



โครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำในนวนิยายอังกฤษ

Agentless Passive in English Novels

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยนี้เป็นการศึกษาการใช้โครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำในนวนิยายอังกฤษ แม้จะมีงานวิจัยที่ได้ทำการศึกษาโครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำก่อนหน้านี้ให้ความสำคัญกับงานเขียนของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศและงานเขียนของผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สอง งานวิจัยครั้งนี้จึงเลือกตัวบทที่แตกต่างออกไปคือนวนิยายภาษาอังกฤษ ชุดข้อมูลเก็บมาจากนวนิยายอังกฤษที่มียอดขายสูงเป็นจำนวนทั้งสิ้นเจ็ดเล่ม (www.amazon.com) ชุดข้อมูลนวนิยายทั้งหมดประกอบด้วย *Little Woman* (Alcott, 2019) *the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 2019) *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 2019) *Northanger Abbey* (Austen, 2019) *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 2019) *Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf, 2021) และ *a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce, 2021) ชุดข้อมูลจำนวนประมาณ 350,000 คำจากนวนิยายทั้งสิ้นเจ็ดเล่มประกอบด้วย 30 ตัวอย่างของโครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำในนวนิยายอังกฤษ การวิเคราะห์โครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำตามแบบของ Swan (2016) นักภาษาศาสตร์ภาษาอังกฤษจำนวนทั้งสิ้นสามท่านดำเนินการตรวจสอบความถูกต้องของการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูล ผลการศึกษาในงานวิจัยนี้แสดงให้เห็นว่าร้อยละ 56.67 ของการใช้โครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำที่พบในนวนิยายภาษาอังกฤษเป็นเพราะทราบอยู่แล้วว่าใครคือผู้กระทำ ร้อยละ 33.33 พบว่าไม่ทราบว่าเป็นผู้กระทำและร้อยละ 10 แสดงให้เห็นว่าผู้กระทำนั้นไม่มีความสำคัญ นักวิจัยหวังเป็นอย่างยิ่งว่าผลการศึกษาของงานวิจัยครั้งนี้จะเพิ่มพูนความรู้ด้านโครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำในนวนิยายอังกฤษซึ่งจะเป็นประโยชน์ต่อผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาต่างประเทศและผู้เรียนภาษาอังกฤษเป็นภาษาที่สองในการเขียนโครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำในนวนิยายอังกฤษอย่างถูกต้องและเหมาะสม

คำสำคัญ: โครงสร้างกรรมวาจกที่ไร้ผู้กระทำ, นวนิยายอังกฤษ



ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of agentless passive constructions in English novels. Although there are numerous previous studies that paid attention to the studies of agentless passive, most of them focused on the data of EFL and ESL writing. This current study, on the other hand, aims to contribute to the view of English novels how to interpret agentless passive voice semantically. The source of data was collected from English novels based upon their best seller (www.amazon.com). The dataset was gathered from seven English novels; *Little Woman* (Alcott, 2019), *the Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (Doyle, 2019), *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 2019), *Northanger Abbey* (Austen, 2019), *Treasure Island* (Stevenson, 2019), *Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf, 2021) and *a Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Joyce, 2021). In regard to the data collection, as a total of approximately 350,000 words, there are 30 tokens, referring to sentences of agentless passive. Descriptive statistical analysis was applied in this study and the qualitative data analysis follows Swan (2016). The results of the analysis were sent to three English linguists to verify their accuracy and validity. The results show that most agentless passive used in English novels are known as known agents at 56.67 percent. In addition, the unknown agents and unimportant agents were found at 33.33 percent and 10 percent, respectively. It is expected that the results of this study will increase English language learners' notion of agentless passive constructions. Also, it will be useful for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and learners of a Foreign language (EFL) regarding the use of agentless passive in writing English novels and shorts stories effectively and appropriately.

Keywords: Agentless Passive Constructions, English Novels



Introduction

Nowadays, the English language has become one of the most important languages of the world. Radford (2009) suggested that to know a language is to know the grammar of a language. This allows us to upgrade our *grammatical competence*, referring to the ability to use language fluently and accurately.

Although everyone knows that active voice is a common structure in English, it is sometimes found that English is necessary to be used with passive voice, as in (1).

(1)

(a) Mary ate salad.

(b) Salad was eaten by Mary.

