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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

**A Comparative Syntactic Analysis of Passivization in English and French**

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**| ABSTRACT**

This study conducts a comparative analysis of passivization in English and French, focusing on their structural features and formation rules. Key differences, such as agreement patterns and agent expression, are shown to significantly influence both syntactic theory and language pedagogy. The analysis demonstrates that features like participle agreement in French and agent omission in English have direct implications for language acquisition and instructional strategies. Comparative analysis is therefore essential for advancing both theoretical understanding and practical application. Drawing on empirical data and student perspectives, this research identifies patterns and distinctions not addressed in foundational studies, including Siewierska (1984) and Péry-Woodley (2008), and connects grammatical structures to specific educational outcomes. The findings indicate that awareness of cross-linguistic distinctions can enhance curriculum design and inform targeted interventions for linguists, educators, and curriculum developers.

Keywords:

**| KEYWORDS**

Passivization passive voice, syntactic comparison, English, French, language learning, linguistic theory, cross-linguistic analysis.

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**1. Introduction**

Syntax is the study of sentence structure (Crystal, 2008). This research analyzes passive constructions in English and French to identify their principal syntactic structures and to contrast their similarities and differences. Comparative analysis contributes to linguistic theory and clarifies the mechanisms by which meaning is encoded (Chomsky, 1957; Lyons, 1968). The investigation focuses on the interaction of noun phrases, verb phrases, and auxiliaries in each language. English and French, as representatives of the Germanic and Romance language families (Crystal, 2008), are examined through three central questions: (1) How similar or different are their passive forms? (2) What structural features characterize English and French passives? (3) What are the key grammatical rules for passive formation in each language?

To address these questions within the established comparative framework, the paper is organized as follows: a review of relevant literature and foundational theories provides context; the methodology section details data collection and analytical approaches; a comprehensive comparative analysis presents syntactic trees and illustrative examples. The discussion section connects empirical findings to theoretical frameworks and pedagogical implications. The conclusion synthesizes the results and proposes directions for future research and language instruction. This structure ensures continuity and cohesion throughout the analysis.

**2. Literature Review**

**2.1 Theoretical framework**

This section compares English and French passives based on theory and research, directly linking to the comparative questions raised earlier. Main and extra sources are used: Péry-Woodley (2008) gives descriptions, and recent surveys add new information. The study uses Chomsky's Transformational Theory (Chomsky, 1957) as a central framework to guide the formation of passives, while also drawing on Minimalist Theory (Chomsky, 1995) and Lexical-Functional Grammar (Bresnan, 2001) for additional insights.

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Minimalism aims to simplify grammar rules, and LFG offers a different view of structure. Transformational Grammar is chosen for its clarity in comparing language structures. Crystal (2008) provides consistency in definitions throughout. Recent work, such as Agostinho, Silva, and Pereira (2025), links new data to theory, grounding this comparative review for subsequent sections.

## 2.2 Definitions and foundational concepts

A passive voice is a grammatical form where the subject receives the action (Passive voice, 2026; Siewierska, 1984). For example, in the active, 'Redouan wrote the letter,' while in the passive, 'The letter was written by Redouan.' Here, the passive subject receives the action. In English, creating a passive involves making the verb's object the subject and using 'to be' plus the past participle, often omitting the agent (Radford, 1998; Kim & Michaelis, 2006). Examples include: 'The jewels were stolen,' and 'The ministers were thought to have ties to parliament.' In French, 'voice' refers to the relationship between the subject and the verb. Passive sentences use 'être' plus a participle that matches gender and number (French Grammar, 2026; Péry-Woodley, 2008). For instance, 'écrit' becomes 'écrite,' 'écrits,' or 'écrites' to agree with the subject, highlighting the importance of agreement. French typically retains the agent and enforces strict agreement rules, unlike English. These concepts lay the foundation for the comparative analysis in the following sections.

