

## ON VOICE IN THE ENGLISH VERB

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# ON VOICE IN THE ENGLISH VERB

*by*

JAN SVARTVIK

UNIVERSITY OF GÖTEBORG



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To Gunilla, Agneta, and Jesper



## PREFACE

Voice in grammar is an aspect of English syntax which in recent years has attracted considerable interest in discussions of linguistic theory. This book is not primarily intended as a theoretical contribution (which of course does not exclude the possibility that it might be used to such ends); it is a corpus-based discussion of some grammatical categories that seem relevant to problems connected with voice in English. There are, at the present time, diverse views on the value of a corpus. Here, let it suffice to mention two reasons for using a corpus in the present inquiry: firstly, one of the aims of this monograph is to describe the use of voice, in particular the passive, in some varieties of present-day English; secondly, it is maintained that corpus-studies will help to provide descriptively more adequate grammars. It is interesting to note that in his latest book (which unfortunately arrived too late to be discussed in the main body of this study) Noam Chomsky comments: 'Perhaps the day will come when the kinds of data that we now can obtain in abundance will be insufficient to resolve deeper questions concerning the structure of language' (*Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, 21). However far away the day is when corpus-data are needed, it seems likely that, to get nearer our goal of understanding language, we need a multi-pronged approach.

Although presented as a Ph. D. thesis to Uppsala University, this book is essentially a British product: it was conceived in Durham, and the work took place chiefly in London where, for four years, I had the benefit of doing research in the stimulating atmosphere of University College. Most of the research was carried out under the auspices of the Survey of English Usage, and I owe a very special debt to its Director, Professor Randolph Quirk — for suggesting voice as a suitable field of study, for helping to make available the necessary technical facilities, for setting an excellent (albeit inimitable) example with his zest for work, and, above all, for providing compelling stimulus and acute criticism at all stages of the work.

In spite of my long absence from Sweden, I have had the benefit of close connexion with many scholars there. I am particularly indebted to the following Uppsala professors: to Erik Tengstrand for guiding my first steps in English studies; to H. W. Donner for constant support and encouragement; and to Johannes Söderlind for supervising the final stages of my work. All of them have contributed to producing a more finished product by making valuable suggestions.

The often very laborious tasks involved in this work were made lighter by the happy camaraderie among Survey colleagues, who also contributed in many other ways. In particular, I am obliged to Mr Henry Carvell, who lavishly and patiently provided computational and statistical knowledge. Among other London colleagues who have helped by criticism, discussion, informant responses, etc. are Mrs Judith Carvell, Mr Derek Davy, Mr Norman Fairclough, Mr Sidney Greenbaum, Mrs Joan Huddleston, and Mr Geoffrey N. Leech. My thanks are further due to Dr Sven Jacobson for stimulating linguistic arguments and to Miss Berit Hallberg, Miss Ann Helm, and Mr Bengt Odenstedt for assistance with proof-reading.

The research behind this book required both man and machine, and I have depended heavily on the computational expertise of Mr J. C. Gower, Rothamsted Experimental Station, Harpenden, Herts., and Mr A. J. Colin, University of London Institute of Computer Science.

Finally, I want to thank my wife who has always taken an active interest in my work, manifested by typing cards, providing consolation after computer breakdowns, and in innumerable other ways.

Göteborg, February, 1966.

J. S.



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## INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 VIEWS ON VOICE

The study of the grammatical category voice has enjoyed considerable popularity over the last few years.<sup>1</sup> In fact, voice has probably received greater attention from linguists than ever before in the history of English scholarship. Its sudden appearance in the grammatical limelight can be attributed largely to the advent of transformational grammatical theory, where the active-passive relation has been used as a prime illustration of the supremacy of the transformational model.<sup>2</sup> In his grammar, Chomsky derives passive sentences from kernel active sentences: 'For every sentence  $NP_1-V-NP_2$  we can have a corresponding sentence  $NP_2-is+Ven-by+NP_1$ .' 'Thus every sentence of the language will either belong to the kernel or will be derived from the strings underlying one or more kernel sentences by a sequence of one or more transformations.'<sup>3</sup> The idea of representing the English active-passive relation in terms of transformations was not, however, revolutionary. Jespersen, for instance, had spoken of the 'turning'<sup>4</sup> and Poutsma of the 'conversion'<sup>5</sup> of the verb form from one voice to another; but it was only in the case of transformational theory that the

<sup>1</sup> In this study the term 'voice' will be used only with reference to the category 'grammatical voice' or 'diathesis' in the verb.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Chomsky 1957, 1962 and Lees 1957. Bach calls the passive 'a prototype of a transformational relation' (1964, 62).

