Exploring Passive Structures in Political and Religious Text: A Corpus-Based Study of Pakistani Writing

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Abstract

Political and religious texts have been widely acknowledged to be distinct registers. The major objective of this study is to investigate the co-occurrence of two types of passive: the Agentless passives (PASS) and the By-passives (BYPA) proposed by Biber (1988) in Pakistani writing concerning variation among the political and religious disciplines. This research has explored and compared the frequencies and patterns of usage of passive structure with promotional varieties studied by Biber (1988) through a multidimensional analysis. The corpus of the research includes 60 texts chosen from Pakistani Register of Policy Documents and Religious Essays. Online sources have been used to retrieve the distribution of 30 texts from each discipline. The frequencies of the passive constructions are counted through AntConc 4.2.4 software after tagging the data in Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) 2.4. The findings indicated that the structure of agentless passive has occurred significantly more frequently than by-passives in political registers. Moreover, this study confirmed that native English writers have a more lexical variation of agentless passives than by-passives structure in non-native writing. Though limited, the study contributes to clarifying the function of agentless and by-passives across the two registers. This work may be significant for non-native writers and researchers working on disciplinary writing.

Keywords: Pakistani Writing, passive constructions, frequencies, MAT, AntConc

Introduction

This study aims to evaluate its use in terms of frequency, lexical association/ variation, the absence and presence of passive construction, and factors that influence one type over another. The structure of the passive is complex and multifaceted. Traditionally, it is recognized as one of the two primary structures within the voice of grammatical class, alongside the active voice (Quirk et al., 1985, p. 159; Biber et al., 1999, p.475). It encompasses two levels of grammar: the phrase and the clause. Kemmer (1993) delineates the middle voice as a separate entity in the voice spectrum nestled between the active and passive forms. Debates about voice frequently revolve around the relationship or transformation between the active and passive forms. According to Biber et al. (1999), passive constructions are a fundamental form of variation based on unmarked active voice clause structure (Biber et al., 1999, pp. 154, 475). There is a large volume of published studies describing the role of passive constructions in N and NN varieties of English (Chappell, 1980; Quirk et al., 1985; Biber et al., 1999; Carter & McCarthy, 1999; Huddleston et al., 2002).

The passive voice has always been controversial due to its association with a negative perception. Pullum (2014) asserts that the construction of the passive hides the identity of action's performer, and writing becomes weak, repetitive, unclear, timid, complicated, and deceptive (p. 1). Consequently, both native writers (NW) and non-native writers (NNW), have frequently preferred active constructions over passive ones, leading to a general underutilization of the passive voice, as noted by Folse (2009) and Pullum (2014). The current study examines how often non-native and native writers of English use passive structures in their writings. The present study intends to apply a corpus-based approach to uncover variations of passive structures between political and religious texts in Pakistani writings.

The use of passive constructions in writing varies significantly between native and non-native English speakers, with particular implications in specific registers such as political and religious texts. In Pakistani writing, there is limited understanding of how agentless passives and by-passive constructions are employed and the contextual factors

influencing their usage. This study aims to address the gap in knowledge regarding the frequency, variation, and rhetorical strategies associated with these passive structures, ultimately seeking to clarify their roles in the distinct contexts of political and religious discourse within Pakistani English writing. The major objective of this study is to elucidate the reasons behind pervasiveness of agentless passives and by-passives and the observed variances in the use of passive constructions between the two different registers within Pakistani writing.

Research Objectives

Here are two clear objectives of this study:

1. To analyze the frequency and contextual factors influencing the use of agentless passives and by-passive constructions in political and religious texts by Pakistani writers.
2. To investigate how the choice between agentless passives and by-passive constructions reflects the rhetorical strategies employed in political and religious discourse in Pakistani English writing.

Research Questions

The study addresses following two research questions:

1. What are the contextual factors that affect the preference for agentless versus by-passive constructions in political and religious texts by Pakistani writers?

2. How does the choice between agentless passives and by-passive constructions reflect the underlying rhetorical strategies employed in political and religious discourse in Pakistani English writings?

