes, even in scholarly writing, the *passive voice* may be used intentionally and strategically. A writer may intentionally include the subject later in the sentence so as to reduce the emphasis and/or its importance in the thought expressed. See the following examples of intentional *passive voice* to indicate emphasis:

Example 1: Schools not meeting AYP for 2 consecutive years will be placed on a "needs improvement" list by the State's Department of Education. / Училищата, непокриващи АЙП за две последователни години ще бъдат поставени от Държавния департамент на образованието в листата с „нуждаещи се от подобрене“.

• Here, all actors taking actions are identified, but this is in the *passive voice* as the State's Department of Education is the actor doing the placing, but this verb precedes the actor. That may be an intentional usage of the *passive voice*, to highlight schools not meeting AYP.

• To write this in the *active voice*, it would be phrased: "*The State's Department of Education will place schools not meeting AYP for 2 consecutive years on a "needs improvement" list.*" / Държавния департамент на образованието ще постави училищата, които не покриват АЙП за две години в листата за „нуждаещи се от подобрене.“ The current sentence places the focus on the State's Department of Education, not the schools.

Example 2: Participants in the study were gifted with a 5£ coffee gift card, which I gave them upon completion of their interview. / Участниците в проучването бяха наградени с петдоларов ваучер за кафе, който им дадох след завършване на интервюто.

• As the writer and researcher, I may want to vary my sentence structure in order to avoid the same beginning in several occasions: "*I provided/gave/gifted...*" Instead of "~~*I provided the participants with 5£ gift cards, which I gave them upon the completion of the interview.*~~", the 2nd example is written in the *passive voice*, but the meaning is clear.

In Bulgarian the *passive voice* is used in scholarly writing in the same way as in English – to avoid repetition and change the used register more on the official side.

Here are three common uses of the *passive voice* both in English and Bulgarian language:

1. Reports of crimes or incidents with unknown perpetrators

My car was stolen yesterday. / Колата ми беше открадната вчера.

If we knew who stole the car, it probably wouldn't be such a big problem. The *passive voice* puts emphasis on **the stolen item** and **the action of theft** – these are the important facts to be understood in the particular situation.

2. Scientific contexts

The rat was placed into a T-shaped maze. / Плъхът беше поставен в Т-образния лабиринт.

Scientists placed the rat into the maze. But that's less important than the experiment they're conducting, because in scholarly experiments we need to be **maximally objective** and leave out all subjective elements, including ourselves, which in this case is the pronoun "I" or "we", etc. Therefore, we ought to use *passive voice*.

3. When you want to emphasize an action itself and the doer of the action is irrelevant or distracting:

The suspect was apprehended by the policeman. / Заподозреният беше задържан от полицейския инспектор.

It is not so important who arrested the suspect or even the suspect himself, but that the **act of apprehension** took place.

Creative ways to use the passive voice

It is interesting to note some uses of the *passive voice* in different situations. For example, if we want to avoid getting blamed and get away with something, without making it crystal-clear who is at fault, why not say it like this:

"Mistakes were made." / „Някои грешки бяха направени.“

instead of

"We made mistakes." / „Ние допуснахме някои грешки.“

or *"I made some mistakes."* / „Аз допуснах някои грешки.“

This strategy is often used by politicians all across the world, including Bulgaria. They apologize while hiding their or their parties' fault with this simple statement: "*Mistakes were made.*"

Personal and impersonal passive

Personal Passive simply means that the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence. So every verb that needs an object (transitive verb) can form a personal passive.

Example:

They build houses. – Houses are built. /Те строят къщи. – Строят се къщи.

In Bulgarian the second form is used when someone wants to express some objective process without taking direct relation to it. For example, “*houses are built*” could be said if there are construction sites in some highly crowded region of Sofia, but without the speaker living there, or having work related to that region or even having seen them himself. Whereas, the first case reveals that the speaker has some relation and knowledge of the process executed. In Bulgarian the equivalent of *personal passive* is a verb construction with transitive verb + the morpheme “се” (сложна глаголна форма с преходен деятелен глагол и частицата „се“) – *Example: Икономическата система се руши.*

Verbs without an object (intransitive verb) normally cannot form a personal passive sentence (as there is no object that can become the subject of the passive sentence). If you want to use an intransitive verb in passive voice, you need an impersonal construction – therefore this *passive* is called *Impersonal Passive*.

Example: he says – it is said

Impersonal Passive is not as common in English as in some other languages (e.g. German, Latin). In English, *Impersonal Passive* is only possible with verbs of perception (e.g. say, think, know).

Example: They say that women live longer than men. – It is said that women live longer than men.

Although *Impersonal Passive* is possible here, *Personal Passive* is more common.

Example: They say that women live longer than men. – Women are said to live longer than men.

The **subject of the subordinate clause** (women) goes to the beginning of the sentence; the **verb of perception** is put into *passive voice*. The rest of the sentence is added using an infinitive construction with 'to' (certain auxiliary verbs and *that* are dropped).

In Bulgarian when the subject doesn't coincide with the receiver of the action, we say it is an “impersonal variant” (безличен вариант). These constructs are very abstract and short: „Свечери се.“, “Свърши се.” or „Не се ли наспахте вече?“ Here we can't determine neither the doer nor the receiver, for that reason it is necessary to use only verbs in third person singular (Зл., ед.ч.), with or without the morpheme „се“.