<sup>3</sup> Chomsky 1957, 43, 45. In later rules (1962, 140) the requirement 'transitive verb' ( $V_t$ ) was added. However, in the most recent versions of TG rules, many transformations, such as passive, negation, question, etc., have been partly or wholly replaced by phrase structure or 'base' rules, since such transformational rules were found to be too strong in 'expressive power'. This modification of the theory 'excludes in principle certain kinds of derivational pattern that were permitted by the earlier version of transformational theory, but never actually found' (Chomsky 1964b, 61). See the reformulation by Lees (1964) below.

<sup>4</sup> Jespersen 1924, 164: 'what was the object ... in the active sentence is made into the subject, and what was the subject in the active sentence is expressed ... by means of a prepositional group, in English with *by* (formerly *of*) ...' 'We may express this in a formula, using the letter S for subject, O for object, V for verb, a for active, p for passive, and C for "converted subject":

S   V<sup>a</sup>   O   S   V<sup>p</sup>   C  
Jack loves Jill = Jill is loved by Jack,

thus

Jack: S<sup>a</sup> = C<sup>p</sup>  
Jill: O<sup>a</sup> = S<sup>p</sup>.'

<sup>5</sup> Poutsma 1926-9, 2.2.107.

use of transformation was extended, formalised and systematically incorporated into a unified grammatical framework.

Chomsky took actives rather than passives as his kernel sentences, since this method would lead to less complexity than deriving actives from passives (Chomsky 1957, 79-80). The same unidirectional transformation was also favoured by Lees because 'passives are less central than actives' (1957, 388). In a more recent article, however, Lees finds that Chomsky's rule 'is not only very atypical of grammatical transformations in general – it also fails to provide for the correct constituent-structure of the resulting passive sentences, even though it does correctly serve to derive [the] passive *from* an underlying active sentence.' An English passive sentence 'contains two components which do not appear in the underlying active sentence from which it is derived. First, there is the special verbal auxiliary consisting of the morpheme *be* and the participial suffix for the following verb base; ... Second, there is a special "agentive" adverbial-like prepositional phrase in *by* plus a nominal [expression].' His remedy is to 'permit in the expansion of the underlying constituent trees preceding all grammatical transformation rules the optional selection in any transitive-verb sentence of a special Agentive constituent. If not chosen, the derivation leads to active sentences; if chosen, the derivation leads obligatorily to passive sentences.' Hence, the passive transformation rule is no longer optional but becomes obligatory: 'It serves to permute in all trees containing the Agentive formative the transitive-verb object nominal with whatever precedes it, and it substitutes the subject nominal in [*sic*] for the nominal object of *by* in the Agentive phrase' (Lees 1964, 29-30).

Kruisinga had earlier pointed out that while 'it is usual to consider the passive as a kind of secondary form of the verb, a derivative form dependent upon the "active"', 'this treatment, though supported by tradition and convenience, does not really permit us to state the facts completely or correctly' (Kruisinga 1927-31, 2.1.335). Nevertheless, his own classification is based on the active voice. W. S. Allen felt that 'a great deal of harm has been done by teaching the passive voice as if it were merely another way of expressing a sentence in the active voice. Students are asked to put such sentences as: *John likes girls, Henry can read English and French*, etc. into the fantastic forms of *Girls are liked by John, English and French can be read by Henry*, etc. We ought to stress the fact that the passive voice has an important and special place in the language; most sentences that are good in the active voice are just grotesque curiosities when put into the passive voice' (Allen 1959, 290).

McKerrow adopted a more radical attitude: 'If we were now starting for the first time to construct a grammar of modern English, without knowledge of or reference to the classics, it might never occur to us to postulate a passive voice at all. It seems to me that it is questionable whether in spoken English of to-day there is really any such thing, and though, as a matter of convenience, it may be well to retain it in our grammars, I doubt whether it ought to occupy quite so prominent a position as it sometimes does' (McKerrow 1922, 163).

Some of the diverse points of view advanced in these quotations may be paraphrased



and summarized as two statements that are largely contradictory in regard to voice relationship:

(a) There is a relation between the active and the passive voice, and it is therefore economical to consider one voice in terms of the other. Passives, being less central than actives, are then best derived from actives. Subject to certain conditions, such as the verb being transitive, there is a passive sentence corresponding to every active sentence.