The structures in examples (1a) and (1b) are different. Whilst (1a) is active voice, (1b) is passive voice. Despite having different syntactic structures, they are the same semantically. Nevertheless, English language learners often have problems in using these active and passive structures regarding when and why one structure should be used over the other (Bakhshandeh & Jafari, 2018; Scholastica, 2018).

Blanco-Gómez (2002) studied the use of passive voice in English newspapers and stressed that 85 percent of passive voice occurrences are agentless, referring to unimportant agent that the writers do not need to mention. In addition, another case where the agent is not mentioned is because the agent is unknown.

(2) The entire stock that went through three markets [...] will be killed, although some have already been destroyed because they have been infected.

(Blanco-Gómez 2002, p. 19)

This study is interested in agentless passive constructions, as in *the house has been bought since 2022*. With this example, the agent, or the one who instigates an action is omitted from the sentence. The disappearance of agents could semantically lead to confusion or misinterpretation, so knowing the way how to interpret the omitted agent would help to result in better and clearer understanding of the text given among the readers.

While previous studies focus on passive voice in EFL writing, this current study aims to contribute to the field by examining the use of passive voice, specifically agentless passive in English novels. There are various reasons of this reading material. First of all, it was often found that English language teachers use English novels as outside reading materials, especially in the subject of reading, in order to improve English language learners' linguistics skills. With this frequent practice, English language learners could acquire form, meaning and usage at the same time. The second reason for reading English novels concerns the level of English proficiency. English novels provide various levels of English proficiency that are suitable for English language learners to choose. Moreover, present-day English novels are written in international versions, even versions for non-native English speakers. For these reasons, it is possible to claim that English novels written by English native speakers are sources of reading materials that are suitable for most learners, regardless of ages, genders and levels of proficiency.

It is expected that the current study will be useful for learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) in terms of using agentless passive correctly.



This information is narrowed down to the following research questions.

Significance of the Problem

As mentioned in the above section, this study was created to support EFL and ESL learners, especially Japanese, Kuwaiti, Korean and Thai EFL learners, to use agentless passive constructions correctly and appropriately. As indicated by Somphong (2013), it was found that almost 50 percent of Thai EFL learners lack of notion how to use agentless passive construction accurately. To have this study, it would help fix their problem of using agentless passive.

Research Question

What are the semantic interpretations of agentless passive constructions in English novels?

Objective of the Study

To examine the semantic interpretations of agentless passive constructions in English novels

Literature Review

Passive Voice in English

In opposition with active voice, passive voice in English is normally used to conceal an agent or doer who instigates an action (Swan, 2016). Examples of active and passive voice are presented in (3).

(3)

- (a) The doctor prescribed Amoxicillin 1,000 milligrams to a patient who has severe throat infection.

- (b) A patient who has severe throat infection was prescribed Amoxicillin 1,000 milligrams.

Example (3a) represents active voice and the agent who performs the action is the doctor. However, there is another way to say the same thing. Example (3b) represents passive voice where the instigator is concealed.

Based upon generative grammar, expressing a sentence via passive voice requires four elements (Radford, 2009). First, the object of the active sentence, such as *a patient*, in (3a), is moved to become the subject of the passive sentence. Secondly, the auxiliary *be* or copular *be* is added into the sentence with the same tense as the original version. For example, the original tense of the active voice in sentence (3a) is the past tense as in *prescribed*. The past tense was then changed into *was prescribed* as in (3b). The third step is that the preposition phrase *by* is added if needed. The fourth step is the movement of the subject to be the object if needed (Radford, 2009). Nevertheless, the subject as in *the doctor* in example (3b) is omitted in this case.

While the terms the subject and the object are generally used in prescriptive grammar and generative grammar, cognitive grammar refers to the subject as *the agent*, while the object is referred to as *the patient*. The agent is the one who sends energy and performs the action. On the other hand, the patient is the one who receives the energy or is affected by the action. In terms of the subject or agents, there are several reasons why the agents can be omitted.



Agentless Passive Constructions

According to Radford (2009), one of the common cases to omit the agent is when the agent is unknown. The passive voice is used when the author really does not know who the agent who performs the action is, such as (4).

(4)

(a) The three-year old boy was kidnapped in the playground.

(b) The flower was bought for you.

The agents in example (4a) and example (4b) are omitted. The writers, or the speakers, do not know who kidnapped the boy and who bought the flower. Therefore, when an agent is unknown, the passive voice is used.

