

Passive Voice in Police Reports: Balancing Objectivity and Accountability

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Abstract

This study examines the use of passive voice in Philippine police accomplishment reports, analyzing its frequency, functions, and implications. Passive constructions appear in 69% of sentences, predominantly in sections on operations and confiscations. They enhance objectivity by emphasizing actions and outcomes while depersonalizing agents, aligning with institutional neutrality. However, this can obscure accountability and clarity in critical scenarios. Influenced by cultural norms and Philippine English conventions. The passive voice reflects hierarchical and collective values. While supporting professionalism, it risks bureaucratic opacity. Recommendations include strategic training, guidelines for clarity, and audits to strike a balance between transparency and accountability in police reports.

Keywords: depersonalization, forensic discourse, institutional language, legal communication, procedural reporting

Introduction

Language lies at the heart of the functioning and interpretation of justice systems worldwide. The field of law, particularly in police departments, relies heavily on written discourse to record events, offer procedural compliance, and base legal decisions. (Martin, 2013; Filsinger, 2015; Asadzadeh, 2019) One of the institutional language's most significant tools is the police report, a formal record of incidents, actions, and law enforcement response. These reports are to be objective, concise, and truthful to ensure public trust and judicial impartiality. The lexical and sentence choices in such reports, however, do not simply record facts; they create accountability, assign blame, and build meaning within legal and public domains. (Rossetti et al., 2024)

In this syntactic context of language, the most characteristic syntactic form is likely the passive voice. (Ajero, 2025) Used often in institutional discourse such as legal and bureaucratic language, the passive voice gives precedence to action over agent, frequently leaving out the doer of an action in favor of the action or its result. (Trajkovska, 2022) Thus, the application of phrases such as "evidence was recovered" or "the suspect was arrested" is typical of institutional reporting. Although such structures may be useful in helping to deliver an objective tone, they also limit the delegation of individual responsibility and lower transparency in those areas where transparency is most crucial to remain clear and answerable. (Numer et al., 2024) Such lowered transparency can cause confusion, misinterpretation, and even miscarriages of justice.

Linguistic and forensic scholars have long been interested in how language, particularly syntactic structures such as the passive voice, mediates institutional practice (Simpson et al., 2025). Cotterill (2002) mentions that the passive voice assists in the construction of an objective tone by focusing on processes over participants, a feature highly valued in legal discourse. Similarly, Gales and Solan (2016) argue that syntactic structures in legal discourse reflect underlying power relations and institutional ideologies. Police discourse passive structures are typically justified as assisting with professionalism, neutrality, and formalism

(Byrman & Byrman, 2018). Warnings have, however, also been issued on the passive voice's capacity to avoid agency and hide clarity, where results are open to legal review or public understanding (Fannes & Claeys, 2022). Similar trends are observed globally. Linell (2021) and Solheim (2022) demonstrate how police institutions in Sweden and Norway deploy passivization to legitimize state narratives and reify authority. In the Philippines itself, studies such as Bautista (2000) and Martin (2018) have observed the effect of formal Philippine English conventions on organizational discourse. These conventions are not mere grammatical options but symptomatic of more fundamental socio-cultural alignments. Philippine society, based on colonial legacy and hierarchical institutional culture, is predisposed to collectivistic rather than individualistic assertions, expressed linguistically in depersonalized modes, such as the passive voice. Bravo-Sotelo et al. (2023) observe how Philippine language policy and institutional conventions articulate an ideological tension between authority and public agency. This dynamic is most apparent in police reports, where passive voice is used strategically to foreground events over agents, thereby constructing institutional objectivity while subtly downplaying individual accountability (Servano, 2024; Shekhar et al., 2024). These converging patterns suggest that passive voice in police discourse, both in the Philippines and abroad, serves as a linguistic mechanism to balance transparency with institutional self-protection.

