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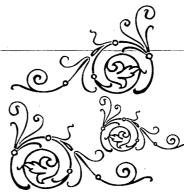
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THE PASSIVE AS A STYLE MARKER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH:
EVIDENCE FROM THE HELSINKI CORPUS

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I. INTRODUCTION

The passive is commonly regarded as a specific style marker in Present-day English (henceforth PE),[1] since one of the factors that determines the choice of a passive over an active clause is linguistic style. The aim of this paper is to examine the stylistic function of the passive in Early Modern English (henceforth EModE) with a twofold purpose: firstly, to ascertain whether the passive voice also has a stylistic significance in that period, and, secondly, to discover the factors which determine the preference for *be*-passives in formal registers. For this twofold purpose, the computerised *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* has been used.

The analysis of the EModE corpus is offered in section 3; nevertheless, before proceeding to examine the linguistic evidence, a few words seem in order concerning the functions, whether stylistic or other, usually assumed to be associated with the passive in PE. This is done in section 2.

2. THE FUNCTIONAL DIMENSION OF THE PASSIVE

Only recently has the function of the passive been examined in detail. Formerly, most of the attention had been focused on the formal, syntactic characteristics of passives and their relation to actives. Traditional grammarians were of course well aware that, though referentially the members of the active-passive pair may be considered synonymous, voice represents something more than a mere possibility of grammatical or stylistic variation (Poutsma 1914-29: 2.2, 102; Jespersen 1933: 120). An examination of the semantic differences between active and passive naturally leads to the analysis of the reasons why a passive clause is chosen instead of its active analogue in any given context.

However, no detailed analysis of such reasons ever came to be provided; most traditional grammarians were satisfied with alluding to the issue cursorily, and, moreover, they tended to concentrate on the function of agentless passive clauses exclusively, because getting rid of the subject / agent is, in their opinion, the main reason why the passive is used (cf. Sweet 1898: 113).[2] In fact, some of them do not mention any other reason, such as, for instance, Zandvoort (1975: 53), who merely says that "it [the passive] is used in sentences in which it is unnecessary or undesirable to mention the agent".

Only a few of the traditional scholars deal with the function of agent clauses. Jespersen, for example, gives two reasons for their use. The first is related to emphasis: "the reason why the passive turn is preferred is generally the greater interest taken in the passive than in the active subject." The other deals with the connection of sentences: "the passive turn may facilitate the connection of one sentence with another" (1933: 121). The latter reason is also adduced by Sledd, according to whom the choice between active and passive is determined by "the ease or difficulty of the transition which each makes possible" (1959: 303).

However, when dealing with Jespersen's first reason, namely the emphasis which passive clauses place on the active object, the opinions of traditional grammarians are contradictory. Sweet agrees with Jespersen: "the passive voice is, therefore, a grammatical device for bringing the object of a transitive verb into prominence by making it the subject of the sentence" (1898: 113). Similarly, Charleston (1960: 286-7) believes that the choice of the passive is subjective because it is determined by the speaker, who employs the passive in order to convey that he views the action from the perspective of an entity which is being affected by the activity. For Poutsma,

however, the prominence may be placed both on the passive subject and on the passive by-phrase: "the passive construction is frequently resorted to to serve the diametrically opposite purpose of giving prominence to the primary participant in the action, by mentioning it expressly at the end of the sentence" (1914-29: 2.2, 101).

This entangled state of affairs (cf. also Doherty 1996: 591-2) led Robin Lakoff, as late as 1971, to put forward the question of "why passivize at all?", and so to express the belief that

> Passivization is one of the few rules I know of that, while apparently adding little semantic material to the 'basic' active sentence, considerably complicate it syntactically and morphologically. The linguist's task, then, in characterizing passivization—it would seem to me—is to ask why it is done, and done in this way, rather than, as usual, merely to ask what is done to the superficial configuration of lexical items. (1971: 149)