(b) There are indications that there is not a one-to-one relation between the active and the passive voice. There seem to be considerable restrictions on the use of passive sentences generated in this way, and considering the passive simply as a derivative of the active will not yield a good grammatical description. In fact, the only reason for keeping the category 'passive' is that it has come down to us as part of our classical grammatical heritage, and there is little or no place for the passive in a description of present-day English.

## 1.2 MODE OF ANALYSIS

This book will discuss voice in present-day English from different standpoints. Most attention will be given to the passive, and we shall try to view it in its own right by reversing the customary procedure of analysis and making the passive our point of departure.

This mode of analysis presupposes that we know what is meant by the term 'passive voice' in English. Any attempt to define its boundaries by reference to previous work will soon reveal that there is no agreement among grammarians as to what constitutes an English passive.<sup>6</sup> Numerous reasons might be given for this lack of agreement. The name is certainly partly responsible. Grammarians do not generally claim that the subject of a passive construction must necessarily be the 'sufferer' of the action;<sup>7</sup> yet there must be some such requirement present in the minds of those grammarians who preoccupy themselves so much with concepts of 'action' and 'occurrence' as opposed to 'state' when they are setting up a definition of the passive

<sup>6</sup> There is no exhaustive treatment of the passive in present-day English. Apart from the works already mentioned, discussions can be found for instance in Curme 1931, Erades 1950, 1958/9, Francis 1958, Fries 1940, 1959, van der Gaaf 1928, 1929, 1930, Hatcher 1949, 1956, Hendriksen 1948, A. A. Hill 1958, L. A. Hill 1964, Hockett 1958, Jespersen 1909-49, 1937, Joos 1964, Kirchner 1936-7, 1951, Koumari 1956, Kruisinga 1927, Mihailović 1963, Nida 1960, Owen 1914, Palmer 1965, Strang 1962, Svartengren 1948. – We have chosen a formal synchronic approach applicable only to present-day English, and we shall therefore not discuss here many works which, while dealing with the passive in English, have little or no bearing on the present material and method of treatment. The following list contains a selection of such works dealing with older periods of English: Åkerlund 1914, Brose 1939, Curme 1913, Frary 1929, Fröhlich 1951, Green 1913, 1914, Jud-Schmid 1956, Klingebiel 1937, Kurtz 1931, Meier 1953, Mustanoja 1960, Söderlind 1951, 1958, Turner 1962, Visser 1941-56.

<sup>7</sup> See, however, the controversy between Meyer-Lübke (1925, 1926) and Vossler (1925). Joos calls the passive subject the 'victim' of the action (1964, 98).

voice: 'The forms of the verb conjugated with *to be* and the past participle of the verb when it does not denote a state resulting from an action.'<sup>8</sup>

The weakness of any such definition is not only that it makes agreement difficult to reach because of reference to semantic criteria, but also that it excludes, apparently quite arbitrarily, so many related constructions. The line of argument taken here is that syntactic relationships can or should be expected to be multidimensional rather than binary and that, in order to find and state this network of relations, it is best to cast the net wide.

In this study, 'passive' will be considered as a technical term, used in a very wide sense, for a formally defined construction. In the primary analysis, all the following sentences will be considered 'passives':

*The house was built by experts.*

*The house was built of wood.*<sup>9</sup>

*His bills are paid.*

*His bills are paid regularly every month.*

*His bills are paid, so he owes nothing now.*<sup>10</sup>

*The snow was piled high by the wind.*

*The snow was piled high by the door.*<sup>11</sup>

*The village was (appeared, lay, looked, seemed) quite deserted.*

*He felt thoroughly disappointed.*

*The door remained locked.*<sup>12</sup>

Whatever their differences in meaning, all these sentences have one formal feature in common: they all have as verbs combinations of *be* (or auxiliaries commutable with *be*) and a past participle. For the purpose of our discussion, this will be our simple working definition of the passive in English.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Scheurweghs 1959, 416. The following are also representative of this view: The 'participles of transitive verbs can form a close group with verbs of little independent meaning to express an occurrence or an action. The most important verb giving rise to such a purely verbal group is *to be*' (Kruisinga 1927-31, 2.1.305). 'The subject signals either "that which undergoes the action" or "that to or for which the action is performed" whenever the Class 2 word [i.e. the verb] to which the subject is bound is the function word *be* (in its various forms) or *get*, with so-called past participle' (Fries 1959, 180). A 'verbal group consisting of one of the forms of *to be* plus the past participle of a transitive verb may denote an action undergone by the subject of the sentence', with the modification: 'in cases where "an action undergone by the subject" seems a somewhat forced definition, the passive may be said to express what "happens" to the subject' (Zandvoort 1960, 53).