Forensic linguistics, a field that tests language in the legal environment, has illuminated the ways in which such stylistic options influence the delivery and reception of legal discourse. (Wright, 2025) Casalan (2024) conducted a forensic linguistic analysis of police blotters and incident reports, focusing on the language structure and organization used by the police in documenting cases. The study identified that many reports followed a templated format but showed inconsistency in structure and clarity. Common issues included vague referents, reliance on passive voice, and ambiguous phrasing, all of which may obscure agency and affect the legal interpretation of reports. Furthermore, this language patterns can impact the accuracy, coherence, and legal defensibility of

police narratives that may influence judicial outcomes, thus highlighting a need for more standardized and linguistically sound report writing practices in law enforcement. Fairclough's (2013) model of Critical Language Awareness (CLA) draws attention to the requirement that an individual analyze the way language represents and reproduces social structure, particularly in power-knowledge institutions. (Ciriza & Marrin, 2024) CLA argues that forms of language, like passives, can be hegemonic, in the sense that they can act to reproduce or reconstitute existing power relations, concealing authority behind the mask of objectivity. (Faez et al., 2018; Gopalakrishnan & Shepard-Carey, 2021) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), formulated by Halliday and Matthiessen, offers a model for analyzing the way language instantiates meaning in context. By using the ideational function, SFL accounts for the way passives conceal agency through process and participant rearrangement in discourse, which is similar to institutional preoccupation with procedural rather than personal attribution.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), developed by M.A.K. Halliday and later expanded by Matthiessen and others, considers language as a social semiotic system with three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Aminudin, 2023). The ideational metafunction, being the most relevant to this study, deals with how language construes experience and constructs reality. (Matthiessen & Teruya, 2023) In this study, the passive voice is not a matter of grammar but a strategic matter of rearranging participants and processes. As an example, the placement of the actor out of subject position ("The suspect was arrested" compared to "Police arrested the suspect") affects the distribution of responsibility and emphasis. Wagner & Cheng (2016) used SFL to analyze Hong Kong police discourse, examining how their grammar choices, such as passivation, align with institutional goals such as risk management and objectivity. (Liu & Chen, 2021) Djatmika et al. (2023) used SFL to examine two news media outlets, *Tribunnews.com* and *Kompas.com* examining how social actors (the perpetrators and the police) are represented in fraudulent news. The researchers identified process types and participant roles in the clauses to uncover patterns in how actions and

responsibilities are assigned. The ‘Preparator’ was typically realized as a goal in material processes, making them the target of actions and representing them as the one proven guilty. Meanwhile, the ‘Police’ were often realized as behavers or sayers, indicating their active role in law enforcement and public communication. Passive voice structures were used to shift focus away from the actor performing the action, often emphasizing the action or its result rather than who carried it out.

While SFL focuses on “how” the language was used, Critical Language Awareness (CLA) provides a framework that explores the “why”, such as in relation to power, ideology or institutional control. According to Fairclough (2013), language use challenges the way it represents, reproduces, or challenges power relations. It encourages analysts to consider not only what is being said, but also how it is being said, and what is not being said. It means that language is not neutral, but instead, a vehicle through which social hierarchies, ideologies, and authority are constructed and maintained. In police reports, the absence of agency in passives may be viewed as a linguistic expression of bureaucratic vagueness. CLA encourages reflexivity in language use, particularly in institutions that hold great power over individuals and communities. Fannes & Claeys (2022) used CLA to further portray how corporate and governmental responses to crises strategically use passive voice to shape public perceptions of responsibility. This linguistic maneuvering, which is foregrounding the outcomes and agents as backgrounds, is precisely what CLA encourages analysts and practitioners to become aware of and critically examine. By situating the passive voice within a framework of power and institutional discourse, CLA helps this study to move beyond frequency counts into critical interpretation. It further supports the argument that that linguistic choices in police reports are not merely stylistic or formal, but rather ideological. They reflect how the police institution presents itself, protects its members, and navigates its relationship with the public.

SFL and CLA has been widely used in legal, political, and institutional discourse studies, but a few studies have applied them to Philippine police reports specifically. While prior studies have described

features of Philippine English and language policies in the justice systems, some rarely combined systematic grammatical analysis into a critical ideological lens. This study contributes by demonstrating how formal grammatical patterns (passives) reflect larger cultural and institutional practices in the Philippine law enforcement context, namely, collectivism, proceduralism, and institutional opacity. It also argues that the professionalism often associated with passive constructions can be double-edged: while enhancing neutrality, it may unintentionally reduce transparency and public accountability.