Today, the passive is generally regarded as having a thematic and a stylistic dimension.[3] From the thematic perspective, the passive involves two related phenomena: a) firstly, *subject backgrounding*, whereby the subject/topic of an active transitive clause is removed from initial position when passivisation takes place (Stein 1979: 142; van Valin 1980: 317; Werth 1984: 238; Siewierska 1984: 237; Shibatani 1985: 832-4). In Givón's words, "in the passive, the agent of a semantically-transitive event is **demoted**[4] from its prototypical topic position" (1990: 567). b) Secondly, promotion of a non-agent to subject position, known as *topicalisation* (Givón 1981, 1982) or *object foregrounding* function of the passive (Langacker and Munro 1975; Frajzyngier 1982; Foley and van Valin 1985; Keenan 1985). These labels refer to the assignment of subject/topic or merely topic function to a non-agent, which Givón terms *clausal topic assignment*: "the subject/agent of the active clause ceases to be the *topic*, and a non-actor argument of the active then assumes, by whatever means, the clausal-topic function" (1981: 168; cf. also Givón 1994: 9; Vezzosi 1996).[5]

Independently of the thematic function just outlined, the passive serves a stylistic function in the language, since, as is widely acknowledged, the passive is a specific style marker in PE (Bryant 1959: 68; Leech and Svartvik 1975: 258-9; Nash 1980: 140-42; Palmer 1987: 90). Section 2.1 below provides a brief analysis of the interrelation between the passive voice and certain varieties of PE.[6]

2.1. THE STYLISTIC FUNCTION OF THE PASSIVE

Linguistic style is defined by Crystal and Davy (1969) as the language habits of one person or group of people in a given situation. By situation (later in the same work labelled *dimensions of situational constraint*) is meant "that sub-set of non-linguistic events which are clearly relevant to the identification of the linguistic features" (1969: 11), namely individuality, singularity, dialect, time, status, province, discourse and modality. The assumption, therefore, is that certain linguistic habits provide information about the speaker/writer's unconscious idiosyncratic features, conscious idiosyncracies, geographical origin, age and social standing, and also about the nature or type of the discourse, medium (oral or written) and suitability of form. As is well known, one of the linguistic features that can provide this type of information is the use of the passive construction, because the choice of a passive over an active clause is not random, but determined by the linguistic style concerned.

A distinction must be drawn here between *be*-passives and *get*-passives, since *be* and *get* are not interchangeable as passive auxiliaries because of syntactic, pragmatic and, what is more relevant here, stylistic differences (Weiner and Labov 1983: 43; Downing 1996: 183-201). As is well known, *get* is far more prevalent in the speech of working-class speakers, and is avoided in formal language,[7] whereas *be*-passives are associated with formal styles, as has already been mentioned.[8]

With regard to *be*-passives in particular, linguists of various tendencies have voiced their opinion about the relationship between the passive and impersonal style. Leech and Svartvik, for instance, believe that the use of the agentless passive is associated with impersonal style, which in turn is characteristic of formal written varieties of English. This style—they say—is the style characteristic of those discourses in which the speaker tries not to refer to himself or his readers directly (1975: 25, 258-59), because in impersonal styles "the question of who is the agent (i.e. who performs the action described by the verb) is unimportant and often irrelevant" (1975: 259). This opinion is shared by Bryant:

> Its [the passive's] greatest asset is its impersonality, which makes it well adapted to the statement of scientific facts. . . . Its use is necessary where the actor is unknown, and no one would be likely to condemn a writer of a mystery story who wrote the brief passive "Lord Lee had been murdered" in preference to the far clumsier "A person or persons unknown had murdered Lord Lee." (1959: 68)

For Palmer (1987: 79), too, the passive is most common in formal writings, particularly in scientific texts, for "the work can be described impersonally—without indicating who did it" (cf. Also Gotti 1996: 64). Similarly, Biber's multidimensional approach to register analysis (1988, 1995; Biber and Finegan 1997) has shown that passives are one of the linguistic features characterising his Dimension 5 ('Abstract versus Non-Abstract Style'; see Biber 1988: 103, 111-13; 1995: 163-65, or 'Non-Impersonal versus Impersonal Style'; Biber and Finegan 1997: 259). Abstract registers as found in official documents, academic prose or technical and engineering prose yield high scores for passive constructions (1997: 261).