In contrast to the first case, in the second case the person who performs the action is obvious, so it is not necessary for the writer to mention the agent, such as (5).

(5)

(a) Tom stole money from the supermarket.

Two days later, he was caught in his house.

(b) Henry was killed brutally in the forest.

Examples (5a) and (5b) are examples of an obvious agent. The omitted agent in (5a) is obviously known as policemen. Similarly, the omitted agent in (5b) is obviously known as a murderer.

The third case is called a concealed agent as the speaker or the writer wants to hide the agent for some reason, such as (6).

(6) Amoxicillin 1,000 milligrams was prescribed to a patient.

We can assume that the person who prescribed Amoxicillin 1,000 milligrams to a patient is

known as a doctor. However, the doctor's name is concealed to avoid being sued when something goes wrong.

The fourth case of omitting the agent is where the agent is unimportant. It is usually found in scientific reports and scientific writing, as in (7).

(7) This academic report was being uploaded into the system.

In (7), the important information is that the report is uploaded into the system. The person doing the uploading is considered unimportant.

Previous Studies of Passive Voice

This section reviews the use of passive voice by EFL and ESL learners. Mathieson (2017) studied passive voice from Japanese EFL writing. The participants in this study were Japanese high school students whose ages were between 17 and 18 years old. Their English proficiency was measured at upper-intermediate level. The results show that this group of English language learners clearly understood the form of passive voice as in *be* + *-ed*. However, most of them experienced first language interference by producing structure like *"the nuclear accident was happened in Fukushima"*.

Halik and Kareema (2020) examined Sri Lanka ESL learners regarding their difficulty in using passive voice. In this study, 35 students from the institute of NAITA were selected as the sample to investigate their use of passive voice in their writing. The results in their study showed that most students (82 percent) only use active voice and they tend to avoid using passive voice in English. Although they enjoyed learning grammar in



classrooms, they lacked the ability to apply passive voice in their writing.

When it comes to the context of Thai EFL learners, Somphong (2013) studied the errors of passive voice in Thai students' writing. The data were collected from first-year students in English II at Thammasat University, Thailand. Students were instructed to modify transitive verbs, such as *read*, *drive*, *hit*, *write*, *won*, *sing*, *find* and *steal* from active sentences into passive sentences. The results showed that only 52.27 percent could produce well-formed passive sentences. Obvious examples of error included *drove* instead of *driven* and *stole* instead of *stolen*.

Alotaibi and Alajmi (2015) studied the use of passive voice by Kuwaiti EFL learners. The study was conducted with 50 Kuwaiti EFL learners via a Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT), where this task instructed the participants to judge whether they agreed or disagreed. The verbs that are commonly used with passive voice were derived from COCA or Corpus of Contemporary American English. The list of verbs includes *beat*, *built*, *made*, *complete*, *eat*, *protect*, *smash*, *steal*, *paint* and *lose*. The results in their study showed that the top five verbs that EFL learners judged appropriate to be used with passive voice are *beat*, *built*, *made*, *eat* and *steal*. The study reflected that their use of passive voice depended on certain verbs.

Jung (2006) investigated the problems of Korean EFL learners when they produce passive voice. The participants in this study were 200 Korean second-year university students. The participants were instructed to write an essay according to the given topic "discuss the problem of pollution in your country". From the results, the most common problems that the

participants had were tense at 20 percent, subject-verb agreement at 16.70 percent and the omission of copular *be* at 15.8 percent. Approximately 12 percent of errors showed that the participants had problems with *by*-phrase usage.

Whilst previous studies observed passive construction in EFL and ESL learners' writing. This study aims to contribute to the field by using English novels due to numerous positive reasons as mentioned in the introductory section. The methodology of this study is given in the following section.

Methodology

Source of Data

This study employed seven English novels based upon the criteria of best-seller. The researcher visited the website (www.amazon.com) where the sale volume of English novels from the year of 2019 to 2021 were recorded. The researchers selected English novels that had the best sellers to study agentless passive in this study. The lists of English novels was presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Source of Data

Novels	Authors and Years
<i>Little Woman</i>	Alcott (2019)
<i>The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes</i>	Doyle (2019)
<i>Frankenstein</i>	Shelley (2019)
<i>Northanger Abbey</i>	Austen (2019)
<i>Treasure Island</i>	Stevenson (2019)
<i>Mrs Dalloway</i>	Woolf (2021)
<i>A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man</i>	Joyce (2021)



Data Collection

The data collection of English novels in this study is based upon purposive sampling method. The advantage of this method is that it allows the researchers to keep collecting the data until the results become generalizable. It is convenient and cost saving (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016). The seven English novels in this study contained approximately 350,000 words totally. Passive voice in this study is collected based upon sentence level from the main verb only.

