

VOICE PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATIONS OF ROMANIAN AND ENGLISH ECONOMIC TEXTS

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The difficulties brought about by the passive constructions have been an issue to debate for many linguists and scientist. Translations become ever more important in an increasingly global marketplace, and they are sometimes taken too lightly, when in fact it is a serious business that should be approached sensibly in order to avoid poor results.

Business translation is a specialised branch of translation, which requires specific skills and also methodology, theme as well as terminology competences.

Without being exhaustive the aim of our paper is to focus on the types of the passive constructions specific to the scientific discourse, the economic one, in particular. It also tackles the translation difficulties that may come along when dealing with scientific papers and rendering texts from Romanian into English. Passive constructions are frequently used both in English and Romanian. However, active forms are more common in literary writing or where the focus is on the people who make things happen. In contrast, passives are mainly specific to texts where the focus is on events and processes, in things that happen.

The most common problem in writing economic texts is overusing the passive voice. Specialists recommend or even require the passive voice in scientific, technical writing; motivating that by using the passive voice in scientific writing it achieves an objective tone whereas, sometimes it only obscures the text.

The scientific discourse and the economic one in particular, basically mean presenting ideas, descriptions, definitions, classifications, instructions, etc. The speech is brief, the technical person, and the scientist managing to say things which in ordinary language would require a vast amount of talk. Therefore, speakers or writers use the passive constructions in the scientific discourse for the following reasons: a) when there is no use of identifying the agent of the action, being unimportant or obvious from the context; b) to avoid repetition of the subject; c) to put emphasis on the action or the process; d) to convey objectivity; e) to avoid a long active subject.

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1. Introduction

The general tendency is to consider translation as something that anybody can do with the help of an adequate dictionary. In fact, producing a written text using another text as a basis is a much more complex phenomenon than what is commonly believed. This difficulty becomes even more evident when the text in question deals with specialized, technical subjects such as finance, banking, or the like. Specialists have argued that the main difficulty of scientific English in general, business or economic English in particular, lies more with the grammar than with the vocabulary. In this particular case, when words belonging to the so-called General English appear next to specific terms and within a specific context, they contain nuances that must be accounted for in the final translation.

It is common sense that translators are responsible for and faithful to source texts. Professional translators should be expert linguists who know quite well the correct grammar of both the source language and the target language.

2. Definitions

The scientific rigor of this paper cannot be without previously dealing with the fundamental concepts of passive voice on one hand, and the scientific or specialized text on the other hand. First, let us review what passive voice is.

2.1. The passive voice is a grammatical construction in which the subject of a sentence or clause denotes the recipient of the action rather than the performer, that is, a category of verbs that is related to what thing or person is acting and what thing or person is being acted upon (Crystal 1997). It should be noted here that both active and passive constructions exist in English as well as in Romanian. In the English language, the English passive voice is formed with an auxiliary verb (usually be or get) plus a participle (usually the past participle) of a transitive verb. In Romanian the passive voice is formed with the auxiliary a fi and the past participle of the verb to be conjugated, the participle behaving like adjectives, and thus agreeing in number and gender with the subject.

e.g. *The contract **was signed** by all the members of the Board.*

*Contractul **a fost semnat** de către toți membrii Consiliului.*

Not all verbs can be expressed in the passive voice either in English or in Romanian for example *die*, *arrive* and *have* are all inherently active. According to Greenbaum and Quirk, the distinction between active and passive applies only to sentences where the verb is transitive (Greenbaum and Quirk 1990:44; Popescu 2001:107).

2.2. Specialised language. The concept of technical or specialized language bears several features, among them, according to (Bakr-Serex 1997: 54):

- a) logical order of statements with clear indication of their interrelations and interdependence;
- b) the use of specific terms to each given branch of science;
- c) the frequent use of specific pattern-sentence, the impersonality of this type of writing being mostly revealed in the use of *passive voice constructions* with which scientific experiments are generally described;
- d) the use of its own terminology, besides the specific syntax.

Specialists recommend or even require the passive voice in scientific, technical writing; motivating that by using the passive voice in scientific writing it achieves an objective tone. The scientist's use of language is "specialized" and "peculiar", the speech brief and the language effective and powerful. (Bloomfield 1933:74).

Scientific discourse basically implies written scientific English. It mainly concentrates on presenting ideas, descriptions, definitions, classifications, instructions, etc. The fundamental characteristic of the scientific discourse is conciseness. As J. Swales discusses, the passive is generally used "to give the information in the best possible way: impersonally, concisely, objectively and giving importance to the most important facts" (apud Croitoru 1996:138).