Literature Review

Register, genre, and style are different techniques for examining a variety of texts (Lee, 2002). Each term identifies text varieties in a wide range. From the register perspective, the analysis focuses on identifying typical linguistic features (e.g., pronouns, adverbs and verbs) within a text variety and examining their use in specific situations. It functions under the assumption that fundamental features, such as grammar and vocabulary,

are tailored to fulfill communicative roles and aligned with the text's intended purpose and situational context. In contrast, genre refers to a specific type of text and focuses on the conventional structures that construct a complete text within a variety. The style approach examines the linguistic elements prevalent in texts, emphasizing aesthetic choices over functional motivations and underscoring the distinctive patterns linked to individual authors or specific historical eras (Biber & Conrad, 2009).

Afterward, two grammatical constructions are involved at the phrase and clause levels in the passive voice, as stated by Quirk et al. (1985) and Biber et al. (1999). Crystal (2011) defines voice as a grammatical category at the clause level. The concept of passivization is primarily pragmatic. Halliday (1985) discusses the concepts of old and new information, tied to the notions of theme and rhyme, where the thematic structure dictates the flow of information.

According to Biber et al. (1999), short passives are defined as agentless and long passives as agentful, respectively. The most common type of passive construction in English is the short passive, also called the agentless passive. The agent is absent altogether rather than reduced to a prepositional phrase introduced by the writer (Quirk et al., 1985). The second form of passive construction in English is known as the long passive, commonly referred to as the by-passives. While the agent phrase is long and usually expresses the agent as a by-phrase, the long passive agent is indicated by a word or another prepositional phrase (Biber et al., 1999). Additionally, these are passive constructions with a by-phrase indicating the agent.

Researchers investigating voice in terms of frequency have heavily relied on corpus linguistic methods, as these techniques contain real language samples from naturally occurring data. Granger (2013) observes that the tools and data derived from corpus linguistics offer a significantly clearer understanding of how passives are utilized. Svartvik's (1966) texts are collected from various registers to identify the passive structure. This study found that passive construction is more common in written language than spoken.

Many studies have tried to determine how often passive voice, especially agentless passive structures, occur in written language (Biber et al., 1999; Crystal, 2003; Swan, 1995;

Wanner, 2009). Agentless passive constructions are used in impersonal speaking and technical contexts, such as academic writing, where the emphasis is on processes rather than individuals (McCarthy, 2006). The study by Khawar et al. (2021), discussed the perspective of linguistic determinism and the use of various linguistic features with their fixed references. In another study, the news structures were compared in the context of the juxtaposition of macrostructures, reflecting the divergent positioning (Zehra et al., 2017).

Previous research has investigated using the long or by-passives across various contexts. Ponelis (1979) states the rationale for the preference for short passives over long passives. When a by-phrase appears in a sentence, the passive is known as the long passive, according to (Biber et al., 2003). However, in some situations, the long passive voice seems more appropriate. The use of by-passive construction is more frequent with particular verbs in academic writing. The by-phrase typically serves to identify different types of data and evidence instead of a human agent (Conrad et al., 2009). Some studies have been conducted on knowing the frequency of content words and their conceptualization with reference to events (Batool et al., 2022).

By reviewing the literature, one can conclude that numerous studies have examined the frequency of passive structures in native and non-native writing. However, no previous research has explored the construction of agentless passives and by-passives in Pakistani academic culture. This study contributes to the understanding of passive structures by focusing on their usage in Pakistani political and religious texts, filling a gap in existing research on non-native English registers. By employing a corpus-based approach, the study provides empirical data on how agentless and by-passive constructions are used across these disciplines. Additionally, it offers a comparative analysis with native English writers, highlighting linguistic variations in Pakistani writing. The findings can be valuable for educators and researchers, offering insights into the distinct ways passives are employed in academic and professional contexts within Pakistan.

Material and Method

This research employs quantitative and qualitative approaches to gather and analyze data on the frequency and use of the passive structure. A large portion of the study relies on the frequency of information obtained from the corpora. Quantitatively, this research

involves calculating the frequency of passive structures, both agentless and by-passives, across the political and religious registers. This is achieved by systematically counting occurrences of these constructions within a large dataset, using corpus analysis tools like AntConc. The quantitative analysis focuses on the raw frequency data, which reveals how often each type of passive structure appears in different texts. Statistical measures, such as percentages or frequency distributions, are then used to compare the prevalence of these structures across registers, offering a clear numerical insight into their usage patterns.