In spite of these rich theoretical accounts, few studies have been conducted to analyze how passive voice works in police reports in the Philippine context. Existing work is either done on Western legal systems or grammatically based without considering cultural and institutional specificities, such as Četković's (2017)'s study on the language of police reports. Their study critically examined the language of police reports, arguing that these texts strive for legal precision, they often devolve into bureaucratic exercises marked by redundancy, formality, and inflated phrasing. Their study revealed that the pursuit of exhaustive documentation can paradoxically degrade clarity and communicative effectiveness, especially when institutional norms encourage verbose and impersonal reporting. These findings resonate with broader concerns in forensic linguistics regarding how stylistic conventions, particularly passive constructions, can obscure agency and weaken accountability. However, while Četković outlines these dynamics in a general and European context, what remains underexplored is the strategic use of passive voice within Philippine police achievement reports. There is a clear need for more research in the Philippine context to bridge this gap and enhance a more complete understanding of the question.

What remains to be studied, however, is how the passive voice is strategically employed in Philippine police achievement reports, and how such employment in such an environment substantively reinforces or undermines institutional goals of objectivity, transparency, and accountability. In particular, there is little examination of how such constructions are employed rhetorically, what the implications are in

terms of agency and responsibility, and how such constructions index underlying systems and cultural ideologies. The need for local research, in particular in the Philippines, is thus central. Furthermore, there is a stark lack of such research that combines quantitative frequency analysis with critical linguistic examination to measure the impact of passive construction in real police testimony. This study investigates the frequency, rhetorical functions, and communicative implications of the passive voice in Philippine police accomplishment reports.

In light of increasing public demand for open and transparent law enforcement in the Philippines, especially in the context of extrajudicial killings and institutional secrecy, the study is timely and pressing. The potential impact of this study on improving institutional communication and public trust is significant. Police reports are not only internal reports but also part of public records, court records, and news reports. A study of the language use in police reports can thus add depth to our knowledge of overall trends in institutional communication and public trust.

Through filling the above research gap, this study informs various academic discourses. Firstly, it adds to forensic linguistic scholarship through the empirical evidence provided on how syntactic options structure institutional discourses in a given Southeast Asian setting, i.e., the Philippines. Secondly, it fills the gap between institutional practice and linguistic theory through the use of SFL and CLA to illustrate how language works in socially embedded systems. Thirdly, it offers practical suggestions for improving police report writing through the balanced use of a passive and active voice to attain transparency and professionalism.

The findings are important to policymakers, legal professionals, discourse-based linguists interested in accountability and institutional communication, and law enforcement agencies. Amidst increased international discourse on police reform, linguistic analysis offers a seminal but frequently neglected view which emphasizes appreciation and evaluation of the subtleties in institutional behavior and public interaction, hence shedding light on the audience in terms of the crucial role of linguistic analysis.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to analyze the use of passive voice in Philippine police accomplishment reports. The dataset consisted of 20 incident reports from a city police department in Misamis Occidental, Philippines, covering various law enforcement operations such as arrests, evidence gathering, and case resolutions. To ensure confidentiality, all sensitive information was anonymized.

The quantitative analysis measured the frequency and distribution of passive voice constructions using PassivePy software. Sentences with auxiliary verbs paired with past participles were identified as passive constructions, categorized into agentless passives and agent-included passives. Data were visualized using Microsoft Excel to calculate percentages and create graphs. The qualitative analysis involved manual coding of the rhetorical functions of passive constructions, focusing on their communicative purposes, such as depersonalization, emphasis on outcomes, and procedural alignment. Additionally, a section-based analysis examined the use of passive voice across report segments, including summaries, operational details, and conclusions. This combined approach provided a comprehensive understanding of linguistic patterns, ensuring a structured analysis of how passive voice supports institutional priorities of neutrality and objectivity while raising issues of accountability and clarity.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the use of passive voice in police reports reveals a pattern of syntactic choices that emphasize the actions of the actors involved. These findings are consistent with the general tendency in formal and official reports, where the focus is often on the event or outcome rather than the person acting.