Data Analysis

The data analysis of passive voice in this study employs descriptive statistical approach. The raw frequency of the data collection was converted into percentage. Agentless passive in this study was analyzed according to the interpretations given in Table 2 below.

Table 2 The Semantic Interpretations of Agentless Passive in English Novels

(8)	
Agentless Passive	Examples
Unknown agent	(a) James was robbed in the car park.
Known agent	(b) A patient was diagnosed with lung cancer.
Concealed agent	(c) The contract of employment was terminated.
Unimportant agent	(d) This academic report was being uploaded into the system.

The data in Table 2 was semantically interpreted based upon Swan's (2016) who provided four types of agentless passive. In (8a), the *by*- phrase agent is not spelt out because the agent or the doer is unknown. In (8b), the agent is not spelt out because it is assumable by everyone that the person diagnosing a patient would be a doctor. In (8c), for the sake of the company's good reputation, the company name is not spelt out. In (8d), the focus is on the report being uploaded into the system rather than who is doing the uploading, so the agent is considered unimportant.

Data Validation

After being analyzed, the data were validated. In the current study, at first, three non-native English linguists were instructed to read the definition of passive voice as provided in the section of literature review. They were then asked to validate the data analysis. In this process, there are column A, representing agreement, and column D, representing disagreement. If two or more linguists placed a tick in column A, the data analysis gained reliability and validity as the percentage or accuracy was between 66.66 to 100 percent. However, if only one or none placed a tick in column A the data was reanalyzed according to their suggestion.

The Results

This section presents the result of agentless passive in English novels. There are approximately 350,000 words from seven English novels in this study which contain 30 tokens or sentences as presented in Table 4.



Table 4 Frequencies and Percentage of Agentless
Passive in English Novels

Classification of Agentless Passive	Frequencies	Percentage (%)
Known agents	17	56.67
Unknown agents	10	33.33
Unimportant agent	3	10
Total	30	100

Table 4 present frequencies and percentages of agentless passive constructions as available in English novels. The majority of agentless passive constructions in selected English novels are used as known agents at 56.67 percent. The use of unknown agent is reported to be the second place at 30 percent. The use of concealed agent is informed as the third place at 10 percent.

Known Agents

One of the distinctive results of the study was given as in (9) as known agents.

(9)

- (a) They had taken their vow. The traffic respected it; vans *were stopped*.

(Woolf, 2021, p. 53)

- (b) He *was caught* in the whirl of a scrimmage.

(Joyce, 2021, p. 10)

- (c) The boys who *had been painted* walked about or stood still awkwardly.

(Joyce, 2021, p. 67)

In example (9a), the omitted agent in this case can be interpreted as known agent as the one who normally works on the road and stops our car is a

traffic officer. In (9b), the semantic interpretation is known agent because the instigator(s) of the action would be the other people in the scrimmage. The agentless passive as in (12c) is interpreted as known agent being the painter.

Unknown Agents

Another outstanding result of this current study is presented as in (10), which is semantically interpreted as unknown agent.

(10)

- (a) The War was over, except for someone like Mrs Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy *was killed* and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin.

(Woolf, 2021, p. 8)

- (b) Here, she *was obliged* to look and consider and study for a likeness.

(Austen, 2019, p. 193)

The results of agentless passive as in (10a) were interpreted as unknown agent due to the fact that it is unknown who killed that nice boy. In (11b) it was unknown who obliged her.

Unimportant Agents

Another result of this study is presented as unimportant agents as in (11).

- (11) A large and comfortable double-bedded room had been placed at disposal.

(Doyle, 2019, p. 119)

The unimportant agent as in (11) is interpreted as the house maid.



Discussion

The higher frequency of the agentless passive constructions in English novels as know agent as reproduced in (12).

(12)

- (c) The War was over, except for someone like Mrs Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy *was killed* and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin.

(Woolf, 2021, p. 8)

- (a) As I was waiting, a man came out of a side room, and at a glance I was sure he must be Long John. His left leg *was cut* off close by the hip.

(Stevenson, 2019, p. 58)

- (b) Several witnesses *were called*.