For some authors, however, the fact that the passive is used mostly in scientific texts[9] is not due solely to the requirement of impersonality in the sense of modesty or of not revealing the agent of the action. Thus, Gotti (1996), when describing the style of the experimental essay-writings by the 17th-century writer Robert Boyle, mentions another case in which the passive voice is also resorted to, namely "in reporting how certain procedures (usually involving the utilization of equipment) have been carried out" (1996: 65). Turner argues that the passive is also used in order to avoid making mistakes in attributing agency or causality in scientific phenomena that are as yet not fully understood. According to him, then, the passive is a tentative, prudent way of describing scientific processes about which not much is known. He illustrates this idea with the following example:

> In the history of physics the problem of 'action at a distance' became a central one in discussions of gravitation. As the new and related science of electricity and magnetism developed, the causes of the phenomena observed were unknown and it was an embarrassment even to find a subject for an active sentence. Something deflects a needle. What deflects it? A needle is deflected. That is all we know. (1973: 181)

Finally, Stanley believes that the agentless passive is a syntactic construction used by the writer when he is guided, not by politeness or tact, but by a desire to deceive or misinform the reader:

> the passive voice provides us with a syntactic construction for deceiving our readers into believing that we're giving them information when we're not. It is a construction that allows us to lie without overtly lying, and only the careful, analytical reader will notice that information is missing. (1975: 30)

As has been shown, most authors believe that the reasons for the association between the passive and formal varieties of English are primarily related to the impersonalising purpose of the passive. Other authors, however, adduce other stylistic factors, which are examined in the following paragraphs.

As was pointed out at the beginning of this section, certain linguistic habits provide information about the situation in which the act of communication takes place. This is clearly the case with passives, as is demonstrated by the fact that almost all traditional books on rhetoric recognise the widespread use of the passive in formal texts and warn against the abuse of it. As Sinha points out, "pundits of stylistics censor even writers like Gibbon and Shaw for using too many passives" (1974: 631), and believe that a text with less than one passive every twenty verbs is "tough," while a text with more than one passive per five verbs is "stuffy."

Bryant, for example, characterises active clauses as spontaneous and lively, while passive clauses, in his opinion, are stiff, complex and rhetorically contrived:

> Probably the majority of the verbs used in spoken English are in the active voice, which is usually more direct, brief and vigorous than the passive. . . . Many rhetoricians advise against its use on the grounds of its frequent dullness, monotony and circumlocution; yet these qualities do not seem to inhere in the passive itself so much as in the ideas it expresses. (1959: 68)

In this vein, Nash (1980: 141) believes that the passive "helps convey the impression of consciously planned rhetoric rather than casually impulsive argument" and Biber (1988: 112) states that "discourse with very frequent passive constructions is typically abstract and technical in content, and formal in style."

Siewierska (1984) also views the passive as determined by register, and provides a very accurate explanation for the connection between the passive and the written medium. As she points out, the passive is mainly used in academic, bureaucratic, literary and journalistic texts, because it "has acquired the status of a sophisticated stylistic device" (1984: 229). This status, she says, is due, firstly, to the fact that the passive is morphologically more complex than the active; secondly, to the traditional influence of Latin on European culture as a whole. In Latin the passive voice was also used in the most formal registers.

The association between the use of passives and formal registers has a corollary in the lack of passives in the oral medium. Siewierska (1984: 229) claims that the lack of passives in live discourse is due to the widespread use of ellipsis. As is well known, the speaker and hearer in a conversation share most of the information, which is, therefore, given information. Since, as Chafe (1976: 30) puts it, "given (or old) information is that knowledge which the speaker assumes to be in the consciousness of the addressee at the time of the utterance", speakers do not normally repeat anaphoric information, unless for emphasis or contrast. Instead, ellipsis is used.