Frequency and Distribution of Passive Voice

The analysis in the table below revealed that 29 out of 42 sentences (or 69%) employed passive voice constructions, highlighting their dominant role in institutional police reporting. This high proportion confirms prior observations that passive structures are frequently used in formal legal discourse to present events with procedural objectivity (Cotterill, 2002; Casalan, 2024). A breakdown by report section shows the Operations section as the most passivized, with 9 of 12 sentences (75%) using passive voice. Confiscations followed at 70% (7 of 10), Arrests at 66.67% (4 of 6), and Surrender/Other Legal Actions at 60% (3 of 5):

Table 1. Frequency of Passive Voice Usage Across Report Sections.

Report Section		Total Sentences	Passive Voice Instances	Percentage (%)
Operations		12	9	75%
Arrests		6	4	66.67%
Confiscations		10	7	70%
Surrender/Other Actions	Legal	5	3	60%
Total		42	29	69%

These figures suggest that passive constructions are particularly concentrated in sections dealing with operational execution, evidence management, and arrest procedures, precisely the areas where responsibility and agency are most consequential. Rather than attributing actions directly to officers or units, these sections typically employ structures such as “the suspect was apprehended” or “evidence was recovered,” thereby shifting emphasis from the agent to the action.

From an SFL perspective, this aligns with the ideational function of language, which enables writers to foreground processes while backgrounding or omitting participants (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The result is a report that appears objective and procedural, but which may strategically minimize personal accountability, a phenomenon also noted in Wagner & Cheng's (2016) study on police discourse in Hong Kong.

Carpenter (2022) also criticized the overuse of passivization and nominalization in legal texts. While the author acknowledged that passive voice can be used to emphasize results and institutional authority, the excessive use in official documentation "invites ambiguity and obstructs clear lines of accountability." This argument therefore supports this study's conclusion that passives, when dominant (as seen in nearly 7 out of 10 sentences), can become linguistically defensive mechanisms, shifting attention from those responsible to the procedural outcomes themselves. Similarly, O'Nyangeri et al. (2024) found that in their analysis of courtroom discourse in East Africa, high-frequency passive voice in interpreted legal texts often leads to pragmatic dilution, especially when clarity and accountability are needed. Their observation that passives "disperse agency across the narrative" is applicable: Philippine police reports likewise distribute responsibility implicitly, especially in operations or arrests that could be legally or ethically contentious.

These findings both reinforce and expand understandings of how passive voice is used in legal-institutional contexts. While supporting formality and neutrality, frequent passivization, particularly in action-heavy sections, risks fostering bureaucratic opacity and eroding public accountability (Fairclough, 2013). The data show that this is not a matter of stylistic preference, but a reproducible linguistic pattern with significant institutional and social consequences.

Rhetorical Functions of Passive Voice

The analysis of the rhetorical functions of passive voice in Philippine police accomplishment reports in the table below reveals that passive constructions are strategically deployed to serve multiple communicative and institutional purposes. Of the passive forms examined, the most common use was to emphasize actions and outcomes, which accounted for 86.21% of cases. This focus on outcomes rather than agents reflects a discursive tactic where the report emphasizes what was achieved, i.e., recovering evidence and arresting suspects, and not who achieved it. This aligns with the rhetorical tactics Fannes and Claeys (2022) documented in corporate and crisis communication, where passive voice is used in an analogous way to recontextualize or transfer responsibility. For the Philippine police, this focus is aligned with institutional interests in projecting procedural success, operational effectiveness, and police visibility, all while minimizing personal attribution.

The second function that followed is objectivity and neutrality, which occurred in 62.07% of the cases. Police writers can use passive voice to convey an impersonal, bureaucratic tone that conveys institutional professionalism. This agrees with Gales and Solan (2016), who contend that institutional actors are assisted to seem impartial and rule-based due to passivization, something highly valued in legal and administrative language. Likewise, Fauziah and Bashtomi (2024), in their analysis of academic and legal writing, observe that even though style guides discourage redundancy, passive constructions are common since they are able to suppress author voice and meet formal discourse requirements. In police reports, the neutral voice assists in objectivity, which is typically synonymous with fairness and credibility. The perceived neutrality also serves ideologically, however, silently confirming the institution's authority without subjective judgment or error.

