Investigating the Syntactic Patterns Associated with the Passive Voice in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)

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Abstract
This study investigates the syntactic patterns associated with the passive voice in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), a comprehensive dataset exceeding one billion words from 1990 to the present. Employing a corpus-based methodology, the research analyzes be-passives, get-passives, and prepositional passives through targeted queries, frequency normalization, and qualitative classification of argument structures and semantic prosody. Quantitative findings reveal the dominance of be-passives at approximately 3,500 occurrences per million words, with higher frequencies in formal genres like academic texts, while get-passives prevail in spoken registers at 600 per million words, exhibiting adversative prosody and diachronic increases indicative of colloquialization. Prepositional passives remain stable but niche, often integrating verb-preposition units for affectedness emphasis. The analysis highlights genre-specific variations, lexical constraints in ditransitive verbs, and representational overlaps with active voice, grounded in Construction Grammar and Usage-Based Theory. These insights underscore the passive voice's adaptability in contemporary American English, with implications for linguistic theory, English pedagogy, and natural language processing. Limitations include reliance on COCA's tagging and exclusion of non-central forms, suggesting avenues for comparative varietal studies.

Keywords: Passive Voice, Syntactic Patterns, Corpus of Contemporary American English (Coca), Be-Passive, Get-Passive, Prepositional Passive, Semantic Prosody, Corpus Linguistics, Diachronic Trends, Argument Structure

Introduction

Background of the Study

The passive voice represents a fundamental syntactic construction in English, allowing speakers and writers to shift focus from the agent to the patient or theme of an action, thereby emphasizing the outcome or affected entity rather than the performer. This construction, typically formed with a variant of the auxiliary verb "be" or "get" followed by a past participle, plays a crucial role in discourse coherence, information structure, and stylistic variation across genres. In contemporary American English, the passive voice has been subject to evolving usage patterns influenced by prescriptive norms, colloquialization, and genre-specific demands. Corpus linguistics has emerged as a powerful methodology for examining these patterns empirically, providing large-scale, naturally occurring data to reveal frequency, distribution, and semantic associations. The Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), comprising over one billion words from diverse sources such as spoken dialogues, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts, serves as an ideal resource for such investigations. Prior studies have utilized COCA to explore variants like the get-passive, highlighting its prevalence in informal registers and semantic prosody with negative connotations. Similarly, research on representational overlaps between active and passive forms has drawn on COCA to balance verb selections in experimental designs, underscoring the corpus's utility in syntactic analysis. Furthermore, diachronic analyses of passive constructions, including be-, get-, and prepositional passives, have leveraged COCA to track changes in American English over recent decades, revealing declines in formal passives amid rising colloquial forms.

This study builds on these foundations to delve deeper into the syntactic intricacies associated with passive voice usage in contemporary contexts.

Problem Statement

Despite the extensive body of research on passive voice, significant gaps persist in comprehensively mapping its syntactic patterns within large-scale corpora like COCA. Existing studies often focus on specific subtypes, such as get-passives or prepositional passives, but lack a holistic examination of how these patterns interact with argument structures, adjuncts, and clause combinations across varied genres. This oversight is problematic because passive constructions can influence readability, rhetorical effectiveness, and even pedagogical approaches in English language teaching. In academic and professional writing, overuse or misuse of passives may lead to ambiguity or perceived evasiveness, while in spoken and informal texts, underutilization could overlook emerging colloquial trends. Moreover, with American English evolving rapidly due to digital media and globalization, there is a need to address how syntactic variations in passives reflect broader linguistic shifts, potentially exacerbating challenges for non-native speakers and computational language models. Without a targeted analysis, these patterns remain underexplored, limiting insights into their functional roles and diachronic developments.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the common syntactic constructions associated with the passive voice, such as be-passive, get-passive, and prepositional passive, within the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA).
2. To analyze the distribution and frequency of these passive patterns across different genres and registers in COCA, including spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts.
3. To evaluate the interactions of passive constructions with verbal arguments, modifiers, and agent expressions, providing insights into their usage in modern American English.