<sup>9</sup> Francis 1958, 336.

<sup>10</sup> Jespersen 1909-49, 4.98 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Hill 1958, 323.

<sup>12</sup> Zandvoort 1960, 49.

<sup>13</sup> It may be objected that this is a definition of, say, the '*be* + *Ved*-construction' rather than the 'passive'. The answer to this criticism is that, firstly, the name is too clumsy and, secondly, little harm can be done by extending *pro tem* the domain of an established term to cover not only central constructions but also those on the periphery. Disagreement on the meaning of grammatical terminology is largely due to the fact that terms like 'active' and 'passive' are often applied indiscriminately to notional and formal categories alike, or are used loosely with reference to languages with different voice systems, or are used without clearly separating diachronic and synchronic approaches.

Voice will be regarded as a grammatical system in the verbal group with two terms: active and passive. The active term and the passive term are in formal binary opposition and will be studied both at the rank of the finite verbal group and at the rank of the finite verbal clause, with regard to their internal relations as well as to their external relations. The verbal group operates at place *V* in clause structure.<sup>14</sup>

This approach, starting the analysis with a certain formally defined structure and ending up with a statement of its values, makes it necessary to exclude a concurrent treatment of structures that are formally dissimilar but semantically similar to the passive, as defined here. We do not want to argue that the converse procedure, i.e. conducting the analysis from meaning to form, is impossible, but only that it is more difficult to control in the case of voice. What is essential, however, is to keep the semantic and nonsemantic approaches separate as far as possible.

Form and meaning may or may not coincide: 'Not only do structures usually signal several different meanings but, what is more important, there is probably in present-day English no structural meaning that is not signalled by a variety of structures' (Fries 1959, 203). Meaning may arise out of a pattern of distribution in the language under description so that 'the grammatical "meanings" are determined by their interrelations in the systems set up for that language' (Firth 1957, 22). 'It is this distributional characteristic which above all others allows the investigator to discover a morphemic class in the first place, and to know that such classes are relevant to the language in question, whereas an attempt to make class meaning a basic starting criterion for determining the classes is fatal to any structural analysis' (Pike 1954-60, 1.106).

### 1.3 USING A CORPUS

This investigation consists of a series of corpus-based studies. Some of them are quite independent of each other, but they have all been designed to shed light on problems of voice in English. There are several reasons for using a corpus. One follows directly from our aim to describe the use of the passive voice in some co-existing varieties of present-day English (see below). Another follows from the statement quoted above that some passives automatically derived by rule from actives are 'grotesque curiosities'. Passive sentences recorded from actual speech and writing

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On the other hand, a wholesale rejection of traditional terminology is of no advantage. Traditional labels like 'active' and 'passive', 'subject' and 'object', are useful, provided each is defined in relation to the particular formal system employed by a particular language at a particular time (cf. Vogt 1950, 137; Buyssens 1950, 41; Zandvoort 1961). This is not the point at which we should try to justify our somewhat unorthodox definition of 'passive'. Rather, its value should emerge from the discussion.

<sup>14</sup> When it is convenient to make a distinction between the active and passive verbal groups, they will be said to operate at places *V* and *W*, respectively, in clause structure (see Chapter 3). For the use of 'system', 'structure', 'group', 'rank', and 'term', see Halliday 1961. Halliday, however, recognizes a system of voice in his grammar only in the verbal group, not at clause rank (1964, 14f.).

are assumed to be, on the whole, normal and natural uses,<sup>15</sup> and a corpus-based study should provide basic information about how and to what extent 'corpus-passives' differ from 'rule-generated passives', and from actives. This raises a theoretical problem: the value of 'data' for the construction of a grammar. If, in general, 'corpus-passives' turn out not to be in a one-to-one transformational relationship to actives, it will seriously weaken arguments in favour of deriving passives from actives, at least if our grammar is to be economical and relevant to the use of the language.