In the scientific texts, the passive is mainly used for rhetorical purposes. The most common uses of the passives is when the action is more important than the agent, as in formal notices, instructions, processes, etc, which are specific to the scientific discourse.

e.g. *The employee **has been given** instructions to review the balance sheet. (by the employer).*

This passive sentence is about the employee.

In an active sentence, the agent, the doer of the action usually comes first:

e.g. *The employer **has given** the employee instructions to review the balance-sheet.*

Thus, the sentence in active voice is about the employer, not the employee.

3. The Use of the Passive Voice: when, why, how.

The scientific discourse abounds in passive construction; the emphasis is usually put on the action itself, on the person or thing that "suffers" from the action or on the results of the action.

There are some cases when the agent is not even mentioned the so-called agentless sentences such as:

- the agent is not important, the emphasis being on the object
e.g. *The solution **has been discussed** for more than two hours.*
*25 votes **are required** to pass the bill.*
*The delivery notes **are being written** (by Mr. Smith).*
*The goods **will be delivered** immediately.*
- the agent is unknown
e.g. *The credit card **has been stolen**.*
*Our letter **hasn't been answered** yet.*
*Over 120 different contaminants **have been dumped** into the river.*
- The speaker or writer intends to make a statement impersonal:
e.g. *The invoice **should have been** thoroughly **checked** 20 minutes ago!*
*Appointments **are required** in such cases.*
- the agent is obvious:
e.g. *Many cases of fraud **have been solved** nowadays.*
- the agent is a long phrase:
e.g. active: *The union leaders as well as the management **concluded** the agreement.*
passive: *The agreement **was concluded**. (both by the union leaders and the management).*
- in the scientific genre that traditionally relies on passive voice when the focus is usually on events or achievements, rather than on agents:
e.g. *This cost-effective method **has been applied** in many computer companies.*
*Contracts **can be cancelled** within five business days.*
- When deliberately you do not wish to name the agent, i.e. you want to be vague about who is responsible. According to Emery (2005), “the passive voice is often used as a strategy that allows language users to avoid mentioning the agent”, and in majority of cases, the subject of the active verb – the agent - is not expressed in the passive.
e.g. *One thousand dollars **has been contributed**.*
*The net benefits of subsidiary divestiture **were** grossly **overestimated***

However, the passive voice is especially used when there is a need to *be diplomatic* or want to avoid personal pronouns to create an *objective* tone.

- e.g. *I **recruited** seven programmers last month.*
*Seven programmers **were recruited**.*
*You **lost** the shipment.*
*The shipment **was lost**.*

Here we actually have to do with one of the most famous political uses of the passive: to hide blame or obscure responsibility. *You* wouldn't do this, but you can learn how to become a critic of those who exhibit what George Orwell included among the "swindles and perversions" of writing (apud

<http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/passivevoice.html>).

e.g. *Mistakes **were made**.*

*The Exxon Company accepts that a few gallons **might have been spilled**.*

*It costs so much money to pay for these campaigns that mistakes **were made** here by people who either did it deliberately or inadvertently. Now, others—it's up to others to decide whether those mistakes **were made** deliberately or inadvertently. (Bill Clinton, January 28, 1997)*

4. Passive versus Active Voice.

There is always a strive to achieve a style that is so clear that their messages cannot be misunderstood. One way to render a clear style is to minimize the use of the passive voice. Although the passive voice is sometimes necessary, often it not only makes the writing dull but

also can be ambiguous or overly impersonal. Here's an example of the same idea expressed both passive and active voice:

e.g. *The net benefits of the subsidiary divestiture were grossly overestimated.* (passive: Who did the overestimating?);
The Global Finance Team grossly overestimated the benefits. (The second version is clearer and thus preferable).

Another reason for this shift in our psychological thinking about science: nowadays there is a growing demand for greater transparency in science by requiring that published scientific and specialised papers in general, and economics texts in particular. Active voice proves a better choice when emphasizing the agent of the action. The other good reason behind this growing preference for active voice is stylistic: often passive voice is simply more awkward, less direct, and less clear and this will be later tackled in the paper.

But historically the sciences have encouraged the use of passive voice. And the reason for this tradition was that passive voice helped emphasize the objectivity of the sciences better:

e.g. *Microsoft was founded in 1975.*
The employee was last seen entering the warehouse two hours ago.

The passive voice can also prove useful if you want to put the doer of the action at the end of the sentence in order to create a bridge to the next sentence:

e.g. *Saturn was created in 1985 by General Motors. GM, the world's largest auto maker, was trying to learn a new way to build and market cars.*

5. Difficulties in Translating Passive Constructions

Technical translation has been considered as part of specialized translation; consequently being non-cultural, it is universal, as the benefits of technology are not limited to one speech community. (Ionescu 2000:217). The most common problem in writing and then translating economic texts is overusing the passive voice but it is seldom easy to cut down on the *passive* just to avoid any misunderstanding or ambiguity. All that is required in fact is the accuracy and clarity of expression achieved also by verbal expressions. Scientific translations differ from ordinary and literary ones as they do not accumulate emotional associations and implications.

