

THE PASSIVE VOICE IN ENGLISH AND CZECH AND SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

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Abstract

The paper presents the outcomes of research investigating the passive in English texts in comparison with their Czech translations. The outcomes are then related to English language teaching. The findings show that the periphrastic passive and the active are the most common Czech equivalents for the English passive, depending on the style. The findings imply that the different ways of expression in English and Czech should be taught, especially with respect to word order and different functional styles. The exploitation of past participles closely related to adjectives is suggested as potentially beneficial for learners.

1 Introduction

The new *General Educational Programme for Primary and Lower Secondary Education* (Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání online, henceforth RVP ZV) strongly supports the creation of cross-curricular links between different subjects in the school curriculum. Therefore, comparing and contrasting the English language with the mother tongue enables teachers of English to interconnect the educational content in the area of language and language communication. The passive voice in English and Czech differs both in form and usage and so is one of the potentially problematic areas for Czech learners of English. The English passive voice is one of the ways of changing the fixed word order in English and so special attention should be paid to it when teaching Czech learners.

The passive in English and its contrastive analysis with Czech have attracted the attention of Czech linguists for many years (e.g. Poldauf 1940, Mathesius 1975, Dušková 1999a, 1999b). This paper tries not only to contribute to linguistic theory but also aims to relate the linguistic findings that are acquired to English language teaching in Czech schools. The research presented here is based on a comparative study of the occurrence and characteristics of the passive in the English and Czech languages. On the basis of the outcomes, recommendations are made for teaching and teacher training with respect to RVP ZV.

2 The passive voice in English and Czech

Before the research data are discussed, let us summarize several main features of the passive in Czech and English which make it an area of possible difficulties for Czech learners.

The English passive formed with the verb *to be* + *past participle* is equivalent to the Czech periphrastic passive *být* + *passive participle*, e.g. *the house was built in 1896* = *dům byl postaven v roce 1896*. In addition to that, the passive in Czech is also expressed by the reflexive passive denoted by the reflexive form of the verb, e.g. *tento program se vysílá denně* (verb + reflexive particle *se*) = *the programme is broadcast daily*. The reflexive passive is limited to the third person because the reflexive particle *se* in the first and second person functions as a reflexive pronoun, e.g. *bráním se* = *I defend myself*. The agent is usually not expressed with the reflexive passive (Karlík, Nekula & Pleskalová 2002, Grepel & Karlík 1986).

In English, both the direct and indirect object of ditransitive verbs can become the subject of the passive – the object with the lower degree of communicative dynamism becomes the subject (Dušková et al. 1994: 252). In Czech it is only the direct object. When the passive of a ditransitive verb in Czech is formed, the indirect object stays unchanged, e.g. *Stálým zákazníkům (O.) jsou nabízeny různé výhody* = *Regular customers (S) are offered various benefits*.

The agent is expressed by a prepositional phrase with *by* in English, and in Czech by the genitive with the preposition *od* or with the instrumental case, e.g. *The boy was praised by his parents* = *Chlapec byl pochválen svými rodiči* (instrumental)/*od svých rodičů* (genitive).

In Czech, the passive is used mainly to move the agent of the action from the centre of attention (Kopečný 1962: 119), while in English, because of the relatively fixed word order, the passive is used to express the recipient of the action as the subject before the verb and to put the agent after the verb. When comparing word order in English and Czech, the passive in English should be used whenever it feels natural in Czech to place the subject after the verb (Mathesius 2001).

3 The research

The research is based on the analysis of excerpts from four types of English texts and comparison with their Czech translations. Texts in the British variety of English were chosen since British English is the model taught in Czech schools. The texts were chosen to contrast the use of the passive in two styles – the scientific and literary styles. To examine the scientific style, a scientific text on biochemistry (Voet & Voet 1990) was used. The literary style is represented by three different pieces of writing, a novel, a collection of short stories, and a play, in order to gain a more varied sample of language. The novel (Townsend

1989) is written in the form of a teenage boy's diary and thus provides a sample of informal language; however, the main character tries to give the impression that he is a sophisticated intellectual and so he sometimes uses formal ways of expression not common in colloquial language. The author of the book often uses the language to emphasize situational humour. The collection of short stories (Carter 1995) is a source of lexically rich language full of metaphors and poetic words. The stories are based on traditional fairy tales rewritten as post-modernist fiction. The play (Stoppard 1993) complements the corpus with the language of conversation. The play is set in the present as well as the past; therefore the sample includes both informal and formal language.