## 3. Research Method

Primary data were collected through an online questionnaire administered to 40 undergraduate linguistics students, equally divided between native speakers of English and French, balanced by gender, and aged 19 to 23. The ten-item questionnaire assessed participants' perceptions of passive-voice constructions in both languages, including comparative judgments, self-assessed understanding, and perceived difficulties. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The rationale for employing this methodology was to capture authentic student perspectives and to provide direct evidence of cross-linguistic awareness, which are vital for informing both theoretical analysis and pedagogical recommendations. Secondary sources, such as recent empirical studies on verbal passives (Agostinho et al., 2025), were also reviewed and synthesized. Survey results were interpreted within the established linguistic frameworks, integrating theoretical and empirical findings. This methodological approach supports the comparative focus and structural cohesion of the study.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Results of the survey

Approximately 65% of students perceived English passivization as similar to French, while about 25% identified differences. The survey included 40 undergraduate linguistics students, all native speakers of either English or French, with equal gender representation and ages between 19 and 23. The ten-item questionnaire examined perceptions of similarities and differences in passive voice, capturing comparative judgments, self-assessed understanding, and reported challenges. The online and anonymous format facilitated the analysis of cross-linguistic perceptions. Notably, these empirical findings correspond with theoretical claims about both the structural parallels and divergences in passive constructions outlined in transformational grammar. The recognition of cross-linguistic similarities among most participants supports the notion that English and French share common foundational mechanisms for forming passives, as described within the generative framework, while the identification of differences aligns with language-specific rules, such as participle agreement in French and greater agent omission in English. This synthesis of student perspectives and theoretical models reinforces the argument that surface similarities may obscure underlying syntactic distinctions crucial for linguistic analysis and pedagogy.

These results indicate that many participants recognize cross-linguistic similarities, potentially due to shared instructional contexts or prior comparative exposure. However, as the responses reflect perceptions rather than systematic syntactic analysis, their empirical validity is limited. The lack of standardized instruments and random sampling further reduces reliability, meaning the results represent attitudes rather than definitive evidence of structural equivalence or divergence. This limitation highlights the importance of interpreting survey findings within established theoretical and empirical frameworks, ensuring that the discussion of participant perceptions remains closely aligned with the overall argument concerning actual syntactic distinctions between English and French passive constructions.

The following section presents comparative data, illustrative examples, syntactic trees, and an analysis of passive constructions in English and French. This discussion builds upon the empirical and theoretical foundation established earlier, maintaining cohesion and continuity in the comparative analysis.

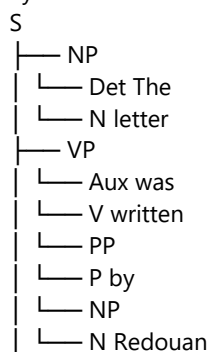
### 4.2 Formation of the passive in English

David Crystal defines the passive as a grammatical phenomenon within voice analysis, denoting a clause or verb where the subject typically serves as the recipient or goal of the action expressed by the verb. This structure is thereby contrasted with the active form, as demonstrated in the following examples.

1. Redouan wrote a letter. (Active)
2. The letter was written by Redouan. (Passive)

**Figure 1**

Syntactic Tree for "The letter was written by Redouan."



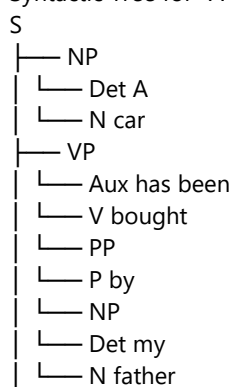
Note. This syntactic tree represents the phrase structure of the English passive sentence above.

3. My father has bought a car. (Active)

4. My father has bought a car. (Passive)

**Figure 2**

Syntactic Tree for "A car has been bought by my father."



The passive form of an active tense is constructed by placing the verb "to be" in the same tense as the active verb and appending the past participle of the main verb. The subject of the active verb becomes the agent in the passive clause. The agent is infrequently specified, but when included, it follows the preposition (by) and is positioned at the end of the clause, as in examples (2) and (4) above.

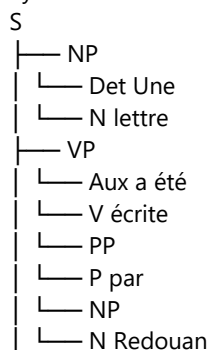
4.3 Formation of the passive in French

5. Redouan a écrit une lettre → Redouan wrote a letter

6. Une lettre a été écrite par Redouan → A letter was written by Redouan

**Figure 3**

Syntactic Tree for "Une lettre a été écrite par Redouan."