Research Questions

1. What are the predominant syntactic patterns in passive voice constructions within COCA, and how do their frequencies vary across different genres?
2. How do argument structures in passive clauses, particularly with ditransitive verbs like "give," vary in terms of agent expression, omission, and semantic prosody?
3. What diachronic trends and representational overlaps with active voice can be observed in passive patterns, and what implications do these have for linguistic theory in spoken versus written genres?

Delimitation

This study is delimited to data extracted from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), focusing on texts from 1990 to the present to capture contemporary usage. It emphasizes syntactic patterns in passive voice constructions, excluding in-depth semantic or pragmatic analyses beyond basic prosody. Genres are limited to spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic texts, without extension to historical corpora or non-American English varieties. Methodological scope is confined to quantitative corpus queries and qualitative pattern identification, with no primary data collection or experimental validation.

Literature Review

The literature on the passive voice in English, particularly within large-scale corpora like the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), encompasses a range of syntactic, semantic, and diachronic analyses. Early corpus-based studies have laid the groundwork for understanding passive constructions, emphasizing their role in information structure and genre variation. For instance, Davies (2010) [7] highlights COCA's utility as a monitor corpus for tracking syntactic changes, including the frequency of passive forms across genres like spoken and academic texts. Building on this, Stewart (2013) [14] examines the get-passive variant, using COCA data to demonstrate its increasing acceptance in informal registers compared to the traditional be-passive. Similarly, Thompson *et al*. (2013) [15] explore patient-related constraints on get- and be-passives, drawing from COCA to analyze how semantic factors influence passive choice in paraphrasing tasks. Further research delves into specific syntactic patterns, such as argument structures in passive clauses. Kurniati and Yuliati (2022) [10] investigate the argument structure of give verbs in passive constructions within COCA, revealing patterns of recipient and beneficiary roles in ditransitive passives. In a related vein, Li (2019) [11] conducts a corpus-based study of valency sentence patterns for verbs like "appoint," using COCA to map syntactic valency and passive realizations. Mannerström (2018) [2] provides a comprehensive classification of passive voices, including be-, get-, and prepositional passives, based on thousands of COCA sentences analyzed for syntactic and semantic parameters. This work underscores the decline in formal passives and the rise of colloquial forms in recent American English.

Semantic prosody and representational overlaps have also been key foci. Lowder *et al*. (2018) [1] demonstrate incremental processing of active, be-passive, and get-passive forms, utilizing COCA for verb selection to ensure balanced representational overlap in experimental designs. Raungsawat *et al*. (2025) [3] extend this by analyzing get-passives in spoken English from COCA, highlighting negative semantic prosody and syntactic preferences in informal discourse. Abdulrahman (2015) [4] offers a corpus-based approach to get-passive constructions, examining their distributions across COCA genres and arguing for their grammatical distinctiveness from be-passives.

Diachronic trends and genre-specific usages further enrich the literature. Davies (2020) [8] overviews COCA's enhancements, including tools for querying passive structures like the get-passive, showing genre-based frequency shifts. Schwartz (2019) [13] tracks the grammaticalization of the get-passive, using related corpora but referencing COCA for contemporary baselines. Igo (2015) [9] analyzes syntactic distributions of "get" in COCA subsets, identifying passive patterns in soap opera dialogues as indicative of spoken language trends. Alotaibi (2018) [6] focuses on passive voice usage in STEM textbooks, incorporating COCA data to compare academic passives with general American English patterns. Rühlemann (2015) [12] treats the get-passive as a case study in lexical grammar, leveraging COCA to illustrate its integration into broader syntactic frameworks. Finally, Abdulrahman (2020) [5]

reassesses get-passive frequencies across COCA genres, providing empirical evidence for their prevalence in fiction and spoken texts over academic ones.

Collectively, these studies reveal a dynamic landscape of passive voice usage in contemporary American English, with COCA serving as a pivotal resource for empirical insights. However, gaps remain in holistic examinations of syntactic interactions across all passive subtypes and genres, which this research aims to address.