Collection of Data and Corpus Compilation

A corpus of political policy documents and religious essays was compiled to investigate the prevalence of passive structures across both registers. Data was collected in a historical context. From 1960 to 1970, the data were obtained from the libraries of different public institutions. In Pakistani writing, particularly political and religious texts, it is critical to understand how language is used to convey and influence political and religious ideologies. It examines language patterns and techniques reflecting Pakistan's cultural and societal norms and how those factors are interwoven in Pakistani English literature and discourse structure. This kind of evaluation enables us to reveal the underlying messages and intentions inside political and religious communication, presenting insights into the dynamics of power and belief in Pakistani society. Therefore, these texts from the two disciplines are comparable with native writers of English.

The corpus comprises two distinct categories of texts: political texts, which include policy documents that outline governmental strategies, regulations, and frameworks designed to address various societal issues; and religious texts, which consist of essays that delve into the beliefs, practices, and ethical principles associated with different faiths. These political policy documents provide insight into the functioning of institutions and the decision-making processes that shape public policy, while the religious essays offer a deeper understanding of the moral and philosophical underpinnings of faith traditions, reflecting the values and cultural contexts of the communities they represent. Together, these texts serve as a rich resource for analyzing the use of passive structures in both political and religious discourse.

All texts were carefully processed after data was acquired from various public

institutions' libraries through a printer scanner and copier. Then, all collected print texts, political and religious, were edited and analyzed using Notepad. Finally, a corpus of 410,747 words, including 60 texts, was compiled (Table 1).

Table 1:
Corpus Size (Description of Corpus in terms of word count)

Discipline	Number of Text	Number of Words
Political	30	202,248
Religious	30	208,499
Total		410,747

Analysis procedure

In this study, the Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) version 1.3 was employed to tag the corpus of political and religious texts, enabling a detailed examination of linguistic structures, particularly passive constructions. This computer program is based on Biber's (1988) research. The current tagger incorporates the Stanford Tagger (2013) and automatically executes it to provide a preliminary grammatical analysis, notably part of speech, according to Toutanova et al. (2003). This tagger represents 67 linguistic features, which explain the linguistic variance across the most significant English language registers (Nini, 2019).

After tagging the corpus data, frequencies of passive structures were counted through file tags. Biber (1988) studied agentless passives and by-passive tags to assign passive constructions. This tag could be easily searched from the MAT Analysis folder or MAT text file tag. The scores of PASS and BYPA were calculated using the normalized frequency across 1000 words.

This research compares political and religious writings using the PASS and BYPA tags. The Multi-Dimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) was used to annotate the corpus and calculate frequencies. Next, AntConc 4.2.4 was used to reveal the patterns of political and religious language that frequently occurred in texts (Anthony, 2022). It was developed by Dr. Laurence Anthony, a professor at Waseda University, Japan, and is one of the most widely used corpus analysis tools. This tool was used to compare the frequencies of PASS and BYPA between two registers. Finally, the functional importance of passive structure was

determined using a qualitative comparison of the two corpora.

In sum, the AntConc program is employed in this study to retrieve the passive constructions from the two corpora mentioned in Table 1. The first step is to find how frequently certain passive types, namely agentless passives and by-passives, are used by non-native English writers across the two registers. Subsequently, the study compares the occurrence of these passive constructions with native writers.

Result and Discussion

Previous researchers claimed that Pakistani English is a distinct variety across the different disciplines of writing (Anwar & Talat, 2011; Afzaal at al., 2022; Batool et al., 2019; Fatima at al., 2023; Mahboob, 2004; Mahmood, 2009; Muhabat et al., 2015; Rahman, 1990; Talaat, 2003) and its political and religious register differs from British registers, with its norms. The current research scrutinizes these proclamations by comparing the prevalence of agentless passives and by-passive structures in Pakistani political and religious texts with those found in British academic prose and religious registers in Biber's (1988) study.

Agentless passives are predominant in all syntactic positions. The prevalence of agentless passives or short passives is more common and commonly used in academic writing. The extensive usage of passive construction shows that the authors are objectively detached from the description as mandated by the Western scientific tradition (Biber et al., 1999). This section outlines the characteristics of political and religious texts. Figures 1 and 2 below demonstrates the prevalence of agentless passives in these two registers.