#### 1.4 MATERIAL

The material has either been taken from the files of the Survey of English Usage or collected, as far as possible, on the principles of the Survey's method of text compilation.<sup>16</sup> The material is intended to represent some coexisting varieties of educated present-day English, spoken and written. In this case, 'present-day English' means English produced between 1950 and 1964; these are of course only arbitrary dates of limitation. For practical purposes, it has been necessary to restrict the material to British English. (There is however little reason to expect that an extension of the material to cover the other major Standards would give significantly different results from those arrived at for British English.)

The material consists of a number of 'texts', or samples of spoken and written English which, with a few exceptions, are continuous stretches. In all, 28 texts varying in length and totalling some 323,000 words have been analysed. (Text lengths are stated in number of words, but are not intended to be anything more than approximations. Hyphenated items count as single words.) The texts of 5,000 words each were taken from the files of the Survey of English Usage, whereas the others were collected separately.

17 texts of 5,000 words	=	85,000 words
6 texts of 15,000 words	=	90,000 words
1 text of 28,000 words	=	28,000 words
4 texts of 30,000 words	=	120,000 words
<hr/>		
Total: 28 texts	=	323,000 words

The texts are ordered in groups denoted by capital letters (A-M) and numbered (B1,

<sup>15</sup> This is not, however, a generally held assumption. Bach, for example, maintains that 'real discourse – especially when spoken in a natural context – is always full of fits and starts and incongruities (*This form is found in Homer, don't we?*). In other words, we cannot identify the set of grammatical sentence with the set of actually occurring sentence' (1964, 90). It is not possible to discuss here the justification for equating, in principle, 'occurring' and 'grammatical' without entering into the whole complex problem of grammaticality. Suffice it to say that the material so far analysed in the Survey of English Usage seems to support the line taken here. For an investigation into linguistic acceptability, see Quirk & Svartvik 1966.

<sup>16</sup> See Quirk 1960, Crystal & Quirk 1964, Godfrey 1965.

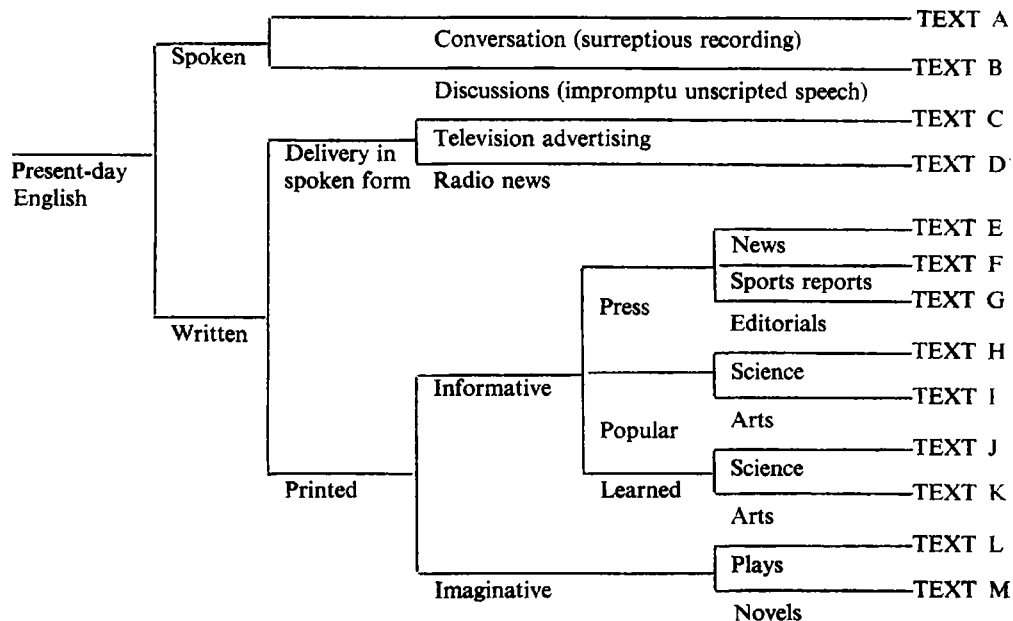


Fig. 1:1. The material.

B2, B3, etc.) where there is more than one text in a group. Figures after stops (e.g. B1.6; F.26.5; I.9; M1.16, etc.) denote internal file references for Texts A, B, C, E, dates (day and month) for Texts D, F, G, and page references elsewhere. The relation between the text groups is shown in Figure 1:1. The imbalance between the spoken and written material (40,000 as against 283,000 words) does not reflect the importance attached to either variety but rather the difficulty of compiling spontaneously-spoken material. First year of publication, if different from the year of the edition or impression used, is given in square brackets.