This study is grounded in the Construction Grammar framework (Goldberg, 1995), which views passives as argument structure constructions influenced by verb-specific patterns and discourse contexts. Complementing this is the Usage-Based Theory (Bybee, 2010), positing that syntactic patterns emerge from frequency in corpora like COCA, shaping cognitive representations. These theories inform the analysis of passive variants, emphasizing empirical data over prescriptive rules.

Research Methodology

This study employs a corpus-based approach to investigate the syntactic patterns associated with the passive voice in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). Corpus linguistics serves as the primary methodology, allowing for empirical analysis of large-scale language data to identify frequency, distribution, and structural variations in passive constructions. This method is particularly suited for examining syntactic phenomena like passives, as it provides authentic, naturally occurring examples across diverse registers, enabling both quantitative frequency counts and qualitative pattern classification. The research design integrates descriptive-qualitative and quantitative elements, focusing on data extraction, manual verification, and statistical normalization to ensure replicability and depth of insight.

Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods corpus linguistics framework, combining automated queries with manual analysis. This design draws on syntactic valency theory to classify passive patterns, emphasizing how verbs govern complements in passive clauses. Quantitative aspects involve frequency calculations and statistical testing, while qualitative analysis includes semantic prosody evaluation and argument structure mapping. The approach is non-experimental and library-based, relying on secondary data from COCA without primary fieldwork.

Data Collection

Data were sourced exclusively from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA), which contains over one billion words from 1990 to the present, spanning genres such as spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts. Queries targeted passive constructions, including be-passives (e.g., [be] + [VVN]), get-passives (e.g., [get] + [VVN]), and prepositional passives (e.g., [be] + [VVN] + preposition). To manage the volume of hits, random subsets of 300–500 concordance lines per construction were extracted for detailed examination. For specific verb classes, such as give verbs (e.g., give, feed, lend), searches focused on passive clauses involving these lemmas, using documentation and note-taking techniques to compile relevant sentences. Inclusion criteria limited data to central passives with clear active counterparts, excluding ambiguous or pseudo-passive forms.

Tools and Instruments

The COCA web interface (corpus.byu.edu/coca) was utilized for querying and retrieving concordance lines, supporting part-of-speech tagging and genre filtering. For advanced collocation analysis, AntConc 3.2.1 software was employed to examine spans of 5 words left and right of target verbs, identifying syntactic preferences and semantic associations. Microsoft Excel was used for organizing data, pivot tables, and initial frequency tabulations. No additional programming or machine learning tools were required, as the focus remained on manual classification supported by corpus tools.

Sampling Procedure

A stratified random sampling method was applied to ensure representation across COCA's genres and time periods. For common constructions like be-passives, random subsets were drawn to avoid bias, with extrapolation based on sample proportions to estimate corpus-wide frequencies. Rarer forms, such as get-passives, involved exhaustive collection where feasible, followed by manual verification for centrality using criteria like active analogue presence and agent addition tests. Sample sizes were determined iteratively, aiming for 300 instances per major passive type to achieve statistical reliability, with adjustments for low-frequency patterns. Genres were balanced, prioritizing spoken and written registers to compare informal versus formal usage.

Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in two phases: quantitative and qualitative. Quantitatively, frequencies were normalized per million words, with chi-square tests applied to assess significant differences across genres, time periods, and constructions (e.g., comparing be- vs. get-passives). Proportions of central passives were extrapolated from subsets to the full corpus. Qualitatively, patterns were classified using schemes for argument structure (e.g., subject, object, oblique relations in give verb passives), semantic prosody (e.g., adversative vs. neutral), and situation types (e.g., dynamic vs. stative). Thematic coding identified syntactic variations, such as agent omission or prepositional complements, with examples tabulated for illustration. Cross-genre comparisons highlighted diachronic trends, such as the rise of colloquial passives.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure validity, search queries were refined iteratively to minimize false positives, and classifications followed established linguistic tests for replicability. Inter-coder reliability was addressed through pilot testing on a subset of data, achieving high agreement rates. Ethical considerations included unbiased genre representation and acknowledgment of COCA's limitations, such as potential tagging errors, mitigated by manual checks. This methodology provides a comprehensive framework for uncovering syntactic patterns in passive voice usage, building on established corpus practices to yield robust findings.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of syntactic patterns associated with the passive voice in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) draws upon the data collected through targeted queries for be-passives, get-passives, and prepositional

passives. This chapter presents the quantitative and qualitative findings, followed by a discussion that interprets these results in light of the research questions and existing literature. The examination reveals distinct distributions across genres and subtle diachronic shifts, highlighting the passive voice's adaptability in contemporary American English. By normalizing frequencies per million words (pmw), the study accounts for genre imbalances in COCA, which spans over one billion words from 1990 to the present, including spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic texts.

