

A Corpus-based Study on the Usage of Passive Voice in English Political Speeches on the Guidance of Text Typology

Mingpei Liu

Institute of Foreign Language, Southwest Petroleum University, Cheng Du, China

Abstract: Due to cultural and other differences, English significantly differs from other languages in many ways, and the usage of passive voice is one of these differences. According to the theory of text typology proposed by Peter Newmark (1988), all texts can be divided into informative text, expressive text and appealing text. As we all know, political speech plays a vital role in English-speaking countries such as Britain and the United States. Therefore, this thesis, based on previous studies, gives special attention to the usage of passive voice in different types of texts, especially in political speeches under the guidance of text typology, and further finds that the proportion of passive voice adopted in political speeches ranges from 2% to 20% and averagely accounts for 10% of the text, and most passive sentences in political speeches are used to state facts and emphasize opinions with American inaugural addresses from 1961 to 2021 as self-built corpus and quantitative analysis as its method. It is hoped that this study can provide some references for translators who are engaged in political speech translations.

Keywords: Text Typology; Passive Voice; Pragmatic Functions; English Political Speeches

1. Introduction

According to the theory of text typology further developed by Peter Newmark (1988), all texts can be divided into three types, namely informative, expressive and appealing texts.^[1] Different texts are featured with different functions. Passive voice is widely used in English and plays various but corresponding functions in these three types of texts. For this reason, most scholars (such as Xiao Bitan^[2], 2012; Zeng Lisu^[3], 1994, et al.) have ever analyzed the pragmatic functions of passive voice. Some scholars (such as Lu Xuanming^[4], 2016; Xiao Bidan^[2], 2012, et al.) are devoted to investigating the usage of passive voice adopted in certain text translations along the temporal dimension. However, few scholars give research on the usage of passive voice applied in English political speeches based on the text typology. In view of this, this thesis firstly gives a summary to the usage of passive voice and its main functions exerted in all kinds of English texts under the theory of text typology and then discusses the applied characteristics of passive voice in English political speeches with successive American presidential inaugural speeches from 1961 to 2021 as its corpus so as to hope to offer some references to English political speeches translations.

2. The Theory of Text Typology

Reiss Christina (1989), the first one to put forward the text typology, defined semantic functions into three types: expressive function, informational function and infective function, and then divided texts into content-based text, form-based text and vocative text.^[5] Peter Newmark (1988), a contemporary British translation theorist, further developed the theory of text typology. According to his theory, all texts are divided into informative, expressive and appealing texts.^[1] Informative text refers to teaching materials, academic works, etc., centering on the information of the text, while expressive text is author-centered, committed to express the author's feelings and opinions, including literary works, personal letters, etc. Appealing text, on the other hand, is reader-centered, especially affecting readers emotionally, consisting of brochures, advertisements, etc.^[1]

English political speech is an indispensable part in British and American political lives which mainly consists of the speeches of election, inauguration, state visit, diplomacy etc. According to Newmark's text typology, one text is usually classified as one or more given text type, which could

equally apply to the political speech. Yang Daliang and Zhao Xiangyun (2012) contended that official documents and reports should belong to expressive text, while political speeches be categorized as appealing text.^[6] But as far as semantic functions are concerned, one political speech often exerts more than one functions such as expressing, informing and calling. So political speech should not be classified into one simple type but a mixture of three types, namely informative, expressive and appealing texts, and each text performs its own functions. In other words, one political speech usually includes three parts: parts of informing, expressing and appealing. What is noteworthy is that, according to Zhang Delu and Sun Shiguang (2015),^[7] western political speeches mainly and mostly center on interpersonal functions and play the role of persuading, educating, motivating and uniting the public so that most English political speeches usually attach much importance to the parts of expressing and appealing.