Consequently, if the object of an active transitive clause is old information and the subject is new information, a situation that normally favours the passive, in speech the piece of new information would be introduced in a separate—elliptical—proposition, and it would not be integrated in a clausal (passive) structure. Thus, the question *who bought the house?* (*someone* = subject: new information; *bought the house* = verb group and object: old information) would not have as an answer the expected passive construction *the house was bought by John*, but the elliptical *John did* or simply *John*, with the verb group and object elided. The speaker, consequently, since he may and does avoid such a repetition of old information, has no need to organise old with respect to new information.

In the written medium, by contrast, the absence of shared knowledge between the writer and addressee makes it necessary for the writer to rule out ellipsis, and to repeat old, anaphoric information. This forces the writer to make decisions regarding the distribution of what is old and what new, which triggers the frequent use of the passive, as it is one of the linguistic devices capable of rearranging the distribution of information within the clause.

The lower frequency of passives in informal styles is also justified by the availability of alternative devices to promote non-agents to topic position in informal registers, namely left-dislocations and topicalisations.[10] According to Givón (1979: 58, 66), while these two constructions are very common in unplanned speech and child language, their frequency in written texts, however, approaches zero. The passive, therefore, is also used in the written medium in order to make up for such a deficiency.

Finally, another determining factor for the use of passives in writing is the fact that, in contrast with the spontaneity that characterises colloquial speech, the written language is a planned mode of communication. As such, the written language is "expected to be more elaborate and varied both in terms of the lexical items and the constructions used" (Siewierska 1984: 230). Consequently, in compliance with the requirements for stylistic diver-

sity, the passive is used in alternation with the active to achieve structural variation and a rhetorically balanced text.

All the above-mentioned stylistic factors have been examined in the passive clauses found in the EModE section of the *Helsinki Corpus*; section 3 below describes the sample used in this study and provides the analysis of the data retrieved from the corpus.

3. THE PASSIVE AS A STYLE MARKER IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH: EVIDENCE FROM THE *HELSINKI CORPUS*

3.1. THE CORPUS

The present study is based on actual linguistic data drawn from the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. The sample used is not the whole EModE section of the corpus, but a selection from it, comprising about 153,000 words. A preliminary overview[11] of these 153,000 words showed that the size of the sample was sufficient for my purposes, since it contained a high number of passive constructions, and, what is more, the passive types and forms represented in the sample were repeatedly met with. In other words, the preliminary examination showed that an analysis of a larger number of words would not result in the addition of significant instances, and that it would not modify their proportional distribution in any relevant way.

TABLE I	WORDS	ACTIVES	% ACT.	PASSIVES	% PASS.
E1 (1500-1570)	50,000	2236	78.5%	612	21.4%
E2 (1570-1640)	48,000	2550	77.9%	722	22.0%
E3 (1640-1710)	55,000	2893	75.8%	922	24.1%
TOTAL	148,000	7679	77.2%	2256	22.7%

Table I: Number of words examined, with indication of actives and passives and of relative frequency of passives with respect to actives.

Table I displays the number of words examined, the number of active and passive clauses found, and the ratio of passive constructions with respect to actives in each chronological subperiod. The count of active constructions was restricted to those for which a passive counterpart would be available, that is, to those active transitive constructions with an overt object eligible to become passive subject.

Stylewise, the text-types selected can be broadly classified into two groups. Though I am aware that it is more accurate to describe a text as more or less formal, since these parameters are a matter of degree rather than a binary distinction, I have adopted in this respect the classification provided by the compilers of the *Helsinki Corpus*. These identify *Science, Statutes* and *Sermons* as formal, and the other three text-categories singled out here, namely *Drama, Fiction* and *Private Letters*, as informal. Table II provides the breakdown for the text-types studied and the number of words analysed in each.