Quantitative Findings: Frequencies and Distributions

The quantitative analysis begins with an overview of the frequencies of the three main passive types: be-passive (e.g., "was built"), get-passive (e.g., "got fired"), and prepositional passive (e.g., "was sent for"). From a stratified sample of 1,200 concordance lines (400 per type), extrapolated to the full corpus, the be-passive emerges as the most dominant, accounting for approximately 85% of passive instances. Normalized frequencies show be-passives at around 3,500 pmw overall, with variations by genre. In academic texts, the frequency peaks at 4,800 pmw, reflecting its preference for formal, objective discourse. In contrast, spoken registers exhibit lower rates at 2,200 pmw, where informality prevails. Get-passives, rarer at about 10% of passives, register 350 pmw corpus-wide, but surge to 600 pmw in spoken genres, indicating colloquialization. Prepositional passives are the least frequent, comprising 5% with 175 pmw, stable across genres but slightly higher in fiction (220 pmw) due to narrative flexibility.

Table 1: Illustrates these normalized frequencies across COCA genres

Genre	Be-Passive (pmw)	Get-Passive (pmw)	Prepositional Passive (pmw)
Spoken	2,200	600	150
Fiction	3,000	400	220
Magazines	3,500	300	180
Newspapers	4,000	250	170
Academic	4,800	150	160
Overall	3,500	350	175

These figures align with chi-square tests ($p < 0.01$), confirming significant genre-based differences. Diachronically, from 1990–2000 to 2010–present sub-periods, be-passives show a slight decline (from 3,700 to 3,300 pmw), while get-passives increase (from 300 to 400 pmw), suggesting ongoing grammaticalization. Prepositional passives remain stable, with no significant temporal variation ($\chi^2 = 1.2$, $p > 0.05$). This trend underscores the influence of colloquialization on American English, where informal variants gain traction in agile genres like spoken and fiction.

For specific verb classes, such as ditransitive "give" verbs (e.g., give, feed, lend), passive constructions reveal constrained frequencies. From 500 sampled instances, give-passives occur at 120 pmw, predominantly in S-V-O patterns (e.g., "He was given the award"), comprising 45% of cases. Feed and pay follow similar distributions, but lease and lend are restricted, with lease appearing only in S-V or S-V-OBL forms at 20 pmw. Agent omission is prevalent, occurring in 70% of passives across types, enhancing focus on the patient.

Qualitative Findings: Syntactic Patterns and Semantic Associations

Qualitatively, the syntactic patterns exhibit variation in argument structures and adjunct integration. Be-passives demonstrate the greatest flexibility, often incorporating optional by-phrases for agentivity (e.g., "The report was compiled [by experts]"), with 60% agentless forms emphasizing the action's result. In ditransitive contexts, patterns like S-V-O-OBL predominate for give verbs, as in "Hundreds of families have been given shelter by a UK aid agency," where the oblique denotes the beneficiary. Semantic prosody for be-passives is largely neutral, though academic genres show a tilt toward stative situations (e.g., "The data were analyzed").

Get-passives, conversely, favor dynamic, telic events with adversative prosody in 65% of instances (e.g., "He got fired," implying misfortune). Syntactically, they resist full auxiliary status, requiring do-support in questions (e.g., "Did he get promoted?"), and rarely include by-phrases (only 20% of cases). In spoken genres, get-passives integrate with colloquial adjuncts, such as "got slapped hard," highlighting perceptual salience. Prepositional passives display unique patterns, treating verb-preposition as a unit (e.g., "The issue was looked into"), with subjects often abstract experiencers. Affectedness is key, as in "The problem was gone into," where the subject undergoes a notable change. Collocation analysis via AntConc reveals strong associations: be-passives collocate with formal verbs like "considered" (MI score 5.2), get with informal like "hit" (MI 4.8), and prepositional with perception verbs like "listen to" (MI 3.9).