Specialists advise the use of active voice in such texts, as much as possible as it is agreed that active voice adds value to the force and strengths of the texts.

There are situations when the use of voices does not coincide in Romanian and English. Some technical novice translators display a tendency to translate English passive sentences literally into Romanian and vice versa:

a. A common mistake in translating a passive construction is due to English **wording** which differs from the Romanian one: in a passive sentence the subject takes front position as compared to the Romanian one beginning with the predicate:

e.g. *The Memorandum of Association is normally signed by at least two subscribers.*
Contractul de asociere se semnează în mod normal de cel puțin doi dintre asociați.
A company is formed by the issue of a certificate of registration by the Registrar.
Pentru a înființa o firmă se depune certificatul de înregistrare la Registrul Comerțului.
The Certificate of Incorporation will be issued in a few days.
Se va emite certificatul de înmatriculare în câteva zile. (Pop and Sim, 2005: 20-23).

b. The so-called **report verbs** (verbs that report people's opinion) like: *request, believe, think, claim, mention, etc.*, are commonly used with impersonal passive constructions like infinitive followed by verbs of saying or thinking. The passive construction is employed to avoid a weak subject or to give an opinion that is shared by a large number of people. It is another difficult construction pattern to be rendered from Romanian into English or vice versa: Examples in case are the following:

e.g. *These accountants are known to be very thorough.*

Se știe / se cunoaște faptul că și contabilii sunt foarte minuțioși.

It is believed by the company staff that the current chief accountant will be appointed manager.

Personalul firmei crede că actualul contabil șef va fi numit director.

It is believed that the stocks will go up within the next five days.

Se crede că acțiunile vor crește în următoarele cinci zile.

c. Causative get and have structures, which can be used in both active and passive patterns may create difficulties of translation. Mention must be made that *get* passives only occur in dynamic events, *be* passives are not sensitive to dynamicity, and therefore can be used in both dynamic and static events, which explains why *be* passives are more common. These structures are more commonly used in spoken English rather than in written English. Thus, the active patterns **get + person +to-infinitive**, or **have + person + bare-infinitive**, have the meaning “cause or order somebody to do something”. (Maftai and Dobrota, 2009: 318)

e.g. The President will get the trustees to sign the agreement.

The President will have the trustees sign the agreement.

The boss will have/get the computer fixed in half an hour.

d. Phrasal verbs are commonly used in the passive. The main difficulty caused by phrasal verbs, either in active or in passive is that they have different meanings and when used in the passive its meaning may be even more problematic.

e.g. The meeting was called off by the Chairman. Întâlnirea a fost anulată de Președinte.

The red invoice will be handed in three days. Factura în roșu va fi predată în trei zile.

The agenda for the next meeting is being whipped up. Se discută ordinea de zi pentru ședința următoare.

There are instances when it is possible to end a sentence with the preposition of the phrasal verb that was made passive:

Active: A high price might weigh our product marketing down.

Passive: Our product might be weighed down (by a high price.)

Active: Un preț prea mare ar putea împiedica vânzarea rapidă a produsului nostru.

Passive: Vânzarea produsului nostru ar putea fi încetinită de un preț prea ridicat.

e. Collocations are two or more words that often go together just because they sound "right" to native English speakers, who use them all the time such as: *deal with, head for, insist on, prevent from, rely on, save from, reply to, to run out of, start up* etc. Sometimes grasping the exact meaning of a collocation and rendering it into the target language may be a real challenge.

e.g. He must be prevented from leaving the company. (Pop and Sim, 2005:12)

Trebuie să fie împiedicat să părăsească firma.

The company has been saved from bankruptcy.

Compania a fost salvată de la faliment.

The goods have been paid for by cash and not by Bills of Exchange.

Plata pentru bunuri s-a făcut în numerar și nu prin cambii.

5. Conclusions

As it has been demonstrated, passive constructions are frequently used both in English and Romanian. However, active voice is mainly employed in literary, creative text whereas passives are very common with exact, scientific, specialised pieces of writing.

To conclude, passive constructions in the scientific discourse are used for the following reasons:

1. when there is no use of identifying the agent of the action, being unimportant or obvious from the context;
2. to avoid repetition of the subject;
3. to put emphasis on the action or the process;
4. to convey objectivity;
5. to avoid a long active subject.

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