A hundred pages were taken from each text; in the case of the scientific text it was fifty pages because of the large book format, while the play was 96 pages long and so the whole text was used. All the instances of the passive voice were excerpted and compared with their Czech translations. All the finite verb forms *be + past participle* were taken into account and examined as to whether the subject of the passive can become the object of the active. This approach was adopted since the definition of the passive is usually based on the opposition of the active and passive voice and the changes in the syntactical functions of sentence elements (e.g. Quirk 1985, Huddleston & Pullum 2002). Past participles which are sometimes considered as adjectives were included in the sample if the corresponding verb exists, e.g. *be interested – to interest somebody*. Besides the passive voice with the verb *to be*, other forms were also included – the *get-passive*, *mediopassive* and the causative construction *have something done* – but their occurrence in the sample was only sporadic and will not be dealt with here.

Two *basic* criteria were used to sort the citation slips with the English passives:

1) The passive with an expressed agent *by*-phrase – the passive without an expressed agent *by*-phrase

The agent is considered to be any animate causer of the verbal action whose recipient is the subject of the passive. The cases of the passive which include an inanimate noun after the preposition *by* are considered agentless. These expressions are mostly reasons for a certain action. Other prepositional phrases with animate or inanimate nouns following passive constructions can have a similar function. Such nouns which can become the subject of the active are identified as *semi-agents* (Quirk et al. 1985: 415) and are dealt with separately. The agentless passives are further divided into subgroups according to the action they are describing and according to the extent to which the agent is identifiable.

2) The central passive – the statal passive

The central passive is a passive which describes an action or activity and has a direct correspondence with the active form; *the statal passive* describes a state, a result of a previous action or activity. The term *central passive* is used by Quirk et al. (1985: 169) and Carter and McCarthy (2006: 794); Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 1438) use the term *verbal passive*. The term *statal passive* (Dušková 1999a: 115) is used here to cover different terms used to refer to these forms, such as *semi-passives*, *pseudo-passives* (Quirk et al. 1985, Carter & McCarthy 2006), *adjectival construction* (Carter & McCarthy 2006) or *adjectival passives* (Huddleston & Pullum 2002). The transformation of the statal passive into the active may involve the changing of the present form of the verb into the present perfect or past, e.g. *The house is made of stone – They (have) made the house of stone*, while the transformation of the central passive involves no tense shift (Dušková et al. 1994, Dušková 1999a, Quirk et al. 1985).

4 The outcomes

overall	scientific text	literary texts	novel	short stories	play
856	363	493	196	185	112
average per page	7.26	1.67	1.96	1.85	1.17

Table 1: Overall distribution of the passive in the texts

Altogether, 856 cases of the passive voice were found in the corpus. The scientific text included 363 cases, while 493 instances were identified in the literary texts. In the scientific text there are 7.26 cases per page on average (see Table 1). If the page format (A4) is taken into account, which was approximately twice as large as the format of the other books, it is 3.63 cases of the passive per page, which is still twice as many as in the fictional texts. Even this approximate examination shows that the use of the passive in scientific texts is very common.

	overall		scientific text		fiction	
		%		%		%
agent expressed	26	3.04	5	1.38	21	4.26
agent not expressed	830	96.96	358	98.62	472	95.74
central passive	512	59.81	263	72.45	249	50.51
statal passive	344	40.19	100	27.55	244	49.49
total	856		363		493	

Table 2: The distribution of the passives

As for the distribution of tenses, it varies between the texts; the most commonly used is the present (57.71%), mainly as a result of its occurrence in the scientific text, where it is necessary to describe general processes. In the fictional texts, because of the narrative style, the past is mostly used (46.45%).

In the corpus there are only 26 (3.04%) cases of the passive with an expressed agent (see examples 1-2 below). The occurrence is slightly higher in the literary texts. The central passive is more common than the statal passive (59.81%), although the proportions of the central and statal passives in the fiction sample are more or less equal (50.51% and 49.49% respectively), mainly because in everyday speech the statal passive is used to express emotions and to describe the state in a certain situation (see Table 2 and examples below).

	overall		scientific text		fiction	
Czech translation		%		%		%
<i>periphrastic passive</i>	323	37.73	243	66.94	80	16.23
<i>active</i>	268	31.31	40	11.02	228	46.25
<i>reflexive passive</i>	32	3.74	11	3.03	21	4.26
<i>be + adjective</i>	71	8.29	7	1.93	64	12.98
total	856		363		493	

Table 3: The distribution of Czech translations

The most common equivalents of the English passive in Czech are the periphrastic passive and the active, the periphrastic passive being a typical feature of the scientific text, while in the fiction texts it appears in only 16.23% of the cases (see Table 3 and examples below). The range of translation possibilities was greater in the literary texts than in the scientific text, where the emphasis is placed on clarity, precision and objectivity of expression. Besides this, the scientific text concentrates on one topic, the description of biochemical processes, and therefore the range of vocabulary and grammatical structures is fairly limited. The table above shows only the most frequent translations.