TABLE II	WORDS
STATUTES	37,000
SCIENCE	25,000
P. LETTERS	37,000
SERMONS	15,000
DRAMA	19,000
FICTION	20,000
TOTAL	153,000

Table II: Number of words examined in each text-type.

3.2. ANALYSIS OF THE CORPUS-DATA

In order to check whether the passive in EModE is connected with style as it is in PE, I examined the distribution of the 2,256 passives found in the corpus by text-category.

Table III shows the textual distribution of passives in each chronological subperiod. The percentages for each register in each of the chronological subperiods in Table III are relative to the total number of passives found in the register in question, a figure which is provided in the right-hand column; for instance, the figures adduced under E1 Statutes indicate that the number of passive examples in this text and subperiod is 240, which represents 23.3% of the total 1030 examples of passives recorded in legal writings. The percentages in the right-hand column and those in the bottom row refer to the total number of passives found in the corpus, namely 2,256.

TABLE III	E1	E2	E3	TOTAL
STATUTES	240-23.3%	377-36.6%	413-40.0%	1030-45.6%
SCIENCE	128-30.8%	90-21.6%	197-47.4%	415-18.3%
P. LETTERS	91-25.0%	122-33.5%	151-41.4%	364-16.1%
SERMONS	61-31.7%	44-22.9%	87-45.3%	192-8.5%
DRAMA	56-42.7%	35-26.7%	40-30.5%	131-5.8%
FICTION	36-29.0%	54-43.5%	34-27.4%	124-5.4%
TOTAL	612-27.1%	722-32.0%	922-40.8%	2256-100%

Table III. Number and percentage of passives per text-type and subperiod.

In Table III it is clear that Statutes and Science yield the highest frequency of passives, and next come Private Letters. This is a somewhat paradoxical finding, considering that Statutes and Sermons on the one hand, and Private Letters on the other, stand at opposite poles as regards register and sociolinguistic characteristics. However, the actual frequency of passives can only be measured by comparison with the frequency of actives in the same text and author, as is shown in Table IV below. There it can be seen that, when passives are considered in relation to actives, the percentage of passives is higher for the three formal texts, namely Statutes, Science and Sermons, and lower for the informal text-types, namely Private Letters, Drama and Fiction. In other words, if the number of passives in each text-type is compared with the number of actives, we find that it is in the three formal text-categories that passives are more frequent.

TABLE IV	TOTAL	ACTIVES	PASSIVES
STATUTES	1,978	948 (47.9%)	1,030 (52.07%)
SCIENCE	1,313	898 (68.3%)	415 (31.6%)
P. LETTERS	2,794	2,430 (86.9%)	364 (13.02%)
SERMONS	853	661 (77.4%)	192 (22.5%)
DRAMA	1,254	1,123 (89.5%)	131 (10.4%)
FICTION	1,743	1,619 (92.8%)	124 (7.1%)
TOTAL	9,9351	7,679 (77.2%)	2,256 (22.7%)

Table IV. Number of actives and passives per text-type, with relative percentages.

Table V is even more revealing: it provides the total figures for active clauses, passive clauses and their relative proportions in both formal and informal texts. The difference is outstanding: while passives in informal texts amount only to 10.6% of all transitive clauses, 39.5% of transitive clauses in formal texts are passives.

TABLE V	TOTAL	ACTIVES	PASSIVES
INFORMAL TEXTS	5,791	5,172 (89.3%)	619 (10.6%)
FORMAL TEXTS	4,144	2,507 (60.4%)	1,637 (39.5%)

Table V. Number of active and passive clauses and relative percentages in both formal and informal text-types.

Thus, the data in the corpus show that the generally accepted view that the passive is much more prevalent in formal varieties of English also holds true for EModE.