Another notable rhetorical function of the passive voice observed in the data is enhancing clarity and brevity, present in 41.38% of cases. With the passive voice, more economical sentence building is achievable when consecutive actions are attributed to a single, typically implicit, agent, hence making the text cohesive and effective through syntactic compression. Writing police reports is typically between the requirement to be clear and the danger of falling into the "bureaucratic exercise of language degradation" (Ćetković, 2017). While passive sentences can be grammatically streamlined, they can also make institutional texts unclear or ambiguous, especially when they pile up without clear agency cues and succession.

In addition, the function of minimizing personal responsibility appeared in 34.48% of passive constructions. The phenomenon effectively hides the identity of the actor, especially in sensitive situations like detentions, seizure of evidence, or neutralization of suspects. Such a strategic reduction of agency prevents potential scrutiny, shields individual law enforcement officers, and further establishes the legitimacy of institutions. From the perspective of Critical Language Awareness (CLA), this is an important ideological function of the passive construction. To Fairclough (2013), depersonalized forms in dominant institutions serve to hide the exercise of power while creating an impression of neutrality. This diversionary function has moral implications. Passive forms used in accounts of violence create a psychological and emotional distance between the author, recipient, and event and therefore blunt the gut effect of actions committed by the state or institutional actors (Rossetti et al., 2024). Likewise, Moreno-Medina et al. (2023) confirmed that media accounts of police shootings in the United States often utilize passive constructions to hide state violence and diffuse popular anger.

Moreover, these rhetorical purposes are embedded in rich linguistic and cultural histories. Passive constructions are not just stylistic options, but also expressions of deeper ideological preferences towards formalism, hierarchy, and legalism (Mirijanyan, 2023). The overuse of passive voice in official documents is also explained by English

conventions and collectivist cultural norms of prioritizing depersonalized over personalized attribution in the Philippine context (Bautista, 2000; Martin, 2018). Finally, the rhetorical use of passive constructions in police reports has a twofold communicative function: conforming to the expected norms of institutional professionalism and objectivity, while purposefully reducing the presence of agency, concealing the visibility of actors, and reworking the presentation of accountability. These results validate that passive voice is not merely a grammatical form in police discourse; it is an institutional self-presentational linguistic mechanism, one attuned to calibrate procedural transparency and strategic opacity. Therefore, its deployment needs to be examined closely, particularly in publicly oriented or legally significant reports, where responsibility and transparency are not merely rhetorical ideals but ethical compulsions.

Table 2. Functional Purposes of Passive Voice in Police Reports.

Purpose	Instances	Percentage (%)
Objectivity & Neutrality	18	62.07%
Action & Outcome Emphasis	25	86.21%
Minimizing Personal Responsibility	10	34.48%
Clarity & Brevity	12	41.38%

Impact on Objectivity, Clarity, and Accountability

Despite using passive voice to enhance objectivity and support the formal tone as expected in legal documents, sometimes it came at the expense of clarity and accountability, particularly in instances where agency was consistently obscured. This tendency was evident in the data on the table below. While the use of passive voice helped to create the illusion of objectivity in 62.07% of instances, in only 41.38% were seen to promote clarity, and 34.48% permitted a perception of responsibility. These results indicate that the syntactic structure of police reports, as

professionally adequate as it is on the surface, can undercut the very openness required in judicial and public forums.

This tendency reflects a discourse pattern in which the process is prioritized over the actor, according to a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) explained, the ideational function of language allows writers to construct reality in ways that emphasize actions while backgrounding participants. This is consistent with global trends in police communication, in which passive voice is preferred in an effort to maintain formal detachment (Solheim, 2022; Linell, 2021). Locally, this trend is facilitated by collectivistic and hierarchical socio-cultural norms as well. As Bautista (2000) and Martin (2018) explained, these values allow for indirectness and deference to authority, which might explain why Philippine police reports tend to leave out individual actors in favor of impersonal institutional encoding. From the lens of Critical Language Awareness (CLA), the frequent use of passive constructions may contribute to what Fairclough (2013) describes as bureaucratic opacity, a discursive condition in which language conceals power relations under the guise of objectivity. In the context of police reporting, this means that although the document may appear neutral, it may also strategically omit the identities of those responsible for significant actions. This phenomenon is particularly troubling in reports involving force, arrest, or confiscation, where the lack of agentive clarity could weaken both legal interpretation and public trust.