Figure 1
AntConc Screenshot of Agentless Passives in Political Register

ght_VBN us_PRP to_TO this_DT	pass_NN ._.Highway_NNP ,_, Bal	Political Text
he_DT already_RB privileged_JJ	pass_NN slurs_NNS and_CC mc	Political Text
Highway_NNP ,_, Babusar_NNP	Pass_NNP ,_, and_CC Juglot-Ska	Political Text
ı_NNP Assembly_NNP did_VBD	pass_VB a_DT bill_NN stipulatin	Political Text
BZ the_DT numbers_NNS to_TO	pass_VB an_DT amendment_NN	Political Text
ıl_JJ condemnation_NN and_CC	pass_VB and_CC enforce_VB stri	Political Text
VDT has_VBZ come_VBN to_TO	pass_VB ._. In_IN a_DT statemen	Political Text
:ountry_NN ._.opted_VBD to_TO	pass_VB legislation_NN without	Political Text

Figure 2

AntConc Screenshot of Agentless Passives in Religious Register

In response to the first research question, Figure 3 shows the frequency of agentless passive constructions in two different disciplines of political and religious texts. Note the differences in PASS between the two disciplines

Figure 3

Comparative Analysis of Agentless Passives between Political and Religious Register
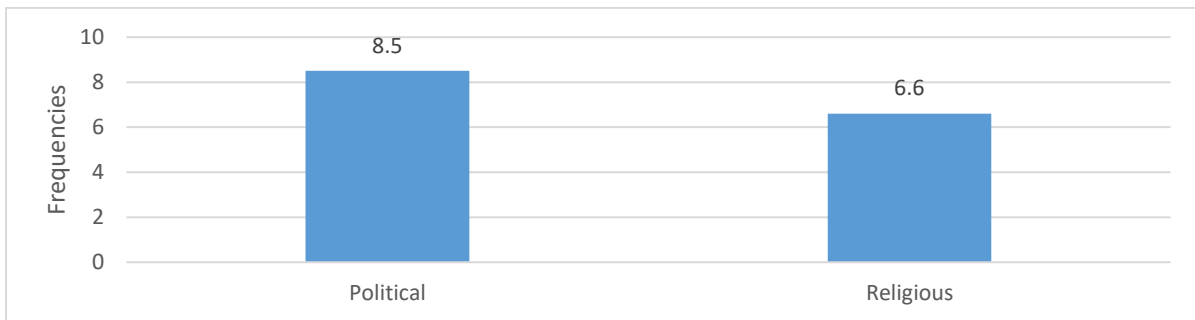
The findings indicate that agentless passives occur considerably more frequently in the political text than in the religious corpora. These findings suggest that political discourse may choose a more formal or impersonal style, which is commonly used to explain policies or acts without directly attributing an agent. This also implies that Pakistani writers of English prefer agentless passives in their writing, the same way native speakers do (Biber et al., 1999, pp.477-478)

Figures 4 and 5 depict by-passive structures across the political and religious disciplines. By-passive construction is less common in religious works than in political texts.

Figure 4
AntConc Screenshot of By-passives in Political Register

in_IN Punjab_NNP ,_, LDA_NNP by-laws_NNS were_VBD change Political Text
EX are_VBP several_JJ extant_JJ by-products_NNS of_IN this_DT Political Text
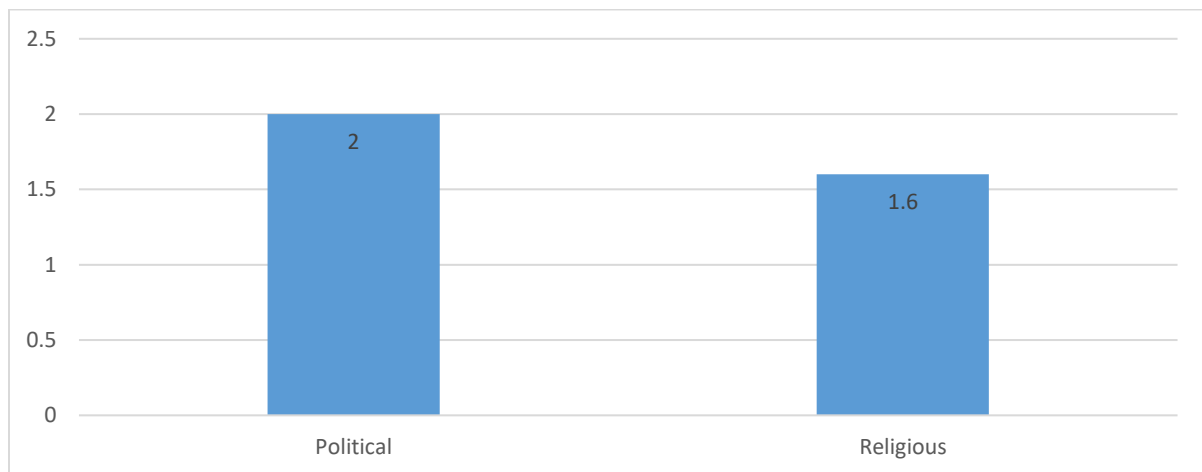
Figure 5
AntConc Screenshot of By-passives in Religious Register

cenes_NNS they_PRP pass_VBP by_IN nobly_RB and_CC gentlen Religious Te:

The prevalence of by-passives serves as a scenario for the narrative or interpersonal approach that is increasingly common in religious discourse, as can be seen in Fig 6. In religious writings, the passive voice is often more commonly used when describing supernatural actions or ethical principles, as these subjects usually do not demand direct reference to an agent (Nofal, 2013). The same conclusion is reflected in the study by Biber et al. (1999), which reported that by-passives/ long passive is significantly lower than short passive in both written and spoken English.

Figure 6
Comparative Analysis of By-passives between Political and Religious Register

Regarding the first research question, the findings of this study compare the proportion of agentless passives and by-passives across these two disciplines. As seen in Figure 7 below, the proportion of Agentless Passives compared to By-passives. It is quite similar in the two corpora: i.e., the Agentless Passives occur more frequently than By-passives in all two corpora.

Figure 7

Comparison of Agentless Passives and By-passives in Political and Religious Register
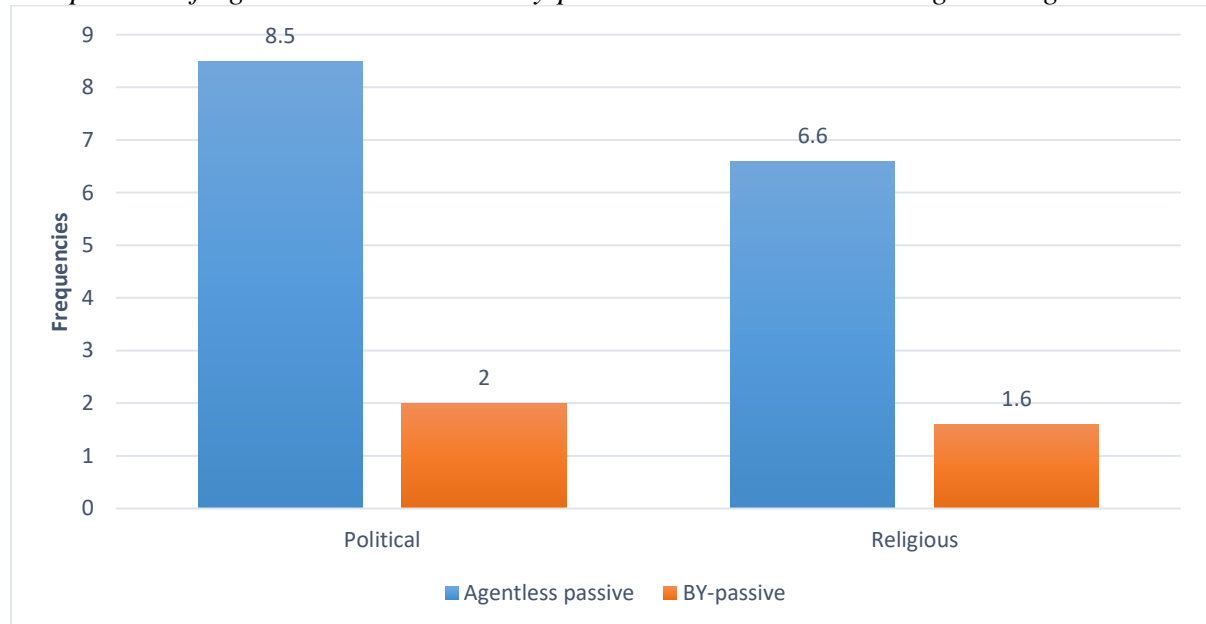
Note: Comparison of PASS and BYPA between Political and Religious Register

Hence, the agentless form is predominant in its use. This was suggested by Biber (1988) and it is supported by Biber et al. (1999), who report on the analysis of the scientist's academic writing. Additionally, political discourse often includes complex processes and regulations in which the actor is either unknown or intentionally omitted for neutrality or to focus on the action itself. Passive constructs in political writing influence readers' attitudes by changing the relationship between the action itself and the individuals responsible for those actions (Almahameed et al., 2022)

On the other hand, religious writings have a reduced frequency of these structures. It may reflect a more direct and prescriptive writing style that emphasizes straightforward advice and instruction, with the agent of acts (typically divinity) known and openly expressed (Nofal, 2011)

This analysis helps to comprehend the stylistic choices made by Pakistani writers across disciplines and how these choices serve their communication purposes. Passive structures are frequently used in political writings to depersonalize acts or policies. At the same time, they may be less common in religious texts due to the nature of the text, which often attributes acts to divine agents.