As already stated, the second purpose of this study is to examine the factors that determine the association found in the EModE corpus between passives and formal styles. As mentioned in section 2.1 above, when analysing the motivations behind the correlation between formal texts and passive clauses, most authors voice the opinion that such a correlation involves the impersonalising function of the passive, the reason being that formal texts demand an impersonal style to which passive agentless clauses contribute (cf. section 2.1 and Turner 1973: 181; Stanley 1975; Leech and Svartvik 1975: 25, 258-9; Palmer 1987: 79).[12] Agentless passives, accordingly, are used in formal texts because they constitute a useful device to present propositions with no emphasis on the agent, in compliance with the wish to avoid mentioning it out of modesty, ignorance or tentativeness.

In order to ascertain whether the association between the passive voice and formal styles in EModE is also motivated by a desire to describe facts impersonally, the distribution of agentless passives by text-types was examined. A higher proportion of agentless passives in formal texts should be indicative of the passive being used with an impersonalising motivation. The results of such an analysis are shown in Tables VI and VII:

TABLE VI	AGENTLESS	AGENT
STATUTES	804 (78.05%)	226 (21.9%)
SCIENCE	368 (88.6%)	47 (11.3%)
P. LETTERS	340 (93.4%)	24 (6.5%)
SERMONS	154 (80.2%)	38 (19.7%)
DRAMA	126 (96.1%)	5 (3.8%)
FICTION	115 (92.7%)	9 (7.2%)

Table VI. Distribution of agentless and agent passives by text-type.

TABLE VII	AGENTLESS	AGENT
FORMAL TEXTS	1,326 (81.0%)	311 (18.9%)
INFORMAL TEXTS	581 (93.8%)	38 (6.1%)

Table VII. Distribution of agentless and agent clauses in formal and informal text-types.

As can be observed in Table VI, the highest percentages of agentless passives do not correspond to formal text-types, but rather to informal texts: agentless passives amount to 93.4% in *Private Letters*, 96.1% in *Drama* and 92.7% in *Fiction*. The correlation between informal texts and agentless passives is most apparent in Table VII, which shows that 93.8% of passives are agentless in informal texts, as opposed to only 81% of agentless passives in formal texts.

The data relating to the distribution of agentless passives in the corpus, as shown in Tables VI and VII, therefore, do not seem to confirm, at least for EModE, the widespread assumption that the motivation behind the preference for the passive voice in formal registers lies merely in the requirement that the style should be impersonal. It seems that the passive is connected with formal written English for reasons other than this. The paragraphs that follow briefly outline other stylistic factors which may also be responsible for the correlation between the passive voice and formal registers of English observed in the corpus.

As shown in Table V, noteworthy among the stylistic factors that may determine the preference for the passive in formal registers are, firstly, the rhetorical, sophisticated style typical of formal registers as opposed to the ca-

sual style characteristic of informal texts (Nash 1980; Siewierska 1984). In this connection, it was pointed out in section 2.1 that Siewierska (1984: 229) accounts for the connection between passive constructions and formal styles in terms of the complexity of the passive structure and the traditional influence of Latin on English. Obviously, the influence of Latin and French on English is much more conspicuous in earlier stages of the language, when Latin was still regarded as the grammatical model to imitate and French culture had great prestige. It may be concluded, accordingly, that one reason why the passive construction is chosen mostly by formal writers in the corpus may be that it is considered suitable for the rhetorical, sophisticated style which formal texts require.

A second factor that may well justify the higher porportion of passives in formal registers in the corpus is the close relationship between formal registers and the written medium on the hand, and informal registers and the oral medium on the other. Though, as is obvious, all the linguistic evidence of past stages of the language at our disposal belongs to the written medium of expression, some texts record a type of language which is fairly similar to speech. This is the case of *Private Letters*, a text-type consisting of a communicative exchange between friends and relatives not intended for publication or official use. This text-type, consequently, exhibits characteristics of unplanned, spontaneous and speech-like discourse.

The other informal texts selected, namely *Drama* and *Fiction*, also afford a possibility of approximation to spoken language, for they contain lively dialogues between different characters, who, in their turn, very often belong to the lower orders of society, so that colloquial, spontaneous speech is imitated in such fictional discourse. Undoubtedly, when analysing the linguistic style of these three text-types we are often drawing inferences about actual speech.

