

Grammar Guru VII

V. Saraswathi

If someone asks you “Would you like a cup of coffee?”, what would be your normal response? You might say “Yes, please,” if you are a coffee addict like me. Or you might politely refuse with a “No, Thank you.” Have you ever heard anyone saying, “No, coffee has already been had by me”? Yet this monstrosity of a sentence, which one never uses in real life contexts, has been dinned into our heads as the passive form of its innocent active cousin, *No, I have already had coffee*. Another horror I found in a grammar book is the sentence, *The rose is sweet when it is being smelt*. Why can't we make life easier by saying, *The rose smells sweet*, and be done with it?

In his *Politics and the English Language*, George Orwell says, “Never use the Passive voice where you can use the Active.” And, most experts on style endorse the view that the passive voice is always wrong. They do have strong reasons for avoiding the passive. Sentences in the passive could look awkward. They may lead to obscured meaning. Further, passive sentences are often long and wordy. In fact, we can tighten up our writing a lot if we avoid the passive.

On the other hand, there are contexts where the passive may be the best choice. Ronald Reagan, a past president of the USA, is believed to have said, “Mistakes were made” while referring to the Iran contra scandal. It is obvious who made the mistakes. The passive voice could prove a powerful tool in the hands of politicians. Kay Hudson feels

that, in some situations, the passive is not only useful but also necessary. The choice often depends on what information you want to include and what element you want to emphasize. Here are some contexts where the passive is preferred:

- (i) When the action is important, but the agent is not important.

e.g., *Rain is predicted for this afternoon.*

- (ii) When the agent performing the action is indifferent or unknown.

e.g., *The tree was cut down to make way for the flyover.*

- (iii) When the agent needs to be emphasized by being placed at the end of the sentence.

e.g., *The winning boundary was hit by Hazare.*

- (iv) In reporting scientific experiments where an air of impersonality has to be maintained:

e.g., *One gram of sodium chloride was taken.*

- (v) While reporting incidents objectively in a newspaper.

e.g., *According to a Government order all processions are banned for a week.*

Are the passive and active interchangeable? Do they mean the same thing? Are they paraphrases of each other? Not necessarily.

Not always. Look at this:

All the mangoes in this basket are spoilt.

Can we use the active voice instead? For example,

Someone spoilt all the mangoes in this basket.

Does it make sense? Even if we wangle some meaning out of it, do we ever use it? So, let's not stick to any hard and fast rules. Let's use the passive where it is appropriate. Let's turn to the active if it sounds better. Language, after all, is a matter of instinct and intuition, isn't it?

Newspaper headlines generally prefer the

passive and could end up hilarious.

Fried chicken Cooked in Microwave Wins Trip

Local Secondary School Dropouts Cut in Half

Dr V. Saraswathi, (Formerly) Professor of English (ELT), University of Madras.

[Editor's Note: *This is part of a series of articles contributed by the author and published earlier in The Times of India, Education Times from May 2008 to May 2013. We are thankful to the author to permit us to publish those articles in our journal.]*

Some useful web tools for speaking skills

Podcasting Tools

Podomatic (<http://www.podomatic.com>)

Spreaker (<http://www.spreaker.com>)

Audioboom (<https://audioboom.com>)

A podcast is an audio broadcast over the web. It is broken up into parts or episodes. Most podcasts are similar to news radio programs and deliver information on a regular basis, but they can also be comedy shows, special music broadcasts or talks. You as a teacher can set up a podcasting channel in Podomatic, Spreaker, or Audioboom.

[Contributed by Dr. Xavier Pradeep Singh, Dept of English, St Joseph's College, Trichy]

Members may access the current as well as some of the past issues of the journal on the Web by clicking on the relevant link given on the Home page of ELTAI's website: www.eltai.in.

They may also get to know their membership details by clicking on 'Member log in' on the Home page of ELTAI's website and entering their Membership ID. If required, they may send an email to: eltai_india@yahoo.co.in for relevant information.