Examples from COCA underscore these patterns. In fiction: "She was sent for by the doctor" (prepositional, emphasizing urgency). In spoken: "I got nominated" (get-passive, neutral but dynamic). In academic: "The hypothesis was tested" (be-passive, agentless and objective). These illustrate how passives adapt to discourse needs, shifting focus and modulating information flow.

Discussion: Implications and Relation to Research Questions

Addressing the first research question on predominant syntactic patterns and genre frequencies, the findings confirm be-passive's hegemony, with get and prepositional variants as niche alternatives. The genre gradient from informal spoken (high get) to formal academic (high be) mirrors literature on colloquialization, where get-passives rise as markers of informality. This supports 21q2the Task-Based Framework, as routine tasks in formal writing favor be-passives for objectivity, while creative spoken discourse employs get for vividness. Chi-square results validate significant differences ($p < 0.001$), extending prior studies that noted get's increase but lacked COCA's scale.

For the second question on argument structures in ditransitive passives, patterns like S-V-O for give verbs highlight lexical constraints: flexible for give/feed, rigid for lease/lend. Agent omission (70%) aligns with Usage-Based Theory, where frequency shapes cognitive preferences for patient-focus.

This reveals how passives mitigate ambiguity in complex clauses, with obliques often encoding beneficiaries (e.g., "paid by check"). Compared to active counterparts, passives show representational overlap, facilitating paraphrase but with semantic nuances like adversativity in get-forms. The third question explores semantic prosody and active-passive overlaps. Get-passives' adversative tilt (65%) contrasts be's neutrality, influencing genre choice: spoken favors negative prosody for emphasis (e.g., "got killed"), while academic avoids it for impartiality. Overlaps with actives are evident in processing, where passives reinstate focus on patients without altering core meaning, per experimental balances in COCA-derived stimuli.

Finally, diachronic trends (fourth question) indicate be's decline and get's rise, implying linguistic evolution toward informality. Prepositional stability suggests resistance to change, perhaps due to rarity. Implications for theory include refining Construction Grammar: passives as emergent from frequency, with COCA data challenging prescriptive norms against "overuse." Pedagogically, this informs ESL teaching, emphasizing genre-specific usage to avoid ambiguity. For computational linguistics, patterns aid NLP parsing, reducing errors in passive detection. Limitations include COCA's tagging inaccuracies (mitigated by manual checks) and focus on central passives, excluding semi- or pseudo-forms. Future research could incorporate multimodal data or compare with British corpora for varietal insights. Overall, these findings portray the passive voice as a dynamic tool in American English, balancing tradition and innovation across contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this investigation into the syntactic patterns of the passive voice in the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) reveals a multifaceted landscape shaped by genre, diachronic trends, and semantic influences. The be-passive dominates as the most versatile and frequent construction, particularly in formal academic and newspaper texts, where it facilitates objectivity and patient focus. In contrast, the get-passive emerges as a colloquial variant, prevalent in spoken and fiction genres, often carrying adversative semantic prosody and dynamic event connotations. Prepositional passives, though less common, add nuance to argument structures, treating verb-preposition units as integral for expressing affectedness. Diachronic analysis indicates a subtle shift toward informalization, with get-passives gaining ground, underscoring the evolution of American English toward greater expressivity. These findings affirm the utility of Construction Grammar and Usage-Based Theory in explaining passive variations, where frequency and context drive syntactic preferences. Practically, the results inform English language pedagogy by highlighting genre-specific usages, aiding non-native speakers in navigating ambiguity and stylistic choices. For computational linguistics, the identified patterns enhance NLP models for passive detection and generation. Limitations include reliance on COCA's tagging accuracy and exclusion of non-central passives, potentially overlooking edge cases. Future research could extend to comparative analyses with other English varieties or integrate multimodal data to explore pragmatic dimensions.

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