The close relation between informal text-types and the oral medium I have just mentioned may determine the lower frequency of passives with respect to formal texts, since most of the information that the interlocutors of informal texts exchange is given, and, therefore, elided. By contrast, in formal registers given information is repeated and must, therefore, be integrated into clause structure; and, as was explained in section 2.1, contexts in which the interlocutor is given information favour the use of the passive voice (Chafe 1976; Siewierska 1984).

A third factor that may play a role in the connection observed in the corpus between formal text-types and the passive voice seems to concern the stylistic diversity demanded by formal texts, to which the passive, in alternation with the active, contributes (cf. section 2.1). Thus, in *Statutes,*

Sermons and *Science*, the choice of passive over the active may be a stylistic device resorted to for the sake of stylistic variation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, in this paper I have examined the stylistic function of the passive voice in Early Modern English as represented in the *Helsinki Corpus*. The analysis has yielded the following results. Firstly, as can be gathered from the results in Tables III, IV and V, the data retrieved from the corpus indicate that the passive in EModE is associated with formal registers, as in PE, and that it therefore functions as a style marker in this period, since the proportion of passive clauses with respect to active clauses is much higher in formal (39.5%) than in informal texts (10.6%).

Secondly, my data, however, do not corroborate the traditional hypothesis that the main reason for the association between passive clauses and formal styles is the aim for impersonal style (Bryant 1959; Turner 1973; Leech and Svartvik 1975; Stanley 1975; Palmer 1987; Biber 1988), as agentless passives are more common in informal than in formal texts, with frequencies of 93.8% and 81% respectively. The distribution of agentless clauses, consequently, seems to validate the opinion voiced by Nash (1980) and Siewierska (1984) that passives are associated with formal registers for reasons other than the search for impersonality.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, Leech and Svartvik (1975: 259), Nash (1980: 140-2), Granger-Legrand (1983: 193), Huddleston (1984: 445), Quirk et al. (1985: 161), Palmer (1987: 90), Biber (1988: 112), Biber and Finegan (1997: 259), Denison (1993: 420) and Givón and Yang (1994: 138).

2. Jespersen (1933: 120-21) adduces the following reasons for not mentioning the agent: either it is unknown, or self-evident from the context or it must be avoided out of tact. Both Kruisinga (1925: II, 122-3) and Sledd (1959: 303) also state that sometimes the speaker / writer merely wants to mention an action or process, independently of who performed it, which, as is well known, is not possible in English if an active is used: the presence of a subject is obligatory and the indefinite personal pronouns *one* or *someone* are not always suitable for the role of subject (cf. Frajzyngier 1982: 271; Siewierska 1984: 238-54).

3. Other factors, of a syntactic nature, may also intervene in the choice between active and passive clauses, namely the principle of end-weight and the desire to maintain the same

topic over consecutive sentences (cf. Leech and Svartvik 1975: 175; Weiner and Labov 1983: 42; Werth 1984: 237-8; Downing and Noonan 1995: 35).

4. "Demotion" refers to the change in syntactic status undergone by the agent NP in passive clauses, with concomitant loss of accessibility to and control of certain grammatical processes (cf. for instance, Foley and van Valin 1985: 317). The emphasis in the quotation is Givón's.

5. As a topicalising device, the passive serves a two-pronged purpose; on the one hand, it restores the unmarked given / new order of information within the clause and places an inherently topical NP in topic position (Givón 1979: 30; 1983: 10; Werth 1984: 236-40; Siewierska 1984: 220ff; Downing and Noonan 1995: 35). On the other hand, as is the case with other fronting strategies such as topicalisations and left-dislocations, it can topicalise a non-agent for contrastive, emphatic purposes (Givón 1981: 165; 1983: 17; Siewierska 1984: 234-36; Foley and van Valin 1985: 300-3; Keenan 1985: 244; Doherty 1996: 631).