Figure displays the proportion of agentless passive structures across native and non-native writing in English. As seen in Pakistani registers, the frequency of agentless passive structures is much lower than in British registers. In addition, there are many possible reasons for this, such as variations in stylistic preferences and the impact of cultural discourse practices in Pakistani writings.

Figure 8
Comparative Analysis of Agentless Passives across British and Pakistani writing
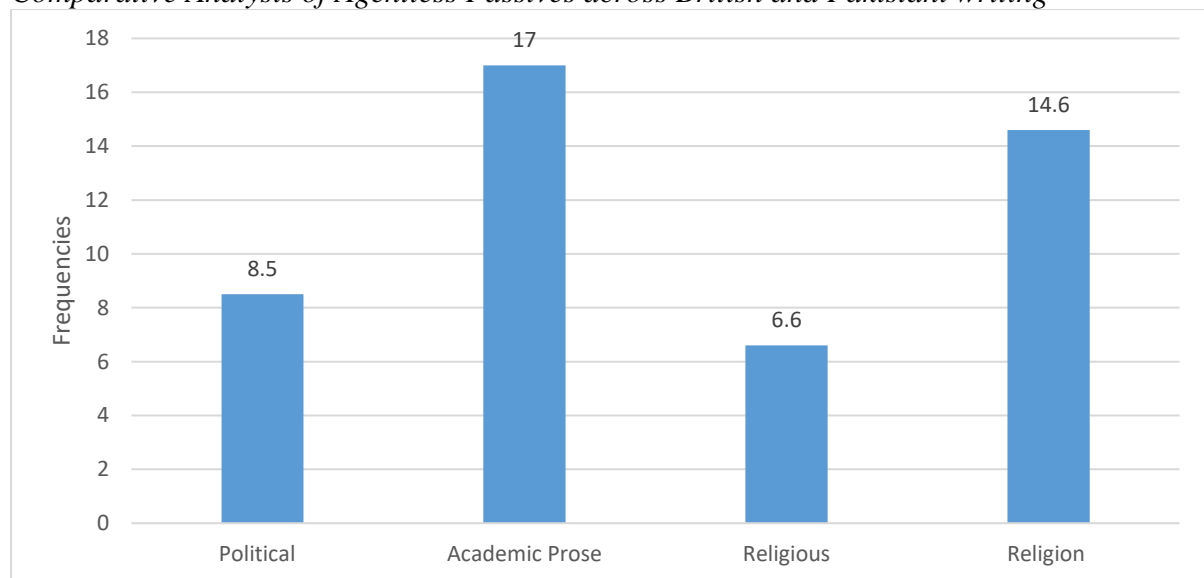

Note: Comparison of Biber's (1988) work with Pakistani registers

Native English writers use agentless passive structures more frequently than non-native writers of English. According to Sulaiman (2022), the agentless passive/the short passive appears significantly more in the works of native speaker (NS) and non-native speaker (NNS) (p. 1). Biber (1988) suggested this and Sliger and Elana (1989), who reports from the analysis of the second language research, supports it.

Figure 9 displays the overall frequencies of by-passives or long passive structures across Pakistani and British writings. By-passives construction is similarly prevalent in the political discipline, as seen in Pakistani writers' works and Biber's (1988) research on promotional registers of academic prose (p. 255). Conrad et al., (2009) notes that by-passive construction is more prevalent in scholarly writing (p. 49). Besides this, the frequency of passive structure is higher in academic writing (Biber et al., 1999, p. 476).