In French, the passive construction denotes the relationship between a subject and a verb such that the action expressed by the verb is performed on the subject by an agent. The passive voice (la voix passive) is formed with the conjugated verb être followed by the past participle. Importantly, in French, the past participle in a passive construction must agree in gender and number with the grammatical subject of the sentence, rather than with the agent. This agreement is obligatory and applies in the same way as participle agreement in compound tenses formed with être, such as the passé composé.

#### **4.4 Uses of the passive in English**

The passive voice in both English fulfills a variety of communicative functions. In English, the passive is used when the agent of the action is obvious or unimportant (7), when the doer is unknown or forgotten (8), or when the subject of an active verb refers to people in general (9). It is also used to focus on the action or its recipient rather than the agent (10) or to express psychological distancing from negative statements (11).

Examples (English):

7. The rubbish hasn't been collected.
8. The president of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, was murdered.
9. They are supposed to live in California.
10. The restaurant near my house has been bought (by Mr. Ahmed).
11. Overtime rates are being reduced.

#### **4.5 Uses of the passive in French**

In French, similar motivations underlie the use of the passive. The passive construction shifts the focus from the agent to the object (see Example 12). It is also used to emphasize events or outcomes without naming the responsible party (13 & 14) and is common in contexts such as inventions, laws, or situations in which someone is a victim of an action (15 & 16).

12. Le livre "Guerre et Amour" a été écrit par Tex. (The book "War and Love" was written by Tex)
13. Oh, Corey et Fiona ont été enlevés ! (Oh, Corey and Fiona were abducted!)
14. Oh, le trésor a été volé ! (Oh, the treasure was stolen!)
15. Les parents de Tex ont été écrasés. (Tex's parents were run over)
16. Un nouveau genre de grammaire a été créé. (A new kind of grammar was created)

In French, the passive voice is frequently employed for stylistic purposes, such as facilitating sentence transitions or emphasizing specific words or phrases, often by positioning them at the end of the sentence. This stylistic application distinguishes the French passive from its English counterpart and illustrates the broader range of communicative and rhetorical functions that passivization serves in each language. The preceding examples demonstrate that the passive is used for particular purposes and remains an optional, rather than obligatory, construction.

#### **4.6 Transformational generative grammar**

Transformation is a formal linguistic operation that links two levels of structural representation. The rule's input is the structural description, which defines the phrase marker classes to which it can apply. The rule performs structural changes, such as movement, that reorder elements of the input structure. Transformations involve: a) Insertion: adding new elements; b) Deletion: removing elements. One of the earliest illustrations of the operation of a transformational rule was the one that converted active sentences to passive ones, and which can be formulated as follows:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{NP1 — Aux — V — NP2} \\ \rightarrow \text{NP2 — Aux + be + en — V — by + NP1} \end{array}$$

Where \*be\* is a form of the verb \*to be\*, and \*-en\* represents the past-participle ending of the lexical verb. The rule is said to operate on the first underlying phrase marker, converting it into a second derived phrase marker. This type of grammar was first discussed by Noam Chomsky in *Syntactic Structures* (1957) as an illustration of a Generative Grammar and was devised as stronger than Finite-State Grammars or Phrase-Structure Grammars. (Huddleston, 1976; Lyons, 1968)

#### **4.7 Deep and surface structure**

Deep structure is a central theoretical term in transformational grammar. It is the deep grammar in the sense of an abstract syntactic representation of a sentence, that is, an underlying structural organization which specifies all the factors governing the way the sentence should be interpreted. This basic notion has been referred to theoretically as D-structure, underlying structure, base structure, remote structure, and initial structure. This level provides information that enables us to distinguish between alternative interpretations of sentences with the same surface form.

17. Flying planes can be dangerous.

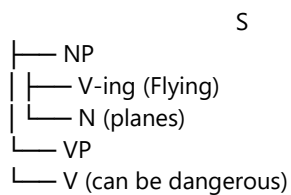
This sentence can be related to two underlying sentences.

- a) planes which fly can be dangerous
- b) Flying planes can be dangerous.

This type of sentence is therefore said to be ambiguous. The deep structure is a way of relating sentences that have different surface forms but the same underlying meaning, as in the relationship between active and passive structures. As opposed to deep structure, surface structure is the final stage in the syntactic representation of a sentence.