(Shelley, 2019, p. 84)

As presented in (12), the agents are omitted due to widely known agents. The semantic interpretation of the known agents in (12a) is murderers. The semantic interpretation of agent in (12b) is known as *Long John* as available in a previous discourse. Similarly, the interpretation of the agent in (12c) is policemen.

This section will compare the results of the current study with the results of a previous study by Somphong (2013), which assessed the errors in use of passive voice among Thai EFL learners. Somphong's data were collected from first-year students in English II at Thammasat University. It was found that Thai EFL learners are likely to use the passive voice with transitive verbs, such as *read*, *drive*, *hit*, *write*, *win*, *sing*, *find* and *steal* in agentless passive. On the other

hand, the results of the current study show that the verbs that are commonly used with agentless passive are *kill*, *stop*, *caught*, *lost*, *end* and *carry*. Comparing the result of this study with previous reliable studies of Thai EFL learners, this could be empirical evidence to understand the cause of Thai EFL learners' problems or difficulties in using passive voice, especially with agentless passive.

Despite being different from Thai EFL learner, the high frequencies of unknown agent in this study go along the same lines as the use of agentless passive in English newspapers. In the study carried out by Sogut (2018), *the New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Washington Post* were used. The results showed that passive voice written by new reporters is frequently used with unknown agents, as is the case found in the current study of agentless passive use in English novels.

(13)

English News

- (a) At least 95 people were killed and more than 500 were injured, the Health Ministry said. But local politicians said the remains of 120 victims had been identified.

(Sogut, 2018, p. 170)

English Novels

- (b) The boys who had been painted walked about or stood still awkwardly.

(Joyce, 2021, p. 67)

In (13a), agentless passive is used because of an unknown agent, whereas the use of agentless passive in (14b) is due to known agents. Unlike other genres, English novelist is likely to use passive voice when the agents have already been known. This is because there are a lot of both important and



unimportant protagonists in English novels. Repeating protagonists' name that frequent would be unnecessary and it would make the story become boring.

Pedagogical Implications

As mentioned earlier, this study is expected to be beneficial to the learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) and learners of English as a Foreign language (EFL) to learn form, meaning and function of a certain grammatical feature at the same time.

Based upon the results and discussion in this study, English novels are regarded as a good source of material for English language learners to learn agentless passive. English novels offer enough frequencies and various categories of agentless passive to learn. It can be seen from the data in this study that English novels' writers use agentless passive construction in different situations. To avoid misinterpretation and confusion of the readers, especially non-native English readers, the notion of interpreting the agentless passive construction in this study would encourage English language learners to read and understand English novels more thoroughly. Also, this encourages English language learners to be autonomous and independent learners. They do not need to depend entirely on their English teachers to learn grammar in classrooms, but they can learn different grammatical features themselves, everywhere. From qualitative point of view, native English speakers' written novels are considered as productive and effective English learning sources.

Some English language learners comment that learning grammar and structure via explicit learning of grammar in English classroom is so boring. In other words, the subject of English sentence structure is the

most boring subject subjects. If teachers bring the materials like English novels to class, this could avoid their boredom as English novels are a kind of writing to provide entertainment as well. Accordingly, teachers could apply the result in this study as a piece of material to teach their study in their English classrooms.

Conclusion

This study examined the use of agentless passive in order to answer the following research question.

What are the semantic interpretations of agentless passive in English novels?

Approximately 350,000 words in the selected English novels contain 30 tokens of agentless passive to be studied. The results show that the use of agentless passive in English novels is various, such as unknown agent (i.e., *That nice boy was killed*) and known agent (*The traffic respected it; vans were stopped*).

When comparing the results of this study to the use of passive voice with Thai EFL learners, it allows us to know why Thai EFL learners face difficulties in using passive voice, especially in agentless passive. This is because they lack the grammatical competence in applying agentless passive in the right situation.

The comparison of agentless passive between English newspapers and English novels broadens the researcher's new viewpoint. In English newspapers, the agentless passive is used with the case of unknown agent. On the other hand, the agentless passive in English novels is used in the case of known agent to avoid repetition of calling the protagonists' name again and again.



The results of agentless passive in this study are only generalized to English novels. Generalizing the data in this study to other types of texts, such as EFL writing, academic prose and newspapers will not be applicable to the optimal level. For future research studies, it is recommended that using other genres such as English magazines and bibliographical texts would lend something new to the field.

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