Figure 9
Comparative Analysis of By-passives across British and Pakistani Writing
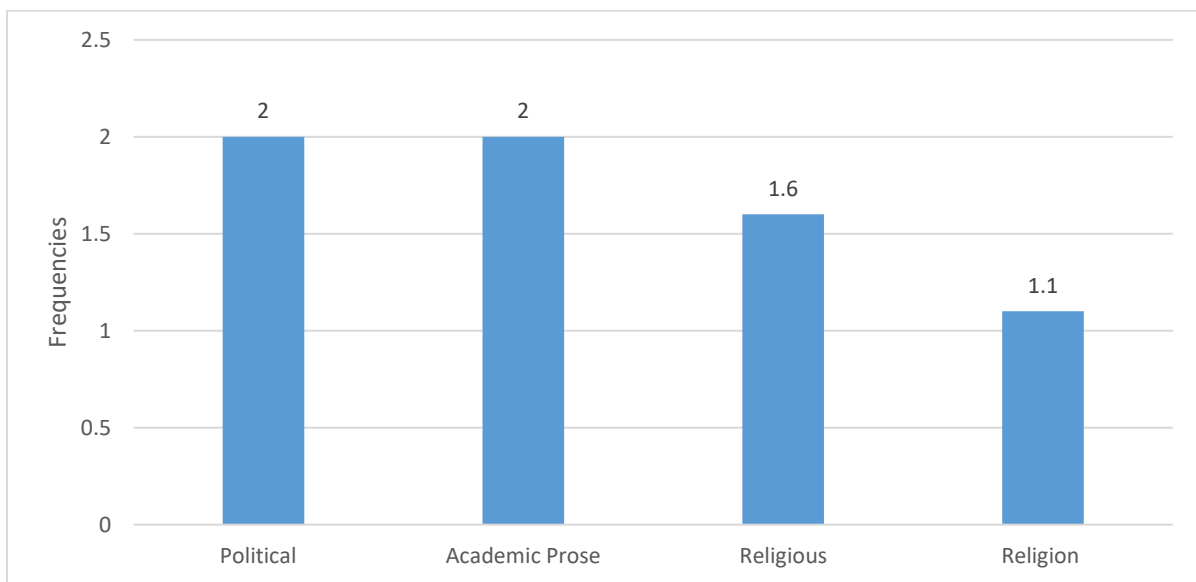
In the same way, the result indicates that the construction of by-passives is less prevalent in religious disciplines of both Pakistani and British writings. It suggests a lesser frequency of this grammatical pattern in religious writing compared to other registers (Biber, 1988, p. 250). The second question identifies similarities and differences in the use of agentless and By-passives constructions in political and religious texts. Furthermore, agentless passive structures differ significantly between the Pakistani and British sub-corpora. The findings indicate that native English writers use more passive agentless construction structures in their writing (Biber, 1988; Sliger & Elana, 1989; Biber et al., 1999). In contrast, in Biber's (1988) research, the construction of By-passive in political texts demonstrates consistency compared to academic prose.

Conclusion

This study examines how passive English constructions are used by native English writers (NEW) and non-native writers (NNW) from Pakistan, with a focus on agentless and by-passive structures within Biber's (1988) framework, by analyzing two distinct corpora—Policy Documents from political texts and Religious Essays from religious texts written by a Pakistani writer. This research contributes to understanding passive constructions and highlights the linguistic similarities and differences between these two groups. The findings suggest that agentless passive constructions dominate Pakistani writings, particularly in political texts, which are more frequent than in religious texts. This pattern reflects a preference for depersonalized, formal language in political discourse, contrasting with the more direct attribution of actions to divine agents in religious discourse. The lower frequency of by-passive structures in religious texts further supports this idea, indicating that religious writing focuses less on passive narration than political texts. Compared to Biber's (1988) findings, Pakistani writing uses fewer agentless passives, possibly due to cultural and educational influences. However, native and non-native writers demonstrate stylistic similarities in their use of by-passive constructions, aligning with Biber et al. (1999).

These findings have several important implications for future research. The results can serve as a normative reference for studying passive constructions in Pakistani political and religious registers, and they may be compared with other genres, such as literary, medical, and philosophical texts. Additionally, tools like the Multidimensional Analysis Tagger (MAT) and AntConc enable valuable comparisons between contemporary disciplines and passive structures in various registers. Such comparisons can offer deeper insights into the distinct linguistic features across different fields and cultural contexts, enriching the academic discourse on passive voice usage in English. In conclusion, this study enhances our understanding of how language functions across different cultural backgrounds, providing educators, linguists, and writers with valuable insights into the complexities of passive constructions in varied English registers.

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