The forms “*мръква*” and “*мръква се*” are equal in meaning, but there are cases when the use of “се” is necessary, example: „*Тук не се пуши.*“ instead of “*Тук не пуши.*”

Examples in different tenses (Таб. 2)

Таблица 2 Active and passive voice in different English tenses

TENSE	ACTIVE VOICE	PASSIVE VOICE
Present Simple	Elly sees the pyramids.	The pyramids are seen by Elly.
Present Continuous	Elly is seeing the pyramids.	The pyramids are being seen by Elly.
Present Perfect	Elly has seen the pyramids.	The pyramids have been seen by Elly.
Past Simple	Elly saw the pyramids.	The pyramids were seen by Elly.

Past Continuous	Elly was seeing the pyramids.	The pyramids were being seen by Elly.
Past Perfect	Elly had seen the pyramids, but she wanted to do it again.	The pyramids had been seen by Elly, but she wanted to do it again.
Future Simple (going to)	Elly is going to see the pyramids.	The pyramids are going to be seen by Elly.
Future Simple (will)	Elly will see the pyramids.	The pyramids will be seen by Elly.
Future Perfect	Elly will have seen the pyramids by then.	The pyramids will have been seen by then by Elly.

It is uncommon to use the passive voice with the following tenses:

- Present Perfect Continuous;
- Future Continuous;
- Future Perfect Continuous;
- Past Perfect Continuous.

If we used the passive voice for these tenses, we would have two forms of the verb 'be' together. This makes the sentence awkward and confusing.

Таблица 3 Active and passive voice (залог) in Bulgarian tenses (време)

Време	Дейтелен залог	Страдателен залог
Сегашно време	Аз уча урока си.	Урокът е учен от мен.
Минало свършено време	Аз научих урока си.	Урокът беше научен от мен.
Минало несвършено време	Аз учих урока си.	Урокът беше учен от мен.
Минало неопределено време	Аз съм научил урока си.	Урокът е бил научен от мен.
Минало предварително време	Аз бях научил урока си.	Урокът беше научен от мен.
Бъдеще време	Аз ще науча урока си.	Урокът ще бъде научен от мен.
Бъдеще предварително време	Аз ще съм научил урока си.	Урокът ще е бил научен от мен.
Бъдеще време в миналото	Аз щях да науча урока си.	Урокът щеше да бъде научен от мен.
Бъдеще предварително време в миналото	Аз щях да съм научил урока си.	Урокът щеше да бъде научен от мен.

We see that in some cases in Bulgarian *passive voice* (страдателен залог) the verb-form for the correct expression of the meaning requires the usage of grammatical category absent in English – *aspect* (вид на глагола). The underlined affix-morphemes in the upper scheme signifies that the verb is in *unitary aspect* (свършен вид). (Таб. 3)

• In English, past participle (approx. страдателно причастие) is the same in every occasion.

- The aspect of the verb in Bulgarian changes with the tenses (глаголните времена),
- or can be used with both forms, but transmits different meaning.

Forming of questions in English passive voice

The formation of questions in *passive voice* in English is very easy. It requires you to move the verb “to be” (is, are, was, were, will be etc.) or the auxiliary verb (have, can, would, etc.) in front of the main clause. (Таб. 4) (Таб. 5)

Таблица 4 Example statement in present continuous

statement in active	I am writing an email now.
statement in passive	An email is being written now.
question in passive	Is an email being written now?

Таблица 5 Example statement in past perfect

statement in active	I will write an email.
statement in passive	An email will be written by me.
question in passive	Will an email be written by me?

CONCLUSION

Active and Passive voice are equally appropriate in both formal and informal situations. Nonetheless, we use active voice when we speak with friends, when we are expressing our thoughts and emotions, when we want to emphasize that we are a doer, that we have seen or see the action, or even that we have an attitude (positive or negative) towards the subject of the verbal action or state. In other words, with active voice we tilt the scale on the subjective factor. Passive voice, on the other hand, we use to speak of something that has happened or is happening, but we might not see it directly (*For example: Houses are being built.*). We use it in scientific and criminal context when we want to exclude ourselves from the picture (although, we can use active for scholarly and criminal reports, too), or just simply to put the weight on the action exercised, or the object of the verbal action or state. Therefore, with *passive voice* we tilt the scale on the objective factor. This is valid for both Bulgarian and English language. (Таб. 2) (Таб. 3) (Таб. 6)

While the *active voice* brings more expressiveness to our statements, regardless of the verbal tense, in which it is used, the *passive form* sounds quite unnatural in some verbal constructions - thus, we avoid them. (“*My messages have been expected by them.*” or “*My room will be cleaned by me.*”) (Таб. 2)

In Bulgarian when we place the action in passive voice, almost always (except *сегашно време* and *минало несвършено време*) the verb acquires an additional “на” prefix to indicate that the activity is in unitary aspect (свършен вид). (Таб. 3) That is not to be mistaken with the verb *tense*, which we express with tense-forming morphemes like „ще“ and „сях“ and the verb “to be” in its different forms (бях, беше и т.н.)

Таблица 6 SWOT analysis of common traits in both Bulgarian and English of active and passive voice

	Active voice	Passive voice
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expressiveness• Emotionality• Better describes the verb subject	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sounds more academical• Brings diversity in speech• Better describes the action or the object
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sometimes it can be too personal	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• In some cases it can sound unnatural
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good for using in fictional literature or in a motivational letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Good for scientific reports or for court testimonies
Threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speech can become too one-sided or monotonous	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Easy to make an error with the verb construction

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