Figure 5

Syntactic Tree (Deep/Sentence ambiguity)



(Interpreted as either: planes that fly OR the act of flying planes)

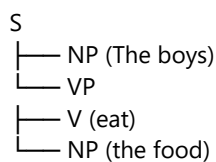
#### 4.7.1 Deep and surface structure in English

18. The boys eat the food.

19. The food is eaten by the boys.

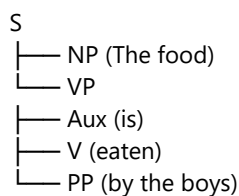
#### Figure 6

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Active Structure

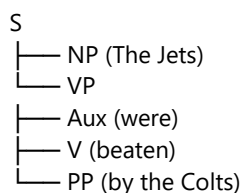


#### Figure 7

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Passive Structure



20. The Jets were beaten by the Colts.



#### 4.8 Passive transformational rules

##### 4.8.1 The passive transformation in English

SD: NP Aux V NP

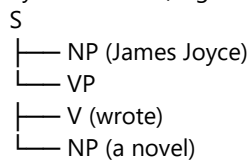
SC: NP2 — Aux + be + en — V — by + NP1

21. James Joyce wrote a novel.

22. A novel was written by James Joyce.

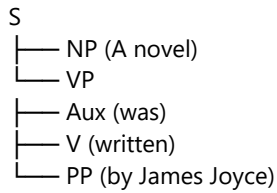
#### Figure 8

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Tree: Active



**Figure 9**

Syntactic Trees (English Passive Transformation) Tree: Passive

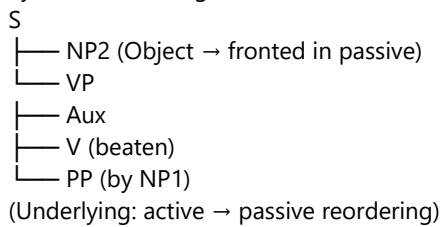


**4.8.1.1 Movement in English**

Movement is a transformational operation that moves constituents from one part of the phrase marker to another, thereby leading to reordering.

**Figure 9**

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Movement in English

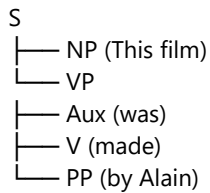


**4.8.1.2 Movement in French**

23. This film was made by Alain.

Figure 10

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Movement



**4.8.1.3 Insertion in English**

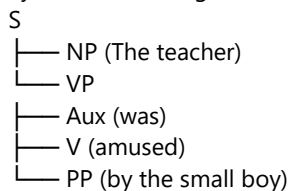
A syntactic operation that brings a new structural element to the surface.

24. The small boy amused the teacher.

25. The teacher was amused by the small boy.

**Figure 11**

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Passive Tree Insertion



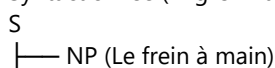
**4.8.1.4 Insertion in French**

Le garagiste règle le frein à main.

Le frein à main est réglé par le garagiste.

**Figure 12**

Syntactic Tree (English Passive Transformation) Passive Structure Insertion



- └ VP
- └ Aux (est)
- └ V (réglé)
- └ PP (par le garagiste)

In summary, the comparative analysis highlights both shared and divergent features of passivization in English and French. While both languages employ auxiliary verbs and participles and involve similar transformational operations such as constituent movement between subject and object positions, critical differences exist. French mandates past participle agreement with the subject in gender and number, unlike English, and typically retains explicit mention of the agent, whereas English frequently omits it. Recognizing these patterns leads to a clear pedagogical recommendation: instructors should offer targeted practice on participle agreement for learners of French and on agent omission for learners of English, as well as provide explicit instruction on when to use or avoid the passive voice in each language. This focused approach can help students internalize the structural distinctions and communicative functions of passives, thereby improving cross-linguistic competence and making passive-voice instruction more effective in bilingual or comparative classrooms (Baghit et al., 2024a; Baghit et al., 2024b; Touhami & Jaafari, 2024).