3. The Pragmatic Functions of Passive Voice

Passive voice is commonly used and has its own pragmatic functions in English expressions. According to Lin Zhengjun and Wang Meng (2020), English passive voice serves conceptual, interpersonal and textual functions in a specific language domain, and conceptual function could make different cognitive images reflected by passive voice so as to form different expressive meanings.^[8] Yao Xuemei (2010) proposed that textual function of passive voice is mainly embodied in theme establishment, content coherence and topic focus.^[9] Qiu Yanping (2008) deemed that passive voice has strong interpersonal function which is mainly used to attract readers' attention, focus on topics, get rid of responsibility, highlight objectivity etc.^[10] Passive voice in different situations have different pragmatic functions and several functions may be performed simultaneously in one situation.

Further, Siewierska(1984), a famous grammarian, studied the usage of passive voice in different writing styles. By comparing the frequency of passive voice in eight text types, he found that the high frequencies of dynamic occurrence of passive voice in eight texts types are science, news, arts, sports, speech, novels, adverting, play.^[11] According to Newmark's text typology, it is clear that passive voice is most used in informational text, then in expressive text, and finally appealing text.

On that account, many scholars studied the specific pragmatic functions of passive voice exerted in certain text types. Zeng Lisu (1994) pointed out passive voice is always applied to the non-subjective style which mostly refers to informational texts to state objective facts and highlight objectivity, realizing interpersonal function.^[3] Moreover, Lin Zhengjun and Wang Meng (2020) discussed that passive voice in expressive texts like novels and biographies mainly serve the textual function of establishing theme, cohering content and focusing topics.^[8] Besides, passive voice in reader-centered appealing texts, such as notices, brochures, etc., can be used to establish connections between authors and readers, stand out focal points and emphasize opinions, primarily achieving interpersonal function. It can be found that passive voice adopted in expressive and appealing texts can both serve the function of emphasizing.

4. The Passive Voice Used in English Political Speeches

This part focuses on investigating the usage of passive voice adopted in successive American presidential inaugural speeches from 1961 to 2021 from the spatial distribution and the time dimension with the method of quantitative analysis.

4.1. The Functions of Passive Voice Applied in English Inaugural Speeches

By analyzing the passive voice sentences in the inaugural speeches of successive US presidents from 1961 to 2021 with qualitative analysis, it is found that in these English political speeches, passive voice is mainly used to state facts and emphasize opinions. Specific results are shown in the table 1 below.

Table 1: Functional distributions of passive voice.

Year	Stating	Emphasizing	Stating and emphasizing
1961	25%	62.50%	12.50%
1969	0%	80%	20%
1974	0.00%	0%	100%
1977	33.00%	66%	1%
1981	40.00%	33%	26.70%
1989	16.60%	55.60%	27.80%
1993	20%	60%	20%
2001	35.70%	57.10%	7.20%
2009	31.25%	50%	18.75%
2013	0.00%	50%	50%
2017	30.80%	53.80%	15.40%
2021	41.70%	16.70%	41.60%

The study finds that passive voice adopted for stating facts mostly distributes in a small amount of informational parts and appears in the situation when speakers want to tell people some past facts or severe facts so as to enhance the objectivity and seriousness of the information, and meanwhile arouse people's resonance or concern. Usually, this kind of passive sentence in political speeches performs in the structure of was /were done or have/has been done. Examples are as below:

- (1) Millions Of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of and thousands of businesses closed.
- (2) The wealth of our middle class has been ripped from their homes and then redistributed all across the world.
- (3) Homes have been lost; jobs shed; businesses shuttered.
- (4) The capital was abandoned. The snow was stained with blood.

Passive voice used to emphasize ideas with speaker's strong will mostly appears in a large number of expressive and appealing parts in English political speeches, exerting textual and interpersonal functions, thus conveying speakers' attitudes and enhancing the mutual trust between speakers and listeners. The structure of passive sentence for emphasizing is usually presented as will/should/can/must be done or need/have to be done. For example:

- (1) Every child must be taught these principles.
- (2) If our country does not lead the cause of freedom, it will not be led.
- (3) There is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America.
- (4) Our forbearance should never be misunderstood.
- (5) What has to be done, has to be done by government and people together or it will not be done at all.