6. By "varieties of English" I mean different registers and types of discourse, not geographical varieties. The use of the passive is not indicative of regional differences, because, as Leech and Svartvik point out, these are not normally reflected in formal written language: "within each English-speaking country there are many differences of regional dialect. . . . These differences rarely affect grammatical usage in written English or in educated spoken English" (1975: 22-3).

7. Leech and Svartvik (1975: 259); Granger-Legrand (1983: 193); Huddleston (1984: 445); Quirk et al. (1985: 161); Palmer (1987: 90); Denison (1993: 420-1); Givón and Yang (1994: 138).

8. Obviously, only *be*-passives are the concern of this paper, since *get*-passives had not yet emerged in the Early Modern English period. Denison (1993: 420) records the earliest unequivocal example, namely *so you may not only save your life, but get rewarded for your roguery* (Fielding, *Letter Writers* II.ix.20), which dates back to 1731.

9. Svartvik (1966) has studied the frequency of the passive in eight different types of text and found that the passive is most frequent in scientific texts (1966: 153).

10. These two fronting strategies, namely topicalisations and left-dislocations, are exemplified in (i) and (ii) below respectively:
(i) *Mary, I really love.*
(ii) *Mary, she loves playing the piano.*
For a comparison between the function of these two fronting devices and that of the passive construction, see Shibatani (1985) Keenan (1985) and Foley and van Valin (1985).

11. A preliminary overview of the corpus was necessary because, as Raumolin-Brunberg points out, the sample size depends on the phenomenon under study, and "at the introduction of a syntactic study the researcher seldom knows the real frequency of the phenomenon under examination. . . . This is why it is difficult to know in advance how large one's sample should be" (1991: 53).

12. Of course, the agent in passives is omitted or, alternatively, demoted to the status and position of an oblique adjunct. In both cases the emphasis on the agent is diminished, but to a different extent, since the choice between agent and agentless passives depends on the degree of defocusing that is being sought for. Agentless passives defocus agents completely, for the most conspicuous way of defocusing an element is not to encode it syntactically. For this reason, in the present study agentless passives as regarded as complying most clearly with the impersonal style characteristic of formal texts. Passives with agent *by*-phrases, on the other hand, involve an incomplete defocusing of the agent, because the strength of focus correlates

with the grammatical functions of constituents, oblique adjuncts having the lowest focus of all the syntactically encoded elements: "focus decreases along the hierarchy of grammatical relations: subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique objects" (Shibatani 1985: 832).

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ANAPHORA IN THE INTERLANGUAGE OF SPANISH LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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1. INTRODUCTION

Following previous work on interlanguage grammar (cf. Chomsky, 1981; Yuan, 1994; Schachter, 1996) and, more specifically, on the role of Universal Grammar (henceforth UG) in the acquisition of the English reflexive by native speakers of other languages (cf. Bennet 1994 for Serbo-Croatian; Matsumura 1994, Thomas 1995 and Wakabayashi 1996 for Japanese), this paper describes how native speakers of a Romance language such as Spanish acquire the reflexive in a Germanic language such as English. The experiment I conducted shows that Manzini and Wexler's (1987) GOVERNING CATEGORY and PROPER ANTECEDENT PARAMETER are violated in the interlanguage of Spanish Learners of English. The frequently inconsistent responses obtained from Spanish Learners of English (SPLE for short), which radically depart from those obtained with Japanese Learners of English (JPLE) in Wakabayashi (1996), provide strong evidence that Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is not always systematic. However, it seems impossible to determine the role of Universal Grammar in SLA from the study of the syntactic constraints in interlanguage. More specifically, while the interlanguage of Spanish Learners of English suggests that Manzini and Wexler's (1987) parameters concerning Principle A of the Binding Theory are not universal, the interlanguage of Japanese Learners of English seems to indicate that UG is indeed available in SLA.

As is well known, Principle A of the Binding Theory has traditionally been regarded as a universal constraint on the occurrence of reflexives. It states that they must be bound inside their local domain (cf. Chomsky,