

## **Competitors of the passive in scientific discourse**

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The passive is a construction that has traditionally been associated with formal contexts, in particular with scientific writing (Biber et al., 1999). As a construction that allows for the expression of an event without an explicit agent it used to be considered a perfect match for situations in which a scientist aimed at reporting the findings of an experiment in an objective way. However, the traditional view of the scientist as a neutral observer has undergone drastic changes (Bazerman, 1988). Style manuals and textbooks on academic writing alike dismiss presenting oneself as detached from the findings one reports as a rhetoric style that engenders a false faith in science (e.g. Penrose & Katz, 1998). Knowledge is considered as something that humans shape as much as discover, and the language of scientific discourse ought to acknowledge the active role of researchers in creating data. Hence, style manuals strongly recommend the use of the active voice. Recent corpus studies have found that these changes have resulted in a "dramatic decrease" (Seoane, 2006) of the passive in scientific discourse.

I will examine this claim and will show that this picture is too simple. First, many corpus studies miss up to 30% of all passives because they don't capture passives without "be" (a regular phenomenon in modifying clauses). Secondly, the constructions that the passive competes with are not necessarily more agentive. Over time, a number of constructions have emerged that show less involvement of an agent than the passive, while not being marked morphologically. In particular, I will discuss the emergence of the "paper construction" (as in "This paper argues..."), which is a fairly recent construction, but one that can be traced back to the more traditional paradigm of the invisible researcher. My data will come from historical and contemporary corpora of scientific English (FROWN, ARCHER). Special attention will be paid to the scientific abstract, a comparatively new but already highly formalized genre of scientific writing.