On account of that passive voice may play several functions simultaneously in the same sentence, most of the passive sentences adopted in English political speeches have both interpersonal and textual functions for stating and emphasizing, such as?

- (1) The oath that I have taken is the same oath that was taken by George Washington and by every President under the Constitution.
- (2) That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood.
- (3) We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights;
- (4) This is the first time in history that this ceremony has been held, as you have been told, on this West Front of the Capitol.

4.2. The Frequency of Passive Voice Appeared in English Inaugural Speeches

With quantitative analysis, this part studies the overall adoption situation of passive voice in the successive inaugural speeches of eleven Us presidents from 1961 to 2021. The results are shown below:

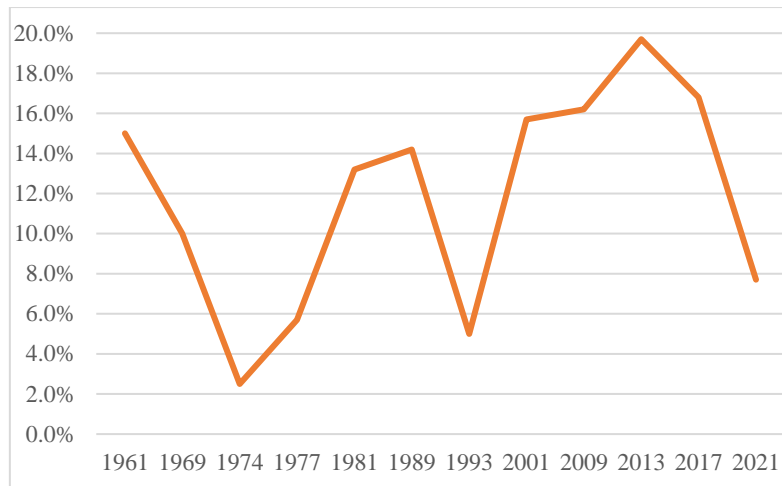


Fig.1. The frequency of passive voice

From the data in Fig.1, it is found that the proportion of passive voice applied in English political speeches ranges from 2% to 20% and averagely accounts for 10% in political speeches, presenting an unstable change from 1961 to 2021. Most speakers usually support their views based on facts so that there is, in English inaugural speeches, always a small part of informational texts in which passive voice is adopted to help achieve objectivity. Moreover, passive voice plays a vital role to perform textual and interpersonal functions in expressive and appealing parts so that passive voice always occupies a certain but not too much proportion in English political speeches.

Moreover, different political speeches possess different language styles which are mainly decided by the speakers. Xiao Bitan (2015) said language expression habits keep changing with the development of the times.[2] So the usage of passive voice in political speech also changes accordingly. That's why the usage of passive voice presents an unstable tendency from 1961 to 2021. However, no matter how the times change, the pragmatic functions of passive voice remains constant and all of them need to have their own places in English expressions. So passive voice always takes up a certain small proportion and performs as a flavoring agent in English political speeches.

5. Conclusion

Based on Newmark's theory of text typology and pragmatic functions of the passive voice, with successive American presidential inaugural speeches from 1961 to 2021 as self-built corpus, this paper gives a special attention to the usage of passive voice adopted in different types of texts, especially in the political speeches, and roughly concludes that passive voice adopted in English political speeches account for 2% to 20% of the whole text, and most of the passive sentences are used to state facts and emphasize opinions, performing both the textual and interpersonal functions so as to enhance the objectivity of the information as well as attract listeners' attention. Furthermore, this paper found that there are many factors such as speakers and the changes of the times which will influence the usage of passive voice in English political speeches. By studying this, the situations when passive voices need to be used in English political speeches are clearly known. It is hoped that more translation ways will be available for translators to deal with passive voices in political speeches.

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