

Passive Voice as a Major Instrument for Information Cover-Up in Political Discourse

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In his book *On Writing*, the prominent American author Stephen King said that passive voice was the choice of indecisive people who preferred the most secure expressions of their thoughts. "It's weak," the writer claimed, "it's circular, and it's often tortuous" (King, 2010). Undoubtedly, this thought of an outstanding writer has the right to exist. It is even possible to agree with it. The only thing we should not do is to detract from the value of passive voice and proclaim its uselessness.

The English language is extremely rich. It includes numerous modes, forms, and linguistic features that have developed over many centuries of its evolution. Passive voice is one such feature. It is an important language tool, and refusing to use it only because fiction and academic writing are better off without passive forms would be a hasty and reckless decision. Like any instrument, it becomes valuable only if a speaker or a writer uses it to do the proper thing in an appropriate field. Passive voice has found its most successful niche in political discourse. However, returning to the analogy with the instrument, it can serve both high goals and low motivations. A hammer in the hands of a builder puts in nails, while it can break objects in the hands of the vandalizer. As it turns out, passive voice has become a standard tool for such dishonorable actions as distortion and the cover-up of the information.

Passive voice has been a tool of political rhetoric for a long time. The most famous example of its utilization in modern politics (or at least the politics that was as close to the present as possible) is the United States Declaration of Independence (Hopper, 2015). In this

document, Thomas Jefferson proclaimed a phrase that later became aphoristic: "all men are created equal." However, in this most famous example, the passive form of a verb was used for a good purpose. Thus, the founding fathers could have easily said, "God created all people equal," but they preferred not to use such a formulation. In such a way, they avoided the excessive mentioning of God in the document and, as a result, did not turn a political statement into a religious proclamation. Consequently, they preserved at least the formal appearance of its secularity.

If the author of the Declaration of Independence employed passive voice to preserve the religiously neutral tone of this document, politicians who used it later mostly had considerably less noble motives. This technique is a perfect way to hide the responsibility for certain actions. At the same time, it allows the speaker to use vague wording without its detailed elaboration and, thus, openly manipulate the consciousness of the people whom a particular speech is aimed at. When the speaker uses passive voice, he or she gets an opportunity to say that something happened while not giving any information about who and how she or she did it (Swaim, 2016). American politics of the twentieth century is particularly rich in the examples of such statements. During the Iran-Contras scandal, Ronald Reagan proclaimed the phrase "Mistakes were made" (O'Flahavan, 2010). Undoubtedly, those mistakes were made primarily by the president, but such a formulation allowed Reagan to position his mistakes as something independent of him. It is unlikely that this choice of words has changed the opinion of people who realized that the president was wrong, but the moral scales of those citizens who had a neutral position distinctly

inclined towards sympathizing with Reagan.

The development of politics has not led to the increase in its transparency. On the contrary, today, when politicians have a much broader informational platform to rely on, they are trying to put themselves in a better light even more than they did before. The US Presidential Election of 2016 showed that none of the candidates were reluctant to use passive voice to make fuzzy and general statements. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders mostly made these allegations regarding the out-of-election phenomena, commenting on social issues and resonating events. For example, speaking about the murder of an African American man, Hillary Clinton formulated her post about it in the following way: "Another unarmed Black man was shot in a police incident "(Swaim, 2016). Thus, she achieved a double result by simultaneously showing her sympathy to the African American community and avoiding a direct accusation of the policemen, which would have negatively affected her popularity among this considerably large professional strata. Bernie Sanders made a nearly similar comment on the same situation, trying to save potential votes as well.

Among all the candidates, the greatest love for passive voice was shown by none other than Donald Trump. It is not strange at all, considering that the current US President loves general statements. One of the main words he used during his election campaign was "rigged." Thus, Trump has publicly called on his supporters to be careful, warning that, in his opinion, "the election is going to be rigged" (Swaim, 2016). It is just one of the numerous situations in which Trump abused this word. In this case, passive voice was not just a tool of persuasion, but a

necessary measure which the presidential candidate should have used to make his speech meaningful. With all of his straightforwardness, Trump has repeatedly put forward a variety of generalized allegations against various members of the liberal political community, but he was most likely not able to formulate his opinion regarding who and how they could have "rigged" the elections, the justice system, and the Democratic primaries. Thanks to the passive form, Trump did not have to accuse anyone directly; consequently, he vacated himself from the potential responsibility that could have arisen if the accused person began to demand the refutation of such words. In this way, the forty-fifth US President did not break the general trend, but instead confirmed it.

Only one thing follows from all these facts. To love or not to love the passive voice, to use or not to use it - these are individual matters. Like any linguistic element, it is just a tool. And like any tool, it can be used both for the right things and for the wrong ones. Propagandists, politicians, and people who combine the signs of both of these categories can aptly use the passive voice to mislead anyone who is easily exposed to such an impact. The task of all the conscious citizens is simple: to be able to distinguish a lie, and not let it overwhelm their minds. The voice can be passive, but the people do not have such a privilege.

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