## 5. Discussion

This discussion elucidates the relationship between student survey results and transformational grammar theory by directly connecting survey findings to specific theoretical claims regarding passive constructions in English and French. Perceptions of similarity or difference between the two languages are systematically compared with formal syntactic analyses to determine where participant attitudes correspond with structural realities and where they diverge from theoretical expectations. This comparison not only assesses whether the data support, contradict, or extend the predictions of transformational grammar, but also reinforces the link between linguistic analysis and pedagogy. By highlighting key areas of alignment and divergence, the discussion underscores their significance for both linguistic theory and classroom practice. Linking empirical results to explicit recommendations provides practical guidance for curriculum design and teaching strategies, demonstrating how a nuanced understanding of syntactic similarities and differences can inform effective language instruction and support targeted pedagogical interventions. Passivization serves specific communicative purposes and is not obligatory; its use remains optional. In both English and French, passivization is a syntactic phenomenon that alters sentence structure through changes in word order, insertion of elements such as *by* and *to be*, and structural reorganization.

These examples demonstrate that passive sentences in both English and French have corresponding active counterparts. Comparative analysis shows that while both languages utilize mechanisms to derive passive sentences from active forms, the specific rules and morphological changes differ. Nevertheless, both languages systematically pair active sentences with their passive equivalents, confirming that passivization is a structured and rule-governed process. In English, passivization involves the transformation of a verb's complement into the subject. For instance, 'The jewels were stolen,' or the subject of an infinitive complement of a passive participle becomes the subject of the clause containing the passive participle, as in 'The ministers were thought to have ties to parliament' (Radford, 1998).

Generally speaking, in French, "voice" refers to the relationship between the subject and the verb in a sentence. A sentence is said to be in the active voice if the subject is performing the action of the verb. For example, 'Tex is calling Tammy.' In this sentence, the subject (Tex) performs the action of calling Tammy. Active subjects are called 'agents'.

The passive voice, in contrast, denotes a sentence in which the subject receives the action rather than performing it. In other words, the subject is acted upon by the agent. For example, in the sentence 'Tammy is being called by Tex,' Tammy is the recipient of the action performed by Tex, who serves as the agent. This structure exemplifies a passivized sentence.

Passivization in English, as well as in French, is actually a syntactic phenomenon that brings about changes at various levels of the sentence: first, to the order of words (word order) within the sentence. Second, it tends to make two types of insertions, that is, the insertion of *by* phrase and the insertion of *{to be}*. The latter is put in the same tense as the transitive verb in the active construction. In addition to being an insertion, there is another kind of insertion, that is of *(by insertion)*, which is placed before a noun phrase, and it is, in fact, the subject of the active sentence. Both the subject and the object may be nouns (proper or common) or pronouns (subject pronouns or possessive pronouns). The latter is most often accompanied by a noun. Having established the theoretical foundations of passivization in each language, the analysis now turns to an empirical examination of the phenomenon within the framework of Chomsky's Transformational Generative Grammar (Standard Theory).

## 6. Conclusion

This study comparatively examines the core syntactic mechanisms that underlie passivization in English and French, offering a clear synthesis of both shared and divergent features. While both languages construct passives using auxiliary verbs and participles, French uniquely requires past participle agreement with the subject and regularly retains explicit agents. English, by comparison, characteristically omits the agent and does not require participle agreement. The analysis also acknowledges that although passivization generally applies to transitive verbs in both languages, notable exceptions are present. These findings collectively underscore that attention to specific syntactic distinctions—particularly participle agreement in French and agent omission in English—is crucial for effective language instruction. Systematically highlighting these contrasts through targeted exercises and

explicit teaching of exceptions will facilitate a more nuanced cross-linguistic understanding and foster improved mastery of passive constructions for learners.

Future research could extend this comparative approach to additional language pairs to further investigate the typological diversity of passive constructions. Studies examining learner outcomes and the effectiveness of targeted pedagogical interventions are also necessary to evaluate how explicit instruction on syntactic differences influences acquisition in classroom settings. Pursuing these directions will enrich theoretical understanding and directly inform improvements in language instruction and curriculum design. From a typological perspective, other Germanic languages such as German and Dutch also employ auxiliary verbs and participles to form the passive and, like English, do not require participle agreement. In contrast, Romance languages such as Spanish and Italian, similar to French, require participle agreement in the passive and tend to permit or require more explicit agent phrases than English. The use and frequency of passive constructions also vary: for example, passives are less common in spoken Spanish and Italian, where reflexive or impersonal constructions are often preferred, while English and German use the passive more frequently in written and formal contexts. These typological parallels and contrasts highlight the considerable structural diversity within and across language families, emphasizing the need for adapted theoretical models and informing effective language-teaching strategies.

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