The risk of such opacity is not purely theoretical. Četković (2022) argued that overly formal police report writing might result in "semantic vagueness," which renders the police report less readable and comprehensible to legal professionals and the public. Similarly, Segovia (2024) argued that police report writing is not only grammatically required but also narratively open, especially for evidence-based cases. If reports employ structures regularly without indicating by whom, they conceal the chain of responsibility and obstruct legal scrutiny. Concern for linguistic responsibility also resonates in institutional and international guidelines. Both the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2011) and the Sacramento State Police Department (2014) highlight the

significance of clear actor identification in police reports. In their guidelines, actor identification in a report is not a stylistic matter but rather an inherent aspect of open law enforcement communication. In line with this, Kulkarni et al. (2025) noted that even in automated drafting systems, trust in police documentation is contingent on retaining clear agent–action relationships.

In addition, the impact of passive voice on legitimacy and public trust has been strongly experienced. Ahmad and Barakat (2019) found that accountability was the most significant predictor of public trust in policing, while Abdi and Hashi (2024) observed that public perceptions of fairness and effectiveness were strongly associated with the extent to which the police justify their actions. Similarly, Nursukma and Rosnawati (2024) argued that language plays a bridging function between the police institutions and the local community, particularly in contexts where trust has historically been low. When accountability is obscured through language, the credibility of the entire institution may be called into question.

The findings of this study therefore support an increase in demands for more linguistic responsibility in institutional reporting. Much more than an organizational or ethical necessity, policing accountability is a discursive one. (Lennon et al., 2023) How action is reported and how far actors are named influence attitudes to justice and its enforcement (Feys et al., 2018). The employment of passive voice, while perhaps useful to convey formality and procedural propriety, is thus potentially erosive of transparency and obfuscation of the very accountability the legal system seeks to deliver.

Table 3. Impact of Passive Voice on Report Clarity, Accountability, and Objectivity.

Impact Factor	Instances	Percentage (%)
Clarity	12	41.38%
Accountability	10	34.48%
Objectivity	18	62.07%

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study underscores the power of language in shaping institutional narratives, particularly in contexts that demand both authority and accountability. By re-evaluating the use of passive voice in police reports through the lenses of Systemic Functional Linguistics and Critical Language Awareness, the research contributes to ongoing efforts to make law enforcement communication more transparent, effective, and responsive to the needs of a democratic society.

To address these problems, this study presents a variety of feasible solutions. Note that these suggestions might be challenged by the resistance to change, insufficient resources, and the need for ongoing training and testing.

By incorporating modules on linguistic sensitivity, with attention to the strategic application of grammatical forms such as the active and passive voice to police training courses will be equipped with the ability to produce reports that facilitate clarity, accountability, and ethical openness. This strategic language instruction builds beyond procedural correctness to enable officers to convey effectively, thus encouraging greater public trust and understanding.

The use of standardized report forms with an even balance between passive and active voice can promote the uniformity and communicative effectiveness of police reports. The forms need to include

instructions on how to clearly express agency, particularly in cases of likely legal liability or public scrutiny.

Incorporating CLA principles into police communication training can foster reflexivity around language use. Police officers should learn how their language options can construct public opinion, reinforce institutional power, or unintentionally obscure responsibility. This aligns with more general objectives of ethical policing and human-centered governance.

A systematic linguistic review of police statements by interprofessional committees consisting of linguists, jurists, and civil society representatives can assist in tracking changing practices and identifying negative trends. Audits can gain valuable information on the effectiveness of language teaching and the application of standard forms. Long-term longitudinal studies must accompany these measures to assess the long-term effect of language reforms on public opinion, judicial decisions, and institutional accountability. Community Outreach through Transparency Initiatives: Strategies for de-mystifying police talk to the public are needed. Initiatives such as public workshops, abridged report briefs, and public communication strategies can help develop mutual understanding. By making institutional talk more accessible, police agencies can enhance active participation from the public, foster civic trust, and create collaborative models of safety. This participatory approach ensures the public is not merely informed but also engaged in the process of improving police talk.

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