**A. CONVERSATION (surreptitious recording):**

Text A: Conversation between two university teachers. 1963. 5,000 words.

**B. DISCUSSIONS (impromptu, unscripted speech recorded from discussions on B.B.C. programmes):**

Text B1: *Any Questions?* 30.1.1959. 5,000 words.

Text B2: *Brains Trust.* 14.11.1958. 5,000 words.

Text B3: *What's the Idea?* 16.6.1961. 5,000 words.

Text B4: *Any Questions?* 4.3.1958. 5,000 words.

Text B5: *Any Questions?* 28.10.1958 and

*Any Questions?* 16.1.1959. Together 15,000 words.

**C. TELEVISION ADVERTISING:**

Text C: 617 advertisements broadcast over the Independent Television Network for the first time 1.12.1960-31.5.1961. 255 different products were advertised in 7, 15, 30, 45, 60, or 75 sec. advertisements, totalling nearly 35,000 words and representing about 4 hours 30 minutes of continuous broadcasting. When 'repeats' are subtracted, the size of the text is over 28,000 words.

**D. RADIO NEWS:**

Text D: B.B.C. Home Service news at 1 p.m. 18-20.3.1964. 5,000 words.

## E. PRESS NEWS:

Text E1: *The Times*. 9.3.1964. 5,000 words.

Text E2: *The Daily Express*. 10.4.1964. 5,000 words.

## F. SPORTS REPORTS:

Text F: *The Guardian*. 23-31.5.1960. 30,000 words.

## G. EDITORIALS:

Text G: *The Times*, not including 'the Fourth Leader'. 1-17.2.1960. 30,000 words.

## H. POPULAR SCIENCE:

Text H: Robert Thomson, *The Psychology of Thinking* (= *Pelican Books A 453*) (1959), pp. 11-57. 15,000 words.

## I. POPULAR ARTS:

Text I: Simeon Potter, *Language in the Modern World* (= *Pelican Books A 470*) (1960), pp. 9-52. 15,000 words.

## J. LEARNED SCIENCE:

Text J1: J. Z. Young, *The Life of Vertebrates* (London, 1962 [1950]), pp. 83-106. 5,000 words.

Text J2: G. E. Bacon, *Neutron Diffraction* (London, 1955), pp. 162-185. 5,000 words.

Text J3: H. N. V. Temperley, *Changes of State, A Mathematical-Physical Assessment* (London, 1956), pp. 22-34. 5,000 words.

Text J4: G. H. Williams, *Homolytic Aromatic Substitution* (London, 1960), pp. 27-39. 5,000 words.

Text J5: 14 articles and letters to the editor on biochemistry, biology, genetics, metallurgy, meteorology, physics, physiology, etc. published in *Nature, a weekly journal of science*, vol. 186, 4721-2. 23 and 30.4.1960. 15,000 words.

## K. LEARNED ARTS:

Text K: P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, 1961 [1959]), pp. 142-154. 5,000 words.

## L. PLAYS:

Text L1: Noël Coward, *South Sea Bubble, a comedy* (London, 1956), pp. 1-90. 15,000 words.

Text L2: Graham Greene, *The Compliant Lover, a comedy* (London, 1959), pp. 1-77. 15,000 words.

## M. NOVELS:

Text M1: Rosamond Lehmann, *The Echoing Grove* (= *Penguin Books 1262*) (1958 [1953]), pp. 16-30. 5,000 words.

Text M2: Malcolm Bradbury, *Eating People is Wrong* (London, 1959), pp. 90-107. 5,000 words.

Text M3: Auberon Waugh, *The Foxglove Saga* (London, 1960), pp. 197-212. 5,000 words.

Text M4: David Beaty, *The Proving Flight* (= *Penguin Books 1318*) (1958 [1956]), pp. 45-59. 5,000 words.

Text M5: Angus Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes* (= *Penguin Books 1311*) (1958 [1956]), pp. 11-89. 30,000 words.

Text M6: Michael Innes, *The Long Farewell* (London, 1958), pp. 9-110. 30,000 words.

## 1.5 AIMS

The principal aims of this book are to study the values of the two terms within the voice system of present-day English, with particular emphasis on the passive and its