

## Grammatical voices as a communication strategy

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Grammatical voice is a critical interface that connects syntax, semantic, and pragmatics together by modulating the relationship between a verb and its arguments. While the formal characteristics of grammatical voices have been extensively studied, the functional usage of it remains an underexplored area, at least in Indian languages. Grammatical voices such as passives, causatives and middles are often used in spoken discourse as strategies for agent de-focusing, managing information flow, as innuendos, or to express politeness. In communication, interlocutors may also make use of passives or middles to downplay or avoid responsibility, to covertly express anger and sarcasm, or as an emphasis strategy. They accomplish multiple socio-pragmatic functions owing to their non-canonical structure and varying thematic structure, and are executed accordingly in varying situations and contexts.

In the current study, we explore how non-active voices such as passives, causatives and middles are used as a communication strategy in daily life conversation in Indian languages belonging to the Indo-Aryan and Dravidian Language families. A comprehensive questionnaire was designed in Hindi, Bangla, Tamil and Malayalam to elicit regularly used discourse and to understand attitudes towards such voice constructions, amongst 2 age groups (18-38 and 39 - 59 and above). It was observed that non-active voices were employed to maintain indirect expression of emotion in certain social situations, in contexts requiring politeness or formality and in mitigating blame, in the languages under study. In Tamil, the data reveal that speakers tend to use Patient/Participant in Sentence Initial Position (PSIP).

To validate this observation empirically, an eye-tracking study was conducted in Tamil to explore the cognitive processing of non-active voices and how emotions would influence their usage. Forty native Tamil speakers' eye movements were tracked while they completed a picture-sentence matching task, using AI generated pencil sketches based on the *Navarasa* emotions. Each image was paired with either an active, passive, causative, or middle voice construction. Participants were asked to judge if they would use the sentence to describe the emotion and picture in everyday conversation. Eye-tracking analysis revealed that passive sentences took longer reading times and triggered extensive reanalysis at the verb and passive agent markers compared to their active counterparts. For the causative constructions there was a large effect at the causal verb marker. Similarly, middle voice phrases also showed increased fixations at the verb. This dissociation between online processing difficulty (elevated for non-active voices) and offline judgement preference (strongly favouring active voice) highlights that pragmatic acceptability involves a trade-off between communicative goals and processing effort.