In the Czech translation, the subject appears in the postverbal position in 103 cases (12.03%). Mostly, it is placed after verbs in the active voice, and in the scientific text mainly after the periphrastic passive.

The hypotheses about the occurrence of the passive within the texts were verified by the statistical test χ^2 on the significance level 0.05. All the results were statistically significant and therefore the following conclusions can be drawn:

- 1) In the English texts, the occurrence of the agentless passive is far more frequent than the occurrence of the passives with an expressed agent.

- 2) In the English texts, the occurrence of the central passive is more frequent than the occurrence of the statal passive.
- 3) In English, the occurrence of the central passive is greater in the scientific text than in the literary texts.
- 4) The most common equivalents for the English passive in Czech are the active and the periphrastic passive.
- 5) The most common Czech equivalent for the English passive in the scientific style is the periphrastic passive.
- 6) The most common Czech equivalent for the English passive in the literary style is the active.

The agentless passive predominates with statistical significance even if the *semi-agents* are included among the agents. If the occurrence of the central and statal passive in the literary style is compared, the result is not statistically significant and therefore it cannot be concluded which type is more common.

The following section deals with the occurrence of the passive in the different texts in more detail and the most significant outcomes are discussed.

4.1 The passive with an agent *by*-phrase

In the scientific text, the agent is expressed in only five cases of the passive voice (1.38%) and in all of these the agent is the author of a discovery. Four of the sentences are translated into Czech as the active voice; three of these move the subject into the postverbal position and so the distribution of communicative dynamism is the same as in the English sentence (1).

- (1) *The requirement for dolichol-P-mannose was discovered by Stuart Kornfeld...* (Voet & Voet 1990: 572)
- (1') *Účast dolichol-P-mannosy objevil Stuart Kornfeld (S)...[= discovered] (1995: 641)*

In the fictional texts, the agent is expressed in only 21 cases (4.26%). A human agent is identified in 18 passive constructions (in three cases the agent is a collective noun, e.g. *the police*), and in two cases the agent is an animal. Nineteen instances are translated into Czech as the active voice, and the subject is in the postverbal position in twelve cases; seven instances follow the SVO pattern (2). The periphrastic passive is used only once.

- (2) *Barry Kent has been done by the police for riding a bike without a rear light.* (Townsend 1989: 53)
- (2') *Policie (S) zadržela Barryho Kenta, protože jezdil na kole bez zadního světla. [= (have) detained] (1988: 40)*

4.2 The passive without an agent *by*-phrase

The agentless passives in the scientific text (358 cases, i.e. 98.62%, see Table 2) can be sorted into several groups according to the nature of the implied agent; because of space constraints, only the main ones will be dealt with here.

A) No agent implied

Most cases imply no agent, no cause of the verbal action (155 cases). Ninety-six cases can be considered central passives, 59 statal passives. Most of the sentences (112 cases) are translated using the periphrastic passive (3).

- (3) *The carbohydrate is then transferred to an Asn residue of a growing polypeptide chain.* (Voet & Voet 1990: 583)
- (3') *Oligosacharid je pak přenesen na asparaginový zbytek rostoucího polypeptidového řetězce.* (1995: 654)

The verbs in this group resemble intransitive verbs and can sometimes be replaced by them, which is often obvious from the Czech translation where a reflexive verb in the active voice is used (4).

- (4) *The resynthesised glucose is returned to the muscle... [= returns]* (Voet & Voet 1990: 568)
- (4') *Resyntetizovaná glukosa se vrací do svalů, ... [= returns]* (1995: 637)

B) Human activity

Altogether, 92 cases of the passive imply human activity, four of which refer to other parts of the book with the verbs *discuss* and *describe*. The rest of the sentences (88 cases) describe scientific hypotheses, experiments and discoveries or classify biochemical compounds using verbs such as *classify*, *call* or *refer*. In ten translations the reflexive passive is found (5).

- (5) *E₁ is proposed to have three interacting catalytic subunits, ...* (Voet & Voet 1990: 552)
- (5') *Osektoru (locative) F₁ se předpokládá, že má tři navzájem interagující katalytické podjednotky, ...* [= it is proposed that...] (1995: 618)

C) Semi-agent – chemical

In 49 cases the preposition *by* appears, followed by the names of various chemical substances. In biochemical processes they can be considered to be kinds of agentive factors causing and influencing the processes. In 40 cases, the Czech counterparts are the periphrastic passive, in 31 cases with the semi-agent in the instrumental case (6).

- (6) *PEP is transported across the mitochondrial membrane by specific membrane transport proteins.* (Voet & Voet 1990: 565)
- (6') *P-Pyr je transportován mitochondriální membránou specifickými membránovými transportními proteiny.* (1995: 633)

D) Semi-agent – circumstances of processes

The preposition *by* is present in another 37 excerpts; here this prepositional phrase can be qualified as the description of the circumstances. Frequently, the preposition *by* can be replaced by *in* without a change in meaning (7).

- (7) *This coupling...is achieved by an electron-transport chain...* [= in an electron-transport chain] (Voet & Voet 1990: 533)
- (7') *...je toto spřažení realizováno v řetězci transportu elektronů* [v = in]... (1995: 597)

In the fictional texts, the agent is not expressed in 472 passive constructions (95.74%). These instances can again be subdivided into several groups.

A) Semi-agent – circumstances of action

Forty instances of the passive are followed by a *by*-prepositional phrase with an inanimate noun or the gerund. The nouns are not agents in themselves but rather causes of the verbal action. In some cases human activity is implied; other cases have statal meaning and the past participle can be considered as an adjective. Again, the active voice (8) predominates in Czech translation (27 cases), in 17 of which the subject is postverbal.

- (8) *Nor is he interested by determinism.* (Stoppard 1993: 87)
- (8') *Ani determinismus (S) ho nezajímá.* [= does not interest him] (1997: 83)

B) Semi-agent – other prepositions

Twelve instances of the passive are complemented by a *with-* or *in-*prepositional phrase where the noun can become the subject of the active voice. Most of these constructions (nine cases) are translated with the linking verbs *být* (= be) or *mít* (= have) followed by adjectives (9), nouns or adverbs.

- (9) *Miss Spraxton told me off because my English was covered in drops of candle wax.* [= drops of candle wax (had) covered my English] (Townsend 1989: 77)
- (9') *Slečna učitelka Spraxtonová mi vynadala, protože jsem měl slohovou práci pokapanou voskem* (instrumental). (1988: 58)

C) Emotional states

In the literary style sample there are 55 passive constructions whose past participles are usually taken as adjectives. Fifteen of these participles are even preceded by intensifiers (e.g. *very*, *too*) that support the adjectival interpretation. These instances were included in the sample because the corresponding verbs for the participles and the active transformations can be found, although sometimes with a change in the verb form to the present perfect or past perfect. Twenty-one of the sentences are translated as the active, the same number as the construction *být* (=be) + *adjective* (10). In 20 cases the cause of the emotional state after different prepositions, i.e. the semi-agent (10), can be identified.

- (10) *I went round immediately and **was shocked** at the dog's condition...* (Townsend 1989: 133)
- (10') *Hned jsem tam šel a **byl jsem šokovaný**, v jakém je pes stavu (subordinate clause)...* (1988: 101)

D) Statal passive

In 93 cases, which cannot be included in any of the above categories, participles cannot always be considered as adjectives but they describe a state which is the result of a previous action or activity.

As it corresponds with the statal meaning, 21 instances are translated into Czech as the construction *být* (=be) + *adjective*. Twenty-five Czech equivalents are in the active voice. Out of these, eleven instances use the reflexive verb *jmenovat se* – the translation of the English *be called* (11).

- (11) *I took her a card and a pot plant; it **is called** Leopard Lily.* (Townsend 1989: 51)
- (11') *Přinesl jsem jí přání a kytku v květináči; **jmenuje se** dífenbachie.* (1988: 39)

E) Central passive

This is the largest group of passives without an agent (149 instances). The human activity is obvious here and the agent can be identified from the context. Seventy-nine cases have their Czech equivalents in the active voice, 38 of which avoid expressing the agent by using the third person plural form of the verb (12).

- (12) *I heard Jellaby telling cook that Mrs Chater **was discovered** in carnal embrace in the gazebo.* (Stoppard 1993: 2)
- (12') *Slyšela jsem, jak Jellaby říká kuchařce, že paní Chaterovou **přistihli** v besídce v karnálním objetí. [= they discovered Mrs Chater]* (1997: 6)

F) General human agent

The general human agent (people) is implied in twelve cases. In five of the Czech equivalents the reflexive passive can be found (13).

- (13) *He said it was so common that it **is regarded** as a normal state of adolescence.* (Townsend 1989: 46)
- (13') *Řekl, že je to tak běžné, že **se to považuje** za normální projev dospívání.* (1988: 34)

G) No or unknown agent

In 91 instances it was difficult to determine if there is any agent implied. The verbs in this group are often found in the passive form; some of them can be replaced by the active (14).

- (14) *This scene from a voluptuary's life **was now abruptly terminated**.* [= terminated] (Carter 1995: 15)
- (14') *Tento výjev ze smyslníkova života zčistajasna **skončil**.* [= terminated] (1997: 14)

5 Ideas for teaching

On the basis of the outcomes above, some implications for teaching can be introduced.

Since in a vast majority of the passive constructions the agent *by*-prepositional phrase is not present, teaching should concentrate on agentless passives. This approach could prevent learners from expressing the agent when it is unknown, e.g. *The car **was stolen by someone*** = *To auto **bylo někým ukradeno***.

The periphrastic passive is far less common in Czech. In the Czech translations it appeared in less than a half of the cases, and in the language of fiction, which is close to everyday use, only in 16.23% of the cases. Learners must be aware of the fact that the passive is a common language device not only in formal and scientific texts. Therefore, when translating, learners should be encouraged to use different ways of expression in Czech to avoid unnatural translations.

In Czech, the active is the most natural equivalent for the English passive and so it is necessary to prevent interference errors such as *Ty šaty ušila maminka* [= This dress was made by my mum] - **This dress made my mum* by comparing the English and Czech word order. A drill exercise practising the English-Czech translation and vice versa of the sentence type mentioned above might be suitable for this purpose.

Concerning the functional styles, more advanced learners should know that the passive is common in the scientific style in Czech as well. On the other hand, they

should be aware of the fact that using the passive is not limited to the scientific style and also appears in everyday speech.

The statal passive which expresses emotional states can be used to emphasize the similarity of the past participle and adjectives. In Czech, adjectives are used in such cases, the passive participles being too formal, and therefore the teacher can link the English and Czech constructions *be + adjective*, e.g. *he was sad = byl smutný*, and then continue to the passive form *be + past participle*, e.g. *he was disappointed = byl zklamáný*. If teachers emphasise that the adjectives/participles are derived from verbs (e.g. *surprise-surprised*), it might support learners' understanding of the passive later on. In addition, in the case of passive constructions with a statal meaning, it can be well illustrated that the subject is not the agent of the action, but merely the recipient or the sufferer, similarly to the central passive.

Learners should know that, apart from a prepositional phrase with *by* to express the agent, other prepositions might also complement passive constructions. These prepositional phrases express the cause of the state (in the statal passive) or the circumstances (the central passive) – so-called *semi-agents*. Active counterparts can be found for these sentences, as well as for those with an expressed agent, with the agent-like element becoming the subject of the active.

As stated by RVP ZV, learners should reach the A2 level of the Common European Framework for languages by the end of their compulsory education. The expected outputs for productive oral skills in a foreign language include creating grammatically correct transformations of simple sentences and texts. Considering the common use of the passive in English, it should not be omitted even at this level. A knowledge of the passive and its active equivalents can support the development of the speaking skill in everyday situations because learners thus operate with more grammatical structures to express their ideas, e.g. *My mum was pleased by/with my school results – My school results pleased my mum*. At this level learners should be able to use the statal passives which describe emotional states and are frequent in conversation. Moreover, the passive in the present simple to describe instructions and processes seems suitable at this level. Even during the early stages of learning English, learners acquire the structure *be called* as a set phrase (= *jmenovat se*), e.g. *She is called Jane*. Examples like these can and should be used to elicit the form and use of the passive from learners.

6 Conclusion

It was my intention here to present teaching suggestions against the background of linguistic data and to show that contrasting the English and Czech languages can help Czech teachers to improve their lessons. Bearing in mind the global cross-

curricular approach to educational content, teacher trainees should be prepared effectively to be able to point out the similarities and differences between English and Czech. Thus, they should be able to extend their pupils' understanding of different language patterns in both the languages and gradually develop their pupils' grammatical competence as an integral part of communicative competence.

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